

Going Live

The Olympus E-330

by Rob Spray

There used to be a gulf between the two castes of underwater photographers - compact snappers or SLR toting 'photographers'. That was before the E-330, which even a year after its launch remains unique. What makes it so unusual goes unnoticed when people 'give it a go'. SLRs, as a rule, can either view or take a picture. The mirror that gives them their name routes the image to either eyepiece or sensor - thus a live view is normally impossible as no light hits the sensor. An increasing number of SLRs can hold the mirror up, allowing the sensor to be exposed for a 'lock up live view'. This includes the Nikon D3 and 300, Canon 40D and 1D MK3 and all new Olympus SLRs. It's OK but the mirror has to flap to focus and shoot so there's an unwelcome delay - just like a compact - only the E-330 works as a normal SLR at the same time as providing a live view.

So real, full-time SLR live view is impossible? Not at all, cue the E-330! An extra sensor shares the viewfinder, seeing what you see and putting it on the screen. That mode (called Mode A) works like a compact and it also has a mirror lock up mode (Mode B). You can use it like a compact or SLR, it has some of the advantages of both. Paired with a housing it's a neat package for divers looking to graduate to the undoubted advantages of an SLR. Like various things that Olympus do, e.g. effective dust reduction, it's a product of lateral thought not just evolution. Some reviews and SLR fundamentalists have missed the point - compact



users never have trouble finding new ways to take pictures, holding cameras up, down or sideways to get their shot. I think there's a message there!

The body

The E-330 is an unusual looking SLR, the side swinging mirror which allows the extra sensor gives it a flat top. It's a solid plastic lump with a good handgrip and pleasant non-slip surfaces. The controls are clear and arranged around the centre piece of the back panel - an articulated 2.5" LCD which is bright and sharp but catches reflections easily. It moves in one plane - tilting up or down - very useful on land but not possible in the housing.

The resolution is an odd 7.5 Megapixels, slightly retrograde as the E-300 and E-500 were both 8. The new LiveMOS Panasonic sensor necessitated the drop and in fact 8 Megapixels are accessible from RAW files. Counting dots is missing the point, the difference is negligible. There are 3 auto-focus points which some regard as a demerit - the first thing I did was to disable the



outer two so it wasn't a problem for me! There are scene modes, several for underwater, but also full manual control and everything in between. It was never designed to be entry level and there are few things you can't configure.

Lenses

The standard lens (14-45mm, film equivalent 28-90mm) isn't bad but not very versatile underwater, the 50cm minimum shooting distance means this is no macro lens. Olympus' newer kit lens, a tiny 14-42mm, focuses much closer. But buying an SLR is all about the opportunities offered by specialist lenses, so I'll concentrate on those :-)

The first choice lens is Olympus' f2 50mm macro. For extra magnification it can be paired with an extension tube or 1.4x teleconverter. It



is famously among the sharpest lenses available for any camera and behaves like a 100mm film lens - excellent for portraits. The 1.4x and 50mm combination is now my macro weapon of choice - it allows crisp, close focus and considerable magnification. A compact 35mm lens offers greater magnification if you can get closer - excellent for slugs but not for fish portraits.

Olympus have no quality handicap in their wide lenses but there are no third party options on offer. The only prime option is an 8mm fisheye which covers 180 degrees diagonally. There's also a very well reviewed 11-22mm. Like the top of the range 7-14mm, it is rated as good as a prime, which is a rare complement.

The 7-14mm is the widest 'made for digital' lens available, a 14-28mm in film terms. You can't match this without a full frame SLR which costs much, much more! It's not a fish eye and has very, very little distortion. Your wallet will get a workout, this beautiful lens costs £1,200. It's for those unique shots which capture a whole scene or defeat impossibly bad vis.

Strobes

There's no room to raise the pop-up flash to trigger slaves so the only options are wired via the 5 pin bulkhead. This is Olympus' own connector and they make 2 flash and case combos but there are also several third party options.



I've tried both and there are some important pros and cons. In their favour they work superbly and have extraordinary delicacy of TTL control. In addition you are not restricted to typical SLR sync speeds (often slower than 1/200th second) and are free to go up to 1/4000th of a second - even compacts can't do that! On the downside the FL-20 isn't very powerful and whilst the FL-36 has higher output it saps the pair of AA batteries which power them both even sooner. Both are bulky in their cases, the FL-36 to a striking extent - the 60m housing is 10mm thick. The third party options work but are restricted to mortal sync speeds (1/180th second) and limited in TTL capability as the E-330 uses a very fast pre-flash which most units cannot recover from.

Battery life

After my C-7070's epic battery life I feared the E-330 was heading for a fall - but it's actually very good. Using the viewfinder helps and I've only reached its limits on long dives. Over 450 pictures (6GB of files) and around 3-3 _ hours is a very

useful performance. I normally feed it every couple of hours or dives. It seems to better some SLRs, e.g. Canon 400D, which I've seen fed batteries on a per dive basis.

PT-E02 Housing



The E-330 fits the 60m PT-E02 snugly, with little air space. If you've used an Olympus compact housing you'll notice how similar everything is, just bigger, better and tougher. The camera slides in on a locking sled, the strobe cable fits on the hotshoe and once the mode control is engaged you're ready to lock the case down. 4 sprung catches secure the back and compress two large, red o-rings. All the camera controls are brought out, none are shared. The rig is large but not big by housed SLR standards. Size is on par with metal housings rather than larger, more generic offerings. The black aluminium ports have a deep thread and are stiff to turn once the signature red o-ring engages - a filter



wrench is a boon when they need swapping. All the port windows are glass. The case allows manual control of one ring – focal length for zooms or focus for primes. The control can't reach if the teleconverter is used.

There's no shortage of other choices with cases from 10bar (also sold as Fantasea), Ikelite and Aquamir.

In use

The E-330 was baptised in Holland. The bulk of the rig disappears once submerged and I

was very quickly at home. Although live view is this camera's USP I soon found myself switching to the viewfinder and back as though I'd been doing so for years. It struck me that some scenes and subjects were easier with the viewfinder – it's more accurate framing macro with the camera steadied on your head... whilst wide benefits from the free view of both the subject and camera. A purist might suggest that both options were compromised but they wouldn't have both options. It's a shame the display can't be angled in the case (it can in the Aquamir) but it would obscure the viewfinder (the



Aquamir can't use it).

Although aware live view might be poor in low light this wasn't the case even on some very murky dives. One of the uses of live view was to arrange lighting from torches which helped focus under these tough conditions. It was a treat having a 'real' view for macro focussing and I was impressed for the most part at the new degree of control over macro which opened up in comparison to the C-7070 - still challenging but the strike rate was greatly increased with the SLR.

We dived the E-330 set up for wide and macro and aside from lens



changing it was much like diving with a compact – only bigger! The drill of 'o'-ring and strobe checking is the same and in some respects it's easier to line up larger catches and more reassuring to see bigger 'o'-rings 'squidged' thru the case.

The dome port looks like a cooking utensil after small, snappy cameras, you are soon very conscious of all the scratchy things which could damage it. Being glass it's not as vulnerable as a polycarbonate dome but then it does cost 2-3 times as much, gulp! Pre and post dive routines now include fitting and removing the dome's neoprene 'knickers'. The macro port is a subtler affair, giving the housing a 'pig snout' for nosing into tight spaces. One interesting feature is that each Olympus housing has the same thread and lens datum so your lens/port pairs can progress from case to case if you change your body.



The results

I spent days wandering around the garden taking pictures of everything until my first dive arrived, so there were fewer surprises when I took to the water.

Diving with new kit can be a challenge but after a first dive expecting too much instant improvement I was soon at home with macro - using the viewfinder in preference to the display – but with the option to place the camera off at an angle or low down. One aspect of SLR photography which shouldn't

have been a surprise was the linked effect of the increased aperture range and reduced depth of field. With the C-7070 I could set it to manual at 1/1000th and F8 and TTL flash would give foolproof exposure within a few feet. It took some time to understand how to trade depth of field for light. The instant readiness for the next shot, snappy focus and viewfinder were changes I had no problem accepting.

Back at my laptop I discovered buying an SLR hadn't made me into a great photographer overnight. I still had to hold the camera still, squeeze the shutter and compose

for a picture to work but there was a clean, pure look to the results that was immediately apparent. There's little picture noise and outside the depth of field the background detail was flattened, almost to extinction in some cases.

Whilst macro was an immediate pleasure it took longer to get used to ultra-wide angle. The 114° field of view was far beyond what I was used to and needed extra care in composition. It came into its own in Holland, we went for the cuttlefish breeding and conditions were murky to say the least! Having the widest

possible lens let us get really close, luckily the cuttlefish are preoccupied. This was a godsend and allowed some stunning pictures in grim vis. We've sometimes struggled to use our prize companion as it suits confident, static subjects or clear wide views - but it'll be our challenge to get the best from it. It'll be amazing for reefscapes and when we're attacked by something huge we'll get great pictures of ourselves disappearing inside.

One problem we encountered with the huge angle of view was that it was hard to get the strobe far enough out to avoid backscatter at

the fringes of the pictures – clearly some longer arms are required... We found our own solution; Dawn swam above the scene with a slave strobe which triggered off the wired one. That kind of performance benefits from the live view as the whole scene; strobes, lights and subject can all be marshalled.

Conclusion

Short on SLR experience I won't say whether the E-330 is better than others. The balance of review opinion seems to be that some competing systems focus a touch faster but that Olympus lenses are among the very best. As a package the E-330 makes a strong case as an upgrade from compact systems with great long term prospects. The case is very well tailored and smaller than the third party housings.

The flash connection is a weakness, but I've made hundreds of dives with no problem - although others haven't been so lucky/careful. I'll make simple guards for them but it would be good to see them positioned safely in the first place. Spares and replacements are available so damage is manageable.

The results have been really good; sharp, true coloured and clean. Operation is in a different league from

compact cameras with negligible shot to shot delay and no speed penalty in choosing to use RAW format - you can save full quality JPEG at the same time which covers all bases.

The large live view screen is a key benefit which makes the compact to SLR transition painless. If you already have an SLR it may not be the compelling reason to change but using the optical viewfinder is no problem either. If you are starting from scratch the very attractive deals on the E-330 make it a good choice - a unique camera with advantages above water too.

Pros: Big live-view, neat case, excellent lenses, cracking results, a real SLR

Cons: High speed TTL only with own brand strobes, ports not cheap, few cheap lens options

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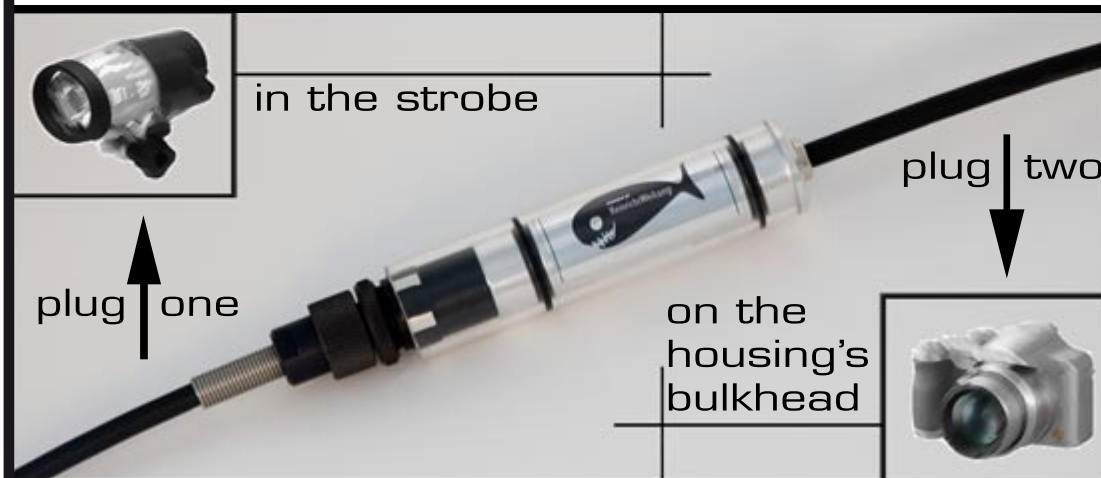
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