

Olympus Mju 770SW

by Rob Spray

A year or so ago I rushed to buy an Olympus Mju720SW when it was released as it seemed the perfect tough cookie camera to pick up all those deck shots which my big, heavy housed diving camera was now just too bulky to catch. The camera was robust, it could be dropped from 1.5m, and waterproof, it could be taken to 3m without a case but despite its credentials I never dropped it and didn't take it unhoused into the water - those levels of indestructibility weren't quite enough to feel comfortable abusing it. It seems I was unjustified in my squeamishness.

The third generation 7series SW model has just landed and now it's grown up, it has a 10m underwater rating and adds 100kg crush resistance to shrugging off falls from the same height as before. The surprise is that you'd be hard pushed to see where the construction has changed. It looks as though the original ratings were conservative.

Like the 720 it's a gorgeous thing to hold; exuding a solid, big watch feeling rather than the flexible, creaky feeling that other wispy cameras have.

There is a raised grip on the

front face to make life a little easier. However dressed in gloves for cold water the camera is hard to hold onto and it is very tricky to pick out the tiny buttons. With bare hands this isn't such a problem and I suppose that would probably put a limit of around 14degrees C on its use - though dry gloves would perhaps retain enough precision. The camera itself isn't bothered by the cold and is ok down to minus 10degrees C, by which time diving is pretty tough! The matching PT-035 dive case allows the camera to be used down to 40m and moves it up by a size or two - making the buttons larger and adding a threaded port for additional lenses and filters, a top cold shoe for lights or strobes and a tripod plate (which the camera also has). If you just want to keep scratches at bay there's some silicone skins on the way to protect the finish on the metalwork.

The external casing is entirely metal, a matt cast frame with brushed, bolted on panels and a 2.5" LCD on the back. All the buttons are metal too. It isn't rubbery and toy-like - which is the normal design shorthand for waterproof, it feels machined. You could suggest that it's a little 'bling'



The Mju770SW is tiny! It appears almost comically small beside other housed cameras (an Olympus C7070WZ here)

but even that's been toned down to a sheen from the chromed 720.

Our underwater trial was undertaken during a trip to Zeeland, Holland, where many of the dives were to less than 10m making it a suitable venue to carry it as a matter of course. We were impressed by the true





Spot metering has taken care of the prawn

to life colours and found it responsive and fun. Using it casually doesn't lend itself to quality photography but we were surprised by the ratio of scrap to keepers (which is always tough underwater). We're used to pixel peeping to assess pictures for huge enlargements or publication but a normal user would get excellent standard prints and enlargements. Getting a bit more nerdy; steadying, concentrating and framing will yield better results.

It's worth noting that unhoused the camera doesn't suffer the 1-2 stop loss of light due to a case's flash diffuser. This helps the range of the little flash, but does nothing for backscatter. What you miss from the case is a sunshade to shield the screen from the sun in shallow water. With the sun behind you it can be hard to see the picture – at least you have a free hand to use as a shade!

The often sub 5m vis in Holland didn't really allow distant shots,



The 770's small size is less imposing to animals than a housed camera. This lobster has no reservations.

which are generally more predictable in any case, so we majored on macro use. We both noticed how easy it was to hold the camera at arms length whilst tracking the subject and watching the framing down holes and under rocks which just isn't possible with big housed, strobed cameras. Anyone can take a bad picture with cameras like this but when you play to their strengths you realise that any diver could quickly learn to get a library of decent pictures from a

trip. After years of big, heavy, bulky cameras it was fun to have such a tiny camera and to enjoy snapping away. The 770 uses the same matchbook sized Li-ion battery as the 720 and we were struck by how much better the battery life was. Little batteries get a real workout in digital cameras and rarely last long but during a frenzied hour I managed more than 200 pictures. A 1GB xD will hold around 300 pictures in SHQ mode or double that in HQ (The SHQ jpeg file size is



This smiling oyster's orange neighbours are bright and true to life.

around 3.5MB).

Like all these 'flat' cameras the 770 uses a folded optical path, which means there is no external lens movement as you operate the zoom aside from a metal cover over the lens window which is treated to dispel water droplets after you surface. The lens itself is a 3x zoom, with the 38-114mm equivalent range typical of most compact cameras. There's a 'plain' macro mode which works down to 20cm as well as two super macro modes which can get you to

7cm. These aren't ground breaking macro distances but you win another 25% magnification underwater which means it will be light rather than proximity that will be the problem. The standard macro mode retains full use of the flash and zoom which makes it a good fish, crab or urchin setting for subjects a few inches across from 1-2 feet away.

Super macro fixes zoom mid way and disables the flash so if you have light you can get close but is less use when it's dark. There is a second

super macro mode which uses a white LED as a focus aid and torch and helps a bit but the camera still has to elevate the ISO (film speed) to keep the shutter speed useable. At super macro distances focus is super critical and the depth of field is limited so taking extra effort to steady yourself will aid success.

As an unexpected bonus the camera even has an onboard pressure meter (manometer) which means it records the depth (or altitude) of every shot and will start to warn you as you approach its 10m limit. Depths beyond that limit are recorded as 10m but the camera continues working - we took it as far as 16m with no sign of any problem. At less than 10m this has the handy side effect of profiling your dive and keeping your depth in view. When Dawn's computer failed on our last dive it was a pleasant surprise to have another backup depth gauge. Above water the gauge reads pressure and approximate altitude which means you can check on aeroplane cabin pressure (820hPa, 1800m - on Virgin Atlantic).

All in all, the 'indestructible' camera has come of age. It's not quite a dedicated diving camera, but it maybe as much as some people would need underwater. On top it has real all round ability for arduous adventure sports such as rafting, skiing, hiking and climbing without having to worry

about getting a record. Ever been on a trek where your camera had to be safely packed, tucked out of the rain or kept away from the snow? Not anymore!

Only a fool would expect a tiny camera to rival larger and more flexible models but the 770SW just doesn't have to stop when the going gets tough. Understand this is a point and shoot rather than some gross uber camera and it'll reward you with fine, first hand records of your adventures which no other unhoused digital camera can match.

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