

Fuji F200EXR

by Rob Spray

In the constantly shifting camera market there's a dividend to be gained from ploughing a different furrow. Most brands try to establish a niche for themselves and for Fuji it is the dark. When low light performance was the bane of digital photography they built a reputation for clever solutions and held a brave resolve in sticking to larger, lower resolution sensors rather than rushing into the unproductive megapixel race a few years back.

Now the ex-champions of conservative pixel counts have decided that they can offer it all and have built their new F200 around a new 'Super CCD EXR' sensor which has 12 million pixels and still works in the dark. They claim the sensor can offer high resolution, low noise and capture highlights. Then they muddy this by saying that it can switch between these three modes on the chip itself – thus implying that the alleged holy trinity aren't really all available at the same time.

The F200 has followed the F100 and appears to be its twin brother. The F200 is the kind of solid, well built trinket which anyone would welcome.

Apart from the USB and battery doors the body is metal clad. Although the buttons are plastic, there aren't many of them as the screen occupies most of the back panel. It's not wafer thin but is easy to stow in a pocket until the 3 section lens is powered up. The top and bottom surfaces are slightly concave which is supposed to make it easy to hold and certainly succeeds in adding a little style to the oblong profile.

The matching WP-FXF200 dive housing is equally pleasant to play with too. Reassuringly rigid and devoid of vulnerable protrusions it should survive life on board even UK dive boats and so should be easy to keep safe in the tropics where things are more genteel. The most notable feature of the case is the clever way it includes two 'o' ring seals on the back door, a unique feature in a case this size. It's a very neat arrangement which has a piston type 'o' ring on the door – like Canon cases do – and a gasket 'o' ring inside – the style that Olympus prefer. Either should be enough and they're both well screened from falling silt within a deep groove so they don't need cleaning all the

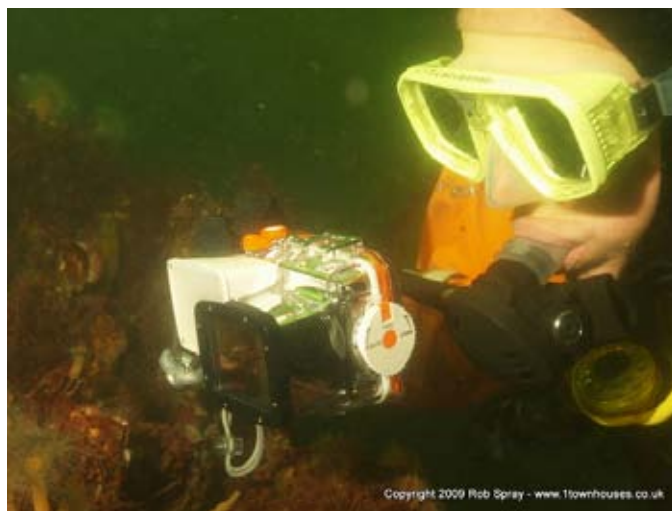


time. Throughout a week of use the 'o'-rings never collected the slightest speck of dirt. This is a very well designed sealing system which makes the set ideal for a school set up where maintenance and care might be 'variable'.

The only feature which seems absent from an otherwise well thought out little case is a shutter lever. A simple direct button does work but underwater it can be very difficult to feel for the half pressed position when your hands are cold, wet and gloved. The shutter button itself is a

little wobbly as it has to 'reach' across under the zoom control. This kind of wobble can wear a sealing 'o' ring faster than normal and since I hope you'll be using the shutter button an awful lot you had better keep an eye on it!

Another thing which became apparent was that while the macro performance is good on paper, down to 3cm, as soon as you zoom in that's long forgotten. By the time you are fully zoomed in it can't focus much less than half a metre away. Some cameras nobly maintain the minimum



possible distance at each stage of zoom but the Fuji, like many, makes a sudden step up. This severely limits what you can do close up, but it's not a unique failing. You hit the happiest medium at around 1/3 zoom but basically you have to get closer for more magnification so there's hardly any point zooming in. It's simply not a great macro lens though the results are very sharp, there's nothing wrong with the quality of the optics.

Far from being sophisticated the F200 is a bit of a raver. Especially close up it appeared to allow red, and to a lesser extent blue, to overload, rendering deeply coloured areas posterised and short of texture. At first I thought that it was simply poor flash control at close quarters but some shots well over a metre away were suspect too.

The battery in the F200 is pretty small, barely larger than those in some of the smallest cameras so it's no surprise that it has limited life. On a surface day out the F200 lasted for 206 shots, including lots of fiddling with menus and plenty of flash use. It's far from spectacular but easily lasted for

two 50 minute dives. More impressively the F200 showed no signs of fatigue even toward the end of the second dive and the flash was still cycling impressively fast – easily fast enough to cope with moving from shot to shot every few seconds.

Around a pair of caves the F200 made a great attempt at some very difficult interiors, dark walls with bright exterior views and sullen skies. Often it was holding detail in deep shadow we hadn't seen with our eyes, whilst also coping with bright areas. To do this it rarely dropped below ISO200 which didn't appear to compromise quality too much but was a trick it seemed to rely on a lot and many scenes which appeared quite unremarkable were shot at elevated speed too. This resulted in a strange mixture of surprise and disappointment where chance shots taken to see what would happen were really quite good and easy shots taken to keep seemed rather lifeless. Perhaps controlling the highlights and capturing the shadow is all very well but like a child who can only play one tune the F200 needs to learn when to try something different.

The F200 certainly does have good low noise and good low light performance but I'm not sure it should be resorting to raising 'film' speed whilst still losing light by increasing shutter speed and closing the aperture way beyond what is required. If the ISO100 performance isn't better than the ISO200 and 400 performance then why is it included? A curious user (i.e. me) might suspect something... is this simply required because a limited choice of lens aperture needs ISO to be the main mechanism for light control?

The F200 boasts a whole heap of modes... including a 'Manual' mode which is really very nominal – the aperture can be set only fully open or closed. That's 3.3 or 9 at wide angle and 5.1 or 14 zoomed in – absolutely no use for finely balancing strobe and ambient light. A three stop step (1/8 or 8x as much light) just isn't a fine adjustment.

The F200's piece de resistance is its eponymous EXR mode which is such a full auto that it will try to sort out your life completely. Apparently this is a full time job and it sets to work



adjusting itself continuously even when set down on a table pointing at a static scene. I'd imagine this would hammer the battery life. It's also very annoying to have a camera that rattles and clicks as though it is operated by clockwork. If the results spoke for themselves perhaps this could be forgiven but underwater waiting for the camera to shuffle around was a bit of a non starter – so it was ignored there. On a sunny day I turned the dial, which is very easy to spin as you pick it up, to EXR and watched it cope with extreme highlight and deep shadow around a concrete quay and glittering sea. Shooting into the sun or shadow the camera switched modes to keep exposure

under control under real duress. This was a real tour de force of the EXR sensor, holding onto a blazing sky behind a badly lit smiling face. Boats which were silhouetted in the bay weren't flat black or eroded by burnt out highlights. A really impressive performance – great dynamic range, highlight control and clean shadows with detail.

In searching for the best initial setting for use underwater I was torn between Program and, to my horror, the Noddy Underwater mode. There's not much to choose really but if you do slide around to P you can select goodies like centre focus, spot metering and exposure compensation. In Underwater mode control is

severely limited – you can go to the ISO item in the menu just to discover you can't change it!

The F200 is also impressively fast for a compact. Focus snaps in predictably and accurately. Underwater the yellow focus confirmation generally means sharp results, which is good as it's hard to hold half pressed. This makes it very useful as a note taking camera, you can move from subject to subject almost as fast as you can find them – it has no trouble having the flash ready for the next shot.

In general the best aspect of the camera is its build. The fit and finish is excellent and the controls are pretty crisp – but they are also very small. To add spice most of the controls are also concave and need the precision of a finger nail to operate. I have small fairly hands and even the tip of my index finger can cover the four way pad and menu button entirely. I'm not sure what someone with big banana fingers would make of it! In the dive case this isn't so much of a problem but the buttons are still very close together, the dial remains small and in thick gloves with cold hands using it is harder than it really needs to be.

As a camera for the well heeled surface traveller the F200 won't disappoint. It's fast and, at a high level, responsive and nice to use. Unfortunately digging deeper isn't

rewarded as most of the magic is only available in automated modes and trying to go your own way won't get much better results.

Underwater the case is excellent, aside from the small buttons, and the F200 remains easy to use. Its tendency to elevate film speed even under close up flash can be overcome in Program mode and it is fast and fun if you don't need to do much macro work.

On land

Pros: Fast, well built, strong totally auto camera work for a normal user, good in low light, low noise at high ISO. Retains highlights tremendously well.

Cons: Over enthusiastic reds in strong or flash light, poor macro performance in practice, complex menus, interfering scene modes, crippled 'Manual' mode, tiny buttons.

Underwater

Pros: Tough very secure and easy to maintain housing. Small and easy to use major functions. Accessory shoe for lights etc.

Cons: Macro limited. Flash coverage uneven and flash control unreliable, controls small for cold, gloved hands, no shutter lever. Boxed port limits additional lens options.

Rob Spray
www.1townhouses.co.uk

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