

Olympus E-620 SLR, PT-E06 housing and UFL-2 strobe

by Rob Spray

Hats off to Olympus, for a relatively small corporation they stream out interesting things at an impressive rate. The E-620 pitches up, the offspring of the tiny E-450 and the muscular E-3, retaining almost all the features of its larger parent while barely bigger than the smallest SLR available. It creates a new niche – a very compact enthusiast SLR and the worlds smallest with in-body image stabilisation

The depth of configuration is striking. There's a wealth of unexpected extras like battery warning levels, separate exposure offsets on all modes and even per point fine tuning of focus. Some review sites have taken exception to this, whining that it's just too much, but you never need enter the menu system if you don't want to. Olympus SLRs have a 'Super Control Panel' which gives display and control over a set of the most used parameters. It's a very natural way to set the camera, although you have to lift your eyes from the viewfinder.

The tilting 2.7" screen is one of the few I've used which can actually hold its own in bright sunlight. Another useful LCD option is to turn inward for protection. If you feel nostalgic looking at the blank back after doing this, why not try playing 'film camera'. See how long you can stand it!

The best 'surprise and delight' feature shows up after dusk; the control button cluster lights up. It's surprising how much this helps, whether to use the super control panel via the cursor pad or go straight to ISO, metering, AF or white balance you



can simply see the buttons you need. The glow also highlights review, live view and IS controls. What a great idea!

Wide Boy

Along with the E-620 a new lens arrived, a 9-18mm wideangle. I've used the fantastic 7-14mm lots, but it isn't light, cheap or easy to hide. For all the difference in cost, it's the contrast in size which hits home most. Little larger than the kit lenses - themselves very small - it hardly extends either. Unlike other 'budget' range lenses it has a metal mount and unlike the 7-14mm it can use filters, 72mm. Olympus should give it nicer control rings to show that it costs more than its range mates. Its crisp and distortion free at all apertures and fits nicely behind the Olympus dome. The dome is an



investment but I've found it very flexible, mine has been used with 5 different cameras and 6 different lenses. Time after time I've been very glad that it was glass... Coming in from from a shore dive in heavy surf I was knocked down repeatedly. Although the camera and I were rolled in the gravel I was able to hose the sand and stones off the housing without any problem. Try that with an

acrylic port, especially one which is secured with plastic clips! The PT housings are tougher than they look, diving alongside a pro in Borneo his big case looked the part until it started shipping water. The generic 'pro' case had cracked on the flat faces between buttons and the port was riddled with stress fractures. On PT cases curved faces avoid the localised stresses that cause that kind of damage and the port fixing is a heavy gauge metal thread. My buddy was also stunned that I could happily pick up the whole rig by the port... big isn't better :-)

What do points make?

Before the E-3 arrived, Olympus SLRs had just three focus points (nothing I ever found a problem, I use the centre). The E-620 has 7 rather than 11 the E-3 has. Five are fully biaxial - 4 sensors at each crosspoint. Much to my surprise, I soon found a use for them; shooting fish with a macro lens, the wider net of points gave more warning of subjects in its wafer thin depth of field and boosted lens ballistics (nerdspeak translation – it was faster). With static macro I prefer to choose the focus point myself.

If you read reviews you'll see that the E-620 is rated ahead or on par with its competitors in all respects bar one – faint praise if you compare the build quality and feature set which

are markedly better. There's only one aspect where it trails, lack of video recording which is creeping into SLRs– although rarely full rate and clunky to say the least. It has a lot in common with the reservations about liveview and it seems that the new Micro Four Thirds cameras are the ones which have done it right from the outset. It may be that Olympus is trying not to muddy the waters with a half baked option, but given their lead in liveview, the omission is odd. Olympus introduced SLR liveview back in 2007; their pioneer E-330 used an extra sensor which worked better than the system on this and pretty much every new SLR now. SLRs now lock the mirror up to expose the sensor and relay its view to the screen. While in liveview all the camera can do is focus like a compact, only when the mirror drops can it use its fast AF. The E-620 can use a hybrid of both methods to refine liveview focus, but isn't as fast as direct view and phase detection alone. It certainly wouldn't hurt to have the contrast detect algorithms from the cute mirrorless Micro Four Thirds cameras.

PT-E06 - case for the defence

In the flesh this new case is an impressive upgrade. Where the case for the E-330 was over butch with a few design eccentricities and the



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minimalist model for the E-400 series perhaps looked a little effete – now the PT-E06 looks just right. While handling it I noticed myriad design tweaks which showed it had been thoroughly re-thought.

The highlights are:

- Black front section, two fibre ports and one wired strobe connector
- Labelled buttons - no more peering at transparent, moulded letters
- Outer 'O' ring now captive piston type - door doesn't have to be tight to seal
- Inner 'O' ring is now captive and easy to inspect.
- Single large locking wheel - instead of fingernail breaking catches
- Zoom control gear now has smooth teeth – a huge improvement

I had precisely no trouble with my PT-E03 (for the E-400/410, and 420 when modded), but there were



Nerd detail! The inner O ring is a captive gasket, the outer is a piston type

people who blamed the bump over the flash for allowing the case to flex – it seemed to me that the zig-zag path the 'O' ring followed was vulnerable to fitting error. The PT-E06 has buttresses each side of the flash so the 'O' rings follow a smooth path. The whole back door looks to have been reworked by the people responsible for the little Fujis – models of tough common sense. The 40m rating looks very conservative. The opaque front half of the case is very black ops cool but rather than macho the black is to stop scatter when using the pop up flash to trigger strobes.

Extra toughness has made the PT-E06 thicker than the PT-E03, a shame as the older housing was comfortably small enough to use single handed – very useful if you want to dismount a strobe to change the mood of your lighting.

The makeover extends to the buttons; they've been spread out and enlarged slightly. To do that the 'OK' has moved out from the centre of the cursor pad which is less intuitive, but as they're better spaced out the furthest ones don't need to be so tall.

Olympus UFL-2 Strobe

In a funny way, the camera wasn't the biggest news in the E-620 test bundle. The unassuming, though admittedly cobby, UFL-2 has been something I and a lot of other nerds have been waiting for. It's nothing more or less than the first completely dedicated digital flash for diving. You can house every land flash under the sun but I don't think anyone else has done the job this way - properly. The very idea of a zoom headed flash is something I haven't even heard discussed. The UFL-2 picks up its rich feature set for free because it is, actually, Olympus' FL-36 mid range flash made watertight. The style suggests Sea and Sea made the case, no shame in that! I guess the zoom head dictated the chunky outline but despite the plump body, they didn't



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find space for more batteries. It takes two AA's but it should have been trivial to fit four in.

Unusually for a strobe the UFL-2 has a display, and lots of controls, lifted from the FL-36. Apart from Power, there's Mode, Zoom and Backlight – for the display – as well as a dial. It needs the display because it can be configured quite extensively. The mode button is the key to setting the strobe, cycling through its modes; Manual, Auto, TTL Auto, FP TTL Auto, FP Manual, Slave Auto



The UFL-2 is an incredibly light and compact TTL underwater flash that is waterproof to 60 metres.

and Slave Manual. Some are only available with a cable connection - as there's a dialogue through the hotshoe. Not as complicated as it sounds, but in reality you choose a mode and use it. It's just that unlike a normal strobe, there are more than two choices.

Zoom zoom

Strobes traditionally major on their wide angle coverage, to suit ultra wide lenses (and make aim easy) so a zoom head is a novelty. The head follows the lens and provides matched



Kate meets a lobster and the UFL-2 lights a wide angle scene

coverage from 12mm to 42mm (8mm with diffuser). Although the UFL-2 is comparatively small, its 'zoomed in' guide number of 36m sounds impressive. Power falls as the beam spreads and drops to 20 at its widest. The coverage is tighter and more rectangular than most strobes. The narrow beam is more efficient but harder to aim, though even '42mm' is much wider than the macro set up I normally use (70mm 4/3 format, 140mm film equivalent).



Remotely interested

The strobe has the Olympus 5 pin bulkhead connector, a simple, hardy set up, which isn't mentioned anywhere. Possibly moot anyway as the UFL-2 can also be controlled optically. Olympus SLRs have offered full wireless for a while and both UFL-2 and PT-E06 have fibre ports. The camera uses flash bursts to signal its intentions and once set to RC mode the system works as though it's wired, except that strobe control is brought onto the back of the camera. It's pretty cool; from the camera you can select any of the modes and control 3 channels of apparently unlimited flashes. It opens up the option of some very complicated multi-strobe lighting. In RC mode the UFL-2 can trigger third party strobes, but you can't use the second port on the PT-E06 for this - the control pulses would false trigger.

The wireless system even adds control options over the equivalent wired, housed FL-36 and there's no difference in exposure or flash performance at all. The optical RC flash mode is extremely



straightforward. The fibre connections are much smaller than wired so it's another way to save bulk, weight, vulnerability and complication. The PT-E06 and UFL-2 work very well together, nicely balanced, easy to handle and well integrated. Two UFL-2s would be so easy to use that they would be the obvious choice for a simple, light travel set up. While the UFL-2 is a great macro strobe it needs back up to light big scenes - if a strobe version of the FL-50R becomes available it would answer that need completely. As the wireless system brings all the control to the back of the camera it would be very easy to work with an asymmetric pair. For



wide angle the wireless mode offers potentially mind numbing possibilities, but actually simplifies the addition and use of extra strobes. Housing the FL-36 properly has made it much more pleasant to use - a land flash with the form factor of a strobe. Although the wired connector could be positioned better and it's not cheap.

The deep buttresses either side of the flash bump do make access to the flash connector and the mode dial a little cramped. Stuff which sticks out is vulnerable and on balance it's much better to have a housing which still works. Not all boats have spacious camera tables and when cameras mix with



dive gear it's rarely the dive gear which suffers. On top there's a cold shoe for focus lights.

Photo finish

During macro and wide angle sessions off North Norfolk I had a great time; first capturing tiny wildlife and then taking in the scenery. I felt the image stabilisation of the E-620 helped but IS shouldn't work close up so it was probably just a placebo. The IS is driven by the same technology as the dust buster which keeps the sensor clean. Although almost every SLR has one now it's the only system which has worked in independent

testing. Dust isn't a big deal for Olympus shooters, but there's no point tempting fate. The E-620 made a little dip off the beach one of the most rewarding dives of the year as my friend Kate and I found the chalk reefs of Sheringham in fine form. Even the lobsters were cooperative! Up North in the Farnes the seals enjoyed us as much as I enjoyed shooting them. Noise reduction and noise filtering can be adjusted on all Olympus SLRs so you can play with the balance of noise/grain and the softening filtering causes. The default is balanced towards detail and a filmic grain, not a super clean, cold digital look.

Conclusion

From a standing start in 2005 the PT-E series has made continual strides and Olympus is still the only manufacturer to have a complete underwater DSLR system. The relative 'mass' production of their housings allows a depth of design absent from more generic alternatives – producing some of the smallest on the market.

The E-620 is small, feature packed and gives nothing away to its rivals photographically. The PT-E06 is tough, well thought out and a pleasure to use with numerous improvements over previous PTs. The UFL-2 isn't the most powerful strobe but it has superb finesse, you can light subjects actually

resting on the burner!

If you've read this far you won't be surprised that I liked this rig. It's a build improvement over my current set up; while not as comfortable it's a better working tool. I'd be happier handing this package into the care of a 'helper' than my previous toys!

Rob Spray

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