

Olympus TG-810 Review

by Rob Spray

Olympus has been setting the agenda amongst the rugged camera fraternity for a while now and the TG-810 is the latest and greatest. Proof against more things in more ways than any of its rivals – the TG-810 can be dropped from 2m, submerged to 10m, crushed by 100kg, frozen to -10°C and apparently it even resists scratches. At the same time it's crammed to the gills with outdoor extras, so now when the going gets tough the Tough knows where it's going.

Most compacts have been getting smaller but the top Tough has actually been bulking up. It's no lightweight but this palm sized bruiser is muscular rather than flabby. You can even imagine it jostling up to a bar, but unlike bald, stocky Hummer drivers it's amazingly well endowed. It still looks good and can mix with the toffs and the tuffs – it won't look out of place surfing or schmoozing, although it's not as Rolex-like as its ancestors. It's almost a one stop shop for action people and has grown up as a camera too.

If you've met one of the Tough family before then the exterior will be familiar. The signature sliding

metal cover keeps crud and incoming missiles away from the lens when off duty. Although the back panel has regressed to plastic rather than the liberal metalwork of the front and accent chunky end cap, it is dominated by a superb 3" VGA display. One reason for the increased plastic content is that the TG-810 is Eye-Fi compatible. Eye-Fi SD cards are a great complement to the frontierless approach of this camera – but there are so many other add-ons we should save that story for another day!

So it's Tough but what's new? Well, the case reveals one of the major outdoor enhancements without serious searching. The bulge on top shouts GPS so you'll guess that every photo is geotagged (at least outdoors when there's reception) with your location. There's a compass too for old school walking about and a manometer which can tell you how high up you are or how deep underwater you've ended up. It begs a few questions... not the least of which is how soon will one of these carry Bluetooth or act as a phone. Phones packing dodgy cameras have been dogging us for ages but how much better to



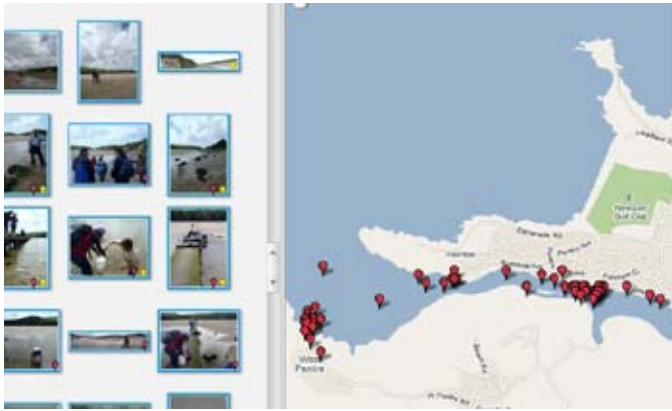
have a camera that can call rather than a phone that acts as a half baked camera?

The large single waterproof door has had an extra lock installed since the last generation which provides access to the SDXC compatible card slot, battery compartment, USB/charging connection and micro HDMI socket. The lock lever only turns when the catch has locked properly so you know you're watertight. The new door has two seals; one gasket and one piston O ring – twice as many as the old style Tough which we took to 20m! The controls are small and metallic but you can engage Tap Control if you expect to be wearing gloves or wielding ham fists.

Whether any little camera needs 14 Megapixels is open to question, but that's what the top Tough has so it's up to speed for any spec hunter. It won't break resolution records but I liked the handy 5x lens, running from 28-140mm (equivalent). For a camera



with folded optics it's sharp and fast to focus. I was surprised that ISO only goes up to 1600 when predecessors have gone higher, but I reckon that's just some welcome realism creeping in. I think the ISO is being used to hold longer exposures and collect more light. It has both optical and electronic image stabilisation which did a fair job under some severe duress on bouncing dive boats. Video shooting only uses the electronic version since that's fast enough to steady 30 HD frames per second. I was impressed with the video quality, as were those I shared the clips with, it's not a bad little camcorder and couldn't be easier to use with a



Geo tagged pictures can trace the path of a day - a walk along a river here - in software like Picasa

dedicated start/stop button on the back. It shoots 720P HD video in the efficient MP4 format – ideal for YouTube clips of your extreme antics. Video wasn't GPS tagged – or at least not in a way any of my apps recognised.

If you want to track your exploits bear in mind that all GPS systems need some time to get a fix, they recover more quickly if they haven't moved. I found it best to power up before moving off. The GPS isn't very configurable but will suggest local landmarks. Positions are given in old school degrees, minutes and seconds which is easy to covert to other format. Once locked every picture was tagged – with the last fix if there's a break in coverage. On playback you can see where you were and even which way you were facing.

Battery life itself is quite variable. As a plain camera the battery is a decent size (same as in the larger XZ-1) but with all the options on it's under pressure. Running the GPS and compass will shorten battery life, from about 300 to around 200 shots. This is a camera that will use power while it's



This kind of camera is ideal for underwater nature lovers, this scallop is 10m down

not shooting too and while there are power saving options, a second battery is a must – like I suggest with all little cameras.

The 10m depth rating is enough to actually start diving, so for a proper test I took it for a dip – much to the disbelief of everyone else on the boat. Underwater the sharp screen is excellent and the manometer keeps track of how deep you are, warning when nearing the 'limit'. We've doubled what's suggested by '10m' cameras but that's silly and there's a matching 40m housing for regular divers. It's worth having as the enlarged controls are easier for cold or gloved hands at greater depth. The joystick particularly needs a deft touch underwater but I was running through all the options which most normal people would set and forget.

The compass works underwater too and there's a navigation mode which can be called up wet or dry which lets you pretend to understand where you are with altitude/depth, heading and position (or the

last fix underwater as there's no GPS for anyone there). The compass works with the camera vertical (like when you're shooting) which feels odd as the responsive needle looks like a real one which you'd use flat.

If you need a Tough camera then you really don't need look any further, by any measure (short of underwater housings) the TG-810 is the toughest Tough ever. The range has a real spread and starts with waterproof enough for any surface use and ends up here with a model dripping with extras. It's not a shoddy snapper and can step up to daily duty for most folk. Even for me whose SLR goes out in all weathers and any topside location there are times when I can't (or won't) put it in harm's way and this is the perfect antidote to photo free peril.

All the bells and whistles simply add to the outdoor credentials of a very decent little camera. To pack everything into the flat case takes folded optics but these are now well developed and the equal of many an expanding lens – I'm sure that's no surprise. I really took to this rugged spring visitor and enjoyed looking at the tracks of my days out and being able to pinpoint views and locations. Not everyone needs all that, but most of us would enjoy it and if you work in the field or spend plenty of time there, it's a great go everywhere companion.

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