

Zen WA-100

by Rob Spray

When the Olympus Pens arrived fully on the underwater scene with the PTE-01 housing for the E-PL1 there was just one topic of disappointed comment. The official line was that the port could not be changed. It was immediately obvious this was just ‘misinformation’. The port could be changed easily but for some reason Olympus weren’t developing any alternatives.

That was bad news. What’s a capable camera doing underwater if it can’t be exploited? The standard port was flat and bulky – a compromise in most respects. True you could use a number of lenses including the 9-18mm ultra wide angle but it would be a wasted travesty behind a plain pane.

Luckily it didn’t take long for third parties to ride to the rescue. I think Zen beat Athena to the market but both quickly turned out the compact domes that were the most obvious absentee. Both have gone on to produce macro ports and Athena has added adaptors to other port formats but it was the Zen dome that crossed my path first.

I’m sure you all know why a dome is desirable, but for the

uninitiated it is because they retain the surface angle of view of lenses by trying to maintain a perpendicular air to water transition. It is the oblique angle of transition that adds converging power and magnification to your view through a flat port (or your mask).

The WA-100 is pretty small for a dome, it’s a very similar size to the standard port. As the name suggests it’s 100mm (4 inches) across. It’s a very good match for the tiny Micro Four Thirds lenses, most especially the Olympus 9-18mm but also the 14-42mm kit lens.

Unlike the standard port the walls of the Zen are aluminium rather than polycarbonate. This adds a little weight to the setup, which is particularly handy with the E-PL1 housing if you haven’t bought the VF-2 eye level viewfinder and simply have an empty void in the top of the case. The port tube extends to offer a built in shade which doubles as protection for the dome. The shade is, neatly, part of the port tube – so there are only two parts to the dome port, tube and glass aside from a pair of ‘o’ rings.

Olympus would have you



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The WA100, works fine with the Pen kit lenses but needs a wider lens to exploit it fully

believe that the standard port cannot be changed, in fact it is very easy. It hasn’t been designed for rapid replacement but it is a bayonet fit with a small locking plate secured with one small screw. Swapping the port is a 5 minute job – including replacing the locking plate. The port was as least as good a fit as the original and both have harder, black rubber ‘o’ rings that can stay in place long term – soft, coloured port ‘o’ rings can be vulnerable to crystallised salt pushing



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Drifting fast. The 9 to 18mm is fast enough to grab shots

them aside after a numerous cycles of use and drying.

The dome is glass and thus added to the density of the port, I guess the benefit of this depends on the strobes you use but with my setup of UFL-2s or YS-120s it feels very well balanced. I like glass ports and feel much more relaxed than with acrylic as we dive lots of rough gravel shores. Glass is tough but acrylic can be buffed out – every



Confusing? An undomed Pen in action shot with a domed Pen

ying has a yang.

Optically the dome seems to do the trick, its shallow and covers the 100 degree view of the 9-18mm but wouldn't suit the 180 degree diagonal of the 8mm fisheye (as far as I know). Zen haven't dressed up the dome with anything more than a logo. There's nothing to catch crud or collect salt and that's just dandy.

The WA-100 has transformed my Pen from

my bridesmaid camera with the 'jack of all trades, master of none' standard port to my preferred wide angle set up and also default 'camcorder'. That's part dome and part the arrival of the 9-18mm lens. The two are a match made in heaven (well the US and China respectively) and as the lens is an MSC (Movies and Stills Compatible) model it is a revelation for shooting video. The internal focus optics are apparently reduced to just one very light element which can be flung around rapidly, silently and smoothly. The MSC lenses are a huge improvement over the original Pen kit lens which wasn't home video friendly at all.

Once you've been using it for a while you forget how you blend into the crowd with a smaller camera and how it's no longer such a consideration to go wide angle on a beach dive or small boat. It is so much easier to keep small kit safe and while swapping ports might not be quite as simple as some systems you can seriously consider carrying two complete systems and still be hauling less luggage and shelling out less cash than with conventional SLR shooting.

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