

Olympus PT-EP05L housing and E-PL3 camera

by Jussi Hokkanen

The nice people at the Olympus UK lent us the new Olympus E-PL3 camera and the PT-EP05L for a thorough test and we managed to give it a good soaking in the Northern Red Sea last week.

The E-PL3 is the latest PEN Lite camera in the series and as the previous PEN models the E-PL3 also comes with an Olympus housing. Made from polycarbonate, the PT-EP05L housing looks very similar to the previous PEN housings but there are also some differences. The most useful change is the new port with a 67mm thread and another new feature is the 4 led focusing lights on the port.

The E-PL3 camera continues the series of PEN interchangeable lens compact cameras and is only a very moderate update to the previous E-PL2 camera. Traditionally the E-PLx Pen Lite series have been situated underneath the true PEN E-Px series. However, with the latest models it is very hard to find any real differences between the higher E-P3 and the E-PL3 models. In comparison with the previous Pen Lite, the E-PL2, the differences are again marginal.

Both of the cameras have the same 12.3 megapixel sensor and identical functions including RAW capture. The only real spec change is the 1080 HD resolution with the latest model in comparison with the 720 HD resolution on the E-PL2. According to Olympus the E-PL3 is also a faster focusing machine in comparison with the previous model. The camera body itself has got some more visible differences like the E-PL3's tilting screen, which can be handy on land but completely useless underwater.

The new screen is in 16:9 format which will please video makers but leaves lots of empty space in the edges when using the camera in still modes. Generally the E-PL3 camera body feels a bit sturdier and more metallic in your hand.

Another thing worth noting is that the E-PL3 does not have a pop-up flash. It looks like Olympus has copied Sony's approach with the NEX range; these cameras did not have a built-in strobe either but came with a small clip-on unit that can be attached on the hot shoe. With the Olympus E-PL3 you will get the clip-on FL-





www.deepshots.co.uk



www.deepshots.co.uk



www.deepshots.co.uk

LM1 strobe with every retail package.

On the housing side the obvious novelty factor are the LED spotting lights. The 4 lights are situated around the port and powered by two AAA batteries inside the housing. A small electrical cable connects the battery casing to the lights itself. Internally the port is similar to the previous PEN housing ports, so if you want to use Zen ports with the housing, it is possible. The PT-EP051 has the same bayonet and port removal lock of the previous PEN housings, which can be removed with a screw driver.

Before removing the port you will also need to unplug the cable for the led lights. Pull the white socket carefully with small pliers to unplug. The first time you remove the port is can be extremely tight so use a rubber strap wrench for the job. After couple of times and some lubrication the port seems to loosen up and comes off easier.

The housing feels really nice in your hand and as always the clearly marked Olympus buttons are the best in the business. The size of the housing is considerable bigger than your average compact housing but still very manageable. The package is a bit buoyant underwater but when adding a strobe

and a lens it is extremely nicely balanced. The only criticism I have for the housing is the cheap flash mask. It's almost like the designers of the housing forgot to include this very much-needed mask when they were planning the housing and that the resulting floppy plastic bit was thrown in as an afterthought. The mask sheet is held in place with two supplied rubber push caps and when external strobes are in use by the sync cable ends themselves. Definitely not the most elegant solution but at least it worked during our test week in the Red Sea. And if you loose it you can always cut yourself a new one out of cardboard.

Where the Olympus E-PL3 camera and the PT-EP051 housing really shine is in practice. When we saw the first pictures of the housing we were intrigued by the possibility of using wet lenses with the set-up. Once we laid our hands on the first prototype we realised that the E-PL3 camera could also be used with a wet wide-angle lens. For the first time we would have a large chip system camera with full wet lens capability. And now after testing the package in anger I can reveal that this works even better than we thought.

The E-PL3 camera with the basic 14-42mm kit lens can be used with a wet 67mm macro and wide-angle lens during a dive. The new Inon UWL-H100 M67 type 2 wide-angle lens and the fact that the Olympus 14-42 lens is its longest on its widest position makes this all possible. The 14-42mm lens sits so near the port glass when on its 14mm (28mm) position that it does not vignette at all with the Inon lens and picture quality remains very good.

For macro just zoom the lens to the maximum tele position (84mm) and swap the wide-angle for a close up lens. It's worth noting that the 14-42mm lens does not focus very close without any assistance so it is not a perfect close-up lens but with a strong macro add-on lens you can get reasonably close and do everything apart from a super macro. You should get at least +10 macro adapter for general close-up photography and for smaller things even +16 is not too much. Stacking up is the key here; get a of couple different stackable macro lenses so that you can choose your magnification according the situation at hand.

Remember that the 14-42mm f3.5-5.6 II R lens that ships with the E-PL3 is a new and smaller



version of the previous kit lens and so the old 14-42 zoom gearing, the PPZR-EP01, does not work. However, I tested the 9-18mm zoom ring (PPZR-EP02) on the new 14-42mm II R and that seems to be a perfect fit. The 9-18mm and the new 14-42mm II R are almost identical in size.

Obviously if you already happen to have a lot of micro four thirds lenses you can also use them with this setup. We also tested the new 50mm f1.8 lens with macro add-on lens. Zen Underwater has a range of ports available for the PEN system wide-angle lenses. The dome ports are available for the fairly inexpensive Olympus 9-18mm and for the excellent but pricy Panasonic 7-14mm. You also have a super-wide choice as Zen is now doing a stubby dome port for the Panasonic 8mm fisheye lens.

The port LED lights clearly are one of the selling points of the new Olympus housings. The lights are nice touch but in real life of little use on day diving. On a night dive they work reasonably well as your macro focusing lights. These lights do not have the auto flash off function that “real”

focusing lights offer but the lights are hardly powerful enough to bleed into the photos when using an external strobe.

Olympus is a company that is not afraid to try new things and if the lights were more powerful and have the self-extinguishing feature they would be an awesome add-on but as it is they are more of a novelty than anything else. In the end nothing beats a good powerful spotting light smacked on an accessory shoe.

For this review I also used an Inon S-2000 strobe with the Olympus package. The strobe’s S-TTL function works faultlessly with the camera when on A and P mode; I did almost no adjustments during my dives. Olympus tries to push their own underwater strobes but I would give them a miss. The UFL-1 and 2 are quite slow and underpowered in comparison with the Sea & Sea and Inon models. When it comes to underwater strobes you are getting what you pay for; I’ve never tested a good cheap UW strobe.

The Olympus E-PL3 and its PT-EP051 housing package offer a lot for both the SLR and the

compact camera shooter. It can be a great package for the “first upgrade” as it offers the flexibility of a compact camera system with its wet lenses and is at the same time a significant leap up in image quality. I can also sincerely recommend it to an old SLR user. The image quality is very well on par with a basic SLR cameras and the housing package is so much lighter and cheaper. Additionally you will get all the manual modes and features of a digital SLR camera.

The PT-EP051 housing only costs about £600 in the UK and the full package with a camera and Inon wet wide-angle lens is only about £1500. It is impossible to find anything of this quality and size on the market for this price. And just before I forget I have to add that there is also an aluminium Nauticam housing made for the E-PL3 camera. So if you need to dive deep with your E-PL3 you have to go for the Nauticam option as the Olympus housing is only depth rated to 45 meters. The Nauticam housings is also double the price of the Olympus housing and as the PT-EP051 works so beautifully I’m not sure if I’d even want the Nauticam.

Finally Olympus has hit the jackpot with their underwater photographic product. They have been lost in the dark for years...in fact since the now ancient and almost forgotten C-5060. Let’s hope they can keep it up.

Jussi Hokkanen
www.deepshots.co.uk

www.oceanleisurecameras.com

Thanks to Paul “Duxy” Duxfield for additional photos and comments.