

First look: Olympus 12-50mm

by Dan Bolt

Anyone who knows me knows just how much I like shooting with my Olympus PEN E-PL1 and Olympus PT-EP01 housing. I love the camera, I love the housing, I love the ports and I love the lenses. However, amongst this love nest I do have a least-favoured bit of kit; and that is the Olympus 9-18mm wide-angle zoom lens. I don't want to take too much away from this tiny little marvel of lens design, but even behind the superb Zen dome port it is very easy to end up with soft edges and personally I find the rectilinear distortion a bit too exaggerated for my tastes.

If I had waited for a few months and gone for the E-PL3 I could be using an external wet-lens to give me the same 100degree coverage, but alas I was far too keen and as such can not apply the wet-lens solution to my housing. So having trawled for an alternative to the 9-18mm for some time I was quite keen to get my hands on the newly released Olympus 12-50mm lens.

Looking at the specification it was clear that it would be an interesting lens for underwater use, giving a 35mm equiv zoom range of

24-100mm, and even better it would fit behind both the Zen dome-port and the original Olympus flat-port which came with the PT-EP01. This is one of the new breed of MSC (movie and stills compatible) lenses so it is silent in its operation, has both manual and electronic zooming and, most usefully for putting into a housing, the zoom and focusing elements are all internal.

Putting it behind the Zen dome and jumping in the water means you get full use of the 85degree angle of view, which while not as wide as the 9-18mm is still pretty useful. At the wide end you can focus very close indeed, certainly within 0.20m of the port. On-land this close-focus ability is kept throughout the zoom range, but underwater it quickly jumps out to about 0.5m at 20mm, 1m at 30mm and 1.5m at 50mm. Not so useful in the murky waters of the UK but potentially not a deal-breaker in clearer water. Someone who knows a good deal more about domes/optics than I do may be able to explain why this is the case? (Our esteemed Editor has since contacted me to recommend adding a + dioptré as the left shots show works. The exact strength is still being ascertained).



*Common Starfish at 12mm (84°)
(1/125th, f/12, iso320, +4 dry dioptré,
1x YS-110a*



*The same Common Starfish at 50mm
(24°) 1/125th, f/18, iso320, +4 dry
dioptré, 1x YS-110a*



River Dart topside, 1/30th, f/7.1, iso800, 12mm (84°), 2x YS-110a strobes, Zen WA-100 dome



(Top left) Boring Sponge, 1/100th, f/3.5, iso200, 12mm (84°), 2x YS-110a strobes, Zen dome

(Right) Common Starfish, 1/125th, f/14, iso200, 50mm (24°), SubSee +10, 2x YS-110a strobes, Zen dome

The surprising bonus of this long focal distance is the ability to make use of strong dioptries. I've got an old Subsee +10 which is often far too strong for other lenses, but on the 12-50mm at its longest zoom (35mm equiv of 100mm) suddenly it becomes a pretty useful macro lens too. Using the +10 cuts the working distance down to about 20cm with a frame covering about 40mm. Not super-macro territory but certainly very useful on the same dive where you can also shoot diver portraits.

The lens also has a dedicated macro mode, but this fixes the lens at 43mm for your entire dive

while not providing as much magnification as a +10 and a working distance of only 10cm. Personally I would prefer to use the external dioptre and retain the zoom capability.

My first impression of this lens is quite favourable. Certainly it has a versatile zoom range for exploring new dive sites where you don't know what you will encounter. There is some light drop-off in the corners at 12mm but nothing too dramatic, and I have been impressed with the sharpness even fully open. It's not the quickest lens at f/3.5-6.3 but the PEN cameras have superb high ISO handling and good image stabilization which can negate the



Best of buddies, 1/50th, f/3.5, iso800, 12mm (84°), 2x YS-110a strobes, Zen WA-100 dome

effects of a slow lens. Focusing was always very snappy even in the dark waters of my local river on a cloudy day in February.

By the next issue of UWP I should have spent a week in the Maldives so hope to have more feedback on this lens.

Dan Bolt

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