

Olympus TG-1 & PT-053 Housing

by Rob Spray

If you're a lifestyle kinda dude/dudette you may have heard of the Olympus Tough range. If you're always living life to the extreme and hanging ten you might well have one or perhaps one of the many rugged, flat little cameras that their success kicked off. They were all well and good and as robust as these flat cameras usually were, photographic capability sometimes took a back seat. That situation has had some relief airlifted in... enter the lens fetish camera for masochists!

I have a great life and it got better recently when I was asked out to Gozo to test some cameras. This was a chance to eye Olympus' underwater range and rates as the kind of invitation that has a 'yes, please' floating in the air beside ready to use immediately. Of course there were big cameras and medium cameras but in true three bears style there was also a baby camera. The baby of this party was the new Tough TG-1. Lined up beside the big boys it may not have shouted "I'm really going to surprise you" but it was a unanimous hit with those who tried it.

In the last couple of years we have seen the (very welcome) return of creative compacts with decent lenses. After the pixel wars ended photographers proved their good taste by snapping up enthusiast compacts with bright glass. It's obvious that letting more light in is a good thing and the TG-1 rewrites the class rules by adopting this mantra.

The TG-1 has an f2.0-4.9 lens, nearly 4 times brighter than almost every other rugged camera

(I think the recently superseded Canon D10 is the only rival which is honourably close at f2.8). It's not as bright as the current lens fetish king (the XZ-1) but it is as bright as something quite serious like a Canon S100 and although it is 20mm shorter in reach than the S100 it stays brighter through the range it does cover. It has an interesting 25-100mm (equivalent = 82 – 24°) 4x zoom range too.

On a compact with a small sensor even f2.0 doesn't give you much subject isolation, the big advantage is that the camera has way more light to play with for focus and image capture. The auto focus system is branded FAST (Frequency Acceleration Sensor Technology) just like the latest Pen range. That initially sounds over ambitious but it really is a very fast little camera... on a par with the XZ-1 and kicking other high end rivals into touch without much effort. It's great for grabbing impromptu snaps in social situations or subtle street shooting.

Another surprise was stellar battery life – on a diving day I managed 380 shots! It's fair to mention however that shot life was achieved before all the bells and whistles were powered up. There are some good ones – including a tracking GPS and a 3D compass – but they consume power and that eats into shooting time. You can power down the features you don't need but if you don't the 3.6 V 1270mAh battery will top out at a more modest 220ish pictures. The down side of a hefty battery is long (2-3 hour) recharge times via the camera's USB port – a USB power supply is included in



The Olympus TG-1 - not wafer thin but easily pocketable



Me, by a diver trying a camera for the first time, excuse the flash scatter, but not bad eh?

case you travel back to the 1980's. I'd buy another battery so a weekend of shooting could be self sufficient but if you are normal this could last you much longer.

The GPS acquires lock faster than previous

models and can log your track as you travel with your family surfing, skiing, zorbing and flower arranging. Position is recorded to one second of precision (1/3600th of a degree) which is about 30m. Of course the included software will let you playback your adventures but the data is also easily accessible in plenty of other ways. Pictures are tagged with position information whenever the GPS is on and can be viewed in common software such as Picasa, the optional tracks are stored as .log files which Google Earth can open.

The 3D compass looks wonderful, and would be even more useful if it displayed a heading, the display is fast and clear. Last year's TG-810 had to be held vertically to check direction but the TG-1 works in all planes so you can look at the screen however you want (that's the 3D bit).

The 'manometer' measures pressure, so it can assess altitude in air and depth in water. On aircraft you can see how mean the cabin pressure is, and coming back from Gozo I was lucky enough to sit next to an aircraft engineer who helped by confirming that Easyjet were operating within safe limits! Phew!

For those who doubt they'd cope with the fairly tiny buttons in ski gloves the TG-1 offers 'Tap control' which can mimic the 4-way cursor

pad quite intuitively – you can even dig around in the menus if you insist. Rapping the outer faces of the camera is pretty unambiguous and there's no fiddly touch screen type shenanigans. I felt it worked better than the system on the TG-810 I tried last year.

Plumbing the depths

The spec headline for me (and probably most people) is the 12m depth rating... whether you exploit it or just impress your chums this rating is amazing for an unhoused camera. I've tested cameras way, way beyond these limits and believe it or not the quoted figures are quite safe. As with all underwater cameras you need to make sure the door seals are clean for those ratings to last. To go deeper there is a 45m housing – the PT-053 – which can protect against other nasties as well as covering you for more sea water than 99.9% of amateur divers will ever need. If nothing else it means you can wash salt, soup, sand and sundry splashes off after a busy day at the beach (or clown school).

The housing has a 52mm thread for filters or lenses but the camera itself can also host a filter thread adapter which replaces the lens surround to provide a 40.5mm mount. If it just allowed creative filters this would still be noteworthy for a point and shoot but there are matching tele



A very, very tough little housing

and wide lenses to follow too! Even more remarkably these are safe to the same 12m depth as the unhoused camera. It's a pretty, thoroughly, tough package. The body is sleek but not small, around the same size as the XZ-1 sans lens, well placed rubber patches and a front grip make a secure hold simple.

Video is now 1080P, recorded in Blu-ray format which is simple to play if you have upgraded your home cinema kit from standard definition but needs a meaty computer to edit. I didn't spend long looking at this aspect but the results look good. The 25mm wide end still leaves you a decent field of view after the frame is cropped to a stabilised 16:9 HD aspect ratio.

This is a premium bit of gear so the rear screen is a 3"OLED rather than LCD and looks as good as they always do. Life always looks pretty vibrant on these displays but the TG-1



Controls couldn't really be clearer



Hi Ho Hi Ho, it's off to work we go! 25mm wide gives you enough for a scene

makes a good fist of mixed lighting and coping with drastic dynamic range which the display shows off very nicely.

For anyone getting serious about creative light (including underwater) another treat is waiting in the menus. The flash, as well as being self sufficient, can also send simple trigger pulses or operate Olympus' own remote flash protocol. It's like having an invisible hotshoe and makes it very much more versatile.

Macro performance is excellent too. It can focus down to 10cm at all focal lengths, making full zoom macro a very useful tool along with great flash control. Super macro will focus within 1cm at around _ zoom but prohibits firing the flash so is primarily an outdoor option.

Is it any good?

Olympus have been suggesting in their press that the TG-1 is SLR quality in a tough package. To be diplomatic that is over egging the pudding. The TG-1 may have a bright lens and a backlit sensor but it's the typical chip size for a compact so you simply can't expect miracles. In fact noise performance is on a par with its peers but the lens means it can usually be 2 stops better off – holding faster shutter and lower ISO. It uses its exotic lens and image stabiliser to offset the need for higher ISOs so shooting without flash is viable in some very dingy situations and where there is marginal light it does well.

Looking close up at the images I saw a step in processing at ISO200, at 200 and below the images are really excellent, looking clean and lightly processed, good enough to publish. I could easily see things which were invisible to the human eye like pollen, pores on fish and eyes on sea slugs. Above ISO200 noise filters start to reduce pixel detail but the road isn't steeply downhill from there and higher ISOs maybe softer but the noise and processing are kept pleasant and optimised for print. Images are usable to ISO1600+ because the noise is fine and well managed.

Flat cameras have been with us for a while and Oly's own are some of the toughest. These flat jobs are simple(r) to waterproof and the line has quite a name for itself – Tough. The TG-1 has a naked depth rating of 12m, and a housing for full-on diving to 45m. This means leaks are less stress, snorkelling is on the cards and as a deck camera you can't phase it. As well as water it doesn't fret about freezing, drops or shock and can even support sizeable backsides (100kg!) if they settle on it.

This sleek, little, metal slab is aimed at point and shooters but loaded with good things. There are millions of modes and three of those are underwater ones. Of course you can take the tiller and in Program mode you can drive all the good stuff



Macro at full zoom. Brings you down to an area about 30mm across. Nice *Cratena peregrina*

bar shutter speed and aperture. In practice, likely buyers will find that plenty of scope but there are more bonuses tucked away. I particularly like that choosing one mode doesn't lock out other useful controls – you can be in sports mode and select macro or underwater mode and set custom white balance. If you spend time configuring killer set ups you can store two of them as custom modes for rapid recall.

Uniquely, you can run Olympus's UFL-2 strobe in full remote TTL, as well as simple copy-TTL like



Shoaling fish around Comino Caves, Malta

other baby compacts. It's like it has wired control in RC mode without any additional risk of water ingress – that's really grown up. You can also just fire slave trigger pulses. The housing even comes with a neat clip on fibre port which masks the internal flash. The threaded port allows wet lenses to be added without any expensive adapters. As a further bonus underneath the housing there's a three hole mount for a strobe tray – hallelujah! Having to crank a single fixing super tight to stop a camera twisting becomes a thing of the past.



It's the f2.0 that sets the TG-1 apart on paper



A painted comber, full zoom of a fidgety fish – not normally compact fodder

The TG-1 is a bullseye on its target market. If there is any frustration for me it is that it is aimed at the outdoor fraternity and stops just short of being an enthusiast camera. Nerds like me always want more manual control which is rarely needed when the automated modes are done well. It has stayed focussed on the real market which is for a better roughneck point and shoot and pulls it off with aplomb. Just maybe they'd add an M to the dial for a Pro version for me (drifts off into geeky day dreams!)

The lens is head and shoulders above any competitor which gives it a huge advantage but, for me, the clincher is its AF and operation speed. It is probably the fastest compact I have used.

For starter divers it can knock out good shots straight from the box but it won't frustrate them as they get

more ambitious. The combination of the fast camera, slick well thought out housing and expansion potential make it a great option without annoying limits. On top of all that it won't disgrace itself as a surface camera between extreme sports holidays.

The polish on the icing on the cake is that it looks great. Last years lumpy looks for the range have gone and no one would remark that you must be taking a break from wrestling barracuda if you whip it out at a royal garden party. It isn't particularly small or light but it is easily pocketable and that pocket can go pretty much anywhere.

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