

King of the compacts or SLR Killer?

Olympus PT-EP08 Housing and OM-D E-M5

If you've wondered whether the latest, greatest mirrorless heavyweight will change your life underwater Alex Mustard has done a bang up, pro review of the kind I could only dream of writing... ISO sequences in dark tunnels! _ second macro shots of fish! It's a technical appraisal with knobs on, perhaps aimed at SLR folk. However if you're a compact zealot maybe you fancy a rundown from your point of view?

I'm quite quixotic, swapping between compact, mirrorless and SLR kit so I appreciate cameras of any persuasion. SLRs don't cure all ills, and ever since my first SLR I've known there are pros and cons on both sides. I prefer a viewfinder for macro, quite like a screen for wide angle and enjoy that compacts don't need the lashings of light that SLRs do close up. The holy grail (for me) is a camera which can slug it out on quality with the best and still travel in hand baggage.

So for a compact owner, or maybe a Pen upgrader, what can the step up to the OM-D E-M5 do for

you? Well, like my old E-330 it can do all its stuff through the finder of your choice so you can mix and match the way you shoot – you don't have to give up either option. That's certainly true on land and the first thing I looked for on the housing was the kind of optical eyepiece that would serve the EVF... and I struck out. The EVF gets a flat window in the case with a little hood – it doesn't let you get a full view and so divers are effectively limited to the rear screen. There, I said it, and that's the biggest let down so lets move on and not dwell on that missed opportunity...

Luckily that screen is an awesome looking OLED unit, not record breaking res but sharp with great looking colour. You can't tilt it in the housing - that would need more space – but the viewing angle is excellent. It's a 16:9 unit so you give up some of the edges for native 4:3 stills but video fits the 3" area like a glove. For what it's worth the EVF is 4:3 so the trade off is vice versa up top. It's LCD and looks good down the shaded EVF, on land.



As someone who came up from the ranks I know that you can shoot great macro with a rear screen – it needs practice. I found the Pens easier in this regard and wonder whether the larger EP08 obscures more of the scene and makes it tougher for a returnee like me to spatially position the camera for small subjects.

When I first held the EP08 I had the feeling of compact controls on an SLR housing. The dials and buttons are small and seemed a little mean on a fair sized housing. Actually they are pretty much the same as those from the Pen housings. When I compared them with previous



Olympus SLR cases I saw where the tactile disappointment stemmed from, the bigger heads and thicker stems on my E-620 housing are smooth and comfortable. They spare me needing the same precision I'd expect to use on a smaller housing and dials for primary controls are operable with finger tips, they don't need to be held between a finger and thumb. There are plenty of worse user experiences on offer for a great deal more money but the full pleasure of handling PT housings is missing here. My case was a prototype and another of my enquiries to Mount Olympus was if this was the final fit and finish, as most of my reservations could be answered with a mild change of mouldings. As I haven't heard back I'd guess it was deemed ready to go as is.

Video is a strong suit and one where more and more of us expect to shoot via a screen not a finder – so the EP08 gets let off there too. Top mode is 1080P H.264, with compression this heavy considered, settled shooting pays dividends and this IS is a real bit saver too. The video is wrapped as .mov (Quicktime) files which are less awkward than the Blu-ray structure often used. The lower resolution 720P motion JPEG .avi option is more resistant to compression artefacts if you can't hold still. All modes are 30 fps, where the spec says 60 it

really means segmented 30 – which is just a different presentation of the same thing. Mixing frame rates is easy these days but I've pointed out to Oly HQ (often) that offering 24 or 25 is a quality issue – less frames means more bits available for each one. The EM-5 is limited to 20Mbit/s so who wouldn't want more capacity? Hopefully the OM-D is attractive enough as a video platform to encourage the kind of firmware hacking which has made the Panasonic GH series such a force.

The Pens are barely bigger than some large compacts but this isn't so modest. It's nearly as small as the PT-E03 was for the E410, very small for an SLR, but not tiny per se. The reason it isn't super svelte is the new port system. The mount is fresh to Olympus and appears to be their version of the Sea and Sea RDX port. It's a two lugged system with a large, red ring that locks the bayonet of the port in place. I can see this pleasing and annoying people in equal measure. As it's all polycarbonate it'll be tough and it's certainly faster than the old PT threaded ports but it can't possibly be as strong.

The RDX port seems to be designed with adaptation uppermost in the creator's mind as there aren't many native ports but several inserts which convert it to other formats in almost zero space. Olympus included



Couldn't be clearer

an adapter to PT thread with the housing, Sea and Sea have adapters to NX and CX ports – so there's prospect of more. The one most people have asked about, as the OM-D is seen as a logical step up for Pen users, is to the bayonet the E-PLx series housings have used. If Olympus keep up their insistence that those ports cannot be changed we may never see an official item but people like Zen may well decide it would be a cost effective way to carry their ports over. The zoom gear drive is, quite cleverly, aligned with the same size rings, teeth and body position as the Pens so it's



A single cam lock secures the case without removing finger nails

not rocket science. Olympus suggest using PT ports with the full size 8mm fisheye and 50mm macro lenses – the EM-5 cannot focus those at full speed so the micro lenses are to be preferred if they cover your range.

One lens which will provide a challenge to port and zoom ring makers is the enigmatic 12-50mm kit zoom often bundled with the E-M5. Unimpressive on paper but notably versatile, underwater it presents a lot of flexibility in a package that is simple to house but tough to operate. That's because the modes are swapped by shifting the zoom ring back and

forth (not round and round) and to reach the macro setting you have to simultaneously press a button. It's not impossible, my thought is that using the mid position (power zoom) the extremes of the zoom movement could be used to nudge the ring forward or back against a fixed cam. As the button can be held down permanently without problem it doesn't present an obstacle.

So far I've just made a simple zoom ring so I could exploit the lens in 'standard' zoom modes and I have to shift it into macro manually pre-dive. The results are impressive for what has become a puzzling lens for landlubbers. The lens is just a bit wider than a typical kit lens – it starts at 12mm (24mm equivalent) and stretches further than most to 50mm (100mm equivalent). Although it reaches portrait lengths the maximum aperture is a dusky f6.3 out there. The lens zooms and focusses internally so there is no physical change of length at all. Focus is very fast and nigh on silent. When clicked into macro mode it motors to 43mm (and reduces the maximum focus distance to 20cm from the sensor) the max aperture is f6.0 in this mode which is hardly a problem while shooting and since even the feeblest focus light has it snap into lock not too big a deal for composition either.

I first tried the OM-D in Gozo



The dials are small and can't be rolled with a single finger

while acting as tech support for a review trip. My time with it was limited – even more so as we were ironing out strobe battery issues during the pre-event dives when I had it. But I've been able to exercise it for longer since and now dived with it back in the UK. That has provided an extra perspective on it as a companion for regular dives. Use under a bit of duress gave it a chance to shine. The low profile controls and light weight make it simple to carry and stow, not an egg fragile, lead heavy burden. One vulnerability is to fine sand which can creep in around the buttons and take ages to evict.

AF performance is SLR fast and makes a mockery of most other mirrorless attempts. You can argue the toss about whether it's in a top 10 but since it works from the sensor image rather than phase detectors



Pete Bullen – who organised all the hard parts of the review trip – in the Xlendi tunnel

it is definitely different. I'd suggest that it doesn't offer/suffer from the limited/precise scope of SLR AF and that can be a strength and weakness. Its pattern driven focus tracking can lock on whatever was at your chosen focus and chase it around the screen – haven't exercised that underwater yet! There's potential there for it to do great things but I've yet to try to pick a single fish out of a shoal. I think the water would need to be very clear and my reflexes superhuman!

Only dives will tell how all the configurations work out but



Cerianthus lloydii burrowing anemone – Falmouth

I was mightily impressed by the combination of the 12-50mm in macro mode and an Inon 165 - the fastest macro setup I've tried. When the 60mm lens arrives it will be quite an interesting comparison.

The E-M5 (as Alex noted) makes a step up in low light performance and dynamic range. Rumours still abound about the source of the sensor but whether it's the best Panasonic can do or really is from Sony the results are up there with some of the best. That means it's much less vulnerable to focus paralysis up the dark end of a

modest lens than small sensor compacts (and a lot of SLRs). That's obviously a bonus when you are shooting video under ambient light too – when to a certain extent any video camera is doing its own thing.

To neatly reduce the height of the housing, just a smidgeon, the EM-5 allows its clip-on pop-up flash to fire in the down position – once its underwater modes are enabled. There's no need to use those modes, you just need to assign them to one of the many reprogrammable buttons. It doesn't have to be applied to the prime real estate of Fn1 so I put the rather handy 2x teleconverter mode there - for video the sensor has res to spare so it aids shooting small subjects. I set the magnify function which reduces the size of the focus to the Fn2 button on top. In fact the Fn2 can be set to offer numerous functions but accessing that choice needs three hands once housed - fortunately it remembers the last one used.

The housing has two L-type fibre ports so there's no shock that strobe control is optical. The 5 pin Olympus bulkhead is history, I don't suppose it'll be mourned by anyone but me. Olympus would love you to use their UFL-2 which offers the multi-channel RC protocol with real optical TTL - my choice for macro. It works so simply it would be a boon for many strobe struck divers. At present you're limited to 1/160th second shutter which is really odd since the normal x-sync speed is 1/250th. I suspect it may be an oversight in a corner of the firmware and have an enquiry in to Olympus HQ to see if they have noticed too. However, it's an acquired taste which the majority of people will never sample as keeping a brand specific strobe in stock has little retail appeal (the slow recharge when used at full power doesn't help). So for the masses



I had a pre-production PT-EP08 to play with

it's just as well that the EM-5 will happily drive all the usual suspects in TTL or manual modes.

Olympus use a pre-flash for their TTL lighting, which works in all modes, manual included - of course. Manual slave triggering is present too with fractional powers available for low power triggering or overriding simple slave 'TTL' strobes.

Battery life isn't stellar... which I reckon is due to the very impressive image stabilisation. You can hear it as soon as the camera powers on although it doesn't respond to image movement until you choose. It floats the sensor centrally within the mechanism ready to go at a moments notice. The stabilisation it provides is excellent, very effective for stills and uncannily good for video too. It seems to be well judged as it smooths jitters, shakes and wobbles but doesn't fight gentle panning. To give it a real workout I tried shooting oncoming traffic from a moving car along country roads and even that was fairly successful.

The EM-5 is an heroic piece of kit but the



Lesser spotted catshark (nee Dogfish) – kit lens

EP08 housing doesn't match the finesse of the camera. With Nauticam producing a more spiffy choice that's more an indication of its market position than a criticism. If you are a compact shooter looking for an upgrade the EM-5 is a very convincing proposition. The Olympus housing really doesn't showcase it as an SLR rival, more as a Super Pen. As such any Pen user could pick it up in seconds (well I did) and if you're migrating from other cameras it has the same choice of user interfaces (simple, normal and uber thorough) as the Pens so there is no need to fear the full menus - which do offer immense flexibility. The Micro 4/3 market is head and shoulders more mature and complete than the other mirrorless formats. The EM-5 is, at present the pinnacle of the format and has closed the gap between SLR and mirrorless to create a large sensor continuum.

As the high guru of our sect (the wise Alex M) has said there is a core of capability here which is on a par with SLRs and there's no excuses or



Black faced goby – Panasonic 45mm macro

explanation needed for why you make this choice. The PT-EP08 is an enabling housing, not the class leading offering which I'd hoped. The absence of a real port for the EVF is a shame but perhaps not a fatal mistake for those who retain their rear screen coordination from shooting with compacts. Also not such a downside for many video shooters. It may be that the EP08 is the housing for the compact user trading up and the Nauticam becomes the option for the SLR user breaking free of bulk. A complementary and amicable split of the business I hope :-)

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