

Olympus E-PL5 and PT-EP10

by Dan Bolt

And so it came to pass that almost two years to the day since I first got hold of my faithful Olympus E-PL1, that my chums at CamerasUnderwater thrust into my eager hands the Olympus PT-EP10 housing for the newly arrived E-PL5 PEN camera.

As we all know, two years in the real world might as well be two light-years in the digital imaging world with the latest batch of class-leading cameras being hugely more capable photo taking devices than models only a generations or two older. The same is true of the E-PL5, as after the launch Olympus's much lauded O-MD camera at roughly twice the price of the next best PEN camera there was a real gap opening up not only in terms of performance but in quality and expectation of the PEN line of cameras too.

While the O-MD has seen a large uptake amongst underwater photographers, thanks in part to Nauticam releasing a housing mere milliseconds after the camera was seen in public for the first time, Olympus' decision to redesign the port mount on their own O-MD housing left us current PEN users

high and dry. With their offering of a plastic housing which cost as much as an aluminium one but reliant on 3rd party manufacturers to come up with an adaptor for our existing ports, seeing new-comers to the M4/3rds format using all the new toys was some-what frustrating to say the least.

Enter, stage-right, the E-PL5; the new 16 mega-pixel, 8fps, super high-ISO and dynamic-range Micro Four-Thirds kid on the block. Those specs sound familiar? Well they should because this new little tech-monster uses the same image-sensor and processing engine as its much more expensive cousin the O-MD. In fact, aside from a few firmware and ergonomic tweaks, the only real functional differences are that the E-PL5 does not have a built-in electronic viewfinder, a weather-sealed body nor the O-MD's superb 5-axis image stabilization system (though the E-PL5 still has in-body IS).

Olympus 60mm macro, manual, +5 Subsee, 1/250th, f/11, ISO200, an easily over-exposed nudibranch is handled well by the dynamic range of the sensor



So in a way there is almost no reason for me to be writing this review because if you've read about the O-MD's awesome image quality, amazing high ISO performance, class-leading dynamic range and blisteringly quick operation, then you may as well stop here because guess what? The E-PL5 pretty much matches it on every measure.

Coming, as I did, from the E-PL1, the first impression of the E-PL5 is how very, very fast it is. Everything you ask this camera to do it does with a sense of measured urgency in order to ready itself to perform the next job you ask of it. In playback and menu operation this is all very nice to have, but where the speed really makes itself felt is in the auto-focus system. Obviously a camera this small and cheap is never going to give top-end dSLRs a run for their auto-focus money, but it gives it a bloody good go and even in low light is really very fast indeed.

In fact the AF system on the E-PL5 has breathed a new lease of life into all my M4/3rds lenses because of its speed, even the Panasonic 45mm macro, which has a bit of a reputation for hunting, is super-quick and a joy to use. Putting the latest lenses on the body really shows its ability though; the supplied 14-42mm kit lens or the Olympus 60mm macro are almost instantaneous to lock focus; something that rarely happened on my old camera.

I will add a quick word about speed and SD memory at this point. Up until now the slowest part of any camera I've owned has either been its processing chip, the internal buffer, or the data-buses used to shunt image files around. Not so with the E-PL5. This camera makes use of the latest high-speed memory on offer with gusto. Here's a practical example: if I use a standard class 10 SD



Olympus 60mm macro, manual, +5 Subsee, 1/250th, f/9.0, ISO200, the fast flash synch frost this tiny nudi being battered around in a current

memory card and shoot (RAW & jpeg at the same time) at 8fps, I'll get maybe 14 shots (less than 2 seconds) before the buffer fills and the system slows down. Replace that card with a Sandisk Extreme UHS-I compatible card and you'll get 22 frames - nearly 3 seconds of shooting. That's an astonishing



Olympus 14-42mm kit lens, manual, 1/60th, f/9.0, ISO800, a rainy day in January demands good ISO performance to let in the ambient light

60% improvement in throughput and could make all the difference in capturing that peak action. By the way, if you've never heard what 8fps sounds like; just go to your local retailer & give it a go! I guarantee it'll put a smile on your face.

The much flaunted high ISO abilities of the



Olympus 14-42mm kit lens, +5 Subsee, manual, 1/200th, f/5.0, ISO200, tiny selectable AF points allow for very accurate focusing

O-MD are also carried across to the E-PL5. The change this can bring to your photography can not be overstated; being able to shoot at ISO1600 and still have a high-quality printable image, and even going to 3200 for projection/web use, is an astonishing leap from all previous PEN models. It takes a little while to realise how much impact this has on the type of photography you can now achieve; in terms of low light or creativity the boundaries have just been pushed back yet again.

Now I would love to show you

a stunning sun ball shot to show-off the dynamic range of the new sensor. But as this is the UK in winter, and everyone had seen hundreds of gorgeous O-MD sun balls, I thought I'd treat you to a dull rockpool image with no other purpose than to show that DR is useful for more than just sun balls. Take a look; it's a natural light split-shot image facing into the sun using the Panasonic 8mm fisheye. So you'd expect either the entire sky to be utterly blown-out or the shadows in the pool to be inky black-holes. And yes, while the top-left-corner



Panasonic 8mm fisheye, aperture priority, 1/200th, f/13, ISO640, natural light. Pretty impressive dynamic range

is a little blown out, the rest of the sky retains clouds and colour and yet at the same time the detail in the shadows of the pool are still there. Pretty impressive stuff - the dynamic range, if not the image.

In summary this camera is an awesome and very welcome addition to the PEN range of bodies, however there are one or two notes of caution from an ergonomic point of view that I feel compelled to share with you. Looking around me in everyday life I

see that most folks, as they grow from a child into adulthood tend to 'grow' uniformly ñ that is to say that for a large percentage of people their hands and fingers actually get bigger after 12th birthday rather than maintaining the small and sleek dimensions of a pre-teen. Unfortunately this fact of nature is a little wasted on the clever folk at Olympus because this camera, simply put, is too small to hold! Even if you do use the supplied 'grip' (which you have to remove before

placing the camera in its housing) there is simply no-where for a fully-grown adult to securely hold it by. Compounding this lack of real-estate the buttons and control-wheel are so small (and so easily activated by accident) that this camera is actually easier to use INSIDE the housing with the larger, better placed buttons that it has.

My last niggle with the E-PL5's design is the screen; bright, crisp and gorgeous to look at it may be, but because it uses the 16:9 format, if you choose to shoot 4:3 aspect-ratio then you end up with a viewing area smaller than the original E-PL1. This apparently is called progress. Yes I know it's all to enable one to shoot full HD video but I do find it frustrating as this model is sold primarily as a stills camera.

Ergonomics, it seems, comes at a cost. And anyone previously owning a relatively cheap PT-EPx housing will not be surprised by the PT-EP10 - it retains all the good, and not so good, features of Olympus' other PEN housings. It is small, light and easily operated with one hand but I've always felt that the shutter release is in the wrong plane for those using the housing with handles, and the same goes for the zoom dial. As odd as they may feel at first you quickly get used to it, and as I've mentioned already the buttons are sensibly placed and



The offending port cover that needs to be removed to use mini-domes

Panasonic 8mm fisheye, aperture priority, 1/30th, f/3.5, ISO2000, natural light. At dusk in a shaded pool, these karp demonstrate the great ISO performance of the E-PL5



easily accessible even while wearing 7mm mitts.

The big plus point for existing PEN shooters is that the PT-EP10 retains the same bayonet mount for the range of 3rd-party ports widely available. This represents a clear, and relatively inexpensive, upgrade path for many people. I have three additional ports; an Athena mini dome and two Zen ports for the 9-18mm wide-zoom and 45mm macro lenses. Of these only the Athena port fitted onto the new housing without any trouble. Both Zen ports needed a slight modification to them before I was happy that the force used to twist

them onto the mount wasn't damaging the housing. All I had to do was file off a thin layer of aluminium from the inside of the bayonet so that the action was smooth and didn't require a strap-wrench to remove after a dive.

And the modifications don't end there. Olympus plainly had other designs for either the camera or the housing that didn't make it to the final manufacturing process. There is a blanked-off bulkhead on the front of the housing (looks about the right size for a Sea & Sea type optical fibre) which has a moulded cover that protrudes from the body of the housing by at most 10mm. Sadly

this cover is in exactly the wrong place to enable close-fitting mini-domes to be seated properly into the mount. Having just packed away my metal file, I now reached for a junior hacksaw and set to carefully sawing off this offending bit of plastic - that took some courage I must admit.

I am happy to report that I know other people are advising a 'minor modification' to the housing to enable the use of mini-domes so I feel better about having chopped mine around a bit. And it works like a charm with all my ports so I am now a very happy chap. In addition, it is now impossible to place the camera into the housing



Panasonic 45mm macro, manual, 1/200th, f/2.8, ISO640, L&M SOLA600. Even a low-end video light is useful enough with such good ISO performance

without popping up the flash, this is a nice touch and one certain to save some blushes ñ all we have to do is to remember to put the (external) flash onto the camera in the first place.

So to end with; the only real surprise to the E-PL5 is the price, considering the specification is so close to the O-MD it is an outright bargain (and don't forget the flash synch is now 1/250th, rather than the painfully slow 1/160th found in earlier PEN models). The PT-EP10 is a very usable housing for the price. If you travel a lot, or require small and light kit for other reasons (freediving photography for example) and a 40m

depth limit isn't an issue, then it is hard to beat.

As a parting note I should say that I am not sponsored by Olympus, nor am I given the kit to review nor do I receive any form of payment for putting this piece together. All the reviews I do are based on kit that I actually own and have paid hard-cash for, so you are getting my truly honest opinion - which I sincerely hope you find useful.

Dan Bolt

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