

Olympus Tough TG-3 Review

By Jim Decker

Olympus was kind enough to send along a pre-release sample of the newest Tough camera to The Digital Shootout, the TG-3. The tough series of cameras are truly tough—waterproof to 50 feet without a housing, crushproof to 220 pounds, drop proof from 6 feet, and freeze proof. Put the Tough TG-3 in a housing and it's waterproof to 150 feet! Even if you have a partial flood of the housing at depth, the camera will survive. This makes it great for the person who is rough on their gear or for a rental department needing ultimate reliability.

Macro Mode

The Olympus Tough TG-3 doesn't have a macro mode—it has microscope mode. In microscope mode you can get crazy close up macro—with no other accessory lenses needed. This camera will focus so close in microscope mode that if you have any lint or debris on the

inside of the housing lens, it will focus on that instead of the subject, so make sure your lens port is clean! You can get super close up shots of blennies, so much so that you can see their teeth and their need to floss. All of the images shown are completely uncropped from the camera. While there is a digital zoom capability to enlarge things even greater, all the images displayed were shot with no digital zooming.

A downside to the macro is how close you need to be to pull off these shots. You are practically on top of the subject. This makes it difficult to impossible for more skittish critters that require more distance. The good news is that you can't get closer than the minimum focus distance of the lens since it will focus on the inside of the housing port!

Macro mode has a focus lock so you can lock focus and take pictures without refocusing every time half

shutter is pressed. This is very handy for difficult to focus on subjects and allows you to move the camera back and forth to find the final focus.

Video Light Instead of Strobe

For all of the macro shots I used a video light instead of a strobe. This greatly simplifies shooting macro subjects. Since the light is constantly on, the camera's auto exposure does a great job. When combined with a focus lock, you can shoot in continuous shooting mode to get rapid fire shots like an SLR while not having any lag with recycle time since the strobe isn't firing. The light is bright enough to get a fast shutter speed and knock out any ambient light. I mounted the light to the shoe adapter of the housing and pointed it straight down. While this technique works fine for macro, a light is not bright enough to pull off large



wide angle scenes. A decent set of strobes are needed for wide angle shots.

Exposure Control

Unfortunately, there is no manual exposure mode on this camera. The addition of aperture priority is a godsend for working with external strobes and is the recommended mode for fish portraits and wide angle

scenes. No longer are you chasing strobe exposures because the aperture changes at will. While there is no shutter speed control, you can use exposure compensation to adjust your background exposure.

Wide Angle

The wide angle shots shown here are done with the UWL-04 lens. This lens gives

an approximate angle of 165 degrees with the TG-3. The lens is a wet lens and simply screws on to the housing underwater. Just make sure you “burp” the lens underwater to remove any air trapped between the lens and the housing.

1080p Video

There is no separate video mode for the TG-3, just a red record button on the back of the camera. This is a good thing since you don’t need to fumble around switching modes when some surprise action pops up. You can also use the exposure compensation and white balance without any limitations since there is no separate mode like other cameras.

Custom White Balance

There are 2 custom white balance presets in the camera. I had no problem executing a custom white balance at 50 feet with correct color. The nurse shark in the video was shot with a wide angle lens and natural light with a custom white balance. The wide lens allows one to get closer to the subject and get more clarity and contrast from the image by shooting through less water.

Fast Focus Even in Macro Mode

Focus is super fast, even in the challenging conditions of macro. Only on a rare occasion did the camera have an issue with focusing on the smallest critters of the reef. This is probably one of the fastest focusing compact cameras overall, and definitely the fastest for macro photography.

Downsides

There are a couple downsides to this camera.



First, it only shoots JPEG not RAW. This is a big disappointment and something we have been complaining about to Olympus for the TG series cameras. Compared to a RAW image, the JPEG photos from this camera lack a bit of detail and seem a bit heavy handed on noise reduction. This really only becomes apparent at increased magnifications and if one was to make very large prints.

The second downside is no manual exposure mode. While aperture priority is a big welcomed feature on this camera, going that one further step to include shutter speed adjustment will make wide angle shots easier to pull off and make it easier to balance foreground exposures with strobes and pull in the background exposure with shutter speed.

Conclusion

The Olympus Tough TG-3 is the most capable macro camera we have ever shot. When combined with a focus or video light, you have a super compact killer macro rig you can take with you on any dive, even if you have another larger wide angle system.



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Jim Decker is the CEO of Backscatter Underwater Video & Photo, one of the largest suppliers of underwater imaging equipment worldwide. The Digital Shootout is an annual, week-long event where underwater photographers can take their imaging skills to the next level via workshops taught by some of the industry’s top pros.

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