

Aquatica AE-M1

by Dan Bolt

I can't really call this a review because the Olympus OMD E-M1 camera and the Aquatica AE-M1 housing have both been out for some time now. Indeed rumours abound of a mkII E-M1 so I'm sure a new model is not far away. But one can spend a lifetime waiting for the next best thing to come along so with my friends at Cameras Underwater and Aquatica moving mountains to get the housing to me in time for a week diving in Gozo I felt compelled to share my experiences.

I've been wedded to the Olympus m4/3rds line of cameras for some years now and the switch to this rig was from the E-PL5 with Olympus polycarbonate PT-EP10. I'm not going to talk much about the camera (except where it is relevant to the housing) but suffice to say I'm very much enjoying using it, even though it's hardly a 'micro' sized camera anymore.

The Aquatica AE-M1 is a machined aluminium housing depth rated to 300-feet (100m) - more than adequate for 99% of underwater photographers and certainly more than my usual diving/freediving depths. Despite the bulk of the E-M1 body, the AE-M1 still manages to be diminutive when put alongside any DSLR housing. This is great for travelling divers, but because of the lower relative volume to weight ratio it can feel quite heavy in the water at times. That said, adding the superb SW8 dome and a couple of float-arms and you've got a perfectly neutral setup which is a joy to use and certainly helps the shooter concentrate on the images and not handling the kit.



With the SW8 dome this setup is neutrally buoyant



Light and shade. 8mm fisheye. 1/160th, f/8, iso320



Wrasse in nest. 7-14mm @ 14mm. 1/320th, f/5.6, iso200



Peacock fanworm. 8mm fisheye. 1/250th, f/20, iso200

In the weeks I've had the housing I have used it in almost all its available configurations; with the 4" mini-dome for the Panasonic 8mm fisheye, with the large SW8 dome for the Panasonic 7-14mm and Olympus 12-40mm lenses, and finally with the flat port for the Panasonic 45mm macro lens. I have yet to find a situation where I wasn't pleased with the image quality through these ports and the comprehensive offering of additional extension rings means that you can use other popular lenses (like the Olympus 12-50mm, and 60mm macro) as



Cratena peregrina. 45mm macro. 1/60th, f/13, iso200

well as future-proofing yourself for new glass.

As you'd expect the housing itself is very robust and, pleasingly for me, has been designed with thick-gloved hands in mind. Using 5mm gloves presented no problem with either holding the housing nor using the myriad of buttons, dials and levers. I often only use a single strobe & handle when I shoot macro and so having easy access



Right-side controls

Seahorse stalking. 7-14mm @ 7mm. 1/250th, f/14, iso400





The left-side controls

Inside the blue hole. 8mm fisheye. 1/15th, f/3.5, 3200



Back-plate



Interior

to remove them was essential to me, as well as having a handle robust enough to hold the weight of strobes, torches and arms without flexing. The Aquatica handles are extremely firm and yet are easy to take on and off with a single screw.

As with most housings of this calibre, the ergonomics have been well thought-out. The OMD series of cameras are well known for their almost endless array of customisable options, so with the AE-M1 you can truly set it up so that all your settings are literally at your fingertips.

The version of the housing I have does not have the vacuum port, but one is available to fit through the single available bulkhead. It does come with a moisture alarm (with vacuum circuitry) as standard which is a nice little addition.

There are a few of points of note I would like to make, two positive and two advisory. On the very positive side; the EVF in the E-M1 is amazing and a joy to use through this housing (with Live View Boost set to on, the camera was showing me

the inside of caves where my eyes had given up!), and the ergonomics means that making many rapid changes to shooting settings is a breeze. On the (subtle) downside; I had to add my own hand-strap for shooting single handed while freediving - I don't think Aquatica offer one of their own - and I found the port-lock on the extension quite tricky to open, especially with cold fingers. Neither a deal-breaker but worthy of mention none-the-less.

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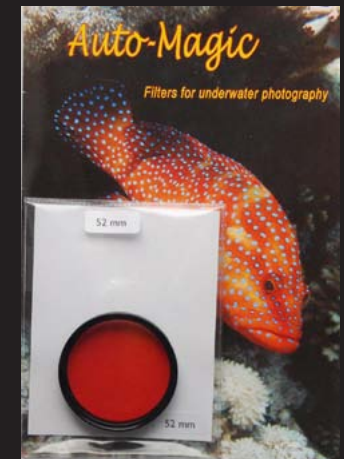
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