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The Olympus E-PL5 PEN Lite review: a mini-OM-D

SEPTEMBER 26, 2012 BY MING THEIN 39 COMMENTS



I make no secret of the fact that I'm a huge fan of the original Olympus E-PM1 Pen Mini (full review here); it brought big-camera speed and image quality to a very compact package. However, the OM-D clearly demonstrated that the image quality potential of Micro Four Thirds could be taken quite a bit further without entailing any compromises. After enjoying a period of exclusivity to that body, the same sensor and imaging processor has now made its way into Olympus' lower end offerings – the E-PL5 Pen Lite and E-PM2 Pen Mini, both recently announced at Photokina. I was given the opportunity to try out a final production E-PL5 recently by Olympus Malaysia.

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Removable grip.

The two cameras retain their original differentiation – a tilting screen and a few buttons. But the E-PL5's screen now pivots through 170 degrees for self-portrait narcissists (I can't personally imagine ever using this feature, though tilting it up for waist-level shooting is great for stealthy capture or a better angle without having to bend over). Both also gain the same capacitative touch screen capability of the E-P3 and OM-D, which I'm find increasingly useful and missing on my Nikons. Sadly though, the LCD on the two smaller cameras remains as a 3″, 16:9 aspect ratio unit, which is great for video but leaves a lot of unused real estate in the form of black bars when you're shooting in the native 4:3 aspect ratio of the sensor. Useable area is probably closer to 2.5″.

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Bookstore abstract. E-PL5, 15/8 body cap

Aside from the 15MP sensor of the OM-D, the E-PL5 also gains a few additional art filters, and compatibility with Olympus' new OI.Share SD card and app for smartphones and tablets (currently, Apple iOS and Android are supported). There are also interchangeable grips – similar to the E-P3. There are also some minor cosmetic changes that give the camera a slightly blockier, more textured appearance. Personally, I prefer the smooth look of the older cameras. Sadly, Olympus still hasn't moved the strap lugs – they still dig into your hands in the normal shooting position. I can't help but feel a narrow loop would be a much better solution for a camera of this size, as well as being silent during video recording.



It's grown in size a little, but it's still roughly in the same ballpark as the original (and Pen Mini, in background.)

I use, the camera is snappy and responsive for all normal operations; AF speed remains excellent, if perhaps fractionally faster than the last generation. (I'm comparing it with my Pen Mini, since I don't have an E-PL3 handy – they share the same innards anyway.) The menu system is redesigned and now looks very similar to the OM-D, complete with most of the custom functions and extensive customizability that is unusual for a camera in this class, which has become one of Olympus' hallmarks. It also gains 8fps shooting, though without AF, of course. I use it as a single-shot camera, or at most in bursts of two or three shots to gain some added stability.



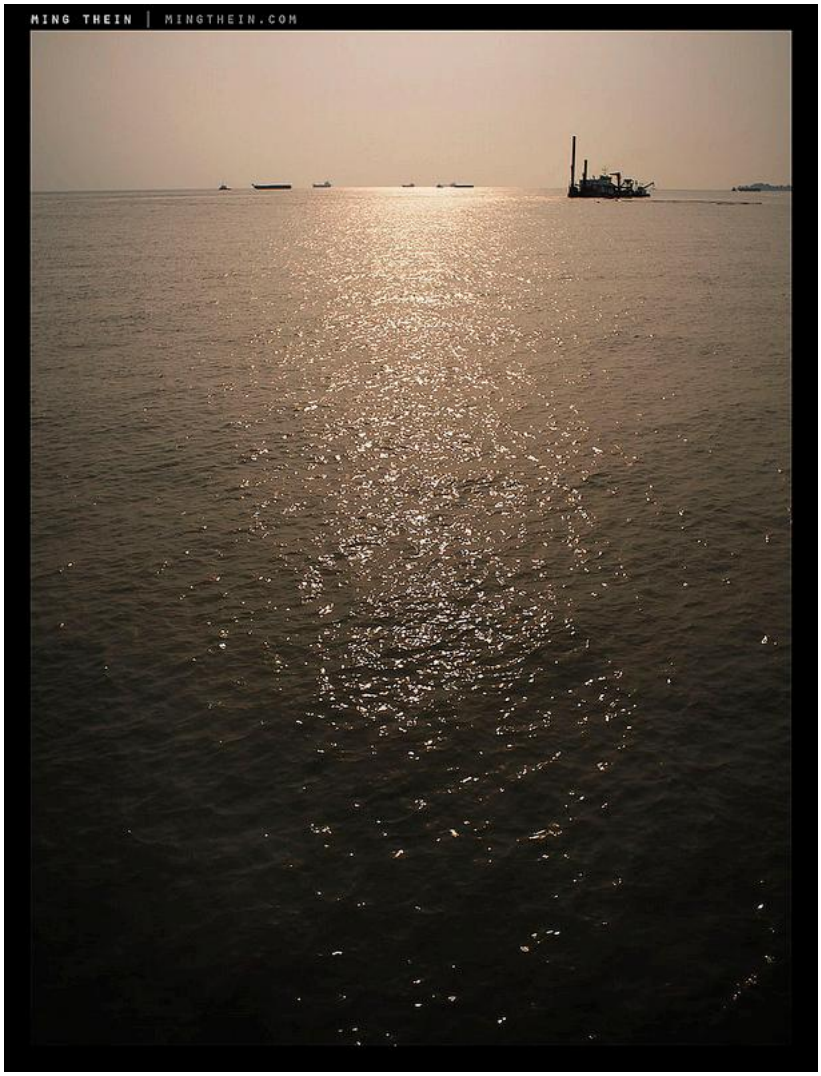
Closed for the weekend. E-PL5, 15/8 body cap

On the subject of stability, the in-body sensor-shift stailization system is improved over the last generation; I actually turned it off on my Pen Mini because it tended to give odd double images under some conditions. I left it on on the E-PL5, but it's worth noting that it still isn't as effective as the 5-axis gyro system in the OM-D.



Pirates can still be found in some parts of Malacca. E-PL5, 45/1.8

One of the things I missed from the OM-D was the configurable single-button magnify option that allowed one-touch enlargement of either live view or the playback image to your desired ratio at the focus point (10x is actual pixels) – until I discovered that you could just double-tap the screen to achieve the same result. Needless to say, score one for the touch screen. You can of course also use it to select the focus point and release the shutter; speaking of focus points, you can now select a smaller point size by default, which the camera remembers when turned off – something I sorely miss on the OM-D as the large boxes often aren't precise enough. A good number of the other buttons are user-configurable, too.



Sunset over the straits. E-PL5, 15/8 body cap

Something I had trouble getting used to was the feel of the shutter button. Since it's probably the single most important control on the camera, the way it feels is actually quite critical in how you feel towards shooting it; in this respect, the pro Nikons and Canons get it right – a soft but distinct half-press, and no clicky transition but a firm increase in resistance to release. There's enough travel between positions to avoid accidental releases, but not so much to induce lag. The OM-D feels pretty good, too. Other cameras get it wrong – the Sony RX100's shutter release is far too soft; I'm always accidentally firing off a frame when I meant only to focus. The digital Leica Ms are far too notchy and difficult to press smoothly; it's as though there's something rough inside the button's housing or something; perhaps to do with the *three* positions. Shame, since the mechanical Ms were fantastic. Unfortunately, the E-PL5 just falls on the wrong side of soft – it isn't so much the pressure required, but the near-zero difference in travel between half and full press that feels off. And to make things worse, even though the travel is short, the pressure required is very firm – making it difficult to hold the camera steady when releasing. Lack of an eye-level finder only compounds this.



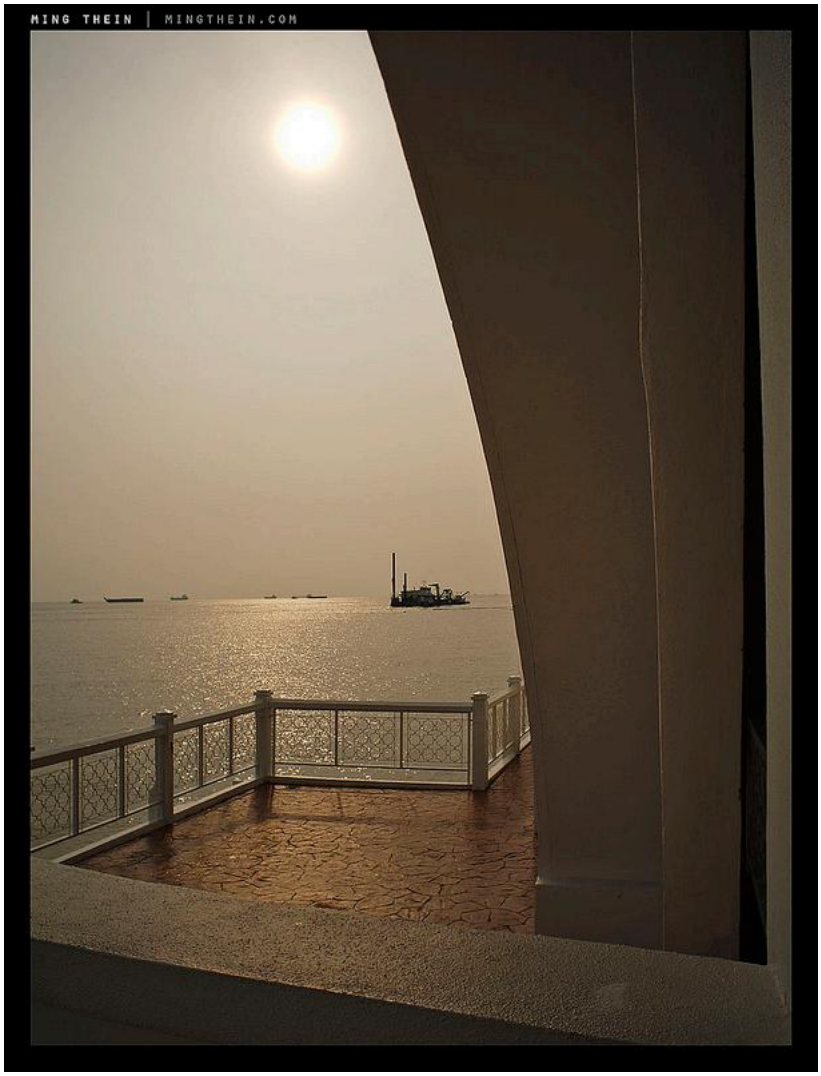
Determination in the face of choices. E-PL5, 45/1.8

I don't' have a lot to say about image quality – if you've used the OM-D, you can safely skip this section. The files look exactly the same, and deliver the same amount of flexibility in postprocessing. Colors are typical Olympus – slightly warm, reasonably saturated, and biased towards delivery of very pleasing skin tones. Dynamic range is around 11-12 stops from a carefully processed raw file at base ISO, which also remains at 200. The tonal range tends to be somewhat midtone and shadow biased; the relatively small pixel pitch of the sensor makes itself known in the highlights; expose with care because there isn't a whole load of recoverable headroom – perhaps a stop at most. Fortunately, there is a live shadow and highlight clipping display option, which allows for precise exposure adjustment at the time of capture. Noise is minimal to ISO 800, and I feel the camera is useable up to ISO 3200, or ISO 5000 under certain lighting conditions.



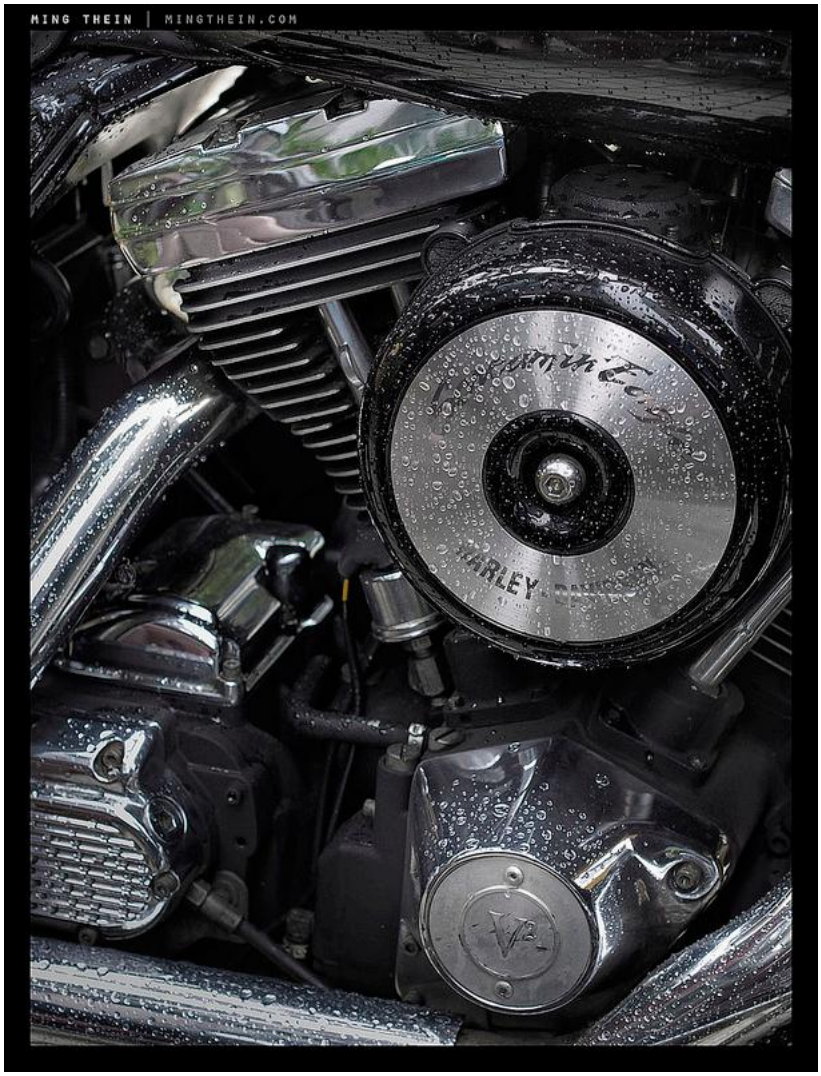
Just your average chaotic street scene. E-PL5, 45/1.8

At this point it's worth talking a bit about the Olympus Viewer software – I've never had to use it before since ACR always supported the files of cameras I'd purchased. This time, I use the built in raw converter to make a relatively low-contrast TIFF with accurate white balance and exposure, which I'd then take into Photoshop. The native environment is very familiar – it looks a lot like Bridge, from which you can develop and save your files in…you guessed it, something that looks a lot like ACR – or at least an early version of it, without the huge number of options the current version has.



Late afternoon. E-PL5, 15/8 body cap

Previews are fast, and general responsiveness and usability was good. This is easily amongst the better own-brand pieces of software out there. (Nikon, I'm looking at you. For shame.) In fact, the only critical things I can find missing are shadow/ highlight recovery sliders and a gradient tool. I'm not so happy with the output, though – the files seem to have a decidedly magenta cast to them which is both difficult to remove, and renders color not as accurately as the JPEGs – especially skin tones, which I find my Olympus cameras generally excel at even via ACR.



Harley after the rain. E-PL5, 45/1.8

Battery life is excellent; I estimate around 500-600 shots with moderate LCD use and power-off between shots. It uses the same battery as the E-PL3 and E-PM1, too, which is nice if you've got a few spares already lying around. Note that there are two models of battery and charger, some of which are compatible and some of which aren't – the light gray model is the latest version of both.



Where Elmo does his shopping. E-PL5, 45/1.8

Throughout the review period, I kept asking myself who this camera was aimed at; the DSLR user/ enthusiast/ amateur looking for a second, more compact body, or the compact upgrader? I personally think it fits the latter better, much like the original Pen Mini. Although it's compatible with the various accessories that connect to the accessory port under the hotshoe (including an EVF) – the lack of a built-in viewfinder means that if youre going to keep the camera compact, you're restricted to arms-length style shooting. The huge number of art filters – also useable in movie mode at the expense of reduced frame rate – and in-camera processing options offers a relatively simple (if slightly lacking in control) method for the amateur user to achieve their desired look without resorting to Photoshop. I personally don't use any of these, but I do know plenty of friends and family who might. What I did really enjoy was using it with the new 15/8 body cap lens as a hyperfocal snapshot camera; in this configuration it's lag-free, and lets you focus solely on timing and composition. It's also just about pocketable.

Ultimately, success at this end of the market will depend heavily on the camera's price point. The rich feature set and overall refinement in operation make me curious to see what will succeed the E-P3; now if only they'd make one with a built-in EVF like the NEX-6…

The Olympus E-PL5 PEN Lite is available here from Amazon as a kit with the 14-42 IIR lens.

If you enjoyed this post, please consider supporting the site via Paypal (mingthein2@gmail.com); Ming Thein's Email School of Photography – learn exactly what you want to learn, when you want to learn it or learn how to achieve a similar look with our Photoshop workflow DVDs. You can also get your gear from Amazon.com via this referral link. Prices are the same as normal, however a small portion of your purchase value is referred back to me. Thanks!

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Where are my customers? E-PL5, 45/1.8



Somewhere in here is a human being. E-PL5, 45/1.8



Abstract Kuala Lumpur skyline. E-PL5, 15/8 body cap

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Comments

Mercurio says:
September 26, 2012 at 12:17 PM

Thank you for your very illustrative review, as always your images are very good.
As an owner of a OM-D, I will love to buy the Olympus E-PL5 PEN Lite as a second camera if it was sold as a "body only" or perhaps with the new 15mm f/8 but not with the kit lens. Maybe Olympus will have to think about.

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 12:20 PM

Thanks. I've been trying to convince them about the 15/8 too…

Reply

Eric says:
September 26, 2012 at 12:31 PM

Very Nice review and pictures. The pictures from the 45mm 1.8 really pop. When I got to the "Determination in the face of choices." I could not believe you got that shallow depth of field with the lens cap. Then i saw it was the 45 mm and it all made sense… Did you use the EVF?
Best Wishes – Eric

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 12:47 PM

Thanks. No, I don't have the EVF…might as well just use the OM-D in that case

DonParrot says:
September 26, 2012 at 12:39 PM

Hi Ming,

thanks for your review.
Seems as if I should replace my E-PL3 as second camera to my E-M5 or not.

If I only knew if the C-AF works on the level of the E-M5. But as you don't like the C-AF of the E-M5 anyway you arguably won't be able to answer this question, will you?

But there are two other things I'd like to know (if you checked them): Does the camera (display or EVF) show a live picture when used in burst mode 'L' – and remains the AF field visible when shooting in the burst mode?

Thanks again for the great work

Cheers

Nicolaus

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 12:47 PM

CAF on all of these things is pretty ropey. As for burst mode…it shows the last taken image, but no AF box.

Reply

DonParrot says:
September 26, 2012 at 6:19 PM

Thanks.
No live view, no real chance for using the C-AF. A pity.

Ming Thein says:

September 26, 2012 at 6:33 PM

I think that's pretty much the same with all mirrorless cameras, unfortunately.

DonParrot says:
September 26, 2012 at 7:27 PM

Well, as you know I don't share this opinion when it comes to the E-M5.
It produces live pictures in the burst mode L, the blackout-phases can be reduced by switching the EVF-speed to high – and with the M.Zuiko 14-150 and 75-300, the C-AF is good enough for shooting sighthounds at work.
I know, it still is far from being on the level of the sports monsters such as the D4 or the 7D – but from, my point of view, it's absolutely usable.

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 8:02 PM

I completely forgot about the high speed EVF mode. Going to have to try it.

Dan says:
September 26, 2012 at 1:03 PM

Thanks very much indeed, Ming. for such a timely report for these cameras.

Which camera did you mean by "E-PM5″, the E-PL5 or the E-PM2? (There is no such camera called E-PM5 yet.)

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 1:17 PM

Oops! Should be E-PL5. Fixed. Their naming convention…

Reply

Dan says:
September 26, 2012 at 1:22 PM

Hi, Ming.

There has been conflicting information about whether there is an orientation sensor in these new cameras? It is a really annoying problem in the current E-PM1 and E-PL3 models. Did you have to manually rotate your "portrait" oriented photos while viewing, editing?

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 1:31 PM

There's an option to rotate/ display the correct orientation under the playback menu, so yes, it would appear that it has an orientation sensor.

Reply

nicwalmsley says:
September 26, 2012 at 1:58 PM

Hey thanks for the review and photos, some very careful work there with colour and exposure.

I also have and love the E-PM1, and was fully really to get the E-P5. But the E-PL5 will do nicely I am sure.

I'm wondering about how you access shadow/highlight control on the camera. On the E-PM1 you'd select Exposure Adjustment (up arrow), then Info to get to the shadow adjustment, then Info again to get to highlight adjustment.

Is it any better on the E-PL5?

Reply

Ming Thein says:

September 26, 2012 at 2:02 PM

Not really. Depends on how you choose to set up your function keys.

Reply

Andrew Marrero says:
September 26, 2012 at 2:18 PM

Wow, you weren't kidding about the 12mm. I see you have replaced it with the 15mm!

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 3:09 PM

Haha no, I guess I just got seduced by the size.

Reply

Wolfgang Lonien says:
September 26, 2012 at 3:03 PM

Wow – that body cap lens is nice! Good photos as always, and thanks for the report Ming.

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 3:10 PM

Thanks. It does the job, but the edges aren't stellar.

Reply

Samsudin says:
September 26, 2012 at 8:46 PM

I've always have soft spot for Olympus, after all my first SLR was the OM10. What are your thoughts on using the M.Zuiko Digital 60mm f2.8 on E-PL5 Pen Lite or E-PM2? Will it be money wisely spent? Fantastic review as always.

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 26, 2012 at 9:12 PM

Good glass will always look better than bad glass…so yes, you'll see the difference.

Reply

cornelius says:
September 26, 2012 at 9:30 PM

I think I've found my next camera!

Reply

Salvador Moreno says:
September 26, 2012 at 10:18 PM

Will you write a review of the 15mm lenscap soon? Could you give us a short impression of its IQ?

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 27, 2012 at 7:29 AM

It's in the plan. I'm waiting for a final production version though, this one is an engineering sample. So far – center is sharp, edges not so much.

Reply

dan says:
September 27, 2012 at 2:12 AM

hi i would to ask what about live view bulb mode from OM-D ? it is implemented on E-PL5 too ? or is it another advantage of high end model ?

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 27, 2012 at 7:32 AM

You get live view bulb on the E-PL5, too.

Reply

micksh says:
September 27, 2012 at 5:32 AM

Thank you.
Does it have stabilized live view like E-M5? (half-press shutter and IS turns on, this needs to be enabled in menu first)
And does mechanical IBIS work during video shooting, or only software IS, like on previous pens? (Wobbly video with IS on would indicate software IS)

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 27, 2012 at 7:37 AM

Yes, the IS is mechanical and works full time under both situations.

Reply

Vesselin Iossifov says:
September 27, 2012 at 5:00 PM

I thought that the 5-axis IBIS was the only one that was capable of working during video shooting. It would be something new if the E-PL5′s mechanical IBIS works during video, as it is not the 5-axis one that the E-M5 has…

Ming Thein says:
September 27, 2012 at 5:05 PM

It *appears* to work on my sample…I wasn't aware of this limitation in earlier models.

Andi says:
September 27, 2012 at 8:21 AM

Great review Ming Tein! Just wondering whether the penpal can still be used in this epl5?

Reply

Ming Thein says:
September 27, 2012 at 8:26 AM

It has the same accessory port as the others, so I don't see why not.

Reply

Sammy says:
September 27, 2012 at 10:20 AM

I've had the e-pm1 since it came out and, other than the sometimes wonky IBIS, I love it. I've decided to keep it as a backup and buy another camera with better high ISO performance (the e-pm1′s isn't too shabby, especially with fast primes, but I find I occasionally need better noise

performance). How many stops would you say the e-pl5 is better than the e-pm1 in terms of noise performance? Better still, how does the e-pl5 compare to the Sony Nex (anyone that you may have tried) in this regard?

Thanks for the great, informative review as always.

Reply

> **Ming Thein says:**
> September 27, 2012 at 11:54 AM
>
> Easily one, possibly as much as two. None of the NEX cameras I've used have given decent color…
>
> **Reply**

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Cycling Photography - Tips and Gear says:
September 27, 2012 at 4:06 AM

[...] whoa, check out these shots from Olympus' upcoming body cap lens. Just search for "15/8" here. Much better than I [...]

Reply

Anyone Order the 15mm bodycap lens - Page 2 - Micro Four Thirds User Forum says:
September 27, 2012 at 1:05 PM

[...] Yep ordered. BTW there are several samples on Ming Thien's review of the E-PL5, although not full res. You can see some sharpness degradation at the edges but nothing too bad at these sizes. In other words, good enough. Which was more than I was expecting: The Olympus E-PL5 PEN Lite review: a mini-OM-D [...]

Reply

Ming Thein's E-PL5 Review - Micro Four Thirds User Forum says:
September 27, 2012 at 4:22 PM

[...] Thein's E-PL5 Review Ming Thein has managed to get his hands on the E-PL5: The Olympus E-PL5 PEN Lite review: a mini-OM-D. Hopefully he'll also review the one I'm waiting for soon, the E-PM2! Apologies if this has been [...]

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