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ARTICLES

Olympus E-620 And Olympus PT-E06 Underwater Housing

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By [Karin Brussaard](#)

The Olympus E-620 is currently the smallest SLR camera available with a matching underwater housing. That is like music to my ears. Every trip is a battle to keep the weight of my diving gear and camera equipment within the increasingly vigorous restrictions of airlines. A camera with a weight of a mere 475 grams is a truly welcome tool. Thankfully, the new 9-18mm wide-angle lens is not that heavy either. Also, since the underwater housing is compact and made of plastic, its weight is also not too bad. This time I can be comfortable when checking in for my journey to the Philippines. However, a universal battery charger for all types of batteries and phones, laptops and diving lamps, is on my wish-list of things that will save even more weight.



Olympus E-620

Olympus succeeded once again in delivering a unique camera with the E-620. The new FourThirds DSLR camera measures 130 x 94 x 60 mm. Internally the camera inherited everything from its big brother, the Olympus E-30 featuring a fast auto focus, 12.3 Megapixels, built-in image stabilizer and various filters for creative effects. Despite its small body, the camera features a 6.9 cm LCD monitor on the back and the necessary buttons to operate the camera. However, there is no second monitor on top of the camera, so all the information about settings is displayed on the LCD monitor on the back of the E620. On the top of the camera is the command dial to select one of the five scene programs-auto mode, shutter/aperture priority or manual mode. Pictures can be stored in RAW (12 bits) and/or JPEG on CompactFlash / Microdrive and xD Picture memory cards. The camera also features Live View a common feature in Olympus cameras for awhile now. The LCD monitor can be folded out which is extremely convenient when taking pictures from unusual angles.

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Sean Wu
Expert Photographer

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Underwater housing PT-E06

The underwater housing is made of plastic with the family Olympus look of the front being black and the back transparent. All camera functions can be operated through the underwater housing with the exception of popping out the flash. The underwater housing could have been made even more compact than it is now, if the space for the popping out flash had been left out, however that would have made it impossible to operate external flashes via optical cables. That said, I find it very logical that Olympus opted for a slightly larger housing to support this functionality. Not only is it possible to operate a flash unit with an optical cable, but there is also a connection available for an electronic cable. It is an Olympus-type connection instead of the more common Nikons- or Ikelite-types.



The function of every button on the housing is clearly displayed on it. To optimize the view on the LCD monitor, a black rubber lens hood is included with the housing reducing the amount of light that falls on the LCD monitor.

The port connection has a screw thread. Not only do Olympus lens-ports fit the PT-E06 but also those of other suppliers with the same format screw thread.

There are no handles attached to the housing. Instead, you can attach the housing to your right hand, with the neoprene wrist band that is found on the right of the housing. If you want to work with external flash units, you need a tray to connect them to it.

Flash units

Unfortunately I did not have time to try out the Olympus E620 with my two Sea&Sea YS 100σ flash units prior to my departure. The evening before my first dive, I assembled the set and to my surprise I was not able to get the flashes to work. I excluded all common mistakes such as: is the camera's flash out? Did I attach the optical cables to the flash units correctly? Is there flash light leaking somewhere? Is the flash in slave mode? However, no solution could be found...until I started thoroughly examining the holders into which the optical cables go and are then inserted into the housing. The cable went into one side perfectly, no problem; but it did not come out on the other side! The back of the tiny holder did not have an opening so the flash light of the camera was unable to reach the light sensitive ends of the optical cable. I solved this problem quickly by punching two small holes in the holders!

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Magic Island

I tested the Olympus E620 in the Philippines. This country consists of more than 7000 islands of which many are deserted. I decided to go to Magic Island Dive Resort on Cebu, near a town called MoalBoal. There is a peninsula along with a beautiful reef with more than 20 diving spots. And although all these diving spots are situated along the same reef, when it comes to structure and cultivation, they are all different. You will definitely not get bored easily here. What also stands out is the state of the reef. Since fishermen have never used dynamite to fish, the coral still looks absolutely beautiful. And due to a slight current, not only hard coral can be found here but soft coral too. The diving resort is situated directly on the water. It's a matter of walking four steps down the stairs and you are on the house reef. The diving centre is well-organized and accustomed to divers with cameras. Even early in the morning, there is a fresh water unit available for cameras, filled up with clean water. Prior to my diving day, I used it to test the underwater housing for possible leakages.

Battery

The camera is mounted to a special slide, which is then inserted in the underwater housing. This ensures the camera is always on the right spot in the housing. This is extremely important because if the camera be slightly slanted inside the housing, you will no longer be able to use the buttons to operate the camera. The slide is just a tad too wide, which makes it impossible to open the lid of the battery compartment completely to change the battery, so you have to unscrew the slide every time you want to change the battery. This is rather inconvenient and I know it will get on my nerves after some time so I took out a file and sliced some millimeters off the slide. During the nine days I used the housing on my dives, I never noticed the slide being less steady. The Olympus E620 works on a BLC-1 battery. This is the same battery used for the E-400 series. This battery is smaller than the BLM-1 battery used in the Olympus E3, E30 and E520. The BLC-1 battery's capacity is fine. I was able to dive three dives of one hour each on one battery load and there was still some energy left.

Using the underwater housing

The underwater housing has a pleasant hand-fit. Since the camera and the housing are compact, it is possible to operate the shutter release button or the dial to select shutter speed or aperture, without having to remove your hand, even with small hands. It is also easy to operate the shutter release with one hand in the neoprene band. You can also feel the difference between pressing the shutter release half-way down to focus and completely down to capture the picture. A large zoom button is found on the left side of the housing. This zoom button rotates smoothly and is accurate at the same time. You actually have to rotate the dial for every mm of zooming in.

With a 50mm macro lens and macro port, the underwater housing has a positive floating power. And since the YS100σ is also very light, the rig is still positive with a flash unit. Personally, I find it more pleasant when a set is slightly negative since I find it easier to push the camera up slightly than to pull it down. By attaching a weight to the bottom of the housing, the set becomes neutral.



The large lock on the left of the housing works fine. You need to use two hands to open the housing, preventing it from opening accidentally. The housing's back has hinges on the right side. It is not possible to detach the back entirely. There is an o-ring on the front as well as on the back of the housing. The o-rings fit smoothly in the intended grooves and seal very well.

Patience

As a photographer of nature and/or wildlife, you often need to have a lot of patience to take good pictures. It is not like animals will wait and pose on command for you to take their picture. Underwater photography is even more complicated. My buddy needs to be as patient as I am and if I stay with a fish for 30 minutes it means my buddy has to stay there too. I need my buddy around me in case I get into trouble. Furthermore, if there is a current, it is hard to remain in one spot; you have to continue swimming against the current in order to stay in one place. You also have to continuously hold the camera and, of course, your time is limited because your air is limited. Nevertheless, I had seen an anglerfish on a few dives and I had already visualized the picture I wanted to take—an anglerfish opening its mouth. When this type of fish keeps its mouth closed, it looks quite normal. However, it can open its mouth very wide and actually extend it very far out. An anglerfish opens its mouth this wide when it is on the hunt, trying to catch a fish with its fishing rod that is attached to its forehead, leaving it to dangle in front of its mouth. And when the anglerfish is not on a hunt, it will yawn now and again and that is the moment I wanted to capture. According to the guide, there would be a small yellow anglerfish on a specific dive location. The 50mm macro lens would be perfect to capture this fish, so we set off, following the guide while equipped with the Olympus E620, the earlier mentioned lens and two flashes. Around 30 minutes later, the guide pointed out a spot on the reef where the small animal was seated on the coral. Excellent! I made a few test samples to set the correct exposure and then the waiting began. My buddy swam some five meters farther down and remained still. The guide and the other divers of our group continued their trip. The anglerfish was seated on the coral (the fins of this fish have evolved into something like feet) and remained seated quietly. Fifteen minutes later, there was no sign of it about to hunt or yawn. Another fifteen minutes later, the situation was still the same. Now and again, I glanced briefly at my buddy who remained in the same spot. Another fifteen minutes later, I was still there with my camera ready to shoot but nothing else happened and I had still not captured any pictures other than the sample pictures. My buddy wondered why I kept staring at the reef for almost 45 minutes and swam over to me to check it out. This distracted me somewhat and when I looked back at the fish, its mouth was wide open! I somehow managed to take two pictures of this pose since I didn't have enough air to hang around for another 45 minutes!



9-18mm wide angle lens

The new 9-18mm wide angle lens builds the bridge between the professional 7-14mm lens and the 11-22mm lens. The angle of the latter is sometimes just a tad too wide underwater to capture wrecks or reefs while the 7-14mm belongs to a different price class. The 9-11mm lens is too long to use directly behind the PPO-E04 dome port, which is why I used two converters of different lengths to see which one would create the best results. The longest of the two, the PER-E02, is clearly too long. The distance to the dome port is then too large which results in blurred edges. The shorter converter, PER-E01, provides considerably sharper edges. There is only some blur if you are on top of your subject. All wide angle lenses suffer from this blur to a certain degree. A dome port with a larger diameter generally suffers from more blur in the corners. The Olympus dome port is quite small. This makes it nicely compact but not all that suitable for the 7-14mm wide angle lens. However; in combination with the PER-E01 converter, the dome port works fine with the 9-18mm wide angle lens.

Small, smaller, smallest

The reefs of Cebu are colorful and filled with fish. Not the big ones or sharks, but tiny little fish. The guides of Magic Island Dive Resort are very capable of finding the all-time smallest animals. I am talking about shrimps of only one centimeter in feather stars, crabs of half a centimeter on sea fan and seahorses of a few millimeters in gorgonian. Animals that are not only extremely small but have also adopted the color of their environment. They have brought camouflage to an art level. Photographing these small animals is also a piece of art. The Olympus E-620 works fine with the 50mm macro lens provided there is enough light. The fact that the amount of focus points has been enhanced is very pleasant. This provides you with more focus points than just the centre one, thus making it easier to make a more creative composition than having the animal in the center of the picture. In order to support the auto focus in badly lit circumstances, I suggest using a focus lamp.



Conclusion

The Olympus E-620 is the lightest SLR camera for which an underwater housing is available. When it comes to the camera's content, it is not so small: the E-620 has many features of the E-30. The underwater housing PT-E06 is pleasant to with all functions (with the exception of folding out the camera's flash) are operable and all buttons have clear symbols. If you like to work with external flash units, you need a separate tray since there are no handles attached to the underwater housing itself. Without a flash, the rig is positively buoyant in most configurations. The auto focus is accurate in normal light circumstances. In dark ones, the camera finds it hard to focus, which can be easily solved by using a focus lamp.

- ++ the lightest SLR camera with underwater housing
- ++ underwater housing pleasantly operable
- slide prevents opening the battery cover
- underwater housing is positively buoyant

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