Olympus E-P3 Review

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The Olympus E-P3 is the top camera of Olympus' PEN line of micro-cameras. It it is small enough to fit in a pouch, but yet it has a relatively big sensor (which is still smaller than a DSLR APS-C sensor) and interchangeable high-quality lenses.

Olympus uses phrases like "classic style. incredible power", "blazing speed" or "professional quality" to describe the E-P3. It is true that it classic looks inspire confidence, but can such a small camera deliver a "professional quality"? This review will show you how it feels to use the E-P3 in the real world.

Olympus E-P3 In a nutshell

The Olympus EP-3 is a Micro Four Thirds (micro ¾) camera that Olympus and Panasonic have created. It

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uses a mirror-less design that elegantly allows light to flow directly to the sensor without any complex mirror mechanism. The main downside of this approach is that any view finder has to be electronic, which is usually not an issue for compact camera users. Here are the technical highlights that you should keep in mind:

Despite being a "micro-camera", the Olympus does not fit in a pocket - not even close

The Olympus E-P3 is a little bigger than its competitors (4.80in (W) x 2.72in (H) x 1.35in (D) for 13oz or 369g), namely the Sony NEX Series and the Panasonic GF Series. Although Panasonic is clearly going away from the high-performance segment and has been “simplifying” (or dumbing down) its GF cameras, I want to make sure that you don’t associate bigger size with bigger performance. The Sony NEX may be proof of the contrary.

The The Olympus E-P3 has a 12.3 Megapixel image sensor, and features in-body image stabilization (IS). Having IS built-into the body is great because it will work on every single lens. In some ways, it seems less wasteful than having an IS system built into the lens itself, since users may be changing lenses. Olympus rates the IS as giving you three shutter speed steps, and while this is not a substitute for a “fast lens” (low f-stop), it does help.

Design

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The design of the Olympus E-P3 will please those who like a “classic” look. I wouldn’t call this “retro” because the Olympus E-P3 still looks much more modern than the Leica X1 for example. However, the Panasonic GF3 or the Sony NEX have more modern designs.

The camera feels solid, but the surface doesn’t feel “metallic” at all. It looks like a magnesium body (the same material is used in most laptops), but I can’t say for sure but It does feel like it.

The OLED display is beautiful and far superior to any Panasonic GF that I’ve tried

Display: On the back, there is a a nice 3” OLED (640×480) touch screen display. It is noticeably sharper than my Panasonic GF1’s display, which it itself better than the GF2/GF3. I suspect that the Samsung NX and the Sony NEX should have competitive displays, but I don’t have either on hand today.

There’s one thing that you should keep in mind: OLED displays are beautiful and great for entertainment, however, they are not the most color-accurate displays. This will not bother most people, except those who need something particularly accurate when checking their photos. That said, I don’t think that the competition offers something that is significantly better anyway.

There are details in the Olympus E-P3 design that I really like. For example, the buttons and wheels are made with quality switches and materials.They “click” and turn nicely and accurately.

The strap eyelets are well designed and feel very solid

The strap eyelets are also well designed. They allow more freedom of motion to the camera strap, which in turn should reduce the pressure on the points of attachment to the body. This is usually not a critical piece of the camera, but it is a nice touch.

On the downside, I think that the right side of the camera does not have a lot of room for the thumb to rest on. One would normally put the thumb on top of the speaker, but there’s a recording button on the left, and the sub-dial on the right. While the setup mostly works (I have not pressed anything accidentally), it just doesn’t feel as comfortable as the Panasonic GF Series, which has a clear spot for the thumb. On the other hand, the GF3 has much less physical dials, which leads to slower tuning of the settings.

The thumb goes on top of that speaker when holding the camera

The rest of the camera like the battery/memory compartment and built-in flash are consistent with the

competition (except that some don't have built-in flash). There are small differences, but it's not something that would sway me from choosing one over another.

What's new?

A button in the back pops the Flash out

Built-in flash: as I mentioned earlier, not all cameras in this category feature a built-in flash, but the Olympus E-P3 does. Although I try to never use the flash, having one is important for many users, and its important should not be discarded. The Olympus E-P3 has a built-in flash that is located on the upper-left side. It can pop out a the touch of a button.

That said, the E-P3 also has an accessory port that can be used to add an exotic flash, as well as accessories like an electronic viewfinder.

The grip is included in the box, and I strongly recommend using it

Optional grip: Unlike its EP-2 sibling, you can attach an optional grip on the Olympus E-P3. That's a great idea, because it allows one to hold the camera in a more intuitive -and firm- way. Most cameras in this category have some kind of bulge that helps retain the camera's body in the hand, and I don't like to use the E-P3 without it as it feels a bit uncomfortable.

TruePic VI processor: few people actually want to know about the processing power of their camera, but in this case, the dual-core TruePic VI chip helps the Olympus E-P3 focus at 120 frames per second, which is excellent. The processor also makes the viewfinder react much faster. Electronic viewfinders often induce a lag time that inherently does not exist with optical viewfinders. However, the lag on the E-P3 is much lower than on my GF1 in this case.

In theory, the faster processing should also allow the E-P3 to compress images faster, thus reducing the "black out time" in between photos. In reality, I don't think that the difference in "black out time" is perceptible, at least not in a meaningful way against the GF1 that we have here.

1080i 60fps video recording (AVCHD): The Olympus E-P3 is capable of recording in 1080i resolution at 60 frames per second. Although 1080i is not as detailed as 1080p, the extra framerate of 60FPS will be welcomed by many users. A higher FPS would allow for smoother panning and action scenes.

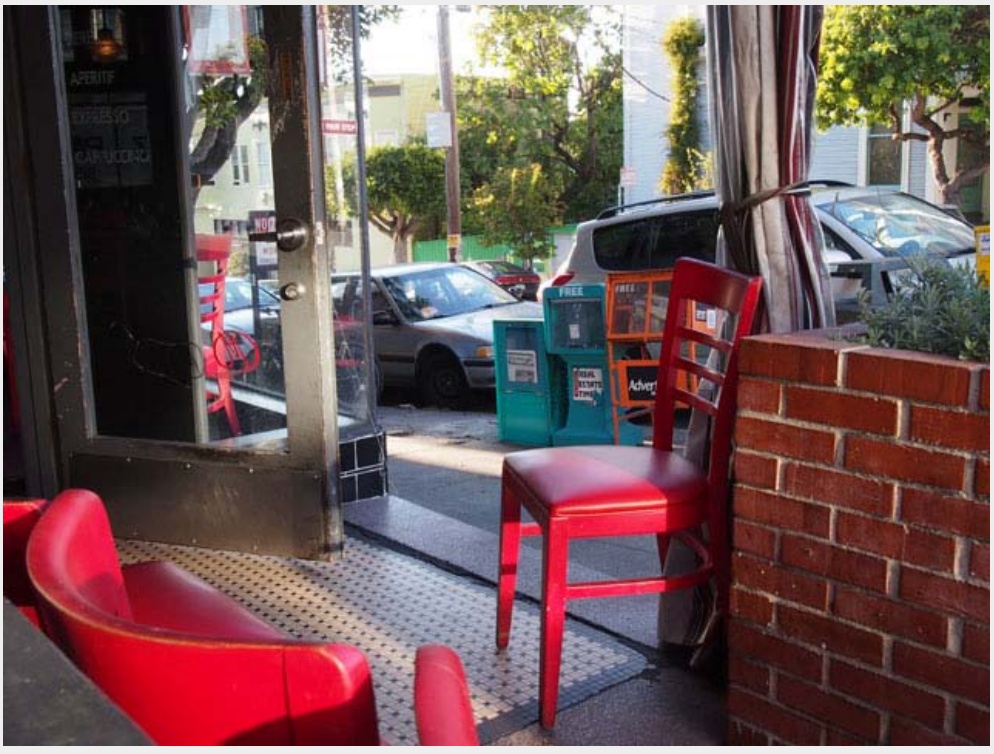
How I use it

Before we go on, I think that it's important that you know how I'm using my micro-camera as this inevitably shapes how I perceive its qualities and pitfalls. Also, in the reviews I mainly use the fully-automatic mode or the shutter-priority mode as most people (not all, I agree) want to simply "point and shoot".

The micro-camera follows me when I roam around trade shows or go on a vacation. I also own a Canon 50D, which is a really good -but bulky- camera. I have clearly chosen the micro-camera for its small size and weight, and I love the fact that it can fulfill most of the duties that my 50D does for me (I insist on the "for me" part).

In both situations, I tend to shoot in difficult lighting conditions, whether it is on a poorly lit showroom or at a dinner with friends. But whatever happens, I rarely use the flash as I personally prefer photos without it. Also, I tend to use my photos only on the web, and I rarely print anything larger than letter-size, if at all.

Photo capture (very good)



A photo taken in very good lighting conditions

This is obviously the juicy section of the review that you were waiting for, so let's get to it. There are a lot of things that I like about the Olympus when it comes to photo-capture, like:

1/ Auto-focus illuminator: this helps the camera focus faster in low-light situation by adding a temporary source of light so that helps the image processor figure out if the current settings yield a sharp image. Cameras without such an illuminator may have a hard time focusing when the light is dim.

2/ Integrated image stabilization (IS) system will give you a few extra f-stops, which means that it will let the camera use a slightly longer exposition without suffering from blurriness. It helps, but don't expect any miracles.Being steady, and being able to use a fast shutter speed is still the best combination for sharp images.

3/ Fast auto-focus. With the current 14-42mm f3.5-5.6 lens that came with the E-P3, I have enjoyed very fast auto-focus. While the millisecond numbers won't mean much, I can tell you that it is almost as fast, if not as fast, as my Canon 50D DSLR that weighs 1.6lbs (body only).

The E-P3 does a great job with color reproduction. This is what my eyes were seeing

It's great, but to be fair, the credit should be split between the lens, which has a fast motor, and the E-P3, which has a fast processor. I found that the lens was mostly responsible for the fast focus, because the camera cannot focus faster than the lens motor would let it.

For example, if I use my Panasonic 20mm f1.7 lens with the E-P3, the focus will slow down dramatically because the Panasonic lens has a slower motor. Inversely, if I use the Olympus lens on the Panasonic GF1, it will focus much faster than it would with the Panasonic lens.

Low light photos: cameras have gotten so good these days, that they mostly perform well (within a class) in broad daylight. However, low-light shooting (without a flash) is really the next frontier, and it often makes the difference in real world situations that most regular users would care about.

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Photo shot long after sunset in San Francisco (f3.5, 1/13sec) The exposure was a bit too long to reflect what my eyes were seeing

Seasoned photographers who have the skills, the means and the time to tune the lighting conditions to their liking won't care as much, but those of us who just want to "capture the moment" without spending a couple of minutes tweaking the controls do.

When it comes to low-light photos, the focus system, sensor and lens are critical. The auto-focus illuminator should do a good job on most subjects that are within range of the light. Beyond that it won't help much.
The lens is truly the most important piece of the low-light puzzle because it basically defines how much light will reach the sensor.

This photo is a bit darker than reality, and I could have tuned the settings better manually (ISO 200, f4, 1/20)

For low-light shooting, the 14-42mm f3.5-5.6 (f-stop value) kit lens that came with the Olympus E-P3 is much inferior to the fixed 20mm f1.7 that came with my Panasonic GF1.

What's f-stop? Also called aperture, it's a metric that shows how much light gets into the lens. More light means more "image" information, which means "better image". In dim lighting, more light also means "seeing better". For example, when we go from f1.4 to f2.0 to f2.8 the light intensity is reduced by two each time. f2.8 lets only a quarter of the light in, when compared to f1.4. This is a big deal!

A photo shot in extremely dim lighting conditions. My PC display is the only light source. (25mm, f4.4, ISO1600, 1/30sec)

Obviously, this is a trade-off that photographers know all too well as fixed lenses often have an f-stop

advantage over lenses that cover a wider range (because their simpler mechanics require less glass). I therefore recommend you to choose wisely when you buy the camera. Stand-alone lenses tend to be very expensive. Also, the 17mm “pancake” lens from Olympus has an f-stop of 2.8, versus the f1.7 from the Panasonic pancake lens. The good news is that nothing prevents you from using a micro 4/3 Panasonic lens, if you choose to.

Overall, the Olympus E-P3 is a very good camera in absolute terms, and an excellent one, if you take its size into account.

Video quality (good)

The Olympus E-P3 can capture high-quality videos, especially in broad daylight. I particularly like the fact that they videos looked smooth, despite being shot at “only” 30fps in 1080p resolution.

The camera can shoot videos in low-light as well, and it does a fairly good job at reproducing what you eyes see, even with the f3.5 kit lens, but the quality degrades fairly quickly as the light dims out, so the evening footage may be OK for the web, but not for watching on a TV.

I also tried with my f1.7 Panasonic pancake lens, and not surprisingly, the image quality went way up because much more light was coming in. However, the f1.7 lens has difficulties focusing when compared to the Olympus f3.5. (the videos below show the difference between f1.7 and f3.5 lenses)

In the end, the video quality is good, even in difficult conditions, but just like other micro-cameras, the focus speed isn’t as fast as a camcorder would be, so keep this in mind: this won’t replace a similarly priced camcorder, but you are not likely to have both on you.

Controls (good)

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The Olympus has a hybrid control system that uses the touch screen and the physical dials. Sometime this is handy, for example when it's time to select an auto-focus zone, simply touching the screen is much faster than going through the many possible combinations. On the other hand, using the dials to change the aperture and shutter speed is also great.

However, not all the functions can be triggered with the touch screen. For instance, if I want to select the flash mode, I may want to tap on one of the flash icons, but nothing happens. After using the camera for a while, I found myself mostly using the physical controls, and considering the touchscreen as an "assist" or "accelerator" for very few tasks.

My favorite use of the touchscreen controls is the "tap and snap" mode where to press the screen to tell the

Olympus E-P3 where to focus and snap the photo at the same time. Of course, the tap function can be disabled to avoid accidental trigger.

What could be better

My first wish would be for the camera to get a “faster” (lower f-stop) pancake kit lens. It is a personal preference of course, but I found that the marriage of the compact E-P3 body with a flat lens makes a great combo, and if I’m going to sacrifice some zooming capabilities, I would like to get better light sensing instead.

Touch user interface (UI): this is a very high quality touch screen, but i don’t think that the user interface does it justice. The current UI is not consistent, and most of the graphical elements are a bit too small to be finger-friendly anyway. Smartphone apps have shown us that touch interfaces can be greatly applied to photography, and camera manufacturers have some work to do there.

Remote shooting: Because the E-P3 caters to the enthusiast, semi-pro and pro market, it would be nice to have “pro” features like remote shooting where you can control the camera from a computer and shoot directly to disk. Nikon is coming out with a “pro” compact camera, and we’ll see if they do have remote shooting, but to this day, none of the cameras in the E-P3 category have this feature.

Charger size: the charger is almost as big as the camera. This is ridiculous. Also, it should plug directly on the wall, we don’t need that clunky cable. My DSLR’s charger is smaller and it caters to a bigger battery.

USB connector (non-standard): The Olympus E-P3 has a weird USB/analog video connector, which means that it is proprietary, which means that if you forget your cable, you can’t easily replace it by going to the nearest mom and pop PC shop. It’s time for camera makers to wake up to the fact that we all use micro-USB cables, and quite frankly, there is ample room on the body (sic). If we can do it on a smartphone, surely it’s possible on something that was 3X the internal volume.

Who is this for?

Consumer: by “consumer” I mean someone who will tend to use this camera as an “uber” point and shoot camera. If what you want is to take it out of your pocket/purse, turn it on and shoot a photo that capture a great photo of what your eyes see. I’ll admit it, when I’m not working, that’s what I like to do, and if that’s your case too, don’t let your “photography enthusiast” buddies make fun of you: It’s perfectly OK to snap pictures, not for art, but for memories.

The E-P3 will work great. However, you may also find a cheaper alternative in the Olympus EP-L3, EP-L2 which should offer a comparable image quality. Actually, for such a “point and shoot” usage, I would recommend going for the f2.8 (or better) lens, whenever possible. Obviously, you should also consider alternatives from other brands, like the Panasonic GF3, Sony NEX-5N and Samsung NX200.

Enthusiast: The Olympus E-P3 would be a very suitable choice: it has a lot of physical controls, an optical stabilizer, an integrated flash and an excellent auto-focus.

That said, in light of the recently launched Nikon 1, NEX5, NEX7 and Samsung NX200, I’m not sure that the sensor of the Olympus E-P3 can compete in terms of low-light photography. I have not reviewed those cameras yet, but I would advise you to do some research.

Conclusion

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The Olympus E-P3 is a remarkable camera that snaps quality photos, even in difficult lighting conditions. I like the build quality, and the attention to details that Olympus has put into it. Its design will surely catch the attention of classic camera enthusiast, but I'll leave it to you to decide.

From a photographic point of view, the E-P3 and its kit lens where a great all-purpose combo. I am impressed by the auto-focus speed which was great for quick shots. This is really a promise that has been delivered upon. The photo quality was also very satisfying for a camera of this category. Keep in mind that your lens quality will have a huge influence on the photo outcome.

Overall, the E-P3 is not the smallest camera, and it doesn't have the biggest sensor. One could even say that it is outgunned by newer competitors like the Samsung NX200, Sony NEX5N and NEX7, but in the end, it does deliver very nice photos even in places where other cameras would be way over their heads. To be fair, the E-P3 also costs much more than even fancy "compact" cameras, so it is normal that the expectations should be high.

I hope that this review gave you a good idea on what using the Olympus E-P3 feels like. Don't forget to check the Olympus E-P3 samples on the Ubergizmo Flickr account. If you have questions, drop a comment while we still have the camera on hand. We'll try to reply ASAP.

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