

Olympus targets pros

Great camera, but is the new E-1 enough to add new system components to your existing arsenal?

I'm always reluctant to take a camera that I haven't shot with before on an important assignment.

But, having become acquainted with the Olympus E-1 at trade shows and at its rollout in New York, I was relatively confident it would deliver the results I was looking for. The very first day that I shot with the review unit, I used it as my primary camera for shooting the massive Southern California wildfires, which I was covering for another magazine.

It performed well all day. Even though there were instances when I couldn't make it do what I wanted to because I wasn't familiar enough with its menus, settings and options, I really enjoyed shooting with it. It was fast and responsive, and image quality was excellent. In spite of heavy use, I had all the battery power I needed for long days of shooting.

I had shot with the E-20n, the Olympus DSLR (which doesn't have interchangeable lenses) quite a bit. It is probably the camera that the new E-1 will be compared with most often. With lens attached, at 2 lbs., 12 oz., the E-1 is only two ounces heavier than the E-20n, and its looks are similar.

While they are comparable in size, weight and looks, the similarities are primarily cosmetic. There's no real comparison between the two. The E-1 wasn't a revamping of anything else, either film or digital. From its electronics to its optics, it is a totally new system specifically optimized for digital shooting.

The E-1 and its lenses have been introduced as the Olympus Digital SLR System, products of the Four Thirds System, which Olympus first introduced at Photokina in



The Olympus E-1 digital camera aced its first assignment—the raging wildfires of Southern California.

Germany, in 2002. There were prototypes shown at PMA in early 2003 and the system was announced publicly at a major rollout in mid summer in New York.

The E-1 was designed around a new Super Latitude Full Frame Transfer CCD from Kodak with an aspect ratio of 4:3. It has a total resolution of 5.5 megapixels and an effective image resolution of 5.0 megapixels. That makes it a slightly lower resolution than competing Nikon or Canon bodies, but that's not a major consideration.

A computerized focal plane shutter and the retractable mirror mechanism really makes the camera feel and shoot like a film camera. While things like resolution and exposure controls are important, because of the reputation that digitals have for

being sluggish, speed and responsiveness are two of the most important considerations for professional photographers.

The E-1 is rated at three frames per second up to a maximum 12-frame burst. It was able to meet those specs without a problem. In the continuous shooting mode, it's as responsive as a film camera, at least until the buffer is full.

In the single frame mode, while it slowed down a little after the buffer filled up, it was possible to continue shooting at a relatively good pace. Occasionally, when shooting JPEG, the camera hesitated only briefly as it was writing captured data. In the SHQ mode, I was able to shoot 20 frames in 30 seconds and 42 in one minute. That number increased to 26 frames in 30 seconds and 48

frames in one minute in the HQ mode.

In the TIFF and RAW modes, writing times increased. The capture rate fell short of the claim that it can store 12 frames in its buffer for all file formats when we used a SanDisk Ultra CF card, but it's likely achievable with newer, top-end CompactFlash cards. A buffer counter in the data LCD on top of the camera indicates the total buffer space that's available.

The E-1 has all the creative control that a professional is looking for, including multiple exposure options, a number of metering choices and selectable focusing settings.

Four exposure modes comprise program, aperture priority, shutter priority and manual. Exposure setting changes are displayed both in the data LCD and in the viewfinder. Both exposure and white balance bracketing are available, with the

number of frames to shoot for each sequence, the frame-to-frame variation on exposure bracketing and the light temperature range being adjustable.

The new Olympus has a TTL full-aperture metering system with both center-weighted averaging and spot metering options. The AEL button locks exposure settings if there's the need to reframe, but with the same exposure settings. It acts like a toggle switch, which is turned on or off, so there's no need to hold it down to lock exposure. The AF frame selection button makes it possible to manually select one of the individual focusing points. The Sub (selector) dial pages through the focusing points.

The Focus Mode Selector, on the lower left hand side of the body, determines when auto focus is set and locked (in the S

setting), or continuous (C setting) as an object is being tracked. One way of testing to see just how fast it refocuses is by putting your hand up in front of the camera and either moving it back and forth or moving it aside so that the focus shifts from near to far. Overall, the response was good, even though the camera seemed to hesitate every once in a while. There's also a mode for manual focus

Once all the different camera options have been set, it's possible to store that configuration. Up to four different configuration sets can be stored and recalled through menu access.

Between the data LCD on top of the camera, the viewfinder and the image LCD, the E-1 provides a tremendous amount of information and feedback to the photographer. There are the expected things



The Zuiko Digital Specific Lenses, which were designed for the Four Thirds System, are exceptional pieces of glass, boasting speed, twice the resolving power of equivalent 35mm film lenses, and compact size. The 14-54mm lens we tested was pretty sharp, edge-to-edge, corner-to-corner. The montage (above, left) was designed specifically to be busy. In the first shot, the rope pattern was on the top left-hand corner. In the second shot, the top left pattern was placed in the middle of the frame. Detailed sections of the rope patterns were taken from each frame. When these section details were blown up to 300 percent (insets), there was only the slightest discernable difference in image quality between what was captured in the center of the frame and what was captured on the edge. Other lenses available for the E-1 are an ED 50-200mm f/2.8-3.5, an ED 50mm f/2.0 Macro and an ED 300mm f/2.8. An 11-22mm wide angle is expected in early 2004 and an ultra wide zoom should be on the market by mid-year. The E-1 has a suggested list price of \$2,199 and a street price near \$1,800, while the 14-54mm lens costs \$599. Prices for the macro, the telephoto zoom and the 300mm are \$599, \$1,199 and \$7,999, respectively.



A burnt out news van belonging to local NBC affiliate Channel 4 attests to the difficulty of shooting in adverse conditions.

like exposure, focusing confirmation and file format settings. There are also such indicators as the shooting mode, battery level, color space, ISO setting, white balance setting and the selected flash mode.

The E-1 does not include a pop-up flash, but it does have a hot shoe, as well as an X attachment external flash connector. Off-camera flash synchronization is $\frac{1}{80}$ second or less. Flash control modes include TTL-auto (through the lens pre-flash), auto and manual. The company's FL-50 flash integrates very effectively with the E-1, making it possible to control flash intensity and firing time through the camera. The E-1 will also accept other flash units, but controls that are available with them through the camera are limited. The menus are quite detailed, but the menu structure itself isn't particularly complex. To access the different options, there are 41 menu options divided into

four main groups, one of which is the playback menu. Most of the options are relatively intuitive, and, since settings aren't buried in numerous levels of sub-menus, they're easy to find and change.

An adjustable viewing diopter makes it easier for people with glasses to see detail in the viewfinder. There's also an eyepiece shutter lever to block out the light coming through the viewfinder, for when the camera is being fired remotely or with a timer.

Another Olympus feature new with this line is the Supersonic Wave Filter, which can eliminate most occurrences of dust on the CCD, a frequent issue with interchangeable lens DSLRs.

The body used for this review came with one of the new Zuiko Digital 14-54mm f/2.8-3.5 lenses (giving it the same coverage as a 28-108mm on a 35mm camera), with macro capabilities. It's an excellent lens with a great coverage

range. For detail work, it's possible to get as close as 8.67 inches.

Edge deterioration is one of the problems that frequently comes up with lenses that were designed for film cameras and adapted for digital cameras. Since the dimensions for CCDs in digital SLRs are generally smaller than the dimensions of 35mm frames, most, but not all, of the deterioration is clipped outside of the CCD frame.

Overall, the Olympus E-1 is an excellent camera, one that would serve a professional well. Whether that will be enough, though, to stimulate professional photographers to add components of a totally new system to their existing arsenal of equipment still remains to be seen. □



specs: Olympus E-1

Resolution: 5.0 megapixels (effective)

Metering options: TTL full-aperture light metering, ESP, center-weighted average, spot

Autofocus working range: EV 0 to EV 19 (ISO 100)

Viewfinder: Eye level Pentaprism "High Eye Point" type Optical View Finder, 100 percent coverage

Lens options: Zuiko Digital Lens System—14-54mm f/2.8-3.5, 50-200mm f/2.8-3.5, 50mm f/2.0 1:2 Macro, 300mm f/2.8 Super Telephoto, TC14 1.4X Teleconverter

Shutter range: $\frac{1}{4000}$ second to 30 seconds, bulb, sync at $\frac{1}{200}$ second.

ISO settings: Auto ISO 100 to 400, manual 100 to 800, expandable to 1600/3200

Flash: hot shoe and X attachment external flash connector

Burst rate: 3 fps up to 12-frame burst

File format: RAW, TIFF, JPEG (various compression levels), simultaneous RAW/JPEG

Sensor: 5.5 megapixel full-frame Transfer CCD

MSRP: \$2,199 (street price around \$1,800)