

With the EVOLT E-500, Olympus strips, redesigns and improves the E-300 and puts it in a lighter, more traditional body

BY SHAWN BARNETT

# Returning to OLYMPUS EVOLT E-500 *tradition*



I wanted to like the innovative EVOLT E-300, Olympus's first consumer digital SLR, but I couldn't give it an endorsement when I reviewed it last year. It was a good camera for enthusiasts willing to overlook its shortcomings, but given its consumer target market, it needed a better metering system and a more traditional design.

For the E-500, Olympus abandoned the previous radical design elements, including the unique porro prism design that kept the top flat on the E-300, and returned to the standard penta prism. In the E-500, the grip is more rectangular, the hot shoe is nestled in the middle of the pop-up flash, and the rectangular lens release button is just left of the lens rather than just out of reach. The result of the redesign is a handsome, well-balanced body that fits perfectly in the hand and requires no apologies. Olympus tried reinventing the SLR with the original EVOLT, but now they're serious about gaining market share. The new EVOLT can be directly compared with the most successful competitors.

The E-500 retains its predecessor's



This image was taken using the Zuiko 300mm f/2.8 Super Telephoto lens for 1/500 second at f/5.

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Kodak KAF-8300CE sensor, delivering 8.15 megapixels of impressive color with relatively little noise, despite its small Four-Thirds system size (22.5mm diagonal). Competing digital SLRs have larger sensors, but most can't match the coupling of the E-500's resolution and low noise generation up to ISO 800 (ISO 1600 is another story).

At less than two pounds with the 14-45mm kit lens, the E-500 features a fiberglass-reinforced resin and stainless steel chassis beneath its plastic exterior, giving it rigidity and keeping it light. You can carry and shoot this camera all day without fatigue.

My index finger rests comfortably on the shutter, yet without loosening my

one-handed grip, I can use the same finger to flip the power switch on the top panel. A flashing blue light on the top deck announces that the E-500's Super Sonic Wave Filter is shaking off any dust, which falls onto a sticky substance surrounding the sensor. The 2.5-inch LCD on the back panel—excellent for reviewing pictures—serves as a status display, as there's no monochrome LCD status display on top. Pressing the OK button with the display active transforms the display into an array of onscreen buttons for quick access to often-used features.

With its small sensor, the E-500's viewfinder is also small; even the viewfinder on the Canon Rebel XT seems huge by comparison. It's easy to get used

to, but verifying focus with the EVOLT's small optic is difficult. The eyepoint is just high enough for me to wear my glasses when I use the camera, but the viewfinder information display is mounted to the right rather than across the bottom, so I often need to press my glasses against the rubber eyecup to see it.

The three autofocus points across the center of the frame can be selected by the system in the auto modes, or manually by the user. My full-auto experiments frequently yielded portraits with the eyes out of focus, because the multi-point AF focused on the nearest object rather than the most important. I feared the 14-45mm f/3.5 kit lens might not be as good as I hoped, but switching to the center

## specs: Olympus E-500

**SENSOR:** Kodak CCD, 17.3x13.0mm

**RESOLUTION:** 8.15 effective megapixels (3,264x2,448 pixels)

**METERING:** Digital ESP, center-weighted averaging, spot (approx. 2 percent), spot with highlight and shadow control

**SHOOTING SPEED:** 2.5 fps, 4 frames max with RAW or TIFF capture

**ISO:** 100-400 default, up to 1600 expanded

**EXPOSURE SETTINGS:** Full auto, program with program shift, shutter priority, aperture priority, manual, Scene Program AE, Scene Select AE

**SHUTTER:** 1/4,000 to 60 seconds, blub, X-synch at 1/180

**WHITE BALANCE:** Auto, preset, custom, one-touch

**DUST REDUCTION:** Dust Reduction System using Supersonic Wave Filter

**LENSES:** Compatible with Zuiko digital-specific E-System lenses

**FOCAL LENGTH MULTIPLIER:** 2X

**FLASH:** TTL Auto FP/TTL Auto for Olympus Dedicated Flash

**STORAGE:** CompactFlash Type I and II, xD

**PRICE:** \$700-799 w/14-45mm lens, \$799-899 w/2 lens kit, \$650-700 body only

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focus point changed everything and delivered sharp images. Pros will want to get the more expensive 14-54mm f/2.8 lens, but consumers will do just fine with the kit lens if they stick to the center AF point.

Olympus' new 49-point matrix metering system eliminates the major flaw I found in the E-300: having a white object in the center of the frame—like a shirt peeking out from a dark jacket—causes the camera to grossly under-expose the image. All cameras do this to some extent, but Olympus' Digital ESP matrix metering is supposed to compensate, as it does in its other high-end digital cameras. For testing, I duplicated the conditions I used with the E-300 for the E-500, and also shot with a Canon EOS 20D as a control. The E-500 performed significantly better than the E-300, and needed perhaps 1/3 stop more exposure compensation than the 20D to get the image just right, a dead heat as far as I'm concerned.

With more than 250 menu screens available in the E-500 user interface, the novice photographer has much to explore. The E-500 offers such advanced features as exposure and flash exposure bracketing; custom white balance from 2,000K to 14,000K; multiple adjustments, including saturation, sharpness, monochrome with both virtual filters and color tints; RAW+JPEG capture; and a combination autofocus/manual focus mode for fine-tuning after the initial AF pass.

For those who want to move slowly, there are also 15 scene modes, complete with sample images and simple onscreen explanations. I'm not sure how many digital camera owners use scene modes, but these couldn't be labeled more clearly.

The Olympus E-500 is a bargain in the marketplace, offering resolution and



This image was taken at ISO 100 for 1/160 second at f/8 using the pattern meter mode and no flash.

image quality that rivals the Canon Rebel XT, with a two-lens kit (the 14-45mm and 40-150mm) that covers the 35mm equivalent of 28-300mm for about the same price as the XT with only one lens.

I'd like to see a faster startup time on the E-500, though the delay is mostly due to the Super Sonic Wave Filter. A buffer depth greater than four images would be better, and ISO 1600 images are nearly useless due to noise. Given the sensor's size, though, I think Olympus has done well.

Appeal to enthusiasts was clearly important to Olympus, but the aim of the E-500 is to make enthusiasts out of

ordinary consumers. I proved this one morning by firing off a handful of candid portraits of my family seated around the table. Unlike the heavier pro-grade DSLRs I'm accustomed to, the E-500 was comfortable, nimble, and a heck of a lot of fun. The 2.5 inch Hypercrystal display made everyone look great, and its 160-degree viewing angle allowed me to show the image to several folks at once, instead of one at a time. I'm already invested in other equipment, but this is the first of the many DSLRs I've reviewed that I'd consider buying as a family/travel camera. ■