

The top-notch sensor delivers some beautiful images, but unreliable metering cannot ensure perfect exposure.

BY SHAWN BARNETT

Hit and miss

FLAWS WEIGH HEAVILY ON BENEFITS OF OLYMPUS EVOLT E-300

With its boxy body and unusual name, the Olympus E-300 EVOLT is a manifold dichotomy. It invokes a 40-year-old Porro prism design for smallness, yet it

seems big and heavy. The sensor is superior to the Olympus E-1's, but the camera lacks certain essential features for pros. The images it produces are often



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beautiful, perfectly exposed and rich in depth, yet the meter is too often fooled by highlights and shadows, producing badly over- or underexposed images. After working with the EVOLT, I'm wondering whom this camera will serve.

I'm now comfortable with the design of the Olympus E-300, though at first I was frustrated that Olympus' claims didn't seem to match the camera. The EVOLT is being touted for its smaller design, but it felt fatter, and it had a decided tendency to twist out of my hand under its own weight. The lens and Porro prism are situated far left, along with most of the camera's heavier components, and the body and lithium ion battery on the right are an insufficient counterbalance.

These odd anomalies aside, there are some smartly designed features. The EVOLT's control layout is similar to competing SLRs, with five buttons to the left of the screen, and a four-way navigation cluster on the right. The controls are easy to see from the back or top of the camera, with none tucked away on the side or front, as is the lamentable case with

The Olympus EVOLT E-300 delivers beautiful images, rich in depth, when the meter isn't challenged. This portrait was taken in open shade at f/3.4 for 1/125 second with the ISO equivalence set to 100.

past Olympus prosumer models. A command dial navigates through most menus and onscreen controls, the build is tight, and the quality of the construction is better than most comparable cameras.

Unlike other SLRs, The EVOLT has no top-viewable monochrome status display; instead, the main LCD serves as a status display with the press of the Info button. It provides more information than the monochrome displays, but it's a bigger drain on battery power.

Omitting the topside status display leaves room for a pop-up flash that can be used with a hot shoe-mounted external flash to increase the light falling on the subject, or to employ bounce flash with the onboard flash serving as fill.

Behind the lens is Olympus' unique side-swing mirror system, and behind that, a 22.5mm diagonal Kodak KAF-8300CE 8.9-megapixel sensor, which uses 8.15 of those megapixels to build an image. When the capture is properly exposed, this sensor can deliver impressive detail and range.

A flip of the smooth switch next to the mode dial activates a small, bright flash of blue light on the camera's top deck, as a plate over the sensor begins to vibrate at 330,000 times per second, shaking the dust from the sensor. This feature is called a Super Sonic Wave Filter, and soon every digital photographer will want one. For now, only owners of the EVOLT and E-1 know the luxury of never having to clean their SLR sensors.

The EVOLT's features abound, but more important is the camera's performance. In the even light of a cloudy sky or in the shade on a bright day, the EVOLT captured some excellent images. Otherwise, the exposure would vary by as much as 2 f/stops, depending on where I centered the subject. This was true in Digital

ESP and Center Weighted modes, which should not be the case. Only Spot mode should be that position-sensitive, yet I kept defaulting to Spot mode for accuracy in portraits, because dark or light clothing dramatically affected the exposure.

I've regularly shot with a different digital camera every week, and I can't recall ever having this much trouble with exposure, not even with cameras in the same category as the EVOLT. Neither have I found such inconsistency in other Olympus cameras with Digital ESP mode.

The Auto Focus is speedy, and relatively sensitive in low light. One of the three LEDs aligned in the center of the screen will illuminate to indicate which of the three points is in sharp focus. AF assist illumination is available only with the flash deployed because it uses a rapid pulse from the flash to light the scene. With this manual-release flash, AF assist and flash in general cannot be activated without user intervention, even in the auto modes.

Where the EVOLT fails for the pro photographer is buffer capacity. There is a moment, especially in portrait photography, when model and photographer mesh, and the camera must keep up with the rapid shooting pace and adjustments necessary to capitalize on this synchronicity. I've found myself softly swearing into the back of the EVOLT as I watched the light of the setting sun rapidly diminish on the best pose of the day. The camera refused to fire while the write LED on its back panel furiously flashed red. It was particularly problematic in RAW capture mode, the preferred mode when using the EVOLT.

The camera produces large RAW files (13.4MB), which will make a 1GB memory card seem small, and punier still when coupled with the roughly 4.3MB JPEGs of the RAW +SHQ

specs: Olympus E-300 EVOLT

SENSOR: CCD, 8.15 effective megapixels (3264x2448 pixels)

METERING: Digital ESP, Center Weighted, Spot

ELECTRONIC SHUTTER: 1/4,000 to 30 seconds, Bulb

SENSITIVITY: ISO 100 to 1600

WHITE BALANCE: Auto, 3,000 to 7,500K, plus 4 preset custom settings

AUTOFOCUS: TTL Phase Difference Detection System. 3 AF points. Single AF, Continuous AF, Single AF plus MF, and Manual Focus.

FLASH: TTL Auto built in; Hot Shoe for external flash; 1/180 X-Sync; Auto FP allows sync from 1/30 to 1/4,000 sec.

LENSES: Kit comes with 14-45mm (28-90mm equivalent) F3.5-5.6 Olympus Digital lens, compatible with all Olympus E-series lenses.

STORAGE: CompactFlash Type I and II, Microdrive

INTERFACE: USB 2.0 (12Mbps)

MSRP: \$999.99

mode. The EVOLT maxes out at four to five frames before making you wait five seconds to fire the next shot—too long for my shooting.

The Olympus E-300 EVOLT is a capable, innovative SLR for the consumer market, with an unfortunate bug in its metering that requires a seasoned photographer's touch. It remains a good choice for the hobbyist photographer with more time to tune exposure and take advantage of its excellent sensor. ■

Shawn Barnett is senior editor of Imaging-Resource.com and a freelance writer. Go to www.ppmag.com for example images from the Olympus EVOLT E-300.