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Olympus Mju 790SW digital camera

Can this latest compact withstand a battering?

by Doug Harman published on 27 September 2007

Unlike the recently tested and ruggedised Mju 770 SW the new Mju 790 SW has a slightly lower level of toughness and a lower price at £200, a hundred quid less than the launch price of the 770. Its depth capability of 3 metres is 7m less than that of the 770 and, while the new camera sports a range of colours (black, blue, orange and silver) the finish (at least on the black version I had to play with) could still be marked quite easily by some change in a pocket. The price drop presumably comes at the expense of that extra toughness.

That aside, it is tough enough to withstand a drop from 1.5-metres - even onto a hard surface - and the additional benefit of the waterproofing, even if it is only down to 3 metres (that's still just shy of 10-feet, actually 9.84-feet) so easily enough for most snorkeling, canoeing or simply swimming use, means it is proofed against dirt and dust and sand; it is an ideal camera for use on the beach as well.

It also makes at great camera to let the kids loose with as they will be hard pressed to make a dent in it's hardened carapace. In terms of kit, you get a 7.1-megapixel sensor with a sensitivity range from ISO 80 to ISO 1600 with an auto range of ISO 100 to ISO 400, a range that does not sacrifice image quality from noise issues as it keeps the ISO with in a reasonable range.

As you've probably guessed, however, above ISO 400 noise is a bit of an issue at ISO 800 and bad at ISO 1600. But what is not bad is the camera's ergonomics that combine an attractive upright style (with an internal vertical 3x optical zoom lens design) with a nice control layout.

All the controls are straightforward to use barring the four-way jog buttons on the back plate, which for anyone with fatter fingers, such as those on



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my hands, will find them fiddly and it's easy to miss-press buttons or press two together. For example, the exposure compensation button (the top segment on the four-way jog control) is very close to the adjacent menu button, and this it has in common with the playback, screen display toggle button and the delete, Shadow Adjustment button, each of which surround the four-way controller. The Shadow adjuster is a nice touch that can help adjust and pull detail out of high contrast shots for example, where shadow detail can be lost.

A neat Mode dial provides access into the shooting, high sensitivity, Scene mode, video capture, Guide mode and a favourites mode. Spinning the dial brings each into play and is very straightforward to use. The 38-114mm optical zoom lens is controlled via a small rocker style control and the shutter release, and power on/off buttons sit in the usual place on the top of the camera.

The 790 has a neat menu structure that provides a range of options into which you can tunnel depending on whether you want to adjust things such as the image quality or, say, the date. A nice Guide mode is a nice add-on and provides a description of the mode you'll be using and when to use it.

You also get an additional guide button via the Display button that also toggles composition guidelines; an active histogram display and the one touch LED illuminator that provides an additional beam of light in addition to (and placed adjacent to) the small built-in flash unit, white balance is automatically set accordingly too. One issue is the histogram display vanishes as you compose and half press the shutter button to take a picture, a shame as its usefulness in helping assess exposure is then removed!

23 scene modes are at your disposal including the usual modes such as portrait, sports, landscapes and night scene modes. Usefully

At a glance

What is it?

Shock and waterproof 7.1-megapixel ruggedised digital compact

Good

Build, image quality, easy to use, handling Face Detection AF

Bad

Noise at higher ISO settings, full manual on CD, purple fringing at wide end of zoom, 30fps movie's limited to 10-second clips, frame rate, lacks manual/creative control

Verdict

A 3m-depth waterproofing and robust build means it is droppable from 1.5-metres - without it breaking into a sweat - or any of its components, and it is also capable of good quality images

Price £200

Our score

8/10

Your score

?/10

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there are four underwater modes from underwater snap shot to various macro or wider-angle modes.

The 2.5-inch HyperCrystal LCD is extremely nice to use and very bright, a good job given the lack of an optical viewfinder. However, in bright direct sunlight the screen still became hard to see a problem as the most obvious place this camera is likely to be used in the bright sunshine of a beach holiday.

However, for those outdoors types among you the Mju 790 (in common with all the Olympus SW range) has a great appeal as it can withstand most things you're likely to throw at it and in terms of taking pictures, performance is less assured and a bit of a mixed bag.

First up, the metering is very good and the Olympus ESP system is as reliable as ever with even very high contrast shots into direct sunlight exposed well. Exposure compensation provides a modicum of manual control over the metering but that's about it for manual control options.

White balance is good but colour performance is a less accurate, particularly with some shots I took of a vibrantly coloured fountain, it's deep rust colour transformed here into a garish bright orange, this using the correct sunlight white balance setting. You get the usual gamut of pre-sets including tungsten, fluorescent cloudy and the like.

Focusing is where one of the problems arises, it's quite sluggish so you can rush the camera and get unfocused shots this can be a problem for fleeting subjects, as can the shutter lag which while not particularly bad for such as camera is still noticeable. However, the Face Detection AF system works a treat and it will automatically adjust image parameters to get a "good" portrait for example. In practice, this is just a warmed up image but anything that can help get better shots is no bad thing.

Start up is fast however; you can get the camera up and snapping in about one second. Shot to shot times are a little over one second and in continuous shooting you can snap up to 6-frames in one gulp at just over one frame a second or 3.5fps for 11 snaps when shooting in the camera's 3-megapixel mode. Finally, image detail is quite good though images are quite soft by default from the camera and image noise processing hampers detail as well when shooting at higher sensitivities.

I have one other frustrating quibble that is revolves around chosen settings. Some of the camera's modes, such as activating the Fine Zoom mode also disable the use of the higher resolution modes available (in other settings) to the camera. But, it's hard to discover which mode has affected what setting and why without the manual, which is on CD and without simply resetting the camera (via menus). So, unless you carry a laptop with you all the time or print it out yourself, this problem is a classic example of why a proper paper manual is of benefit.

VERDICT

Image softness and sluggish focusing hamper an otherwise accomplished package, as does the lack of a proper manual.

However, this is a very versatile camera that is simple to use and one that's extremely tough and waterproof to boot, making it a camera that provides a good level of point and shoot capability (but with fairly limited photo features, it's true) and at a good price for a camera that you can literally take anywhere, even underwater.