

The Olympus C-5050 For The Underwater Photographer

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Part I

In this two part installment, I will try to provide some basic information from a 'personal' point-of-view on using the new Olympus C-5050 digital camera with the Olympus PT-015 underwater housing. I am in no way a professional and have just recently began to use this new setup but I do have over 200+ dives using the Olympus C-3040 and a PT-007/010 case so some familiarity is inherited. I am providing this information in hopes that it will help answer some basic questions for those researching this particular underwater camera outfit.

This text will not delve into the extreme technicalities of digital cameras but instead provide real-world feedback on its basic use for the underwater photographer. There are plenty of websites available with detailed information on the intricacies of every function of this camera. I will only cover what I personally know and use for shooting underwater photographs.

As a final note, please regard any of my opinions with the utmost scrutiny as they are just my thoughts on the matter and opinions may vary.

The Olympus PT-015 Underwater Housing



The new Olympus PT-015 underwater housing offers one of the most inexpensive ways to house Olympus' new C-5050 5 megapixel digital camera. Developed from a line of underwater housings that goes back a couple of years, this housing offers a myriad of features found in more expensive housings. This transparent, polycarbonate housing is molded to fit snug around the C-5050 camera.



Color coordinated—a signature feature of all PT cases. The striking red accent of the PT-015's knobs, handles, o-rings, and even the red washer on the inside of every button shows that Olympus works to not only make this housing functional but also stylish!



With its 19 buttons—some push buttons, some turning dials—full control of the C-5050 camera is possible. These stainless steel Nickel-plated brass buttons are surrounded by a Buna-type o-ring that helps to seal the case from any water intrusion.

The front (non-removable) flat port is made of flourite (FL) glass and is millimeters away from where the extended lens of the C-5050 camera will reach. The outside front port sports a vivid red, 67mm metal lens ring that will accept many of the available external lenses made by companies such as Olympus, Sea & Sea, Inon and a few other. Attaching these external lenses is done once underwater so as to avoid trapping any air in between the port glass and the external lens. Swapping from a wide-angle lens to a macro lens and vice-versa is simple!

A new feature just recently appearing on the PT cases is a well designed, internal rubber boot that surrounds the LCD display on the C-5050 camera. On the outside of the housing, Olympus molded a pair of rails along the top and bottom area around the LCD window to help hold in place a removable rubber LCD shade. Designed with the intentions of installing and removing at will while underwater, Olympus even integrated a small leash into the outside rubber hood so as to avoid losing it.



This clever invention works together to do away with one of the most complained about problem with underwater digital camera housings—the fact that the camera's LCD is hard to see because of the reflection from the sun's light. A simple solution that is sure to please all the snorkelers and divers who dive in shallow waters. It's also great for showing your pictures when you're back up on the boat while the sun's light shines down upon you and your audience.



Olympus didn't stop here; two of its most impressive new features include using double o-rings on the swing-open back door to help prevent an accidental flooding and increasing the depth rating of the housing to 40 meters (~131ft.). These two features are a welcomed addition by many previous Olympus owners.

Overall, Olympus has once again shown support for its popular line of digital cameras and has produced a housing that blends quality and value into one. While there are sure to be other housing makers that are short on the foot-steps of Olympus on producing alternative quality housings—many of them surpassing the depth rating and longevity of the PT-015 housing. For the sport diver who will not be seeing decompression depths or the amateur/semi-pro underwater photographer who does not want to invest too much money into such a quickly evolving technology—the Olympus PT-015 case is tough to beat in value and quality.

The PT-015 Is Put To The Test

Even though I have used the PT-007 and PT-010 underwater housings hundreds of times, my first impression after seeing the PT-015 case was one of both exhilaration and apprehension. With its rugged and compact design, stylish red color and a host of new features, I feel the PT-015 no longer sports so much of that toyish-look that many have complained about in previous PT housings. Apparent from the first time I held it in my hands, the design of the new handles provides me with a much better grip than I had with the PT-007/010. Its design is such that my hands (medium-sized) wrap around the housing in a comfortable but strong grip while each finger strategically falls into place just where Olympus wants them to be. All this, of course, changes when you attach it to tray and handle set. For me, it's an ULCS tray with a ball-socket on one side and a removable handle on the other.



Olympus has used the same rigid buttons it's used on previous PT housings but because of the C-5050's bundle of buttons, they have raised some buttons to make accessing them easier. This is most apparent in the arrow pad and OK/Menu buttons. On this note, I recommend the first thing to do before you even think about putting the camera in the case and take it underwater is to learn the buttons. Learn what each button on the camera does and get comfortable using it topside otherwise you'll be a stumbling fool shooting macro shots of a Whale shark when your intentions were to shoot it at wide-angle.

Overall, the good impressions I have about the housing are due to things like its ergonomic design, the peace-of-mind it instills from its well integrated dual o-ring door, its LCD shade—although I see myself removing it quite often when trying to shoot from abrupt angles.



One area where I'm expecting to see plenty of complaints will be in the door opening latch. Although Olympus has retained the same tried-and-tested locking mechanism from the older PT-007/010 cases, the latch is now flush with the front area of the handle and, even with small fingers, reaching in to pull the door open requires a little nudging. I can only imagine the difficulties of opening this door for those of you with Paul Bunyan hands.

Unlike the PT-010 housing that required some stretching of the fingers in order to reach some buttons, the design of this housing makes all the buttons accessible without much finger stretching. Up in the front right of the housing is the zoom/wide-angle lever. This lever is independent—unlike the PT-007/010 that has it integrated into the shutter button. Although using it is simple and comfortable, the controls are backwards

to what the camera normally does. So if you push out (away from you) with your index finger on the lever the camera will zoom, pull back (towards you) and it goes wide. A little strange at first but after a while it becomes natural.

The next button back is the shutter button. At first glance I was concerned because the long counter-lever button that became a necessity on the PT-007/010 for trying to get anywhere near the half-shutter press was now replaced by a much shorter lever. Interesting enough, either my practice at achieving a half-press has improved drastically or achieving the half-press wasn't difficult to achieve with this new button. I guess mileage will vary on this one. One thing I can suggest if you have problems—practice, practice, practice.

The next two buttons snuggled next to each other behind the shutter button are the Custom button and the self-timer/remote control button—the latter being of little use to me for underwater photography. The Custom button is a great new feature and it couldn't be located in a better place. If you've got a feature you use often then you can probably program it into this button.

The next button back is the Mode Dial. This spring-loaded dial allows you to switch through different modes on the camera plus there's an extra lever built-in for turning the camera on and off. My only gripe with this is that I can see my fumbling hands easy shutting off the camera by accidentally bumping the on/off lever.

Next comes the dial that has, since I first saw pictures of the C-5050 online, been the culprit of many restless nights cringing in fear as to what possible housing invention could make the operation of this dial simple. It is the DIAL KNOB! Although topside this dial makes perfect sense to be used for so many adjustments, when you integrate it into a underwater housing and have to press one or even two other buttons while simultaneously spinning this semi-notchy dial makes its operation sound like a nightmare of the fumbling-kind.

Luckily, Olympus has made this dial extra rigid and it doesn't wobble like the Mode Dial knob on the PT-007/010. Spinning the Dial knob can be accomplished with just the edge of your thumb although reaching out and using the tip of your thumb and index finger is just as simple. By itself, in full manual mode, this dial changes the shutter speed or the chosen feature in whichever priority mode you choose.

The buttons on the back of the case are all the same, tough, springy buttons with the up and down arrow pad buttons raised slightly higher and the center OK/Menu button sticking out even further. It's a good thing they designed it that way otherwise chaos would have been inevitable after trying to reach the button in the middle of the bunch.



Off on the other side of the PT-015 on the front top are two buttons; one controls the AF/Macro/MF and the one behind it controls the Exposure Meter. These buttons work in conjunction with the Dial knob so some ambidextrous moves are required in order to make any changes to these settings. Not a difficult thing but one that requires both hands. Both of these top buttons are easily reachable.

Off to the left side are what I call the Carpel Tunnel buttons. These guys— the Flash mode button and the Exposure Compensation—get a lot of use in full manual mode. Mainly the Exposure Compensation button which along with the Dial knob is required in order to change the aperture setting on the camera.

Although well placed when using the camera topside, once it's inside the PT-015 and you've got those rigid buttons to deal with, a contortionist move of your index finger is required in order to press one (or if you're unlucky—two) of these buttons while simultaneously spinning the dial knob. Not a difficult task but one that requires some dexterity. In my case, because of the handle on my tray, reaching for these buttons seems a little easier than if I was reaching for them while holding on to the handle on the housing.

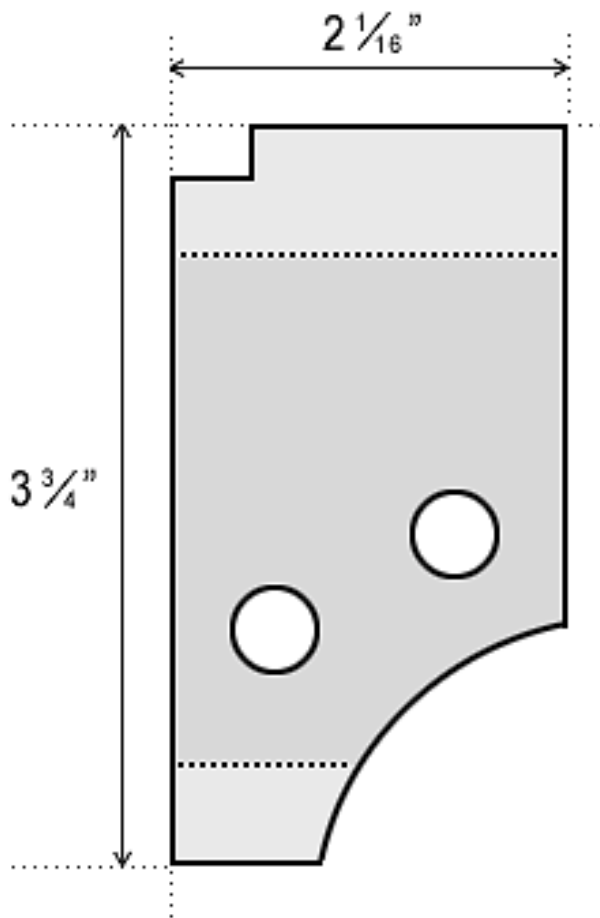
My last gripe is a personal one for I had originally come up with the idea of installing a hand-strap on the old PT-007/010 cases using existing holes. Well, on the PT-015 that top hole is gone.. Sayonara! That simple little hand-strap brought MUCH comfort to my underwater photography and helped me hold on to my rig with one hand while I held the nose of the Great White shark with my other. I guess it's time to get those old rusted gears in my head running again and try to invent something. For those with a nose for money... smell that?!?! That's marketing potential!

One of my favorite features of this housing (all PT cases for that matter) is how Olympus designed a diffuser panel on the front of the housing. This allows the beginner to shoot underwater strobe shots without the complexities of external strobes while still producing some quality shots. There are some limitations to it, including some problems getting the whole subject lit on an extreme macro photograph or getting good coverage on a subject a little far away. Overall though, if you're looking for a very compact setup while diving or just out doing a lazy afternoon snorkel and don't want to miss any photo opportunities then using the PT-015 housing with the included counter-weight is the perfect solution. Try it out—you'll be happily surprised by the results.

To conclude, even with my personal fears of the dial knob, using this housing is simple and comfortable. After using it underwater a couple of times its operation becomes very comfortable and quick. Its list of new features should be a welcomed addition for both the first time and experienced user. Its simple controls makes operating the camera fast and easy and the new red color adds some pizzazz to your underwater setup. But best of all, with a street price of approximately \$300, this is one underwater housing that'll still leave enough money in your wallet to afford the dive trip.

On A Side Note

Do you own a PT-015 case and Sea & Sea's YS90-DX strobe(s)? If you're using the fiber-optic line setup here's a copy of the template I designed for the Velcro to fit across the front of the diffuser panel.



Cut your two pieces of loop material in the shape of the lighter-shaded area of the diagram.