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Wednesday, 23 November 2011

Olympus M. Zuiko Digital ED 12mm f/2 Lens: Review

By **Ctein**

"You get what you pay for."

This bit of anti-consumerism is frequently trotted out as an excuse for high prices, as if it were some law of nature. It's not. Sometimes you get a lot more than what you pay for. Sometimes you get a lot less.

The Olympus 12mm Micro 4/3 lens, with the focus ring pulled down to reveal the distance and depth of field scales.

At $800, the Olympus M. Zuiko Digital ED 12mm ƒ/2 lens is a case of getting less. A lens this pricey should be great; this 12mm (equivalent to 24mm in full frame format) has too many warts and weak spots to qualify as anything more than good. Its deficiencies are serious enough that I strongly considered returning it.

The main reason I didn't is that it occupies a unique spot in the lens selection for Micro 4/3. Fast wide angles are rare; the closest competitor I know of is the Panasonic 14mm ƒ/2.5. I have the Olympus 14–42 mm kit lens, and it's a better lens than most people give it credit for. I didn't need another 14mm lens just to gain a stop. I did hanker for something wider, but, because I'm not a major wide-angle fan, I didn't yearn for one of those small-aperture, large-size wide-angle zooms.

Truth is I was looking forward to this lens almost as much as the 45mm ƒ/1.8 I reviewed last week. It would fill a conspicuous hole at the end of my focal length range, and its fast aperture would let me use it for available light work as well as nature photography, my primary activity.

The first thing I did with the lens after I got it from B&H was take it out for some field tests. When I pulled the photographs up on my computer, I was sorely disappointed. On-axis sharpness was only adequate, even at ƒ/4.5–ƒ/8. Not good. Worse, edge quality stayed mediocre at all apertures (below). I don't expect great edge quality from a 24mm-equivalent at ƒ/2. I do when it's stopped down several stops, at least if it costs as much as this lens does.

This photo was made at ƒ/4.5 with my first sample of the lens. Shown below are the central and corner portions at 100% scale.

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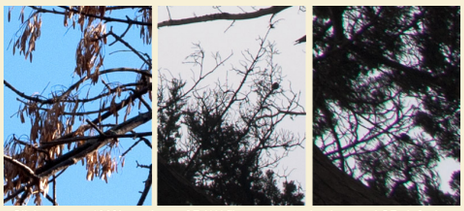

Click to open 100% sections of RAW files, converted using my ACR defaults. On the left is the central portion of a photograph made at $f/5.6$ with the Olympus 45mm $f/1.8$ lens for comparison. By comparison, the central portion of a photograph made at $f/4.5$ with the 12mm lens looks very soft (middle). Corner performance (right) shows clear smearing. Stopping the 12mm lens down further did not significantly improve image quality.

Allowing for the possibility that my expectations were unrealistic, I ran this past TOP's panel of experts. There was a general agreement that this was not stellar performance and that there was a fair chance I had a defective lens. Jeff Goggin, who already owned a 12mm, sent me a JPEG of one of his photos that looked a lot better than any of mine.

I exchanged my lens for a new one. The new one was a lot better. Center sharpness was very good wide open, and became excellent stopped down. Edge quality? Well, it still wasn't particularly good wide open, but I would not expect that from a 12mm $f/2$ lens at any price. It got a lot better stopped down than my first sample did, but it never got great. Most important for me, it was only marginally acceptable in 15x20" image area prints. That's my standard size for sale. It's pushing what this camera can do, but my other lenses perform well there. This lens makes the grade, but only barely, and you better not be looking too closely at those corners:

A second sample of the 12mm lens performed much better. Please note this is not a straight RAW conversion; this is a print-ready file I worked magic on in Photoshop. It illustrates the best sharpness and fine detail I can extract from this lens.

100% sections of the center and corner illustrate that central performance is excellent, but the corners still show some smear, even at $f/7$.

$800 should get me better optical quality than that.

One much-touted feature of this lens is full manual focusing. Pull back on the knurled focusing ring and it reveals a distance and depth of field scale. The focusing ring no longer free-wheels as it does in normal manual focus mode; it locks into place so that you can manually focus this lens like an ordinary camera lens. A very nice idea when you need to focus quickly; scale focusing is a valuable technique with wide-angle lenses, which benefit from generous depth of field. Fixed-position focusing rings are also easier to use than the free-wheeling kind; you quickly develop tactile feedback that lets you focus very quickly in situations where autofocus won't cut it.

Olympus's implementation of this has three big problems:

1. The focusing ring focuses well past infinity. The end stop is at about $+f/4$ (I'm using the depth of field marks as indicators). You can't blindly set the lens to infinity, or you'll actually be focused well beyond infinity. This kind of slop is often needed with telephoto lenses to allow for thermal expansion, but that shouldn't be an issue with a 12mm lens.
2. If you align the infinity mark with the focus line, you're still not in focus at infinity. True infinity focus is when the infinity mark is at about $-f/2.8$. Consequently, scale focusing isn't going to be very accurate.
3. When you focus in this full manual mode you don't get continuous focusing, as you do in normal manual focusing where the ring free-wheels. The manual ring only provides coarse zone focusing. Focus snaps from zone to zone abruptly; the separation between zones is about the same as the separation between the focus line and the $f/5.6$ mark. That huge jump makes it impossible to achieve either precise or accurate focus.

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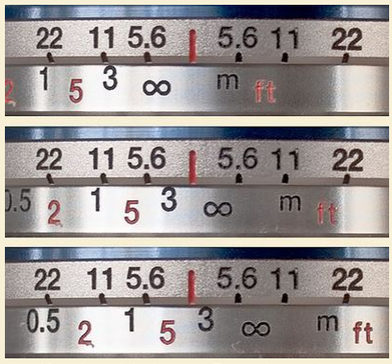

Full manual focus is poorly implemented. The top close-up shows the position of the distance scale when the focusing ring is turned to the full left; the lens is actually focused well beyond infinity. The middle illustration shows the ring's position at the point of best infinity focus; the infinity mark is well off the distance indicator. The lower illustration shows how much more the focusing ring needs to be rotated to change the focus by a single zone. That is a very large jump in focus.

I began to wonder if I might not have another defective lens. Jeff graciously loaned me his copy. The results are reminiscent of good news/bad news jokes:

Our two lenses perform essentially identically, so the good news is that I didn't get a second defective lens.

The bad news is that this isn't a defective lens. This seems to be as good as it gets.

Actual good news
Unexceptional image quality and an amazingly awful manual focus ring. Is there anything I can wholeheartedly praise in this lens? Yes: image stabilization.

This lens shines at available light work. I made this photograph handheld at ISO 100 at ƒ/2 with an exposure time of 2/3 second. There was no light on in the dining room; the only sources of illumination were lights in other rooms. It is actually much darker in there than normal dim indoor lighting. Note how little blur there is in the 100% section on the right.

This lens is so stable that I would swear the image stabilization system in the Olympus EP-1 had been designed around it. I can handhold this lens at 1/4th second and get photos that are sharp down to the single pixel level three-quarters of the time. At 1/2 second I'm good half to a third of the time. On rare occasion, when the gods smile, I can push even further (above), although a full second seems beyond my capabilities.

If I crank the ISO up to 800 (the maximum ISO for high quality with this camera), the results become amazing, as you can see below. If I can see it, I can photograph it (assuming, of course, that "it" is standing stock still).

ISO 800 at ƒ/2 and 1/2 second, handheld. It's the middle of the night; the only illumination is a street lamp up the road and the ubiquitous urban night sky illumination. The white spots in the sky aren't hot pixels, they are stars.

100% sections from the frame above, showing how rock-steady the image it is. The faint white dots on the right? Those are the Pleiades! They're just barely visible in the full frame, near the top center of the frame.

For available light work, this lens is a true champion, due to its combination of acceptable wide-open image quality and unbelievable stability. Under more normal conditions, the lens is less impressive. This is not a bad lens. But it is no better than merely good, and its performance doesn't come anywhere close to justifying an $800 price tag.

For the present time, I'm keeping it. If a better fast wide-angle comes along, I won't hesitate to replace this lens. It is only its uniqueness that makes it a keeper for me.

Ctein

Olympus 12mm ƒ/2 from B&H Photo

Olympus 12mm ƒ/2 from Amazon.com

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Ctein's regular weekly column appears every Wednesday on TOP.

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Featured Comment by **Jeffrey Goggin:** "While I agree with most of what Ctein says about this lens factually, I disagree with him a bit as to a few of his subjective statements of opinion.

"For a start, $800 doesn't strike me as ridiculously expensive for a lens, at least not these days. I have paid quite a bit more than that for several of them over the past three years, including the Olympus 4/3-format 7–14mm and 14–35mm zooms I happily use with my E-P1 and other Micro 4/3 bodies, and I personally consider the 12mm ƒ/2 lens to offer good—but not great—value for the money.

"Second, the maximum size print that *I* can make from the average Micro 4/3 file is 12x16", slightly less than two-thirds the size of Ctein's preferred 15x20" prints. At that larger size, I am not surprised that he is less than delighted with E-P1/12mm combo's image quality overall, but at 12x16, I find that I am generally satisfied with the quality of the results that I achieve with it.

"Third, the various focusing quirks he cites, while definitely annoying in theory, don't seem to be nearly so annoying in practice. At least not to me; your mileage may vary, of course.

"However, I do agree that the E-P1/12mm combo handles handheld, low-light photography with considerable aplomb. Last summer, I used mine to photograph handheld inside the underground parking garage at the office building where I work and was amazed to find I could consistently capture sharp photos using shutter speeds in the 1/8 to 1/2 second range, especially when I would hold the shutter button down and capture batches of three images consecutively, as the middle one almost always proved to be slightly sharper than the other two.

"Bottom line: If you're considering purchasing this lens, I suggest that you check it out personally and decide for yourself whether it meets your needs and/or fits your budget, rather than rely solely upon the opinions of others. And I suspect Ctein will agree with me on this point."

Featured Comment by **Christina Brandon:** "For those of you who haven't tried the 12mm ƒ/2, don't put your wallets away too hastily. I have had every wide-angle lens for the 4/3 and m4/3 formats—the $1800 7–14mm ƒ/4 lens (for 4/3); the $890 7–14mm ƒ/4 lens (for m4/3); the $600 9–18mm ƒ/4–5.6 lens (for 4/3) and the $700 9–18mm ƒ/4–5.6 lens (for m4/3)—and this is hands-down my favorite of the bunch.

"I have had the 12mm ƒ/2 lens since July and to say I am blown away by it is an understatement. As somewhat out-of-control collectors of cameras and lenses, my husband and I have plenty of other gear for comparison, including a Nikon D3 setup, a Canon 5DMII, and lots of truly stellar manual focus legacy glass we use on the Sony NEX 5n. We both agree that this little 12mm is a gem on all fronts.

"Here's what's great about it:

1. Image quality—By far the most important aspect of a lens to me is its image quality. Over the four months or so I've been using this lens, it has delivered consistently sharp, contrasty images under a wide variety of shooting conditions and with an equally wide variety of subjects, from portraits to architectural interiors. It's one of those lenses I feel I can depend on to give me not just good images but truly special images.
2. Wide aperture—I love this lens for interiors in available light, and guess what—an ƒ/4 or ƒ/4–5.6 lens is not much fun to use in low light. An ƒ/2 lens makes all the difference, and it's so sharp wide open that I find myself using it at ƒ/2 for the majority of my shots.
3. Minimum focusing distance—It's closer-focusing than any of the other wide and ultra-wide angle lenses I listed above (20 cm vs. 25 cm). This is a big deal for me as I enjoy getting in close to many of my subjects. Not only that, but an added benefit of getting in so close is that at ƒ/2 the backgrounds can be thrown significantly out of focus.
4. Aesthetics and ergonomics—Nothing to forgive here, either! This is truly a beautiful lens to hold, use, and just gaze at.

"Do I think the $800 price tag is appropriate? You bet I do. The lenses I listed above range from $600 to $1800. The only cheaper lens is the $600 9–18mm for 4/3, and I really struggled to get sharp images with that lens, so much so that I sold it. And of course all of those other lenses are ƒ/4 or slower! I consider it a minor miracle to have such a beautiful, tiny, jewel of a lens that is both super sharp and super fast for less than $1000.

"I am scratching my head a bit about Ctein's experience with edge sharpness. I get consistent sharpness across the frame at all apertures with this lens. I can't speak to the manual focus issues he discusses, as I've only shot it in autofocus mode.

"By the way, I have the 45mm ƒ/1.8 lens as well, and while that lens is also excellent and the 'right' focal length for my way of seeing most of the time, I have to say that the 12mm would be the harder of the two to part with if I had to make a choice. It's that special."

Posted on Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 10:25 AM in Ctein, Lenses | Permalink

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Comments

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Have you tried the Olympus wide-angle converter for the 14-42 kit lens? As I recall, it gets you to 11mm equivalent. My informal testing indicates that the performance is as good as the kit lens alone. Certainly works for me, although you don't get the f/2.0 speed.

Posted by: Tom Judd | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 10:41 AM

Well, I still love this lens, which just goes to show what I already knew, namely that I am a still a rubbish photographer after 60 years of photography. Guess I should stop aspiring to improve after all this time, and settle for an easier life.

Posted by: Mike Hessey | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 11:08 AM

Pleiades? Or Ursa Minor?

Posted by: Rob Atkins | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 11:24 AM

I had noticed some smearing in the corners in early sample images.
I have a 4/3 9-18 for comparison., which is sharp from edge to edge.

However the m4/3 9.18 has the same problems, so my impression is that digital correction has problems with superwides and does some 'pixel stressing' at the edges, when correcting.

In other words it might be a format/distance to flange problem with wides in mirrorless, where APS is even worse (see NEX 16 mm).

Posted by: Giles Wright | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 11:46 AM

Thanks for the review - you've probably saved a good many people a nice chunk of change (me included)!

Chalk it up as another puzzling move by Olympus though - they clearly know how to do good lenses (45/1.8) and even good WA lenses (ZD 12-60). So why are they trying to get away with mediocrity in an $800 product?

Posted by: Michael Bernstein | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 12:27 PM

Thank you thank you thank you. Our family budget thanks you. :)
Now I can reduce my lens lust to just the 45/1.8. I have the Olympus 14-24 and I agree that it produces excellent results for a kit lens. Between it and the 20/1.7 I find it hard to justify additional lens purchases.

Posted by: Dennis | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 12:27 PM

Handheld at 1/2 sec, wow.

Posted by: Robert Roaldi | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 12:59 PM

I was almost wooed by this lens, but bought a NEX 3 with 24mm Equiv f2.8 for half the price (yes, the lens came with the camera for 399). Given what I am seeing here, that may provide users of mirrorless systems a viable alternative, albeit non stabilized.

Posted by: yunfat | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 01:09 PM

Another Support-Oly-no-matter-what piece?

Posted by: Scottag | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 01:12 PM

Scottag,
How could an essentially critical review be a "Support-Oly-no-matter-what piece"? Did you even read the review?

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 01:21 PM

I suspect that the achilles heel of m4/3 fast wides is the short flange distance combined with the need for a certain amount of telecentricty of the optical path. I am guessing that this results in the significant degree of barrelling the m4/3 wide primes display uncorrected. I further guess that the From what I've seen in other reviews, all thin-camera or in-raw-processor correction of this barreling results in the relatively poor edge performance that is the hallmark of all the m4/3 wides (i.e., the Panny 12mm and Oly 17mm).

Posted by: Alan Fairley | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 01:50 PM

Eh, Ctein,

I use the 9-18 and indeed some smearing occurs due to the fact that it has some horrible CA wide open and even stopped down a fair bit. Now I use a Pana.....and correct that in Silky Pics....maybe you could give that a try. Without CA correction the 9-18 stinks big time....but mannually correcting CA improves matter a lot, as to make it one of my favorite lenses.

Greetings, Ed

Posted by: Ed | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 01:57 PM

Dear Tom,

I am always dubious about converters, but if you want to lend me yours for a couple of weeks, I'll give it a test.

~~~~~~~~

Dear Mike,

I never understand how readers can possibly interpret a less-than-favorable review of a product as an attack upon the product-owner.

Not my problem, guy. Really.

~~~~~~~~

Dear Giles,

Hmmm, so if I understand you, the smearing might not be a problem with the original photo but with how the RAW is getting processed? OK, worth checking out. Can anyone recommend to me a way to look at the RAW files, unmassaged? On a MAC, thank you, and for free (for this purpose a trail version of a program or crippleware download will do just fine)?

I'd note, by the way, that if this is an unavoidable side-effect of software correcting some other lens aberration like geometric distortion, still amounts to the same thing-- part and parcel of what the lens can deliver.

~~~~~~~~

Dear Scottag,

Have you ever heard the term "drive-by comment?" Just wondrin'....

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Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 02:10 PM

"Pleiades? Or Ursa Minor?"

Pleiades. No doubt in my mind plus Ctein has a degree in physics and does astrophotography. Not a mistake he'd make.

Posted by: TBannor | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 02:21 PM

I've done a lot of debating with myself recently and have almost sold myself on moving from a compact and aps-c DSLR to a Mft. The Olympus 12,17,45mm lenses would make the perfect prime lens set for me. This is the lens that is holding me back, I've read similar reviews online and now that I've read this here on a trusted site, I'll be sticking to my wonderful Tokina 116. The $800 plus another $1000 for the setup is just to much to make the jump.

Posted by: kenzo | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 02:51 PM

Ctein
Maybe if you had reviewed the lenses the other way around, first the 12 and then the 45, your review of the 12 wouldn't have had these conclussions. I was very happy and proud of my DZ 11-22, 14-54 and 50-200 until I got de 50 Macro and the14-35 f2, these two are so excellent and sharp that I'm not using the others anymore, and planning to get a couple of additional SHG from Olympus.

Regards,

M. Guarini

Posted by: Marcelo Guarini | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 03:01 PM
~~~~~~~~

Ctein's observation of this lens vs. the 45 f/1.8 isn't surprising, if you think about lens technology. Companies have been making lenses in the 40-50 mm range at f/1.8 and faster with excellent quality and reasonable prices for many years now, while it is only recently that they've even attempted a 12 mm, much less f/2. It's a much harder lens to make, and the fact that it even exists is pretty remarkable.

Posted by: fizzy | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 03:01 PM

I have it on the e-p3 together with the 25 1.4 and the 45 1.8 and the 12mm stopped down to 4 makes crisp pictures!!

www.flickr.com/photos/timvanvliet

Posted by: tim van vliet | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 03:09 PM

The price all but had me scared off of this lens already, and this review puts the final nail in the coffin. I have the (m4/3) 9-18, I love it, and I very rarely find myself wishing for extra light when using it. (The IS works great for that lens as well, turning out sharp photos at a quarter-second with great regularity, which is part of the reason I don't need more aperture so very much.) So, $800 will remain in my account, waiting for an Oly m4/3 body with an upgraded sensor.

Posted by: Nicholas Condon | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 03:15 PM

I have the 12mm 2.0 25mm 1.4 45mm 1.8 together with the E-p3. Have had it since it came out have been shooting it alot. More than my 5DII lately. I think the 12mm is well worth the $$. And no i'm not praising Oly because service wise they are not so good to put it sofly.

Some samples of the 3 lenses above most have all exif. and are full size.

http://www.flickr.com/photos/timvanvliet/sets/72157627295087

Posted by: tim van vliet | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 03:35 PM

Dear Rob,

Pleiades; I was facing due east. But it does look kinda Ursa-ish, dunnit?

~~~~~~~~

Dear Alan,

I'm hoping to get pointed at software that will let me figure out where the problem is.

Understand, I have no problem with software correction of aberrations. I don't care if the silicon doing the correction is bound up in silicon dioxide in a lens barrel or buried in my computer. I'm totally fine with it. All that matters is what comes out the end. If I see an unacceptable amount of image degradation, doesn't matter exactly how it is arrived at. Similarly, if the image looks great, I don't care what combo of hardware and software was involved.

~~~~~~~~

Dear Ed,

It's not a lateral chromatic aberration problem. I routinely correct for LCA (if the RAW converter hasn't already done it for me). This is smearing that's visible in the individual color channels, it's not a simple misregistration.

~~~~~~~~

Dear Marcelo,

In point of fact, I got the 12mm lens before the 45mm. I wrote the reviews in the other order because the 12mm review took a lot more work.

It made me kind of nervous, truth be told, about the 45mm I was getting. I had to cancel my order with B&H because the lens was on too-long backorder, and I bought it off of eBay. After getting a bad 12mm, I was feeling kind of gun-shy (never bought a bum lens before, really, truly). The seller was very good about holding my hand, sending me a couple of sample image to reassure me before I bid. If you ever find yourself doing business with "alans49" you'll get treated well. He's an A+ in my book.

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Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 05:08 PM

There's always the Noktor/SLR Magic F1.6. A bargain if you can forget autofocus.

Posted by: TheVoiceoverman | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 05:56 PM

Ctein,

By your reply I take that you have been shooting Jpeg only with the 12mm?

It doesn't make such difference though. If you check the LensTip review you'll see that before (in camera) correction the lens has a huge amount of barrel distortion.
That is probably unavoidable if one wants to build a lens that is both small and super wide.

Now I know from experience that when one corrects a Fisheye in PS to make it linear, one has to throw away part of the image because of 'stressed pixels' at the edges. This smearing happens too to the m.4/3 9-18, so I take that it is unavoidable in m4/3.

This lens however is fast. When introducing it Olympus presented it as a street shooter, not as a landscape lens. So you might reconsider the intention. In mirrorless, with short distance to flange, one can't have everything.
Or else, as said above, one should use older 4/3 telecentric lenses for landscape, as I do with the old 9-18: no smearing at the edges. But the lens with adapter is way bigger.
You won't have this problem with teles, only with lenses whose focal is shorter than the m4/3 register, some 20mm.

Posted by: Giles Wright | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 08:58 PM

---

i disagree with your conclusions , this is a vastly superior lens , but QC copy to copy is a bad as canon L glass....sadly ,it seems

i pixel peeped my copy when if first came out
and center and corners were great,

also the mf is in 13 stepped zones , which snap at intervals it is the best one will be in focus exactly the oof in stepped intervals in front or back

it is the best implementation of focus by wire in any modern af lens , but
thats not sayin much

my copy was made in japan ... were your 2 made in china IM NOT TRYING TO BE FUNNY HERE

Posted by: cosinaphile | Wednesday, 23 November 2011 at 09:02 PM

~~~~~~~~

Wow - thanks for the review Ctein. I was playing around with the idea of getting an EP-3 and the 12mm lens before Olympus vanishes in a puff of smoke. Now I'm having second thoughts, considering the price of the lens, but there aren't many other options for 24mm equivalent and fast aperture for a large sensor pocket camera.

Perhaps this is a reflection of the difficulty involved in getting decent image quality from short focal lengths on relatively large sensors? I'm guessing the 45mm 1.8 is technically not that difficult to make razor sharp - the designers can ride the back of 60+ years of 35mm standard lens development - but 12mm f/2 with flat field, minimal edge aberrations, and pocket size sounds very challenging!

Posted by: Kelvin | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 01:20 AM

"This lens is so stable that I would swear the image stabilization system in the Olympus EP-1 had been designed around it."

I don't quite get this. Isn't the IS in-body, and aren't lenses supposed to be stable? Specially prime lenses.

That snap zone manual focusing is quite a turn-off.

Posted by: toto | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 01:25 AM

Ctein, thanks for this review.
I have the 12 and my copy is doing fine. Not great in the corners, but then I don't do landscapes nor architecture so I suppose it's enough. What really strikes me with this lens is the micro-contrast, which gives images made with it a natural, realistic look even at f/2.
The geared focus ring is a great idea, but I noticed its inaccuracy too. I've learned to compensate and get zone focusing right in most cases. It is an annoying flaw, though.

Posted by: sneye | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 01:25 AM

My experience with the lens is closer to Jeffrey's. (It was with me for just about a week, though, together with E-P3.) There is evidence of softness in the corners but nothing that would really bother me. (OTOH, I noticed *slight* CA in only one photo. If I wasn't looking at 100% because of your photos, I doubt I would have noticed it.)

Besides, this MTF chart shows that is an expected behaviour. In comparison, the SHG 7-14mm lens is better but it's not F2.0 and is much bigger and heavier.

But then, I may be an undemanding person.

Posted by: vlatko | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 02:07 AM

Lighten up guys, surely Scottag just had a sarcasm attack. Didn't you Scottag? Scottag? Are you there?

Good review, straight and to the point. I hate having to read between the lines trying to decipher the true meaning of phrases like "well adapted to portraits due to the dreamy way it renders details at the edge of the frame". It's much better when you just say what you mean.

Posted by: beuler | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 02:08 AM

Gilles wright wrote here :
http://theonlinephotographer.typepad.com/the_online_photograp
12mm-review.html?
cid=6a00df351e888f8834015393 73c40a970b#comment-
6a00df351e888f8834015393 73c40a970b

That it may well be a limit with the format, exactly what I thought. Also the lens may be too heavily corrected through software, which can add to the problem.

Posted by: rrr_hhh | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 02:09 AM

BTW, Ctein, have you tried looking at the files in Olympus Viewer 2? (Wouldn't recommend it for regular work, though.)

Posted by: vlatko | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 02:14 AM

I agree with Tim I have the same set up and have found the lens to be outstanding, I also own the K5 and various pro lenses and it has been left behind in proeference to the Olympus.

I would suggest folk try it in real conditions and shoot what you normally do to gauge whether it fits your expectation, whilst this review has said it is poor I have read a number completely contradicting this. It is the same for most things one mans honey is anothers poison.

Posted by: shooter | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 03:26 AM

Looking at various pixel peeping web sites e.g. SLRGear as well as some 'seat of the pants' reviews I had come to the conclusion that the Panny 14mm f/2.5 was a worthy addition in place of this much vaunted and expensive alternative. As a bonus the panny is a pancake.

The trio of 14mm f/2.5, 20mm f/1.7 and 45mm f/1.8 takes some beating in terms of bang-for-buck and sheer jacket pocket, no camera bag, portability.

Posted by: Simon | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 05:46 AM

Can anyone recommend to me a way to look at the RAW files, unmassaged? On a MAC, thank you, and for free...

Raw Photo Processor (RPP).

Posted by: Alessandro | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 07:17 AM

First, if we want to have Olympus stuff, we have to pay for some guys over the Caiman islands, therefore the lens price being so high. The japanese mafia won't let you have a decent lens hood for free not even a miserable 1$ pouch, so forget about the price.
I have the 12mm, the pany 20mm and the 45mm f1.8 and I have to make some justice to the 12mm. While I agree that the IQ of the 12mm is exceeded by the 20mm and the 45mm, the 12mm is still good, plus it's a wide angle lens! Normal and short tele lens always performed better unless we are talking about highly priced lens such as the Leica branded. Compared to them the 12mm is really cheap.
Second, I don't know if you tested the lens with a camera hood, but with this one you really need it or otherwise definition and contrast are heavy affected, also, the lens is useless closed up over f8. Even f8 produces just acceptable pictures. This is the main reason why the dof scale is not that useful, you can´t work it's hiperfocal capabilities.
Also, It maybe be just me but I see small details with this lens like fine spider web strings, that I don't remember to see on the scene, neither in the final results of pictures taken from, for example, the panasonic 20mm.
Finally, I have seen that you don´t care much about color rendition and maybe that's why you don't like this lens, because from all the m4/3's I have used, this one produces the best colors by far.
I guess my English is not that good so please forgive me.

Posted by: Ricardo Silva | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 09:01 AM

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simply put....my 12mm from Olympus is absolutely superb. I own every lens they have made as well as Panasonic and the 12mm is just wonderful.

It's not a matter of how many degrees one has or what their field is...I have been in this industry for over 50 years and my experience with many systems most of which I have owned tells me that olympus did a great job with the 12mm as well as the 45mm.

Posted by: ELLIOT | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 09:06 AM

Ctein wrote:

"I am always dubious about converters, but if you want to lend me yours for a couple of weeks, I'll give it a test."

Ctein - not practical for me to ship it to wherever you live, as I'm about to leave on a long trip. It's only $100 ($80 at B&H right now). Perhaps you could find a dealer who would loan you one. These folks tested it more than I did, with fairly positive results: http://www.ephotozine.com/article/olympus-pen-converter-lenses-tested-16886
My needs are less critical than yours, but for 13x19 max prints it does the job for me. I can't justify spending more for the few times I need wider than 28mm equivalent. I do share your suspicions about converters.

Posted by: Tom Judd | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 09:43 AM

Thank You Ctein. :-)
Your artical was Illuminating as to why the lens is flawed for you as a photographer and equally illuminating as to why the lens has merit and usefulness in available light situations.
Sincerely
Richard in Michigan

Posted by: Richard Ward | Thursday, 24 November 2011 at 11:31 AM

Dear Tim,

I couldn't learn anything from the photographs on your Flickr site because I couldn't view them with anything more than one quarter resolution. At 25% scale, none of the problems I'm talking about are particularly visible, so I can't tell if your sample of the lens behaves better than mine. Also, lacking technical information for your photographs (in particular, aperture), I can't make any meaningful comparison.

Do you have another site where you have images posted at full resolution? I'd be happy to take a look at some. I am not above considering the possibility that I've looked at three substandard samples of this lens (pace Christina). While I doubt it (See my comment to Giles, following), it's not impossible. Not that that would make me feel especially kindly disposed towards this lens, but it would explain the “nope, it's wonderful” versus the “yeah, what you said” comments.

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Dear Giles,

I always make my photographs in RAW. Not sure how you got the impression that I use JPEG.
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I grabbed RAW Photo Processor and confirmed the substantial barrel distortion. I compared the barrel-distorted and ACR-corrected conversions in Photoshop, and it does indeed look like the smearing that I'm seeing in the perimeter is a consequence of correcting for the barrel distortion. So, in my book, this qualifies as a lens design problem: a poorly-corrected aberration that compromises final image quality. Considering the amount of distortion that is being corrected for, I'm impressed that ACR does as good a job as it does

Personally, I'd rather have the lousy manual focus ring eliminated and a couple of more elements put in the lens to reduce the barrel distortion to an acceptable level. This level of barrel distortion is not fundamentally inherent in a lens. A better optical design can reduce it.

As Kelvin also noted, making a lens of this focal length and aperture excellent is a challenge. Well, that's why I'm paying $800. Doesn't matter to me if there are other lenses out there that are even more expensive. This is still an expensive lens, in my book, and I expect a lot from it accordingly.

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Dear cosinaphile,

The boxes say the lenses were made in Japan. I don't know another way to check this.

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Dear toto,

That sentence could have been written better. Try this on for size: “Stabilization is so good when using this lens on the Olympus EP1 that I would swear that the image stabilization system in the camera had been designed with this particular lens in mind.”

In-body image stabilization exhibits very different degrees of effectiveness with different lenses. Some lenses stabilize really well, some nowhere as well. For example, relative to the 1/FL sec rule for exposure, image stabilization only gains me about a stop with the 45 mm lens. With the 12 mm lens, it's gaining me almost 3 stops.

Hope this clears the matter up.

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Dear Ricardo,

Your English is entirely understandable. I think there may be a little confusion over my use of the word “soft”. When I talked about image detail being a little soft, I did not mean it was low in contrast (it can mean that). I meant that the detail wasn't really crisp. That is, the acutance was not very high. A lens hood won't change that; it would improve contrast by reducing flare and other scattered light, but that wasn't the problem I was seeing.

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Dear Elliott,

It's not only not a matter of how many degrees one has or what their field is, it's also not a matter of how many years one claims in the business. I've got 45. So what? This is not about seniority.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Friday, 25 November 2011 at 01:45 AM

It seems that most small wide-angle lenses in the m4/3 and NEX systems suffer optically partly due to the emphasis placed on miniaturization. Having a fast max aperture compounds the problem.

You can't have small, wide, fast, and flawless optics all at the same time. Pick any three. Layer on price constraints, and it becomes even harder.

Posted by: e_dawg | Friday, 25 November 2011 at 10:43 AM

I'm sorry no i don't but you are able to see full resolution now and you can see the exif data if you click on the camera it's been taken with.

And please keep in mind it's a 12mm 2.0 lens everyone!! Name a better one thats sharper throughout the picture?!?

I don't say your sample isn't working right i'm just saying something must be wrong somewhere because i think and many many others think this is the best wide fast m4/3 lens no doubt.

But no worries i'll still read your blog :)
Greetz.

Posted by: tim van vliet | Friday, 25 November 2011 at 07:36 PM

Dear Tim,

First, an apology and correction-- when I went back to your Flickr site, this time I could bring up the original-size images. I don't know why the browser wasn't showing me that option before. But clearly my problem, not yours.

Second, if you want to show someone an example photo, point them at the specific photo, OK? There were hundreds of photos on your site. How am I to easily know which ones were made with the 12mm lens and at what apertures? I've got lots better things to do with my time than find appropriate samples by trial and error.

That said...

Third, I did find two or three appropriate comparison images. Frankly, the corner image quality sucks. Lots worse chromatic aberration, lots worse smearing than my lens. Worse, even than figure 3, right, which is from the defective lens I returned.

I don't know if that's due to you having a poor sample or if it's in how your JPEGs got processed for posting. All I can tell you is that those photos aren't anywhere close to "crisp."

If they're making you happy, well and good. YOU are the one who needs to be happy with YOUR lens, not ME. You already own the lens, so my review should be entirely irrelevant to you.

But I will tell you that the photos you pointed me to that are supposed to praise this lens only serve to confirm my modest damnation.

pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Friday, 25 November 2011 at 10:30 PM

Dear e_dawg,

That's a good question, where the root of the design-concept problem lies. It could be in the miniaturization, but since the primary aberration turns out to be geometric distortion, it may have to do more with price points and creeping-featuritis. Geometric distortion's definitely not an inherent problem with the constraints of this system.

And, to some extent, it's a market position problem. If this had been a $400 lens, no one would be demanding as much from it. But for the marketing people that then becomes a call they have to make on how much the customer is going to demand at a certain price point. For my purposes, Olympus made the wrong design decisions for a lens at this price point. But it's entirely understandable how those decisions got made.

What I can't figure out is why the full-manual focus system has so many warts. I would think all three of the problems I described could be very easily fixed. Either that means there is something about designing those kind of focusing rings that I don't understand (entirely possible) or a designer at Olympus dropped the ball on that (also possible). We will probably never know.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Saturday, 26 November 2011 at 07:41 PM

I am concerned with reports like these. Are we looking at pixels or are we see the picture?

Posted by: Ramesh | Monday, 28 November 2011 at 12:27 AM

The comments to this entry are closed.