

SERENADE TO
CANADA'S OLDEST

OLYMPUS
OM-1



A FIELD TEST IN REVERSE

Field tests are a great guide to camera users. They furnish details, new designs, performance, and look into the future in terms of their reliability.

Wouldn't it be nice, if we could curb our excitement at new models, and have tests done two or three years later on samples that have been in full use, to see how they stand up?

In fact there is a British magazine that does just that, and results can be surprising. After all, we can't all be running out once a year to buy a new camera because the introduction and hoopla tempts one beyond measure.

Professionals who have a hefty investment in a camera system rarely swap equipment until it has put in some considerable time of solid work.

They can't afford to.

In a recent issue of a leading photo magazine, an expert questioned the compact, lightweight camera trend very strongly, suggesting that most can not stand up as well as older, heavier and potentially more rugged designs.

I think that in many cases he was right.

Olympus and the OM-1 ?

Well, in a field test of the OM-10 in a subsequent issue the following comment was made.

"The emphasis on materials in discussing the OM-10's interior is because the OM cameras have become a standard of comparison among camera makers when the question of compactness comes up. Its more expensive siblings, the OM-1 and OM-2, are splendid examples of getting much from little; every part is contrived to be as small and light as possible without sacrificing strength."

(Popular Photography February 1980).

So what about Canada's oldest OM-1?

How has it stood up and for how long? What has it needed in terms of servicing? What is good about it? What could be improved?

This camera has been in steady professional use for almost nine years. In fact I have used it continuously myself.

I first handled the camera as a sample in the top secret category in the summer of 1972.

I lost it for a while as it had to go to the 1972 Photokina where the new compact concept was to be introduced — just how many times it was wound and tripped by thousands of visitors, who knows?

It came back to me in the autumn for further assessment, and for a reason I'll mention later, stayed with me as it was never intended to be marketed in Canada.

Readers who weren't into photography at the beginning of this decade can hardly realise the impact of the OM-1.

The 35mm SLR was dominant in photography, but over the years had grown in size and weight more and more with almost each model. Some of the more "professional" ones were over the 40 oz. mark. The 24 oz. (with f/1.8 lens) OM-1 was a joy.

Not only the camera, but the lenses were smaller and lighter so that the OM-1 with the 75-150mm zoom weighed less than many competitors with standard lens only.

The OM-1 set new standards in viewing brightness; about 70% brighter, which was important. The more through-the-lens metering took over, the darker focussing systems became as light was bled off for the metering systems.

The finder offered 97% accuracy, matching the area of a 35mm mounted slide. Accuracy, or lack of accuracy in contemporary finders was often in the 80's as far as percentage was concerned. (Even today current models of most makes are around 93-95% only).

Simple interchangeable focussing screens (now 14 in all) gave perfect matching of the most exotic lenses in the OM system to easy focus. Not perhaps of interest to most amateurs with a modest range of lenses, but invaluable for much professional, and scientific and medical work for which the camera was also designed.

Noise and vibration had also become a problem in SLR design and were one of the greatest design challenges in the OM concept.

The OM met this with a great new shock absorbing system rounded out by the first pneumatic damper in a 35mm camera mirror system.

The quietest 35mm SLR yet

Particular attention was paid to rugged design and smooth operation. In fact, in an early incident, (Jan. 1973) with an avalanche in the Alps, and airlift out, conditions were so cold and my current camera winding so heavily that I was sure something had broken in the OM-1. And in a bad fall, which was part of this incident, my other camera was badly damaged, the OM-1 not at all. Had my ribs and leg been as tough, I wouldn't have been out of the travel business for a year.

This wind feature surfaced again with the first Japanese ascent of Mt. Everest when, at the summit, the OM was operating so smoothly, the successful team had the same reaction that I had in the Alps.

Nothing wrong with the camera.

Optically we expected the best from the OM system, for Zuiko lenses were already a byword from the late 40's when I found two for my Leica.

In any event, two years before the OM-1, Olympus introduced their first 35mm SLR, the FTL, as a stop-gap design, and its lenses received the highest praise as the most outstanding from a camera designer that the particular magazine had ever tested.

Those lenses, 28mm, 35mm, 50mm, 100mm, 135mm and 200mm were to be amongst the approx. 30 lenses for the OM system.

This particular OM-1 was used as a support camera for a year and then gradually took over our 35mm photography by 1974. It has been used for subjects from furniture catalogues to flowers, travelled across Canada, and on dozens of assignments from Venezuela to Istanbul, from the cold of Canadian winter and the Alps to 114F under the Golan Heights. Its framing accuracy and low vibration plus mirror lock up have made it the ideal camera for slide duplication or making negs. from slides, 1.1 or higher magnification on my Illumitran unit. And, because of its compactness, filled a role which few professional cameras have shared in the past, as a companion camera for the sheer joy of personal picture making.

It has been 100% a working camera, and not an occasional one.

So what have been the problems?

Frankly only one, which was un-suspected. In 1978 I decided to have it checked prior to an extended assignment. It never had been.

I was told that the shutter slit was running just a fraction out of vertical, not serious, but it might as well be attended to whilst the camera was in.

A couple of times, as a precaution after working in

blowing fine sand conditions I have had the mirror and viewing system checked and cleaned, a brief operation which I don't care to try myself, and when changing lenses under such conditions small particles blowing into the mirror chamber are very possible.

Not a bad record.

What would I like changed about the OM-1?

First, though I use little flash, I prefer to use a hand held model off-the-camera synched by a cord, rather than flash in the hot-shoe.

With the special OM flash units this can be done, but for me the investment is not warranted, so I get very angry at that X and FP setting around the one flash socket. It is too easily moved by accident, so I have had to tape it. I would prefer two separate sockets, or just X synch.

I found the finder eyepiece very vulnerable to perspiration in heat, rain drops or snow flakes. This is easily cured with the eyecup. The eyecup however must be removed when closing the ever-ready case or opening the camera back, and Olympus showed no interest in the hinged "fold-back" design I produced which could be kept on at all times.

Any other offers?

I use the camera a great deal under low light conditions, and for lens changing in the dark would appreciate locating dimples on the lens and camera body to assist me in fast location of the lens for fitting by feel.

Not much of a list of condemnations considering all the plusses.

Now most of the SLR world has gone compact.

WHERE DOES THE OM-1 STAND?

I personally think its still stands not only tall, but with many years of design and production advantage over other cameras as a proven, tough, camera of very high quality.

Most other makers seem to have headed in the direction of advanced electronics as attention getters (so have the remarkable OM-2 and OM-10), for most it will be some years yet before they can prove themselves in terms of applied durability.

Canada's oldest OM-1, #108949 is still going strong, its chrome finish virtually un-marred. It accepts all the latest OM system lenses and accessories so that it is not obsolete.

(It was not designed to accept the motor-drive or power winder at that stage, and, whilst like the early OM-1's could be easily modified, I preferred to keep it in its original state).

Oh yes, that bit about it never being marketed in Canada!

Actually it isn't really an OM-1! It is a prototype "M-1" which was released briefly in Japan and withdrawn!

Why?

Designer Maitani felt that it could be tougher still in one or two features, so beefed it up to become the OM-1 that we all know. As he said in Toronto some time ago, he wanted to make a camera that his grandchildren would still be using with confidence.

So, if the M-1 did not quite meet Olympus' standards for long life under tough conditions, and is doing just great in its 9th, tough year . . . How about today's OM-1, OM-2 and OM-10?