

# THE VIP TREATMENT

*If your camera suffers a breakdown you want it fixed – and fast! How does a five working day turnaround sound? If you're an Olympus shooter, that's what its state-of-the-art repair and call centres offer*



It's an interesting fact of life that sometimes you only find out the quality of a company you're dealing with when something goes wrong. From a photographer's point of view this might mean that the shiny new all-singing, all-dancing camera you have in your hands does an excellent job for you, but if you happen to drop it, or it suffers a breakdown of some kind, you could suddenly find yourself on your own, wondering who to contact to get it working again. That could be a total disaster for a busy professional.

This is when the true value of after-sales service really starts to make itself felt, and it's one of the things that any professional photographer needs to take into account when they're eyeing up a new system. In this department there are very few, if any, manufacturers that can match the offer made by Olympus to its growing army of serious and professional users. Its Service-Plus package is free to access following registration, and puts any E-M1 user, professional or amateur, firmly into the VIP category. Benefits include an extra six months on the statutory warranty, a dedicated hotline for any technical queries, free pickup should the camera require repair and a jaw-dropping, five working day turnaround, which includes a day's travelling time on either side of a fast-track three-day repair service.

For wedding photographer John Nassari it was yet another box to tick when he was considering whether to stick with his existing kit or move across to the Olympus OM-D E-M1 a couple of years back. "Like so many other photographers I was using the recognised professional kit," John recalls. "The quality of the images I was getting was superb and it was doing a good job for me, but it was heavy to carry around, and after a while that started to take its toll. At one wedding my back was really hurting, and eventually it got so bad I had to stop shooting and rest for a while. I just about got through the day but it was a warning things had to change."

Given the opportunity to step back and to assess the options John read an online review by a photographer he respected, who was waxing lyrical about the performance of the E-M1 he was trying out. "I knew that this photographer was impartial," says John, "so it got me wondering whether this camera really was as good as he was making it out to be. So I got in touch with Olympus and they sent one over for me to try out. I was captivated with it immediately: I liked everything about it, from the styling through to its competitive price and the fact that it could accept a whole range of different lenses, such as the

**“Free pickup and a jaw-dropping, five working day turnaround”**

Voigtländer and Leica optics I love. Best of all it was really compact, and was a fraction of the weight of my previous gear."

John is now an Ambassador for Olympus, and through his honest feedback, workshops and blogs he's encouraged many others to look more seriously at what the E-M1 and its supporting system can offer. One of those to subsequently move across from her existing gear was Katie Heath, a fellow wedding photographer who works regularly with John in his business. She too was won over by the light weight of the OM-D kit and its total flexibility and ease of use.

"I spend a lot of time in post-production as well," she says, "and the amount of information in the files is amazing. For example, I had a wedding shoot last year for an extremely important client, who was very full on and demanding, and there was precious little time to take the pictures we needed. At one point I was pulled away and asked to shoot a picture of the couple, and was given just two clicks. Frustratingly the flash didn't fire and the shot was massively underexposed, perhaps by as much as four stops or so.

"The moment was gone and my heart sank, but when I worked on the file I found that, although it looked almost black, all the detail was in there and the shot was completely recoverable and looked great. It was an impressive performance, and justified my faith in the camera."

## Behind the scenes

It's all very well to hear about the service that Olympus offers its users, but being an ambassador for the brand John needs to be able to speak first-hand about what goes on behind the scenes and so he and Katie recently visited Olympus' European Customer Support Centre in Prague, Czechoslovakia and the Olympus Repair Centre in Coimbra, Portugal. It promised to be an exciting and enlightening trip, but there was just one small snag: the entire itinerary was scheduled to take place over just two days! A great deal of stamina, logistical skill and black coffee was clearly going to be called for, and it was just as well that John and Katie's gadget bags were so small and light they could fit into the overhead locker on the numerous flights.

Flying from Gatwick to Prague, the pair travelled to the Customer Support Centre, where they were greeted by its manager, Martin Jankovsky, who was accompanied by Mark Shayler, technical specialist supervisor (UK). No repairs are carried out at the centre, rather this is where the initial calls are fielded by a highly trained technical staff that's divided into eight regional teams. Each team speaks the language of the area it's looking after. If a query can't be dealt with on the spot, it's escalated and the customer is called back with the answer: no one is ever left feeling that they're not considered important.

The centre's philosophy is clear for all to see: posters on the wall remind staff that the customer is not an impediment to the job, they are the reason for the job, and it should

be considered a privilege to serve them. Obvious maybe, but many big companies tend to lose sight of this simple fact. Martin sums it all up remarkably well in one sentence: "We tell our staff that our relationship with the customer doesn't stop once we've persuaded them to buy our product," he says. "Rather this is where it actually begins."

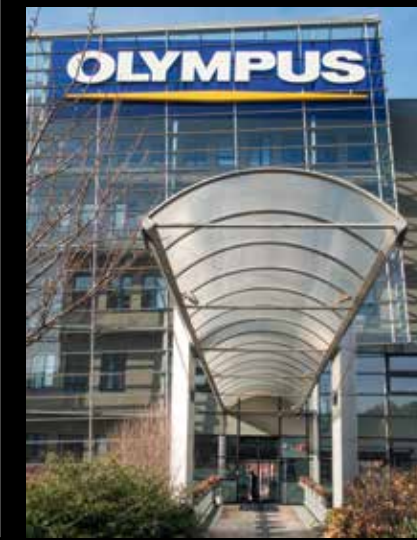
On the building's top floor the line-up of operators are in full flow. This is no call centre that you might recognise from a certain reality TV series: rather it's highly efficient, most operators are deep in conversation explaining some technical matter to a caller or dealing with their issue, and there are TV monitors visible from around the office that denote the ongoing status of each operator.

John enquires about the shelves that are stacked from top to bottom with Olympus gear, ranging from virtually every camera of the past few years – compacts as well as DSLRs and CSCs – through to just about every lens within the current Olympus system. "These are there so that when an operator gets a query about a specific piece of kit they can go to the shelf and have it in their hands while they talk to the customer," Martin tells him. "It makes it easier for them to talk the customer through their query."

Hugely proud of the Olympus product, Martin makes the point that he believes the brand should be considered one of the top three interchangeable lens camera manufacturers in the world, due to the technology, lens line up and overall design. "We're individual, not mainstream," he says, "and should be considered alongside the likes of Leica and Hasselblad."

Meanwhile Mark, already an Olympus employee, relocated to Prague from the UK with his family a couple of years ago, "I've really enjoyed my time here," he says. →

**IMAGES** Olympus takes after-sales service seriously, with dedicated facilities in Czechoslovakia and Portugal.







"Prague is a great place and my children are at the local school and are already bilingual: which is more than I am at the moment unfortunately!" It's staff like Mark who pick up the phone when a call comes in from the UK and Ireland, so the caller is addressed by someone proficient in their language, and the accent is refreshingly familiar.

John and Katie ask about the history of the centre and Martin tells them that it's been here for 11 years, a dedicated building that Olympus built from scratch. All calls to the centre are via a Freephone link and, as far as possible, all Olympus camera products are covered, from the entry-level compact through to the flagship professional model.



Around ten per cent of the enquires are pre-sales, customers enquiring which kit they should buy, while the rest are technical queries. Many of the calls relate to perceived rather than actual breakdowns: once an operator has talked through the issue there's no need for the kit to come in.

#### Moving on

Leaving the centre behind John and Katie headed to the centre of Prague. On this whirlwind trip there's an all-too-brief opportunity for the cameras to come out and to shoot some candid street portraits in the city's landmark Old Town Square, populated by a throng of street entertainers, stalls selling local delicacies, such as giant sausages, massive slabs of ham and hot wine, and masses of tourists. The pair are in their element, getting carried away by the cheerful, almost party-like atmosphere.

"I just use the E-M1 exactly as I would a film camera," John confides. "I keep it to my eye and shoot away, and the electronic viewfinder means that what I'm seeing is what I know I'm going to get so I don't need to keep checking things. The EVF was one of the hardest things to get used to when I first started using the camera, but now I love it."

From here they make their way to the famous old Charles Bridge, pedestrian only and crammed with sightseers, musicians and artists. The glorious spring sunshine created long shadows and brought opportunities and challenges in equal measure, but both John and Katie were relishing the experience, blending in with cameras that didn't alert the world to their professional status.



**BELOW** Technicians at work in the service facility. **OTHER IMAGES** Olympus Ambassador John Nassari, photographer Katie Heath and their Olympus kit on the streets of Prague.

#### Last port of call

The next day in Coimbra, Portugal, the pair set out for the Olympus Service Facility, where facility manager Richard Sousa greeted them. He's clearly hugely proud of the operation and the team he oversees, and over a short presentation he explains in detail how everything works.

"It's very different to the way things used to work," he says. "Previously every country had their own separate service centres and it was very inefficient: Olympus took the decision to centralise things, and we're one of two centres that now service the whole of Europe." Why Coimbra? "Because this is a big university town, and many of the students will come to work for a time in the factory. They're denoted by the fact that they wear green hats, and many of them eventually come to work for us full time when they graduate."

Olympus focuses on the more advanced models, the low-end compact market having largely been overtaken by mobile phones. It's meant that the Service Facility now caters for significantly fewer repair cases than before, but the quality of the service is higher than ever, and it does free up the opportunity to set up bespoke operations, such as the three-day in-house turnaround for the OM-D E-M1.

This is specifically what John and Katie have come to see, and they're fascinated to hear how it all works. "When an E-M1 comes in for service it's prioritised from the very

start," Richard tells them. "It's separated from the rest of the products and fast-tracked through the facility, being placed in a green box to denote the fact that it needs to be handled first. We know that we have to turn it around within a maximum of just three days, so there is no time to lose. We want the photographer to feel that the service is personal, and so the camera is returned to the customer in a bespoke black box, accompanied by a signed note from the technician that worked on it."

It's an extraordinary level of service and, of course, under the warranty, it's all free, with the option to extend this by an extra three years. That kind of reassurance is music to John and Katie's ears, and they know that, for several years to come at least, their own cameras are covered pretty much whatever happens. "It just shows the kind of confidence Olympus has in its cameras," Katie remarks. "You couldn't afford to offer that kind of service if the cameras were expected to break down regularly."

In fact we only see a couple of green boxes while being shown around, which seems to bear out the point. But while this kind of VIP service is directed at those using the flagship product, it doesn't mean everyone else is at the back of the queue: service times are fast across the board, and as John and Katie walked around Richard points out the charts that record performance in each department on a daily basis. Any fall in productivity is investigated and put right on the spot.

En route to London the pair are shattered by their whirlwind tour, but feel lifted by the whole experience. "As an ambassador



for the product I'm often asked by other professionals for a candid view on what it's like to use," says John, "and it's really good for me to be able to say that I've not only used the camera but I've seen the backup facilities and can personally vouch for them."

"This is all part of the reason why you might choose to use a system. Not only is the product good but Olympus clearly values its customers and is pulling out all the stops to make life easier for them. It understands the specific needs of the professional and is putting a lot of resource into catering for this sector, and I think this is one of the reasons why more and more people are now coming across and taking a closer look at what their cameras can offer." **PP**

#### MORE INFORMATION

[www.olympus.co.uk](http://www.olympus.co.uk)

**OLYMPUS**