

Cameras for Journalists

Tools of the Trade · By Simon Townsend · 18 min read

Cameras

"What kind of camera should I buy?"

Students ask me this frequently. I answer the question with a question: how good are you at taking photos? Can you take photos good enough for Time, National Geographic and Home Beautiful? Do you understand lighting? Shading? The part that shutter speed plays in creating a great photo for which these kind of publications will pay \$1000, \$5000, or \$10,000 or more? Or do you shoot mere snapshots? Good enough for the family album, but never good enough for a top quality publication? If you're not already a really good photographer, then a \$20,000 digital camera with all the bells and whistles is not going to make you one.

A top photographer can work with a \$69 Kodak, or a \$9 disposable camera and turn out a great photo because he knows what he's after and how to achieve it. I can only repeat my advice in my first letter:

If you'd rather concentrate on writing and not worry too much about photography, that's fine. If you feel that way, you'll be better off focusing on what you're most comfortable with and what you're best at. There are some sure and easy ways that you can avoid photography altogether and still supply editors with photographs:

- If you're writing about anyone or anything FAMOUS, your target publication is sure to have many suitable photos on file.
- If you're writing a travel story, any big travel agency is happy to supply photos free of charge (this includes airlines, shipping companies, hotels). Just phone their Public Relations people.
- All countries, states and regions have tourist and trade information services. These government or locally-funded organisations need publicity and will gladly supply free photographs.
- All businesses need publicity and will go out of their way to cooperate. They all have PR people who will fall over themselves to supply you with free, professional photos.
- Another way (which I don't recommend) is buying a photo from stock libraries. They are expensive, but they are a last resort. Ask me more about this if you want to go this way.

There is no doubt that the BEST camera is a digital camera. Every picture is a computer file. But unless you are familiar with computers and you use the internet and email, don't rush into buying a digital camera yet. A good digital camera is expensive. But it's the efficient, fast, convenient, modern and cheap way to take photos and, most importantly, to SEND them (that is, email them) to your target publication. And no "original" to risk getting lost. More below about digitals if you need to know more. But if you're buying a normal camera, I recommend you buy a well-known brandname like Canon, Pentax, Nikon, Minolta, Konica, Ricoh, etc. I know nothing about the internet camera retailer www.dirtcheapcameras.com.au but I've

looked at the website and it does have amazing discounts on new, brand-name cameras. If you buy a camera capable of printing the date onto your photo, switch this facility OFF. No editor is interested in a set of photos with dates on them. I recommend you do NOT use a compact camera with a viewfinder above the lens. These are essentially family snapshot cameras and never produce the consistent high quality needed for publication. I recommend you buy an SLR camera (single lens reflex) with which you look through the lens itself to see the image, not through the viewfinder. If you must buy secondhand DON'T buy from a classified ad or a pawn shop. Buy only from a recognised camera store which will give you some kind of warranty in writing, and buy ONLY if it comes with the original user's manual. I wish I could advise you on price, but it's too fluid a market. But roughly, expect to pay 30%-to-50% of new value. Now this is most important (and yes, it's expensive) . . . first task: you must buy 10 rolls of film and shoot the lot (about 360 photographs) over 10 days and nights. Each morning, rush one roll in for processing to give you an idea of how you're going. READ the manual. Keep experimenting. Good luck.

Digital cameras can range in quality and cost from an inexpensive "instamatic" type to a high-end "Hasselblad", and of course all those variations in the middle seem exactly alike. Most buyers want something that will take good quality images, but doesn't cost more than their computer. There are many factors to consider when buying a digital camera. In addition to the conventional camera components, digital cameras have the equivalent of a small computer and scanner in them. They are somewhat similar to a video camera. Both have a lens which focuses the image onto a Charge Coupled Device (CCD), which then converts the image into electrical pulses. These pulses are then saved to a video tape, or in the case of a digital camera, into memory. Please note that there are also digital video cameras, which capture video instead of single images. Before starting to shop for a digital camera, decide what you really need in a camera. A few things to consider:

IMAGE QUALITY: Look at the actual image from the camera, before using a retouching program. Is it washed out? Is it blurry? Are the colors true? Many reviews in camera magazines will have samples of actual output. Look at them closely, and remember that much of the time, these are in a studio setting and are probably "best case" situations.

RESOLUTION: Your images will be used for printing in magazines, and the resolution on most midrange cameras should be fine. Consider what the camera will be used for: web pages, quick shots for presentations, pictures for figures for publication, etc. If most of your shots will be for web pages and presentations, don't spend \$15,000 for a professional camera because a print quality shot is needed once a year.

WEIGHT: The size of a camera can be important if portability is an issue. A larger, heavier camera is not as easy to take along. Cameras range from a few half a kilo to several kilos. But some, like the Casio cameras, are small enough to fit in a pocket.

NUMBER OF IMAGES: How many images can a camera take before you need to download the images onto your computer? The number of images may not be a problem if you are shooting near your computer, but if you plan to take your camera away from your computer, make sure it will store enough images. Several cameras use a PCMCIA type card, which is removable. These cards are not inexpensive, but they do give the flexibility of allowing you to change cards and continue shooting.

FLASH: Unless you have good lighting, or plan to shoot only outdoors, a flash is a must. Many midrange cameras are about the equivalent of a film rating of ISO 100, and don't shoot well in dim light. Upper end cameras vary a lot in the ISO equivalent. Personally I feel safer with a built-in flash in my (film) cameras.

LENS: Most midrange cameras have a single lens that may or may not zoom; some have snap on attachments to create a macro or zoom lens. If you need the ability to shoot objects at very close range (less than 40cm), make sure your choice has the macro option. If you want the ability to change lenses, you'll need to get a high end camera which is basically a 35mm SLR type camera with a scanner put in where the film usually goes. These cameras allow the use of many different lenses, as well as other accessories, but of course the lenses are an added expense.

These are just a few comments that may narrow down your choices a bit. Other matters may be just as important: Can it attach to a tripod? Does it have a SCSI interface? Does it have a PCMCIA card? What software does it come with? AND . . . what does it cost? I have never owned a digital camera and this is about the extent of my knowledge of them. Good luck.

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By Rod Easdown

Sydney Morning Herald

There are a few basic points to keep in mind when swapping from film to digital.

How do you pick the best digital camera for your needs? The easiest way is to figure out what you want it to do, and the easiest way to figure that out is to think about how you use your current camera.

If you are like most people, you pull out the camera for weddings, parties, birthdays, family get-togethers and, most often, holidays. You take a lot of photos and get postcard-sized prints made. You seldom get enlargements done.

If this is you, there's good news - you're the number-one target of camera makers and they have a huge range of models for you. But they will try to tempt you into spending more than you intended on a camera that promises greater flexibility and better portability.

They figure people take pictures only on special occasions because cameras are heavy, clunky and inconvenient to carry around. If they can convince you the camera they are recommending is so light and easy to carry that it will become a permanent fixture about your person - rather like a mobile phone - they reckon you'll spend a bit more. The sales pitch is that you'll capture all those "magic moments" you have previously missed by not having your camera with you.

In most cases, the basic specification of the camera you need remains the same. You should get a camera with at least three-megapixel resolution and a good optical zoom. Three-times zooming is more than enough for most snappers.

Such cameras start at about \$350. If you want to go to something that will slide into your shirt pocket, say a Casio Exilim, you may need to spend twice this, although the simpler Pentax Optio 30 is a neat little unit at \$349.

There are cheaper digital cameras with lower resolution and fixed lenses, and some of these will do a terrific job for people who don't have high demands. But there are also some duds, so it's a good idea to take a few pictures in the camera shop and have the salesperson display them on a computer screen for you.

Comparing the pictures you have taken using competing cameras is most illuminating, even when choosing between expensive offerings.

Advanced users will want something more. These people enjoy photography for its own sake and like to experiment with light settings, aperture openings and modes. They want to know they can take a standard picture of the Opera House and, by flipping to a different setting, also capture it as a silhouette against a bright background. They want to be able to use a flash without turning their subjects' eyes into red dots and they enjoy enlarging their photographs.

A camera that is flexible and has a resolution of at least four megapixels is vital for these people. Most importantly, however, they'll need a camera with a really good lens and the best quality lenses come from the companies with a reputation for lens building.

That's why established camera brands such as Nikon, Olympus, Canon and Pentax have an edge. It's also why some of the more recent additions to the ranks of camera makers, among them Sony and Panasonic, have enlisted Leica and Carl Zeiss to supply lenses for their premium models.

Video stills and still videos

Digital video cameras often include the ability to take still photographs that can be downloaded and emailed to friends anywhere in the world. These photos are fine for internet use, but their quality is usually too low to produce worthwhile prints.

Similarly, lots of digital still cameras take short videos. Again, these are usually of low quality and no match for videos produced by dedicated movie cameras. But the two formats are drawing closer and Canon is leading the way with the likes of its MVX10i at \$2299.

However, it's unlikely these two formats will ever totally merge. According to Canon's Stuart Poignand, still-camera buyers are very different from video-camera buyers and most camera users either go for one format or the other, seldom both.

Zooms and wide angles

You can get the wrong end of the stick when it comes to zooming. When you are playing with a camera in a shop you may be impressed by just how effectively the zoom can pull in distant objects, but most people use wide-angle settings far more than they use telephoto functions. Indoor shots, groups of people and landscapes are all captured better and more easily with wide angles. And the problem with almost all digital cameras is that they don't go nearly as wide as lots of users would like.

There are a few cameras that have wide-angle attachments for the lens, available at extra cost, but for the most part getting truly wide-angle performance, such as going to the 35mm film-camera equivalent of 28mm, 24mm or perhaps even 20mm, means buying a semi-professional single-lens reflex model with interchangeable lenses, such as Canon's EOS models or Nikon's D70. They're expensive and so are the lenses.

Take a careful look at the cameras you are considering buying to make sure that when you are photographing, say, a birthday party at close quarters, you'll be able to fit in as much of the scene as you want to include. This isn't always easy to judge unless you do some homework, figuring out where you would stand in your room and how much of it you'd like to fit in, and then translating those dimensions into the unfamiliar setting of the camera shop. But it can be done with thought.

By the way, when judging zooms, go only by the optical zoom figure. You will also hear about much more powerful digital zooms but all these do is blow up the image electronically and, as a result, definition suffers. Optical zooms close in by moving the individual elements of the lens and therefore retain full definition throughout.

Canon MVX10i

Cameras like this \$2299 unit blur the lines between still and video cameras.

Canon PowerShot A75

The PowerShot A75 is a neat solution for point-and-shoot photographers. With three-megapixel resolution, it has a three-times optical zoom and captures short movies. Best of all it connects to a compatible printer for direct printing with no computer required. All this for \$499.

Nikon D70

Digital SLRs are expensive but with interchangeable lenses they are among the few digital cameras to capture true wide-angle shots. Nikon's D70 is a six-megapixel camera that costs \$1999 or, with an 18 to 70mm zoom lens, \$2299.

Sony DSCT1

Here's a camera that Sony hopes you'll take everywhere. The DSCT1 has 5-megapixel resolution and a three-times zoom through a Carl Zeiss lens, yet it's no larger than a pack of cards and is, the company assures, "pocket friendly". It's \$1099.

Infofile

Canon phone 1800 816 001 www.canon.com.au

Casio phone 1300 728 606 www.casio.com.au

Nikon phone 1300 366 499 www.maxwell.com.au

Olympus phone 1300 659 678 www.olympus.com

Panasonic phone 132 600 www.panasonic.com.au

Pentax phone (02) 9518 9500 www.pentax.com.au

Sony phone 1300 720 071 www.sony.com.au

SIMON's COMMENT Students often ask me to recommend a camera. I refuse. It's not my job to give commercial endorsements of products. But I can, as a matter of record, tell you what I use. I use a Nikon D70 and I love it. You can look it up on <http://www.dpreview.com/reviews/nikond70/> Note I am not recommending that YOU buy it . . . it may not suit your purposes. But I can tell you of all the hundreds of stills cameras I have operated during my life, this is absolutely the BEST !!

Digital is the way to go

Re-Printed With Permission Of The Sydney Morning Herald

Film cameras are costly and old-fashioned. Nick Galvin gives 10 good reasons why travellers should move with the times.

Film cameras are all but dead and buried. Don't believe me? Take a look at your local camera store. All the focus will be on digital gear with only a small section devoted to film cameras. When was the last time you saw a film camera among the dozens of ads for photography gear scattered through almost every newspaper and magazine?

But what about digital cameras and travel photography - should you trust precious holiday pictures to pixels rather than film? Isn't this the one time it would be best to stick with tried and trusted technology?

A couple of years ago, my answer to these questions would have been a qualified "maybe", but technology has now raced ahead so quickly you are doing yourself a disservice by refusing to pack a digital camera in your suitcase or backpack.

So for all the technophobes out there who persist with messy, inconvenient film, here are the 10 top reasons to go digital.

1. You can take more pictures - and learn from the results

Of the 10,000 to 14,000 exposures a National Geographic photographer will make on an average assignment, only about 10 pictures will be used in the magazine. These statistics from the National Geographic Society's website illustrate a secret that is well understood by professional snappers - if you take loads of shots, but only show people a small selection of the very best, you'll quickly get a reputation as a picture-taking legend.

Until the advent of digital cameras, amateur photographers were hampered by the cost of film. Now amateurs can blaze away without worrying about the cost of film or developing. Not that I'm suggesting you should rely on dumb luck and the law of averages to get good shots, but the more pictures you take, the more good pictures you will get. Many newer digital cameras also store masses of information as well as the image file. Called Exif information, this will typically document exposure settings, such as shutter speed and aperture. By analysing why an image is a winner - or a dud - amateur snappers can improve their photography.

1. You can take pictures in lower light

Many museums, galleries and churches don't allow flash photography. Unless you have a roll of high-speed film handy, that means putting the camera away for conventional photographers. However, all but the most basic digital cameras allow you to select the equivalent of higher film speed (often referred to as an ISO number on your digital camera), making indoor and low-light photography without a flash a snack.

Turning off the flash and using a higher speed setting can also produce better pictures of people indoors - unless you are a fan of the startled rabbit look achieved by firing a flash in your subjects' faces.

1. Forget about memory problems

As recently as a couple of years ago, a big problem with taking a digital camera travelling was image storage. Memory cards were expensive and other solutions, such as taking a laptop, were even more pricey, as well as being heavy and bulky.

However, the price of memory cards has dropped at the same time as capacity has increased. For instance, you should be able to buy a 512MB CompactFlash card for less than \$100. This will hold about 200 decent-sized images that, when expanded, will come to about 5MB each and produce good-resolution 20 x 25-centimetre prints.

Three or four of these postage-stamp-sized memory cards should be enough for the most trigger-happy shutterbug. Cards with a much bigger capacity are also available, but if you store a trip's worth of images on one mega-card, you run the risk of losing the lot to a thief or by accident. Far better to use a series of smaller cards.

1. Beat the battery blues

Digital cameras are heavy consumers of battery power and without batteries your camera is reduced to being a rather expensive ornament.

If you are traveling somewhere with a reliable power supply, you can recharge your batteries each night. It is handy to have an extra, charged battery or set of batteries in your camera bag, too.

If you're heading into the wilds or to a developing country with little prospect of reliable power, ensure the camera you choose works with disposable as well as rechargeable batteries. Read the manual to figure out how many shots you should get from each set of batteries, do your maths based on how many pictures you expect to take, then stock up on batteries accordingly.

1. Instant gratification

If you are back home before you realise you left the lens cap on for that cracking series of alpine sunsets, you can scarcely pop back to do the shots properly.

However, if you were using a digital camera and reviewing your shots on the LCD screen, you would have plenty of time to fix any stuff-ups.

1. Share pleasure

One of the main reasons for taking travel pictures is to share them with other people.

Digital images can be shown off in various ways, depending on the situation. Firstly, you can stick with old-fashioned prints. Most one-hour photo stores offer a digital-to-print service or you can upload your pictures to an online service that will mail completed prints to you.

Alternatively, you can print the images yourself, using one of the new-generation home photo printers from manufacturers such as Epson, Canon or Hewlett-Packard. And if you don't need prints, most cameras come with software that allows you to create a slide show on your laptop, desktop or TV.

Invite the rellies around for a digital photo show. And if those rellies are on the other side of the world, you can include them by emailing pictures or using one

of the many dedicated websites for sharing portfolios, such as Fotki (www.fotki.com).

1. Pixel perfect

One of the fun aspects of digital photography is the ability to improve pictures on the computer after they have been taken. Making that sky a little bluer or removing ugly red-eye from a portrait is simple using the software that came with your camera or another program, such as Adobe Photoshop Elements. You might also decide a shot would look better in black and white, a transformation achieved with the click of a mouse.

1. Cheerfully cheap

While the initial outlay on a digital camera may be pretty steep (even so, prices are falling all the time), there's not much more to spend after that. There's no film cost and no developing cost if you decide to retain your pictures in digital form.

Even if you do want prints, you will only print the shots worth keeping - no more expensive piles of dud prints that go straight in the bin.

1. Time of the signs

A neat trick to help you remember where you've been and what you've seen is to take pictures of written information. This can be place names, labels on pictures and statues or even newspaper stories. When you get back home, you will have a basic visual diary of your trip (see "Give it a shot", right).

1. Snap and show

A sure way to get photographic subjects engaged and interested is to take a couple of pictures, then break the ice by showing them the image on the screen. Try doing that with a film camera.

Fill-in flash is good

One of the best places to use a flash is outdoors in bright sunlight. One of the problems of taking pictures - especially individual or group portraits - by midday sun is that the harsh lighting creates deep, distracting shadows. In people pictures this usually means dark eye-sockets and unattractive shadows under the nose and lips. Fill-in flash lightens these shadows to create more attractive portraits. That is, your flash "fills-in" the shadows with light.

Women's Weekly photo of my family

By Simon Townsend

Editors of first-class, mainstream publications are very fussy about their photos.

Only a trained, experienced photographer with \$50,000 worth of gear would get work.

I had a photo of me, my late wife and three grown children, taken some few years ago, by a contract photographer for Women's Weekly.

First, the freelance makeup artist arrived at my apartment at 8am toting three huge bags and she took two hours to do the hair and make up of the five of us.

Then the photographer arrived toting two large metal cases and huge tripod. His gear looked extremely valuable.

He took an hour to set three lights and take 10 Polaroid shots, just to test his lighting and composition. Then he took 90 minutes to take several different shots.

ONE and one only small photo appeared in the magazine.

But it shows how classy magazines will spend (I don't know, I'm guessing) maybe \$4,000 to \$5,000 to get the one shot they like.

First, it must be technically perfect.

And second, it must look "right", or look "nice" or whatever the requirement may be.

And for that, the publication will pay big money.

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