

## Snapping a good camera

*Photography: A promising new class of digital cameras is emerging between small, basic compact models and bulky, elaborate single-lens reflex ones.*



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THERE has long been a product in the middle when it comes to choosing a camera; somewhere between the expensive heavyweight kit used by professionals and simple point-and-shoot snappers. Not only are serious amateurs interested in this part of the market, but the pros are too. In the 1980s many news photographers carried something like a small Canon AF35M in their gadget bag. With a relatively fast lens, a motorised film winder and, in particular, its innovative autofocus system, it was a useful backup to bulky single-lens reflex cameras.

Now autofocus is universal and 35mm film has been replaced by digital imaging sensors and memory cards. But choosing a good mid-range camera has become more difficult. It is not just that most cameras now pack almost as many megapixels as anyone needs. Some have been redesigned to create new types of cameras especially for digital photography. Indeed, some mid-range models are capable of producing results close to that of the best digital single-lens reflex cameras (DSLRs).

Picture the choice

This year about 120m compact cameras and 11m DSLRs will be sold worldwide, according to Chris Chute of IDC, a market-research firm. The average selling price of a compact camera is about \$250 (£160), compared with \$780 on average for a DSLR. But that masks a wide spread: a high-end DSLR could cost more than \$7,000 (plus lenses) and a simple pocket camera less than \$100. In the middle can be found sophisticated compacts at twice the price of a low-end DSLR. So buyers need to think carefully about how they will use a camera before making their choice. There are four types of mid-range products to consider:

High-end compacts. These are beefed-up small cameras with built-in lenses and some clever features. An example is the Canon PowerShot G11, priced at \$500. If the AF35M has a successor, this is probably it. Moreover, like other quality cameras it can shoot in "RAW" mode, which is used by professionals to produce a large, unprocessed image file for advanced manipulation with photo-editing software. These cameras have a simple optical viewfinder, which allows fast framing of a shot. But instead of looking through the lens, as a DSLR viewfinder does, it is positioned above it. This causes what is known as a "parallax effect", which means the viewfinder may not show exactly what is being projected onto the sensor.

With experience, users can compensate for this—or they can use the LCD panel on the back of the camera which shows a “live” view from the sensor.

Superzooms. These look like small DSLRs but do not have interchangeable lenses. Their built-in lenses can, however, be pretty impressive. The Nikon Coolpix P90, priced at \$399, has a 24-times optical zoom. This is equivalent to a 26-624mm lens on a DSLR. Most DSLR users would have to carry three or four separate lenses to cover that range, which would be far bulkier and more expensive, though they would also produce superior results. Framing with a superzoom can be done with the LCD screen on the back or an electronic viewfinder, which is basically a smaller version of the LCD panel mounted in the eyesight. The image in an electronic viewfinder can appear blurred if the camera or the subject is moving. Pressing the shutter button lightly freezes a sharper image of what is about to be taken.

Mirrorless interchangeable-lens cameras. This is the newest part of the market, and one that is growing quickly. It consists of high-quality compact cameras which have interchangeable lenses, just like a DSLR, but without the bulky mirror and prism system used to look through the lens. Framing is done with a LCD screen on the back or with a clip-on electronic viewfinder. As a result, these new models are sometimes called EVIL (electronic viewfinder, interchangeable lens) cameras. Olympus and Lumix (a Panasonic brand) are the first entrants in the market. Both use a new format called “micro four-thirds” which provides a choice of compatible lenses and, with an adaptor, allows some other lenses to be used, too. The cameras bristle with professional-style features usually found on DSLRs. But the mixture of high-end features and small size is quite pricey: the Olympus Pen E-P1 with a 14-42mm zoom lens (equivalent to 28-84mm) costs around \$800 (though there is now a cheaper model, the E-PL1) and the Lumix GF1 with a 20mm f1.7 lens costs \$900.

High-definition video. The new Olympus E-P2, an upgraded version of the E-P1 priced at \$1,100, also includes a port for accessories like an external microphone to record enhanced audio. This is because many digital cameras can now shoot video, and the more expensive ones can record high-definition video, too.

So buyers need to think not just about still photography but also how they might want to use video features. For short holiday clips, basic video functions might suffice, but if the camera is likely to be used on multimedia assignments involving, say, still shots and a face-to-camera interview, then more advanced features like a plug-in microphone can be useful.

And the story is far from over. Mid-range cameras are still evolving, says Mr Chute. Samsung is expected to launch its NX10 series of mirrorless interchangeable-lens cameras, based on the micro four-thirds standard, in America and Europe this month. And the two leading camera-makers, Canon and Nikon, have yet to reveal their hand. Both produce high-end compacts and superzooms, but they do not yet make mirrorless interchangeable-lens versions. If they do, will they be compatible with existing Canon and Nikon lenses? This will be important, because the investment by many DSLR users in their lenses is bigger than that in their camera bodies. If the mirrorless interchangeable-lens market takes off, as it appears to be doing, Canon and Nikon may have to make a move soon. And that will mean a lot more features to compare.

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