

Buyer's guide

By David Phelan

When you're going on holiday you don't want to be weighed down with a bulky camera, so a compact is ideal and a prosumer model, although it has many advantages, won't be as useful. Many compacts come with scene modes that automatically combine aperture and shutter speeds to make the most of low or bright lights, say, or to allow for the reflective qualities of sand or snow, so look out for these. You'll also want to think about batteries – these are always crucial, but if you're going somewhere remote you may not be able to pick up batteries just anywhere – so make sure you stock up at the airport while you're waiting to fly. Without batteries, your camera is useless, obviously. You may find a battery recharger, which will usually come with batteries included, is a better value option though it's still worth having regular batteries as back-ups. By the same token, the duty-free shops are good places to pick up an extra memory card – almost all cameras come with small-capacity cards. It's worth investing in a 512MB or 1GB card so that you can take pictures without worrying about filling the card at the wrong moment.

If you're planning to take pictures of fast-moving subjects (wildlife, for instance) you should be especially careful to choose a camera with the shortest shutter lag – the time between you pressing the trigger and the camera, after its computer brain has done its calculations, actually shoots. You'll also want a model that leaps quickly into life as soon as you switch it on, for a better chance of snapping your prey before it unhelpfully disappears.



Kodak V610

If you want to have the opportunity to take landscapes as well as portraits, make sure you have a versatile lens. The new 6 megapixel Kodak V610 for instance, has two lenses – one for regular portrait and landscape shots and one for pictures that require a long zoom. Despite its massive 10x optical zoom and large LCD screen, it's tiny and will take up hardly any space in your bags. Also, and this is ideal for panoramic shots, there's a feature which links two or three overlapping shots perfectly.

Where from: Kodak (0870 243 0270; www.kodak.co.uk)

How much: £349



Olympus mju 720SW

You might want something rugged for the beach and able to withstand sand and water. Weather-resistant snappers are common enough, but if you want something that's actually waterproof, try the new Olympus mju 720SW, which is waterproof to a depth of three metres. It's also shockproof – you can drop it one and a half metres. It's a stylish model with large screen and metal body. It even has scene modes such as Beach to make shooting on bright, reflective sand even easier.

Where from: Olympus (0800 072 0070; www.olympus.co.uk)

How much: £299



***** Entry-level digital cameras *****



Samsung Digimax A503

A decent place to start your snapping is this 5 megapixel model. This is a solid, light camera that has 10 scene modes including night, portrait, landscape, sunset and backlight, so there's no excuse for not shooting decent pictures. It also includes PictBridge technology, which allows you to print without a computer between you and a suitably equipped printer, which is unusual at this price.

Where from: Amazon (0800 279 6620; www.amazon.co.uk)

How much: £105



Praktica DC Slim 5

If you really want the cheapest way in to digital cameras, try Praktica. There are even more keenly priced models but try this one for a decent, if very basic experience. It manages to include 5.1 megapixels and a 4x zoom, but, be warned, this is entirely digital, not optical so it merely enlarges the central part of the image and thus reduces the resolution. Still, the screen is a reasonable two inches.

Where from: Praktica (01727 732323; www.praktica-uk.com)

How much: £79.99



Nikon Coolpix L2

The movie mode on this budget camera from Nikon records at 30 frames per second, which is good. What's more, there are a very decent 6 megapixels, along with the standard 3x optical zoom. There's a Dusk/Dawn mode for shooting in low light, along with more than a dozen scenic modes. Even though it's a budget model, it includes Nikon's Face Priority function which can spot a face and locks the focus to it.

Where from: Nikon (0800 230220; www.nikon.co.uk)

How much: £179.99



Samsung Digimax i6 PMP

PMP stands for Portable Media Player and reflects the fact that not only can you use this 6-megapixel camera to take pictures, you can also use it to play MP3 and video files. All this in a slim case designed to look good. The camera has a 15x zoom, with the Macro feature taking you in as far as 1cm, and Advanced Shake Reduction helps to keep your hand steady as you shoot, reducing the need for flash. See www.samsungcamera.co.uk for more info.

Where from: Argos (www.argos.co.uk)

How much: £200



Kodak C533

Kodak has always offered good value for money. Like this 5-megapixel model with a display that adjusts to indoor or outside light and the facility to crop images in the camera. Scene modes to make taking pictures easier include one for parties and one for fireworks. There's also a neat Undo feature so if you accidentally just deleted an image you meant to keep, you can get it back. Very easy to use.

Where from: Kodak (0870 243 0270; www.kodak.co.uk)

How much: £129.99



Pentax Optio W10 waterproof

This is the third waterproof camera from Pentax and builds on an already excellent set of specifications. You can take pictures underwater to a depth of three metres and for up to 30 minutes. It has 6.1 megapixels and it promises to be sand-proof as well. It has a face recognition capability that focuses on and sets the exposure for faces. You won't miss a shot – it's ready to go just 0.6 seconds after you turn it on.

Where from: Pentax (01753 792731; www.pentax.co.uk)

How much: £200



***** Mid-range digital cameras *****



Sony DSC-T30

This very stylish brushed aluminium head-turner builds on Sony's expertise at creating appealing, sleek, slim cameras that take great pictures. This model includes Double Anti-Blur – a Sony technology to counteract camera shake. It has 7.2 megapixels, a 3-inch LCD screen and plenty of scene mode options including Twilight and Snow. The Macro mode enables you to get as close as 1cm from your subject.
Where from: Amazon (0800 279 6620; www.amazon.co.uk)
How much: £343.94



Fujifilm FinePix Z2

There are 5.1 megapixels and a 3x optical zoom on board this deeply attractive compact from Fujifilm. Its small size makes it a great holiday camera – it won't bulk up your luggage. It can take pictures in low light without flash so the results are more realistic, and it shoots at relatively short shutter speeds, so camera shake is minimised. Available in red, black or white. An updated model, the Z3, is out later in the year.
Where from: Fujifilm (0870 084 1310; www.fujifilm.co.uk)
How much: £219.99



Ricoh Caplio R4

This neat model from Ricoh has a large optical zoom (7.1x) along with 6 megapixels. Like many slimmer models, it's prone to camera shake and so there's a correction function to address this. The previous model, the R3, was very popular and this one promises longer battery life and a bright, sharp LCD screen. The macro mode allows you to get as close as 1cm from your subject. There's onboard memory of 26MB.
Where from: Ricoh (020 8261 4000; www.ricoh.co.uk)
How much: £249.99



Casio EX-Z1000

This is the first compact in the UK to have a whopping 10.1 megapixels to shoot with. It also has a large screen (2.8 inches) and the display is particularly bright. The camera's able to make the most of so many pixels by having a large high resolution sensor that promises plenty of variation of tone. The Zoom Continuous Shutter compares wide angle and telephoto and lets you shoot both at the same time.
Where from: Casio (020 8450 9131; www.casio.co.uk)
How much: £379.99



Canon Ixus 60

Canon's Ixus range has always been popular, and deservedly so, as the models are pleasingly compact, powerful and efficient. This model even has a viewfinder – we're all so used to LCD monitors on the back and often find shooting in bright sunlight trying as we squint at the LCD, so an optical viewfinder is a real boon. The shutter responds with no noticeable lag and it's easy to operate – another Ixus feature.
Where from: Canon (08705 143723; www.canon.co.uk)
How much: £248.99



Fujifilm S9500

This is one of the neatest, most effective cameras on the market, with a bundle of features designed to make it almost as impressive as a digital SLR. There's no interchangeable lenses, of course, but at least that means the lens unit is sealed. The 9-megapixel sensor has a Fine setting which makes the pictures even better, and the 10x optical zoom is excellent. Highly recommended.
Where from: Argos (0870 600 1010; www.argos.co.uk)
How much: £399.99

***** Digital SLR cameras *****



Canon EOS 350D

Canon sells a lot of digital SLR cameras. It's responsible for around half of the market and a lot of that is down to this camera. It has 8.2 megapixels and is packed with functions suitable to advanced users, but with enough automation to comfort the novice. It fits the hand well and is a reassuring weight. It's also exceptionally easy to use and is a good value, fully-featured SLR.
Where from: Canon (08705 143723; www.canon.co.uk)
How much: £520



Nikon D70s

Nikon's launch of the D70 provided a powerful digital SLR for considerably less money than had been available. This second model, the D70s, improved on that and, now it's dropped in price, this is an enticing camera. It's a bridge between professional and enthusiast and suitable for someone wanting to move up from an entry-level digital SLR. This model is strong on speed and range of features.
Where from: Nikon (0800 230220; www.nikon.co.uk)
How much: £699



Olympus E-330

One of the things about digital SLR cameras is that you have to use the viewfinder to frame your pictures. As users of compact cameras, used to shooting by watching the LCD screen on the back, move up to SLR they may find it a boon that this camera lets you use the LCD. There are other innovations on this model, such as the sensor which shakes itself when you turn the camera on to remove dust.
Where from: Olympus (0800 072 0070; www.olympus.co.uk)
How much: £899



Pentax *ist DL

This digital SLR is available at a remarkable price (the price below includes an 18-55mm lens) and is a sensational first digital SLR. Not least because it's relatively small and light, so it's easier to cart around. The viewfinder is pleasingly bright and the images are excellent. It's a 6 megapixel camera and even works with standard AA batteries, which is handy if your rechargeable cells die at just the wrong time.
Where from: Pentax (01753 792731; www.pentax.co.uk)
How much: £400



Sony Alpha 100

Available this month, this is the first digital SLR from Sony. Sony's been making excellent compacts for some time now and this D-SLR makes use of the technologies Sony bought from Konica Minolta. The result is stunning. It has a sensor which vibrates to shake dust off, an autofocus system which launches as you put the viewfinder to your eye, and produces great results thanks to its 10 megapixels.
Where from: Sony (08705 111999; www.sony.co.uk)
How much: £699



Canon EOS 30D

With this 8.2 megapixel camera, Canon is aiming at professional photographers as much as keen hobbyists, hence the higher price tag. Although it's not dissimilar to the excellent 350D above, it has a more rugged build, a larger LCD screen than the 350D and a more sophisticated autofocus setup. But there are still plenty of things an amateur can enjoy, helped along by pre-set modes that let you add effects.
Where from: Canon (08705 143723; www.canon.co.uk)
How much: £1,000