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Pocket the difference when it comes to digital cameras

Help Desk

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Here's a little photographic tip for you: The best camera in the world doesn't do you much good if you don't have it with you.

I speak here from experience. Years ago, I invested in a professional grade Nikon camera. Said camera now sits unused on my shelf because unless you really are a professional photographer you just aren't going to lug around a heavy camera and a bag full of accessories just to capture vacation snapshots. The very thought of schlepping them through today's airport security makes me cringe.

Hence the growing popularity of "pocket" digital cameras such as Canon's new PowerShot SD-500 "Elph" 7.1 megapixel camera, which I have been testing. Canon's Elph series began with film cameras and pioneered the pocket-sized form factor. The SD-500 is the flagship of a lineup that also includes the 5 megapixel SD-400, plus 4 and 3 .2 megapixel versions.

The SD-500 is an impressive product that has both an optical viewfinder and a large LCD screen, multiple automatic programming modes, good battery life, simple controls, excellent lenses — and it will fit in a shirt pocket or a carry-on bag. Helping with the miniaturization is its use of postage stamp-sized SD cards, which now deliver recording speeds and capacities suitable for photographic use.

The downside is that pocket-sized cameras cost more than their bulkier counterparts. However, numerous manufacturers recently have introduced competing 5 megapixel pocket cameras, which should mean consumers will benefit from price competition.

Canon is alone, however, in offering a 7.1 megapixel pocket model. This naturally raises a question I hear a lot from people looking at digital cameras: how many megapixels do you need?

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More megapixels are not necessarily better. Digital cameras break visual information down into little dots, called "pixels," and theoretically the more dots there are in an image, the higher the resolution. Traditional film has similar limits, called "grain."

The quality of a digital photo depends on both optics (the caliber of the lens) and on electronics (especially, the sensors that convert the visual information into digital data). So cameras with lower megapixel ratings but higher quality components can give you better pictures than rival devices with more megapixels.

Megapixels primarily come into play if you are blowing up the image. If you expand the size of a photo too much, the picture will break up into individual pixels. You can see this for yourself if you open a photo in Windows Paint or any photo viewing software and maximize the magnification.

A 5 megapixel camera will be more than adequate for the kind of prints or computer images most users want. The SD-500's 7.1 megapixel capability is valuable if you are advanced enough in digital imaging that you regularly crop or tweak your photos. If you don't do this sort of thing, then you don't need a higher-priced (and slightly larger-sized) 7.1 megapixel camera.

Another tip: Be sure you actually read the user manual for your digital camera; at the very least, the section that describes the various shooting modes. No two units, even from the same company, are exactly alike, and you would hate to come back from your vacation with a bunch of shots that were ruined because you used the wrong setting.

On the other hand, I would advise against installing the software bundle that typically ships with most digital cameras. Windows XP and Macintosh OS X both have built in support for digital cameras, and Macs also have a picture management and editing program, iPhoto, that is better than the typical bundled software. For Windows users, iPhoto-like capabilities are available for free in Picasa 2 (www.picasa.com), a Google product.

Finally, if you do want to edit your pictures extensively, I recommend Adobe Photoshop Elements 3. This is the "civilian" version of the industry standard imaging software. It has been given an easy-to-use interface and includes all the editing features you actually need minus the professional graphics functions that would only befuddle you. (Just wait until you try the "healing brush" tool" to make — depending on the age of your subject — acne or wrinkles disappear from a face.) The Windows version also has an excellent photo management component; unnecessary in the Mac version, which works with iPhoto.

Happy shooting.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.

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