

Compact or DSLR?

by Peter Rowlands

For anyone taking up digital photography for the first time there is a lot to take in but in terms of camera choice there is really only two – ‘compact’ or ‘DSLR’ (digital single lens reflex).

A compact digital camera, as the name implies, is usually small and light yet photographically speaking they are far from lightweight. The top end models boast 8 megapixels resolution which will satisfy the needs of most people in terms of output and print size and nearly all come with a useful zoom lens and flash built in. Even the lower megapixel models will produce excellent results and are much less expensive.

Compact cameras work best taking when ‘jpg’ pictures. These are compressed image files with negligible quality loss and can be processed quickly by the camera’s electronics. Some compacts let you shoot ‘RAW’ images where the data is left untouched but the image processing time is not really practical for most purposes.

Compact cameras have LCD screens at the rear for viewing images before you take them. This is a major

benefit and the same screen then displays the result once you have taken a shot.

Most compacts are designed to be used in ‘Auto’ mode but some of the top end ones allow manual adjustment of aperture and shutter speed.

Finally many compact camera manufacturers produce underwater housings for their cameras, most of which can be used down to 40 metres and include controls for most, if not all, of the camera’s functions. In addition, for what you are getting, the cost of them is extremely reasonable.

There are a wide range of accessories for these housings including close up and wide angle lenses as well as external flashguns (strobos) and colour correcting filters so there is almost no limit to the subjects you can capture.

Bearing in mind all of the above, why would anyone want to spend more on a DSLR? Well the main reason is that compact cameras have a significant shutter delay. This is the time from when you press the shutter to when the picture is taken. This can be as much as 2 seconds but newer



£5000 or £500? Is it worth it?

models are improving. During this time the camera focuses and adjusts exposure before finally recording the image.

For many subjects this is not a major drawback but fast moving fish, for example, would be really hit and miss affair!

Many underwater photographers progress from a compact to a DSLR camera purely to eliminate shutter delay but this comes at a significant cost increase. However for most people, eliminating the shutter delay is well worth the extra cost.

DSLR cameras use conventional prism viewfinders to view the image then, when the shutter is pressed, a mirror flips up and exposes the CCD chip to the light. The resulting image is then displayed on an LCD screen at



the back of the camera.

DSLR cameras consist of a body and a lens so there is extra expense buying the lens or lenses which suit your subject requirements. Having said that there is virtually no subject you cannot shoot successfully, finances permitted.

As you would expect from a more expensive camera, a DSLR processes jpg images much quicker, almost instantaneously in fact, and can capture several sequential images in a



One shot was taken with a compact camera and accessories costing less than £1000 whereas the other was taken with a DSLR system costing nearly £4000. Can you tell which one? The answer is bottom right.

motordrive burst. Finally they allow you to shoot 'RAW' images which, for most serious shooters, is the preferred format. This unaltered datafile can be manipulated later to an amazing degree to correct colour balance and exposure as well as sharpness to a certain extent.

In terms of housings they are much more expensive and tend to only be available for Nikon and Canon DSLR cameras. I suspect that these two manufacturers have the lions share of the land camera market so maybe this isn't much of a limitation.

Ports are available to house almost any lens so you have a system which is truly capable.

Unlike compacts, DSLR cameras do not have useable built-in flashes as, if they have one, the housing renders it unusable. Instead they have sockets to connect external flashguns but most amphibious flashguns can only be used in manual exposure mode so you have to set the lens aperture to suit the output of the flashgun. Despite getting instant results on your LCD screen from which you can make any necessary adjustments



some underwater photographers still rely on TTL flash automation and this can only be achieved by housings a manufacturer's flashgun or using a Fuji S2 which, to my knowledge, is/was the only DSLR to offer TTL automation with amphibious, Nikonos compatible flashguns.

Whether you choose manual or TTL flashguns there is the additional expense of sync cords and mounting arms.

Which camera type you choose is up to you but both are capable of taking excellent pictures and, unlike conventional film cameras, once you

have bought one there are virtually no running costs so you can take as many shots as you like and not worry about the finances anymore!

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