



Reader's choice: beginner digital cameras

This month's reader had a budget of £200 to spend on a new beginner digital camera for use at work and home. Spencer Dalziel ran her through the options

Digital imaging was once the preserve of designers using desktop publishing kits but the past few years has seen an explosion in the availability of imaging products. While image quality has improved on peripherals, prices have radically dropped and customers are now snapping up affordable digital hardware capable of photo-quality output. But while it's now easy to buy a digital camera on a tight budget, with the number of choices available choosing a suitable model can be confusing.

We were contacted by a reader looking for help in buying the right beginner digital camera for use in the home and at work. Julia Dagworth is an art teacher in London and lives in Tower Hamlets with her partner Simon.

This is her first encounter with digital photography and Julia admits she's not sure what she's looking for. We wondered, then, why she wanted to use digital

photography rather than the much cheaper film option but she explains that her work got her thinking about opting for a digital model: "I thought it would be a good idea to have a portfolio of all the kids' artwork on the schools network and digital photography is the best way to do that."

Julia doesn't want to pay more than £200 for her first buy. She explains, "Once I get used to using it I'll think about paying out for a more expensive camera but for the moment I'll keep my budget down."

The three models we assessed with Julia were Mustek's MDC3000, Nikon's Coolpix 2000+ and FujiFilm's FinePix A202.

First impressions

Although Julia didn't approach us armed with a list of requirements we did have to change her preconceived ideas about what she could get for her money: "Preferably I want a metal model that's easy to use and one with photo-quality output."

What did Julia want?

- Metal case
- Ease of use
- Best quality for money
- Good LCD screen
- Good zoom capabilities
- To spend no more than £200

Where £250 would buy Julia a good film camera, it won't stretch to a digital model with photo-quality output and most cameras in this price range have plastic casings. Ease of use certainly isn't a problem but Julia will have to settle for something below her estimations.

The first model to catch Julia's eye was the FinePix A202 thanks to its design. The stylish gunmetal finish really stood out and Julia was impressed with the clarity of the 1.5in LCD display. We asked her to operate the camera without referring to the manual and she had no problem getting to grips with the menu. "I like the way you can scroll round the menu system. It's surprisingly easy."

Pros and cons

We told Julia the A202 can't record sound and lacks a lot of manual calibration options but this didn't bother her. She said, "I want everything fully automatic so the camera does it all for me and I won't use the sound function." She did note that the A202 only has slots for two

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

Nikon Coolpix 2000+

Pros: good zooming, good colour reproduction

Cons: plain case, no optical viewfinder

Nikon: 0800 230 220

Website: www.nikon.co.uk

Price: £165 ex VAT



READER'S CHOICE
OUR CHOICE

FujiFilm FinePix A202

Pros: design, ease of use

Cons: only two batteries, no optical zoom

FujiFilm: 020 7586 1477

Website: www.fuji.co.uk

Price: £132 ex VAT



Mustek MDC3000

Pros: easy to use, cheapest

Cons: no optical zoom, badly designed

Redstore: 0870 870 4457

Website: www.redstore.com

Price: £108 ex VAT



AA alkaline batteries and was hoping for rechargeables but we told her that she'd have to pay out more money – at this price point nickel rechargeable batteries often come as optional accessories.

The Coolpix 2000+ may not have nickel batteries but it does use four AA alkaline cells so Julia will get better battery life from this model, as she will on Mustek's MDC3000. She liked the LCD on the Coolpix but found this model harder to use: "There are a lot of options on this model that I don't understand." We explained that the jog-dial has a list of preset modes for different photographic conditions but she can set everything to auto for taking shots.

Easiest to use was the Mustek but this was because it lacks options despite being touted as a multifunction model. Julia liked the 1.8in LCD display but thought it was too dark and grainy.

What the experts say

Having hooked up each model to a notebook and printer, Julia took some high-resolution snaps on each and we looked at the results.

At £108 ex VAT the Mustek MDC3000 is the cheapest model but we think Julia would rather pay more money for better results. She saw the claimed 3.1Mp (megapixels) on the side of the box but this is a software interpolated resolution – it's actually a 2Mp digital camera with a maximum resolution of 1,600x1,200 which, while not bad, is a little misleading.

The 16MB CompactFlash card is generous at this price point and it can hold 24 3.1Mp interpolated shots or 60

snaps at 2Mp. Julia preferred the image results on 2Mp but this wasn't enough for her: "I know it's the cheapest but I wouldn't be happy paying good money for the Mustek camera." There's also no optical zoom needed for closeups of her pupils' artwork.

The FujiFilm A202 fares better with its good menu system and ease of use – not to mention the best software bundle of all the three. However, again, there's no optical zoom so Julia would have to rely on the digital zoom and this won't give her quality shots. The snaps we took had good detail but the default colour setup was a little too intense.

The plain Coolpix 2000+ didn't initially appeal to Julia but when she saw the picture quality she was impressed: "As an art teacher I have to get the colours right on these images and these photos look good." While there's just an 8MB CompactFlash card this is the only camera with an optical zoom and the maximum

resolution is 1,632x1,224. Julia has to use the LCD to compose her shots because there's no viewfinder but we think this is the digital camera that she'll opt for.

The reader's choice

Another month and another reader's choice guessed correctly. Having experimented with all three models, Julia was torn between FujiFilm's well-designed model and Nikon's slightly plain Coolpix, but she decided that the Coolpix was the best option to fulfil her needs. She did say she'd rather spend to the limit of her budget and the Coolpix fitted her remit.

We asked why the Nikon Coolpix 2000+ came out a winner given that it was the most difficult to use but Julia said it was a case of overall quality: "The Coolpix gives me the best colours. It also has the benefit of an optical zoom and I'll be happy to pay out a bit more for extra storage." ■

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