

High-resolution digital cameras have plummeted in price over the last two years and are now within the reach of consumer and business users. Spencer Dalziel takes a *PC Advisor* reader and businessman through the different high-quality devices available



Reader's choice: intermediate digital cameras

We were contacted by Peter McAllister who was looking to spend £700 on a new digital camera, so we assessed his needs to try to find him a suitable model. Peter is the MD of Allister Welding, a structural steel and heavy architectural metal works company. This Docklands-based business designs large steel frames for clients and Peter says that digital photography has become an essential part of his work.

"My work requires onsite visits and progress updates for clients, so I need to take pictures of the site to send to the relevant parties. I used to take film photographs but the process is too long," Peter explains. "I switched to digital photography because I can email any problems to our workshop or the architects, but my 2.3Mp Camedia from Olympus is past its sell-by date," he added.

We asked him if low resolution Jpegs would suffice given that he has to email his pictures, but he was adamant that his company needs to work with high-resolution shots. "There's not enough clarity on low-quality settings and we recently had broadband installed so we

have a big enough pipe to cope. Anyway, our architectural clients send us several CAD (computer aided design) files at a time so one email can take up 20MB – about the same amount as the TIF images we want to send them," he explained.

Peter also wants the camera to double up for personal use. The models we chose were FujiFilm's FinePix F601 Zoom, Canon's PowerShot G2 and Nikon's Coolpix 4500.

First impressions

The emphasis is firmly on ergonomic handling when it comes to assessing digital cameras. On this point Peter was specific: "It's easier carrying around a compact camera at work, but I have a large film camera at home and like to feel the weight in my hand."

This counted against the FinePix F601. The magnesium alloy chassis means it's durable enough to withstand use on a construction site, but it also makes it small and lightweight. Peter wasn't keen on its tall rather than wide frame either, and the pop-up flash can be a hindrance when you're trying to compose shots.

Canon's G2 fared better thanks to its weight and width. But Peter found the Nikon's split chassis unusual: "It feels strange but I suppose it's handy for taking photos at difficult angles," he said.

All the cameras are sturdily built, but Peter was concerned about some design issues. "When I do site inspections I wear a hard hat and steel toecaps so it would be nice if I could get similar protection for my camera," he pointed out.

The Coolpix 4500 has a strong chassis, but it only has a plastic cap for the lens which is prone to falling off. There's also no hard plastic to protect the LCD (liquid crystal display). Canon's G2 has a plastic cap attached to a cord, but again it's not a snug fit and could easily work loose. On the plus side, the LCD can swivel round and face inwards to protect the screen when not in use.

Surprisingly, it was the FinePix that offered the best shields from dust and danger. The lens cover is built into the camera and slides over when not in use, while the LCD is covered in a hard plastic to protect it from grit.

What the experts say

Nikon's 4Mp Coolpix has a maximum resolution of 2,272x1,704 and a 4x optical zoom, while the swivel chassis helps out with difficult shooting angles. For high-resolution shots, capacious storage media is a must and, with just 16MB on the CompactFlash card, the Coolpix can only store one high-resolution shot. The 4500 has a wealth of features, but it also operates as a point-and-shoot device.

Canon's PowerShot G2 is much more expensive than the other two models, yet it has similar specifications. It's a 4Mp camera with a maximum resolution of 2,272x1,704 and its 3.6x optical zoom is less powerful than the Coolpix's. Settings can be adjusted manually, but there's also a jogdial which offers a range of preset modes. Peter liked the feel of the G2, but it would serve him better as a home model.

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

Canon PowerShot G2
Pros: battery life; feel of camera; quality
Cons: expensive
Price: £637 ex VAT
Canon: 0800 616 417
Website: www.canon.co.uk

Fuji FinePix F601 Zoom
Pros: well protected; good quality; small
Cons: gadgety feel; poor battery life
Price: £495 ex VAT
Fuji: 020 7586 1477
Website: www.fuji.co.uk

Nikon Coolpix 4500
Pros: best specifications; good range of features
Cons: LCD and lens not well protected
Price: £495 ex VAT
Nikon: 0800 230 220
Website: www.nikon.co.uk



READER'S CHOICE



OUR CHOICE



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The 3.1Mp FujiFilm 601F utilises Fuji's own Super CCD technology, so it manages to extract 6Mp resolution from the sensor. The 3x optical zoom is complemented by an array of manual configurations but remains easy to use. We thought the FinePix would be too gadgety for Peter's tastes, but this consumer-oriented device actually best suits Peter's working environment.

The FinePix is a quick operator and comes with plenty of protection. Peter liked the detail on the images we took, while appreciating the point-and-shoot ease of use. The camera has a TIF option for high-resolution photos and a cradle to sit in when tethered to a PC. On the down side the lithium battery isn't as long-lasting as the others.

→ Peter liked the size and shape of the Canon and wasn't discouraged by its high price tag. For him, the PowerShot was the best choice for home and office

The reader's choice

We were getting conflicting opinions from Peter, probably because he is looking for two types of camera – one for work and one for home. In the end Peter plumped for the expensive Canon PowerShot G2. "I wish I could combine the best features from all the models, but I have to make a choice. My head tells me to opt for Fuji's model, but I need to consider using the camera at home." We asked him if the price difference was worth it: "If I pay the extra money I'm getting a better storage card and a better battery." ■



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What did Peter want?

- Good image quality
- Value for money not important
- Basic manual configurations
- Well protected camera
- Ergonomically satisfying