

Epson Stylus Photo R800

PC PRO
A LIST

PRICE £174 (£204 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.simply.co.uk (code: YD74066)

VERDICT A significant price drop and fade-resistance claims that stand up to scrutiny mean this is the best all-round inkjet money can buy.

Epson's R800 appeared just too late to feature in our last inkjet group test (see issue 112, p133). Also, at the time, it was impossible to test claims that the UltraChrome Hi-Gloss ink would produce photos that offered unsurpassed fade resistance. With so many alternatives also producing top-notch output, its £350 price made it look incredibly expensive and only appealing to professionals.

But now the market has changed. Both Canon and HP's decisions to replace their already excellent lines has, in some cases, meant backwards steps have been taken. It's now less likely that you can print excellent photos on a cheap HP printer, and while Canon's update to the Bubble Jet i865 (the Pixma iP5000) may look prettier, its quality improvements are minimal and its speed reduction too noticeable. At the expense of versatility, there's once again a distinction in the market between value printers and premium photo printers.

Meanwhile, Epson has resisted change for change's sake and we applaud it. The R800 has matured in the market place and plummeted in price by almost 50 per cent. Compared with both Canon and HP's flagships it now looks cheap.

The R800 uses eight cartridges – the usual cyan, magenta, yellow and black along with matte black for text, red and blue (to expand the colour gamut) and a gloss optimiser.



Importantly, these are all pigment inks. Manufacturers usually steer clear of pigments as, despite their excellent ability to resist fading, they tend to produce dull prints.

Traditionally, glossy photo papers have absorbed dye-based inks, withdrawing the dye into a median layer below the glossy top, thereby leaving a nice shiny surface which looks like a 'proper' photograph. Large, pigment particles rest on the surface and deflect light in random directions giving a matte appearance. However, Epson not only reduced particle size to just 1.5µm, but also encased them in gloss, leaving photos looking every bit as glossy and fine as their best dye-based and high-street counterparts.

We can now also vouchsafe that the fade-resistance claims hold up. Every glossy paper we used with the R800 displayed no signs of fading at all. We've only seen HP's PhotoREt Pro system come close and only then when used with Premium Plus paper. Wilhelm Imaging Research (www.wilhelm-research.com) has rated UltraChrome as colourfast for 60 to 70 years, while Epson claims 80 years for its own Premium Glossy photo papers. This makes fade resistance better than seen on the high street.

Due to the universal high quality of

home-printed photographs nowadays, we were unrelenting in our judging. But the R800's photo montage still scored a perfect ten. Grain was all but invisible even in fades, which can often suffer fine banding from even the best printers (see p132). Skin tones were natural and all detail was pin-sharp. We were delighted with the accurate colour reproduction and the colour of our logo was totally uniform. The A4 sheet also appeared in an impressive 2 minutes, 35 seconds, which was only beaten by Canon's Pixmas and was some way ahead of HP.

Our 6 x 4in colour print appeared in only 97 seconds and was also of similar quality. Likewise, we could find no fault in the 6 x 4in mono print, which looked great even in the face of HP's excellent photo grey cartridge. Graphics on all other media were also exquisite.

Another nifty feature is the ability to coat blank spaces on paper with gloss to avoid ridges where the ink appears. Alternatively, you can stop this and let your graphics literally stand out by saving the gloss and making your images stand slightly proud from the surface.

In other tests, the R800's standard text was a touch more spidery than the output from HP and Canon printers. It's good enough for most occasions but note that it appeared at wooden spoon-winning 2.1ppm – hence its low speed score. However, draft text appeared at an excellent 11.6ppm and saw only a slight reduction in contrast; this is still a highly versatile printer.

Ink costs are relatively high but offset by Epson's cheap paper. At 51p for a 6 x 4in picture it's a touch pricey, but at least you get permanence. However, £2 for a durable A4 print is exceptionally cheap when compared with the £10 equivalent from Snappy Snaps.

Epson claims that the R800 'brings photography out of the darkroom'. We're inclined to agree. Professionals won't blanch at using several full cartridge sets to get a single photograph's colour levels 'just so', and they'll love not having to rely on external developers. The fact that all of this is now well within easy reach of the regular consumer means that if you want to print photos – especially ones larger than 6 x 4in – Epson's R800 is simply the best choice you can make. It therefore takes our Labs Winner award.

PC PRO RATINGS

QUALITY	★★★★★
SPEED	★★★★★
FADE RESISTANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
RUNNING COSTS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

