

● COMPACT DIGITAL CAMERA

Sony Cyber-shot DSC-W5

PRICE £195 (£229 inc VAT)

DELIVERY Free

INTERNET www.sony.co.uk

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT A minor update, but this remains our favourite range of budget cameras, superbly engineered and with great image quality.

In a market saturated with choice, Sony has one of the largest camera line-ups of all – there are well over a dozen digital models in its range. The W1 (see *issue 121, p70*) was one of the stand-out designs in this plethora, and it's now been updated and become the W5.

Little has changed as far as the basic specifications are concerned. You still get a 5.1-megapixel sensor, coupled with a 3x zoom lens (f2.8-f5.2) bearing the Carl Zeiss name. The casing and layout of controls are also unchanged from its predecessor. But that's no bad thing; the alloy outer shell isn't particularly svelte at 35mm deep, nor is it exactly featherweight at 250g, but the simple addition of a protruding brace to one side of the lens, in which your middle finger nestles, makes the camera easy to hold. The back panel is dominated by a huge and superb 2.5in LCD monitor. No Memory Stick is supplied with the W5: it's fitted with 32MB of internal memory, so when you do buy a stick you won't need to juggle two of them.

In use, one of the most impressive aspects of the W1 was its incredibly fast startup time. If anything, this has been slightly improved with the W5 – press the power button and the lens flies out of the body, leaving the camera ready to shoot in about 1.3 seconds.

Shot mode is selected via the top-mounted rotary dial. Fully manual, Auto, Program, Movie and Playback are the main selections, coupled with seven additional scene modes for



The W5 is ridiculously good value for a compact digital camera.

portrait, landscape, night-time portrait and so on. Unfortunately, Sony hasn't taken the opportunity to redress the W1's missing aperture and shutter-priority modes, limiting its appeal as an everyday sidekick to the serious photographer. There's no Sport scene mode either; the ability to quickly put the camera into a mode where it would automatically select the fastest shutter speed possible would be a great deal more useful than the scene modes for snow and candlelight.

The system of using the four-way keypad (see below) for shutter and aperture selection in

Manual mode is cumbersome too.

But in Program and Manual modes you do get spot and centre-weighted metering options as well as the default matrix mode, and the choice of spot or multi-area auto focus. And the option for a real-time onscreen histogram gives the opportunity to make sure you get even exposures.

In low light, a bright AF assist lamp comes into play to help focus, rather

than the laser matrix of higher-end models like the V3 (see *issue 126, p80*). In very low light, this increases focusing time from well under half a second in normal light to about two or three seconds. However, it works over remarkably long distances – 6m or so gave it no problem and pictures were as sharp as they would be under standard light conditions.

Sony has nailed down camera movie modes to the extent that you hardly need to shell out for a camcorder any more. The MPEGMOVIE VX

mode allows you to shoot movies with sound at up to 30fps with better-than-TV 640 x 480 resolution for as long as the internal memory or card has the capacity to store (in the case of internal memory, it's a minute at 640 x 480 in basic quality). There's even a limited video-editing facility in-camera, with cue and review controls and the ability to divide a movie file in two, primarily so you can free up memory space by deleting portions you don't want.

We were hoping that Sony would have abandoned the NiMH rechargeable batteries of the W1 in favour of lithium ion, but those AAs are still there. But in all honesty battery life is still so good you hardly need think about it – you'll get several days' normal use – and there's the option of popping in standard AAs if you get caught short.

Image quality is great, with low noise, a natural colour balance and a spot-on in-camera default sharpness algorithm that neither makes images look soft nor gives them unnatural sharpening halos. Chromatic aberrations (purple fringing) are also minimal.

Considering the price, the W5 gives you a hell of a lot of camera for the money. And like its predecessor, Sony's engineering skill means the inevitable price compromises such as the lack of lithium-ion battery are hardly compromises at all. The amount of manual control on offer is a little shy of what the serious amateur would want in an everyday compact, but for anybody else the W5 is an absolute steal.

DAVID FEARON



The huge 2.5in LCD on the back panel is bright and clear, but the four-way keypad is cumbersome to use in manual mode.

PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

SPECIFICATIONS 2,592 x 1,944 maximum image resolution; 38-114mm equivalent, f/2.8-f/5.2 lens; 3x optical zoom; 2.5in TFT LCD; shutter speed 1/2,000th to 30 seconds; 100-400 ISO sensitivity, +/-2EV exposure compensation; centre-weighted, evaluative, spot metering; 640 x 480 movie mode; 32MB internal memory; Memory Stick/Memory Stick PRO slot; 2 x AA batteries (NiMH and charger included). Dimensions: 92 x 35 x 60mm (WDH). Weight: 250g (inc batteries).