

● DIGITAL CAMERAS HEAD-TO-HEAD

Canon PowerShot A95, Sony DSC-W1

PRICE Sony, £255 (£300 inc VAT); Canon, £271 (£318 inc VAT) DELIVERY Free
INTERNET Sony www.sony.co.uk; Canon www.canon.co.uk SUPPLIER www.jessops.com
VERDICT Canon's new value offering is good and packed with features, but the Sony's speed and price point-busting class put it ahead.



The two new models make very few concessions to their relatively low price.

The huge improvements in mid-range digital cameras show no signs of slowing, and £300 will now buy you a lot of camera from two of the world's most famous vendors. The DSC-W1 is Sony's first foray into the lower ranges of the digital market, whereas Canon has plenty of form – the A95's discontinued predecessor, the PowerShot A80 (see issue 113, p74), was on our A List for six months.

Both models boast image output of 5 megapixels, a level that was the preserve of £500-plus cameras this time last year. Both also have 1/1.8in CCD sensors and so in theory should have roughly the same level of ability when it comes to resolving fine image detail. And both sport a 3x optical zoom lens.

The Sony impresses before you even go near the shutter release. Smaller and more comfortable to hold than the Canon, its looks belie its price. The casing is made of aluminium against the Canon's plastic, and unlike the A95 it's small enough to slip into your pocket. Its LCD monitor can't match the A95's trick of swivelling

and rotating for over-the-head shots, but it makes up for that by dint of its size: a 2.5in diagonal takes up most of the back of the casing.

Press the power button and the Carl Zeiss Vario-Tessar 3x zoom lens shoots out of the casing like a bullet, ready to take a photo within 1.5 seconds. The A95 is no slouch either, being ready to shoot in a respectable 2.5 seconds.

Five megapixels doesn't guarantee high-end image quality, however, and both these cameras show weaknesses in some areas. The Sony's metering was generally easier to fool than the Canon's DiGIC scene processor when it came to tricky lighting situations, but the Canon's lens was more prone to chromatic aberrations, manifesting themselves as purple-blue fringing. At default settings the Canon's tonal range was better balanced; it was able to pull detail out of shadowy areas that the Sony failed to grab. But we found that its compression was a little keen, with shots averaging around 1.2MB to the Sony's 2MB in best quality mode. This resulted in distinct compression artefacts in a couple of shots that weren't visible in the same shot taken with the Sony.

Both models are pretty similar in basic operation, and neither skimps on manual controls. The Canon's focus and metering options are comprehensive to the point of over-complexity though: you can set focus point manually by scrolling it around the frame, keep to the centre or trust the intelligent auto focus system, which communicates its best guess by overlaying boxes onto the frame before you shoot. Metering can be centre-spot, centre-weighted, can follow the focus spot or rely on

the evaluative DiGIC setting. The complexity comes from the fact that metering mode is set via one menu and the focus mode via another. It then requires a third menu to tell the camera whether to set the spot-metering mode either to follow the AF point or keep it at the centre – a messy system.

Sony keeps things simpler but with enough control for most situations: auto focus is limited to centre-spot or intelligent multi-spot. Likewise, metering is the same. You get fully automatic, manual, program and scene modes, but unlike the Canon it lacks aperture and shutter-priority options. It lacks a sport scene mode too, an annoying oversight. For dim light settings, both benefit from an AF assist lamp.

When it comes to movies, the Sony wins, with its full-frame 640 x 480 MPEG output giving 25fps; the Canon manages just 10fps.

The biggest compromise to price in both these models is their batteries, both taking standard AA cells rather than lithium-ion power packs. The Canon needs four – hence its bulk – and the Sony two. The DSC-W1 is supplied with two NiMH cells plus a charger, while the Canon comes with a paltry quartet of non-rechargeable alkaline cells. But with the efficiency of new models this isn't much of a problem – both lasted for a full day's shooting.

Overall, the Sony is quite simply the more desirable camera of the two. On balance, the Canon's overall still-image quality is perhaps slightly better, but the difference is marginal. With its looks, size and super-speedy operation, Sony clearly wins out over Canon.

DAVID FEARON

PC PRO RATINGS: CANON

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

SPECIFICATIONS 2,592 x 1,944 maximum optical resolution; 38-114mm equivalent, f/2.8-4.9 lens; 3x optical zoom; 1.8in TFT LCD; shutter speed 1/2,000th to 5 seconds; 50-400 ISO sensitivity, +/-2EV exposure compensation; centre-weighted, evaluative, spot metering; 640 x 480 movie mode; 4 x AA batteries. Dimensions: 102 x 64 x 45mm (WDH). Weight: 340g inc batteries.

PC PRO RATINGS: SONY

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

SPECIFICATIONS 2,592 x 1,944 maximum optical resolution; 38-114mm equivalent, f/2.8-5.2 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; 2 x AA batteries (NiMH included). Dimensions: 92 x 60 x 35 (WDH). Weight: 250g inc batteries.



10 years ago, consumer-level digital cameras didn't exist. The first Sony model was the DSC-F1, reviewed in our June 1997 issue. Its 640 x 480 resolution equated to just one-third of a megapixel, the battery lasted 20 minutes in shooting mode and its fixed 4MB of memory allowed just 30 shots. And the price? A whopping £700 inc VAT.