



Images made with the Kodak DC210 exhibit excellent sharpness and color range.

Pixel Grain

If you mention the word "digital" to a group of working photographers, they immediately scramble to pick sides. The ones favoring the traditional side will argue that digital will never equal film in quality. Those on the digital side will feed the argument, retorting that new digital technology gives them more flexibility. I have seen many of these discussions become very heated, and there never seems to be a clear-cut winner.

I started as a traditional photographer more than 20 years ago. I still enjoy the thrill of processing my own film and printing in the darkroom, but I also find the new digital tools very exciting. When digital cameras first came on the scene, there were only very low or high resolution, which calculated out to very expensive and totally out of my price range. With consumer demand and technological breakthroughs, digital cameras have come into their own. The new mega-pixel cameras create files with over one million pixels, have a resolution over 1000 lines and provide a much more affordable price tag. In order to better understand how these cameras worked, I asked Kodak, Fuji, and Agfa to send me one of their mega-pixel cameras for testing and evaluation. This was not to be a head to head camera comparison, but rather a study of how these cameras fit into daily photo operation.

In the back of my mind I half expected to see three similar cameras with different brand names on each. But what came by UPS, Federal Express and one of the other guys was something quite different. Each film manufacturer took a completely different approach with their digital camera design. Because of these differences, I feel it only fair to show you how each camera is designed before explaining how I put them to use.

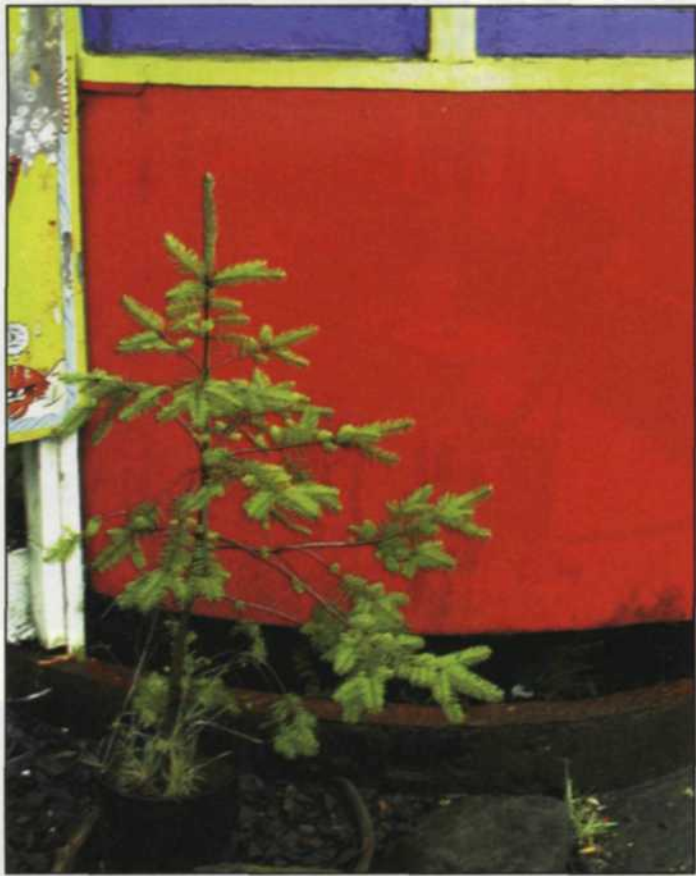


The Kodak DC210 is a somewhat traditional looking digital camera that uses funky graphics to display data on its LCD.

Kodak DC210

I picked this camera first, because it most closely resembles a traditional 35mm camera. In fact, most people we showed it to thought it was a point-and-shoot camera. When set at its highest resolution, the camera will take 1152 x 864-pixel images and save them either as JPEG or Flashpix file formats. The 29–58mm zoom lens is controlled by a thumb lever on the right back side of the camera. Two small sensors on the camera front measure flash and available light and control the amount of light striking the CCD chip. A small flash located on the front upper right section of the camera has a range up to 9.84 feet away. The LCD display on the top provides data on image resolution, image quality, number of images left, battery power, flash settings and the on/off button for close-up photography.

When you move to the back of the camera, it no longer looks



Images made with the Fujix DS-300 capture colors with the faithfulness and vividness of traditional slide film.



The Fujix DS-300 is large and feels similar to a medium format camera.

Fujix DS-300

like a point-and-shoot camera. A rotating control knob allows you to select capture (take the picture), review (look at your results), connect your computer, and preferences (set up the camera). When you take a picture you can either look through the eyepiece viewer at the top of the camera, or use the color LCD panel on the back of the camera. After each shot is taken in the capture mode, a preview of the image is displayed on the color LCD for a few seconds. When you switch to the review mode, a miniature slide show appears on the LCD screen so you can go forward, backward or zoom in on each image. The DC210 comes with an ATA-compatible flash card and can be downloaded through a serial port to the computer or with an ATA flash card adapter. Images can also be sent through a video cable to be previewed on your TV. The camera includes software that brings images directly into most PC or MAC editing programs.

Of these three cameras, the DS-300 was the largest, but offered the most features. In fact, it could easily pass for a medium format camera except, of course, it has no film. With a pixel resolution of 1280x1000 pixels, each image has a 1.4 MB uncompressed file size. On the front you will find the 35–105mm zoom lens controlled by a thumb lever on the top of the camera. The bulk of the camera functions are controlled by two rotating dials, but to list all the possible camera adjustments would force me to run out of space. In a nutshell, you can control image quality, shutter speed, aperture, exposure priority, PC connection, internal flash, black and white or color, ISO sensitivity, focus methods and a host of other functions. Images are downloaded either through a SCSI port of an extension unit that fits on the camera bottom, or with an ATA-compatible



Agfa 1280 does more than a passable job at commercial-type images. These TIFF files are 4.5x3.25 inches at 300 dpi.



flash card. The DS-300 includes MAC or PC software for downloading your pictures into most editing software. You can even change a couple of switches on the bottom of the extension unit so that you can print directly to a Fuji printer. You don't even need a computer for this function!



The Agfa 1280 can't really be described in photographic terms.

Agfa 1280

Of the three, the Agfa 1280 (1280x768 pixels) had the strangest configuration. It doesn't even closely resemble a traditional camera. In some respects, you might say they have re-invented the wheel with this one. I'm not saying non-conformance is bad, in fact I like the camera very much, but describing the camera is impossible in traditional terms. You just have to look at its picture. What is so unique about this camera is that all the viewing is accomplished using a high-resolution color LCD screen. There is no traditional eyepiece viewer, although what you see is what you get. All camera functions are set with two rotating dials on the right side of the camera. The bottom dial sets the camera to record (take a picture), play (see your results) and off. The second dial controls image resolution, flash, ambient light, close focus,



exposure modes, self-timer, exposure compensation, white balance, and several other minor functions. Images are stored on a memory card about the size of a regular postage stamp. They can be downloaded through a serial port to your favorite editing software, or presented in a slide-show format on your TV.

Digital Applications

I arranged to have all three cameras for at least a month, so I took them on various photo assignments along with my traditional camera system. Whenever possible, I would shoot images on both traditional and digital camera systems. I soon found myself using digital cameras to pre-shoot or proof the scene before I recorded the final image on film. We downloaded the final images to a Zip disk so one of our clients could start on their brochure layout before we had even processed our film.

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Say you saw it in

RANGEFINDER

First Exposure

(Continued from page 20)

The real test came when one photo session required both 4x5 and 35mm slides and negatives. The shoot was supposed to last two full days, but it didn't turn out that way. The art director was on hand for the photo session and had very specific needs. He was unaware that I was bringing digital cameras and was surprised when I set up a digital camera on top of my 4x5 and squeezed off a shot. We all previewed the exposure, made a couple of minor changes and then I exposed the 4x5 image. We found we were saving time with each setup by using the digital preview and the art director looked like the hero.

Towards the end of the shoot, we passed a special electronic device that had a one-inch sealed glass port that housed delicate equipment. Traditional photography had been tried on this product before, but to no avail. The lighting was very low and flash was out of the question. I tried the Agfa 1280 digital camera and set it to low light with a new white balance. Hand-holding the camera, I was able to get a one of kind shot that impressed all.

During the month I used the digital cameras to do portraits for the school yearbook, microfiche stock images sent

out for possible sale, and product shots for articles such as this one. I even found myself starting a visual photo equipment inventory. More than once, I used one of the digital cameras as a backup, in case I didn't get the shot on my traditional camera. Much of this testing occurred during the holidays, so I put my traditional camera away, and took only digital images. Everyone loved it because they got to see their pictures immediately. I even previewed some as a slide show on the TV. When it was all done, I wrote the images to a CD and gave out copies so they could view them on their home computers.

So where does digital fit in my life? Well, it now shares the workload with film for my professional work, and is becoming my primary method for taking personal pictures of family events. No matter to which side of the digital argument you belong, try to keep an open mind. You might find that life just got a little better—photographically, that is.

Scott Adams is a freelance journalist/photographer living in the Pacific Northwest.

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