

Best digital SLRs for beginners

With so many digital SLRs on the market today it's no wonder that the decision can be a daunting one for someone who is just starting out.



(Credit: Canon)

An SLR gives you a whole array of shooting options at your fingertips, including manual control and the ability to change lenses and add accessories like external flashes as you need.

Fortunately there are more choices than ever. Here are our picks for the best digital SLRs for beginners, but if you're looking for more information on photography or what SLR to buy make sure to check out our [digital camera basics](#) article, or our [digital SLR super guide](#) for more information.

A lot of people would suggest starting off with the most basic camera in the line up, so for example in the Canon range, the EOS [1000D](#), or in the Nikon range, the [D3000](#). You'll still be able to get a great result with these cameras but unless price is absolutely everything, we'd suggest spending a little more so that as your skills progress, the camera can grow with you.

The [Canon EOS 500D](#) and [Nikon D5000](#) are competent digital SLRs, and both feature HD video recording as part of the feature set; the 500D at full 1080p, and the D5000 at 720p. If you're looking for a lightweight camera, the [Olympus E-620](#) and the [Sony A330](#) are the most feather-like of the options here, weighing in at 475 grams and 452 grams respectively.

Some digital SLRs come with an articulating LCD screen, like the Olympus and the Sony, and all listed here come with live view, which allows you to compose an image on-screen rather than looking through the viewfinder. The Canon, Nikon and Sony use SD/SDHC cards (and the Sony also accommodates Memory Stick Pro Duo), while the Olympus has a Compact Flash and xD card slot. All use a rechargeable Lithium-ion battery, but if you want AA compatibility you will have to shift to another brand such as Pentax's [K-m](#).

Another important thing to note is that the camera is just the starting point of your new digital SLR. Lenses are just as important as the camera body you buy. The cameras below all come in either single or dual-lens kits or as body only if you want to choose some glass separately.

Remember to be aware that each company uses different lens mounts: Olympus bodies have the advantage of being compatible with the Four Thirds system; Nikon uses the F-mount, which means you can use most old lenses, even 50-year-old ones, from the company (though auto focus and metering may be unavailable); and Sony cameras are compatible with some old Konica Minolta lenses.



Canon EOS 500D

- **Good:** Nice and responsive to use • Superb LCD screen • Great photos • Kit lenses are mostly decent
- **Bad:** Viewfinder is small • Video quality is not that impressive • Autofocus in movie mode is loud
- **Specs:** Digital SLR • 15.1 megapixels • 3 inch • CompactFlash Type I, CompactFlash Type II • [See more specifications](#)
- **RRP:** AU\$1,499.00



[Photo gallery: Canon EOS 500D](#)

When we first reported on the announcement of the 500D we were a little disappointed. Why so, when it's yet another dependable Canon SLR, you ask? Well, it was the lack of real upgrade-worthy features, apart from high-definition video.

After having played with the camera extensively, we realize that our first judgment may have been a little hasty — it offers incremental, useful upgrades that will suit a photographer entering

the dSLR fold. Its video capabilities and an increased megapixel count (a step-up to 15 megapixels from 12) are tempting for users looking to upgrade from a [400D](#) or [450D](#).

Design

The 500D has that typical look-and-feel that is characteristic of all the Canon consumer dSLRs — there's the black plastic casing, along with smooth black buttons and a new 3-inch LCD screen. Normally we'd wax lyrical about the screen under the features section, but it really needs to be said here. Filled with 920,000 dots, the screen's brightness and resolution is just great for a camera of its class. It is a joy to use, and ideal for partnering with the movie mode and Live View.

Back to the physical attributes of the 500D, then. The chrome-tipped mode dial makes yet another appearance, housing the usual shooting modes, Creative Auto and movie mode. At the top, a hot shoe sits with the pop-up flash, an over-zealous little beast that loves to spring into action whenever you venture into automatic mode. In fact, it's so similar to the 450D from the outside, at least, that we'd have trouble telling the two apart were it not for Canon kindly raising the flash on the promotional shot for the 500D.



Apart from the flash being popped up on the 500D (right), there's no prizes for spot the difference from the 450D (left) here. (*Credit: Canon*)

The control wheel, which we saw on the [5D Mark II](#) and [50D](#), is absent here, instead a four-way directional pad sits in its place. We find that for first-time dSLR users this is a tad more intuitive. It's also quite lightweight, at 480g without lens or battery, which makes it easy to carry around for impromptu shooting.

Features

Without a doubt the main draw card on this camera is the high-definition video function, similar to what we saw on the 5D Mark II and also with one of the 500D's main competitors, the [Nikon D5000](#).

On the 500D, the implementation is full 1080p — it's also worth noting that the D5000 is limited at 720p. To activate the recording, you move the dial to movie mode or Live View and then hit the record button. Auto focus is available before and during recording by pressing the * button, though do note that you will be able to hear all the lens movements in the audio recording — and trust us, they are loud.

We have to be thankful for the excellent implementation of Live View, as the viewfinder is not as ideal as we would have liked. It does give 95 per cent coverage of the field of view, but the nine focus points are quite difficult to see and using it just doesn't feel as comfortable as on other cameras in its class. The focus points also blink a little too briefly when it's locked onto a subject.

Like we saw on the [Panasonic G1](#), the 500D features a rather over-zealous sensor that swaps between viewfinder and screen depending on where you position your eye. Canon's implementation is slightly better, though it can still be tricked by resting the camera too close to your body as you adjust settings.

Performance

Overall the 500D was nice and responsive in all shooting situations. With the kit lens (18-55mm), shooting in low-light situations was easy enough when using autofocus; though again, thanks to the difficult magnification of the viewfinder, manual focus became difficult to determine.

Using a standard SD card we managed to get 40 frames from the 500D before the camera produced a noticeable display whilst buffering and writing to the card. Canon quotes a shooting speed of 3.4 frames per second and a start-up of 0.1 second for the camera, and in practical use these figures hold up.

Image and movie quality

We tested the 500D with the 18-55mm and 55-250mm kit lenses that retail for AU\$1999 as a package. For beginners, these lenses cover a wide range of focal lengths and we're sure that many people who pick up this camera won't feel the need to change beyond either of them.

In terms of image quality the 500D impressed us a lot. Though you won't achieve optimum levels of sharpness with the kit lenses, for most purposes they do the job. Canon's typical natural level of color saturation is present throughout all the images, and exposures are generally accurate.



The highest native ISO on the camera is 3200, however, this can be expanded up to 12,800 in the additional settings. For the most part, a noise-free shot can be obtained at ISO 1600 thanks to the noise reduction built-in to the Digic 4 processor, but ideally for the sharpest shots you won't want to be hitting this level all the time. As you can see from the chart to the right, the 500D copes really well at higher ISO levels — compare the shot at ISO 100 and ISO 800, which are very similar at full magnification. The noise reduction does kick in though, and you can see evidence of smoothing and softening.

Videos taken with the 500D didn't have the same punch to them as the 5D Mark II's, which is partly to do with the size of the sensor, and partly to do with the lens attached to the body. In dark situations they were a little grainier than we would have liked to see, and a lot of shadow and black detail was lost. At 20fps they weren't particularly smooth, but for most users this won't be too much of a problem — we'll be waiting to see how the [Panasonic Lumix GH1](#) copes with video at 24fps. Also, the 500D doesn't have an external microphone input like its big brother, the 5D Mark II, meaning the in-built mono microphone is all you get.

Conclusion

The 500D is a very capable camera that is ideal for someone who is just entering the world of digital SLRs. The inclusion of high-definition video adds even more appeal to the already good-looking package. It's a pretty crowded market segment, with the Nikon D5000 and the [Olympus E-620](#) also in the "not quite entry level" dSLR space, but the 500D is a pretty strong contender and on specs alone is very appealing.



Nikon D5000

- **Good:** Rotating, articulating LCD screen • HDMI output • Quiet shutter release • Wireless flash control built-in • Good colors and image quality • Excellent noise control
- **Bad:** Screen resolution relatively poor • Often underexposes • Small viewfinder
- **Specs:** Digital SLR • 12.3 megapixels • 2.7 inch • [See more specifications](#)
- **RRP:** AU\$1,499.00



[Photo gallery: Nikon D5000](#)

Editor's note: Nikon Australia is currently offering a cash back offer on the D5000 until 31 August 2009, valued up to AU\$200. For more details please visit Nikon's [official website](#).

Design

The D5000 takes a bit of a different step to the previous digital SLRs from the Japanese brand. From the front the camera looks the same as older models like the [D60](#), but cast your eye around to the back of the unit and things begin to look a little different. The first thing you'll no doubt notice is the 2.7-inch LCD screen, which pops out (more on this later), and the button configuration has been tweaked slightly from older models.

At the side of the camera sit ports for AV out, HDMI out and a GPS connector. The camera is designed nicely for one-handed shooters who like to capture from the hip, as your right thumb doesn't fall accidentally on any button or dial by accident. That said we still miss the front control wheel that's found on higher-end Nikon dSLRs; instead you have to make do with just one wheel at the back. The four-way control pad is generally intuitive to use even if it feels a little flimsy at times.

Features

There are a lot of comparisons that we can make between the Nikon D5000 and the [Canon EOS 500D](#), so we'll get them out of the way first and then concentrate on the camera's performance on its own. They share a lot of similar features, the most significant being their ability to capture high-definition video (D5000 at 720p though) and that they both sit a bit better than entry-level model. The Nikon has to make do with just 12.3 megapixels compared to the Canon's 15.1, but it does win points for having the rotating LCD screen that pops out and underneath the camera body. This is slightly different to the articulating screens we're used to seeing on other dSLRs like the [Olympus E-620](#), which come out from the side of the camera.



With the 35mm DX lens attached (*Credit: CBSi*)

That said, the D5000's version is quite useful for tricky shooting situations. It's not perfect though, because if you have the LCD screen facing out from the camera and you lean in to use the viewfinder, the screen won't turn off automatically when you put the camera to your eye — not great for night-time shooting as you'll temporarily blind yourself. There's a dedicated button to turn off the screen, but we prefer the Canon version which has a sensor to detect when to switch the screen off accordingly.

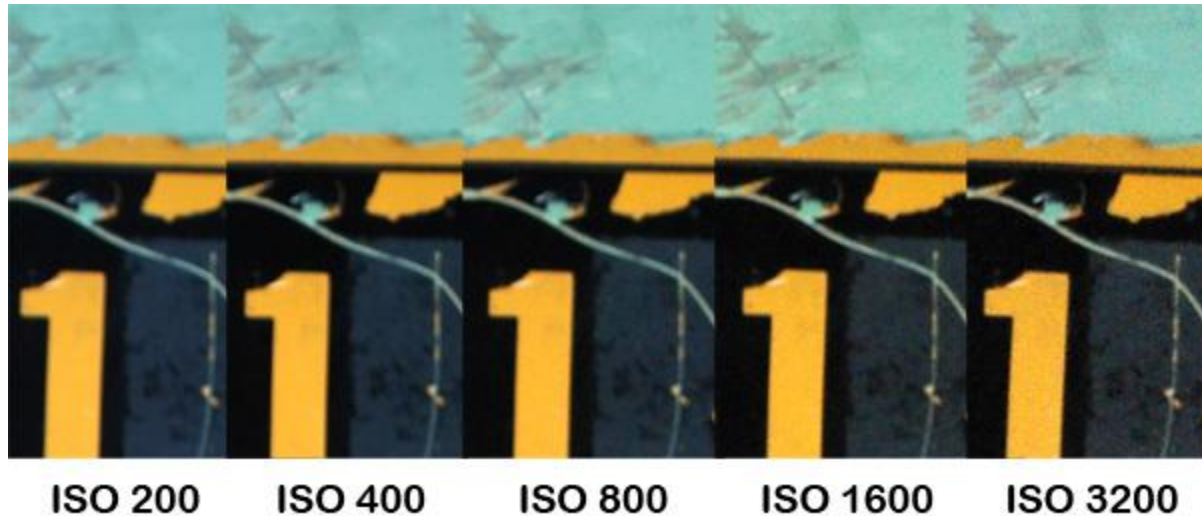
The kit 18-55mm lens is a little more cumbersome than we would have liked, but if we were buying the camera, we'd just go for the body-only option and pair it with the [35mm Nikkor DX lens](#) instead. That said, the 18-55mm Nikkor is a very nice lens, with good clarity and sharpness across the frame and little chromatic aberration noticeable.

Performance and image quality

The first thing you are likely to notice about the D5000 is the incredibly quick start-up and shot-to-shot time, with the camera being ready to shoot within 0.5 seconds of switching it on. The rest of the performance follows suit with the D5000 holding its own against other cameras in its

class. Shooting speed is something that the Nikon excels at, being able to capture 4 frames per second. For most situations like shooting fast moving kids or sports photography the camera will cope well.

Noise control was very good for a dSLR of its class though there were visible artifacts at ISO 1600. Note also that ISO 200 is the lowest native ISO for the D5000, though you can reduce it to the "Lo" settings to achieve lower levels. We also enjoyed the rich colors from the D5000. While not as immediately punchy as those from the 500D, the Nikon was able to keep a lot more of the shadow detail and didn't blow out as many highlights as the Canon did.



In retrospect, this had a lot to do with the D5000 tending to underexpose except in the most well lit situations. Unfortunately, due to the low resolution of the screen you can't always tell on close inspection either, and trying to find an easily accessible histogram is just as difficult. For reference, you need to activate it by going to menu > display mode > RGB histogram.

The size of the viewfinder makes it really difficult to determine focus when adjusting manually, and it is also slightly dim making this task even trickier in low light situations. Fortunately, the AF gets it right most of the time which takes a lot of the guesswork out of focusing, but it is very easy to change the focus points by accident when selecting other options in the information panel.

Movie mode was competent, but not the strongest component of the D5000, with the audio in particular being muffled and difficult to make out in situations with a lot of background noise. Unfortunately, like the 500D, there is no external microphone input. We still think there is a fair way to go before HD video on these digital SLRs is a make-or-break purchasing decision.

The shutter noise is fairly quiet, though there is a special quiet shutter setting for situations where you need to be more silent than a mouse. Activate it through the shooting menu, take your shot and keep pressing the shutter button down until you have moved away from the scene. Release the button to make the mirror come back into position again. It's a great concept that actually

works — and even in general use without activating the quiet shutter mode, the D5000's shutter and mirror movement is softer than many other cameras in its class.

Conclusion

Judged on its own merits, the D5000 is a great digital SLR for those wanting something a bit better than the entry-level D60 model. Including HD video at 720p is slightly gimmicky given that its implementation is still not perfect, and the articulating LCD screen is actually much better value. In some respects, the D5000 equals or betters the functionality and performance of the D90 — certainly in regards to overall performance it trounces the other camera. Some design and operational quirks stop us awarding it a higher score, but these are nothing you can't get accustomed to with time.



Olympus E-620

- **Good:** Illuminated buttons • Rotating LCD screen • Excellent image quality • Light and compact
- **Bad:** No video mode • Slow write time to xD cards • LCD resolution pales in comparison to its competitors
- **Specs:** Digital SLR • 12.3 megapixels • 2.7 inch • [See more specifications](#)
- **RRP:** AU\$1,299.00

There's nothing like a bit of friendly competition to send camera companies scurrying back to the drawing board, but when that competition comes from within their own range, that's a completely different ball game altogether.

In this case, the showdown comes from Olympus' new E-620, which borrows most of the features that we only saw a few months back on the [E-30](#). So, for a smaller body and a cheaper price, why wouldn't you choose the E-620? Read on for our full answer.

The E-620 comes as body only for AU\$1299, in a single lens kit with a 14-42mm for AU\$1399, or a double zoom kit with a 14-42mm and a 40-150mm for AU\$1599.

Design

When it comes to the design of Olympus dSLRs, it really comes down to the old saying of "if you've seen one, you've seen them all". Nothing deviates much from the standard look and feel of other Olympus cameras. You get the same textured black plastics, and just like the [E-30](#) (which we reviewed a little while ago), an articulating LCD screen at the back.

There is one nice new touch which will come in handy for those night owls though, and that's the illuminated buttons at the back of the camera. Far from being a novelty, they are actually quite useful, making shooting in dim situations much easier.

The control wheel, situated next to the main mode dial, is nice and intuitive to use and has a responsive feel. On the right side of the camera is the card slot housing a compact flash slot and an xD slot, whereas the battery is loaded from the base of the camera. The new viewfinder covers 95 per cent of the field of view, and is relatively bright.



The E-620 (right) is now king of the pack amongst the E-420 (left) and E-520 (middle).
(Credit: CBSi)

Features

Just like the E-30, the E-620 has a 12-megapixel sensor and a 2.7-inch free-angle LCD screen. It also borrows a lot of the other features like multiple exposure mode, variable aspect ratios, a quick 4 frames per second burst speed, and a 7-point autofocus.



In plain specifications alone, the E-30 has slightly better odds on all of them; it can shoot 5 frames per second instead of 4, has an 11-point autofocus system and can expose 4 frames rather than 2 in multiple exposure mode, but for the most part these cameras are remarkably similar — apart from their size, of course.

Speaking of that footprint, Olympus is touting the lightness in weight to the E-620, claiming it's the lightest dSLR on the market at 475g (with image stabilization). They probably weren't banking on the [recent announcement](#) of the Sony Alpha A230, which weighs in at 450g and now holds the aforementioned title. In the Olympus range, technically the E-420 is the lightest at 380 grams but it doesn't have image stabilization in the camera body.

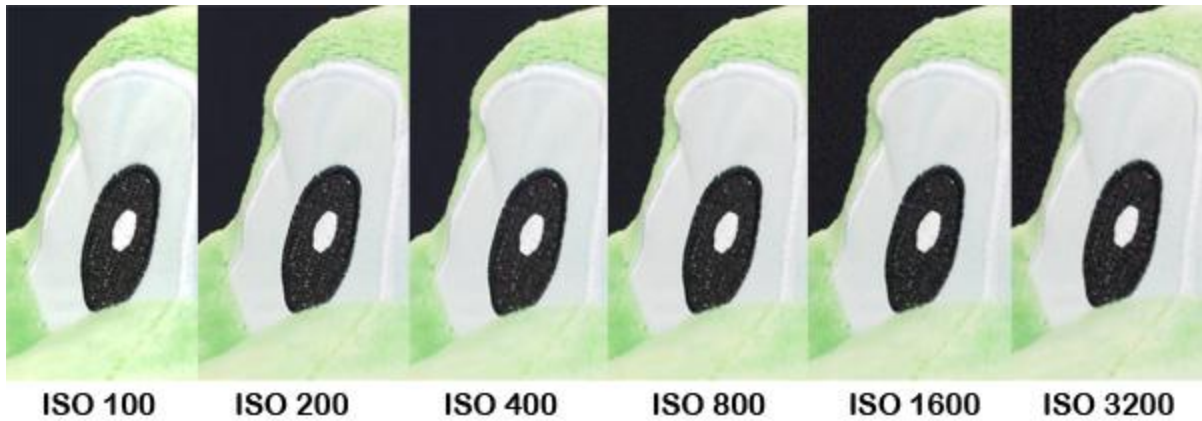
The E-620 is not as diminutive as something like the [Panasonic Lumix DMC-G1](#), but it's not far off, and we have to remember that the G1 is not technically an SLR either. There's also no video mode, something which is sorely lacking on the Olympus range. The 230,000-dot LCD screen is nowhere near as good as what we've (almost) become accustomed to on slightly-better-than-entry-level dSLRs like [Canon's 500D](#) and [Nikon's D5000](#).

As for the Art Filter functionality, there's not much more to add that hasn't already been said in our review of the E-30, and it's a shame that there aren't any additional settings (it's a direct port across from the older camera).

Performance and image quality

Even though we've gone on about how the E-620 feels much like an E-30 lite, the smaller camera does have some extra tricks up its sleeve. In everyday use it's a lot more nimble, starting up in just 0.9 seconds. It also feels more responsive in live view, with autofocus being better as well — as you may remember one of our gripes with the other camera was the sluggish response in live view mode.

Image quality is relatively consistent with what we saw on the previous version, though we did test the E-30 with a different lens. The E-620 renders colors beautifully, with punchy life-like quality and good tonality. In terms of noise, the camera copes really well up to about ISO 800 with some very smooth images even in low light. ISO 3200 delivers a perfectly acceptable shot for small prints and is a marked improvement on earlier Olympus dSLRs.



One issue that presented a problem was the write time to xD cards, particularly when using art filters. Using compact flash instead does alleviate some of the write time, and we'd suggest steering clear of the proprietary format for most uses.

Conclusion

As much as we like the E-30, we can't help feeling that the E-620 is the one to get for most applications, unless you value the feel of a bigger camera. If you want most of the goodness of the E-30 for a lower price, definitely get the E-620.



Sony Alpha DSLR-A330

- **Good:** Fast Live View AF and single-shot performance • Tilttable LCD • Dual card slots • Relatively simple, straightforward operation • Built-in wireless flash and image stabilization • Helpful SteadyShot indicator
- **Bad:** Smallish grip • Middling viewfinder • Default settings produce suboptimal photos
- **Specs:** Digital SLR • 10.2 megapixels • 2.7 inch • Memory Stick PRO Duo, Secure Digital Card, Secure Digital High Capacity • [See more specifications](#)
- **RRP:** AU\$1,149.00



[Photo gallery: Sony Alpha DSLR-A330](#)

A modest update over its predecessor, the [Sony Alpha DSLR-A300](#), the Alpha DSLR-A330 offers the same essential feature set in a redesigned body with sufficient quality and performance-enhancing firmware tweaks to merit the term "upgrade". And like its predecessor, the result is a generally solid, if not stellar, entry-level dSLR option.

Design

The A330 is nearly identical to its cheaper sibling, the [A230](#). The only differences are in the viewfinder — the A230's has a much higher magnification, making it more comfortable to use — and in their LCDs. The LCDs are the same 2.7-inch model, but the A330's can be tilted up perpendicular to the body or down at a 55-degree angle. The A330 also offers Live View shooting, while the A230 doesn't. As they're essentially the same camera, they should deliver the same image quality and performance. Sony also offers an identical but higher-resolution version of the A330, the 14-megapixel A380.

You can get the A330 in a black and metallic grey color scheme, in a kit with either an 18-55mm lens or a dual-lens kit with that lens plus a 55-200mm model. At the moment there's no body-only version of the A330, but one could possibly surface later in its life cycle. As with all Sony dSLRs, you should be able to use any Minolta A mount lens with the camera.

Most of the redesign works for the better, though we do have a couple of quibbles. It's lighter, though it still seems to fall in the middle of the AU\$1000 dSLR herd for size and weight. The new grip design doesn't work for us, however. It's only 3/4 the height of the body and doesn't feel nearly as secure as full-height grips. We do like the rubberized texture that covers it and the left side of the body, though.

The mode dial, which provides the usual access to a handful of scene program modes and the typical manual-, semi-manual and full automatic exposure modes, sits to the left of the viewfinder, while a large Live View/optical viewfinder toggle switch sits to its right. Also on the top right is a cryptic button for the Smart Teleconverter, a 1.4x or 2x digital zoom that produces results identical to cropping and only works in Live View mode. On a ledge behind it is the exposure compensation button; we don't particularly like its position or feel, though. It's hard to feel, and you have to move your whole hand to reach it with your thumb, and we think that will discourage people from using it.

Features

Sony provides both an SD and Memory Stick Pro Duo slot in all its entry-level models, with a manual switch to choose between them, so you don't have to commit to the less popular proprietary format. In an unusual design, the slots and the USB and mini-HDMI connectors sit under a sliding door on the left side of the camera instead of the more common right side. (The half-height grip probably necessitated this.) It doesn't seem to affect usability, however.



Sony's newbie-friendly information display attempts a graphical representation of where your settings fall on the possible continuum and the affect they'll have on the photo. The display isn't interactive, however, as it is with slightly higher-end models. (*Credit: CBSi*)

The back controls are pretty typical for a modern dSLR and will be instantly recognizable to advanced point-and-shoot users. A four-way navigation switch with a centre AF button is just below the indented thumb rest. With it, you pull up flash options (including a no-brainer wireless on/off), ISO sensitivity settings, display choices, and drive mode options. The latter includes an interesting 3- or 5-shots-in-10-seconds self-timer mode and rather limited bracketing: just exposure, for three shots in 1/3 or 2/3 stop increments. Above the navigation switch is the Fn button, with which you access all your frequently needed shooting settings plus some others: autofocus mode, AF area, metering mode, D-Range Optimizer, white balance and Creative Style. There are no novel options here, but in a nice interface touch, some text pops up to clarify the purpose of a setting if you pause for too long without making a selection. You have to go into the menu system to set image quality, flash compensation, and toggle the image stabilization, but there's nothing truly buried or misplaced in the user interface. Of course, with the relatively basic feature set, there's not a lot to hide. (For a complete list of features and guide to the camera's parts, you can download the PDF manual.)

Like many budget dSLRs, the viewfinder isn't very good — it's small and it's hard to see the focus dots blink red, especially against dark objects — and it has an even lower magnification than its predecessor. At least the focus lock indicator is close to the middle of the bottom readout. There's also a SteadyShot scale, which helpfully tells you when you're at your least shakiest; a digital level, which other manufacturers have begun providing, would be a nice complement for that.

Performance

Overall, the A330 is reasonably fast. It powers on and shoots in just 0.4 second, and can focus and shoot in a mere 0.3 second in good light and 0.6 second in dim. The latter is a big improvement over its predecessor. Usually raw shot-to-shot time is virtually the same as for JPEG, but the A330's 0.7 second for raw is slower than its 0.5 second for JPEG. Flash recycle time is pretty slow for its class, pushing flash shot-to-shot time to 1.5 seconds — that's almost twice that of the [D60](#) and EOS [1000D](#), and just a bit slower than the [K2000](#). And while its continuous-shooting speed of 2.4fps is only fractionally slower than the Nikon and Canon — and oddly slower than the earlier model — in practice it still feels too slow to keep up with kids and pets.

The AF system is surprisingly fast for its class, especially in Live View, which tends to be one of the Achilles' heels of dSLRs. As a result it delivers a more point-and-shoot-like experience. However, you only see 90 per cent of the scene, compared to 100 per cent for most other cameras; that's even lower than the 95 per cent viewfinder coverage. The LCD also seems to be the same one as on the previous generation of cameras, because I had the same difficulty viewing it in direct sunlight, even when tilted at various angles. The image stabilization works OK, testing out to a savings of about 2 1/3 stops when zoomed out to 200mm.

Image quality

We're on the fence vis-à-vis the photo quality. Part of the problem is Sony's choice of default values, especially in its Creative Styles. As Pentax does with its K2000, Sony's attempt to provide more "consumer friendly" images with its default Creative Style settings results instead in poor color rendering — too cool outdoors and too warm indoors — which makes you think the white balance is off. Unfortunately, you can't tell that's what's happening because there's no "natural" or its equivalent, and Sony doesn't tell you what the contrast, saturation and sharpness settings are for each style; they're all listed as 0, from which you increase or decrease. So if you know enough to change the settings, or shoot only raw, you can get some very nice photos out of the camera. But that's not the likely buyer for this model. Though, it's also probably fixable via a firmware update if Sony chooses.

By the rest of the image-quality metrics — noise, exposure, sharpness — the A330 renders decent photos for its class. The Dynamic Range Optimizer brings out a bit more detail in shadows and mid tones and brings back some clipped shadows and highlights; in general, you shouldn't regret leaving it enabled. We're a bit disappointed by the kit lenses, which don't match the sharpness of similar models from Canon and Nikon. The A330 delivers a fairly average noise-suppression profile for its class. Sharpness starts to degrade at about ISO 400 and color noise begins to seep in at ISO 800; you really don't want to use ISO 1600 and ISO 3200, where images are both soft and noisy.

Given that the A230 has a better viewfinder, unless you really want the Live View shooting, it's a better deal than the Sony Alpha DSLR-A330. But you can also get some significantly better cameras — higher resolution, with better noise qualities and faster performance — for just \$150-\$200 more.