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Canon Powershot S3IS digital camera

Can the latest update to the IS series prove its worth?

by Doug Harman published on 25 July 2006

Updates seem to come thick and fast where cameras such as this, the Canon S3IS are concerned and in this case, the S3 features some minor tweaks in terms of overall changes, but tweaks, which, nevertheless, make a significant difference in terms of what the camera, can produce.

Key to the changes must be the new 6MP sensor (up from 5MP on the S2) and larger, 2-inch colour screen. Other neat kit that beefs up the S3 spec' includes a couple of new scene modes (more on these in a moment), a new widescreen shooting mode and the addition of a sports mode for high frame rate capture of fast moving action. So, modest changes, but enough to whet the appetite of those looking to purchase an ultra-zoom digital camera packed with neat shooting controls.

And the S3 has these in abundance, from the AiAF (intelligent) focusing system, backed up by a Flexizone AF/AE system that allows you to move the AF point anywhere within the frame with the metering locked to it; ideal for macro or portrait work.

DIGIC II processing, borrowed from some of Canon's high-end D-SLRs helps keep images silky smooth and noise free in all but the new, higher ISO 800 setting, where it becomes, well, bad, and makes the new setting virtually redundant in my view.

The very long (or "Ultra") zoom range offered by the camera's F2.7 to F3.5 lens runs from a reasonable 36mms at the wide end, to a remarkable 432mms at the other. Examples of what this zoom range can do are illustrated with this test, and it really does offer a remarkable versatile range.

The lens is Image Stabilised, so it can



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compensate for camera shake in lower lighting or at those longer focal lengths where maximum apertures reduce, and shutter speeds drop in their efforts to keep the exposure spot on. However, on the down side, the lens is soft at the corners - it seems at all focal lengths - plus purple fringing and chromatic aberration mar its performance. Out of the camera, images seem generally to lack sharpness too, but this can be quickly adjusted and a slight addition of sharpening helps out; or you can tweak it slightly in software later if required.

And in terms of exposures, the S3 does very well, with hardly any poor exposure taken during my tests. And because there's so much control of the camera, from full manual, aperture and shutter priority control, plus 14 scene (or subject program) modes, there's plenty of tweaking possible. But one of my favourite modes is the My Colour control, where you can select a range of colour saturation or special effects.

Colour slide film lovers among you might be pleased to learn the Positive Film setting offers superbly rich colour and mimics the effect of colour slide film quite well. You can also create more vivid shots, switch them all off, shoot in black and white or even swap colours in an image, all in-camera.

A new Widescreen shooting setting crops the image across the top and bottom from the "normal" 4:3rds aspect ratio to the cinema-like 16:9 ratio. However, this is a reduction in the number of pixels used, from the maximum of 2816 x 2112 or 5,947,392 pixels, to 2816 x 1584 or 4,460,544-pixels.

The S3's AVI, 640 x 480 at 30fps movie mode is also extremely good, you can use the Image Stabilisation whilst recording a movie, (via the separate movie recording button on the cameras back plate and alongside the camera's video viewfinder) and you can utilise the full range of the zoom lens (and the digital zoom if you need

At a glance

What is it?

6.0-megapixel 12x optical 'Ultra-Zoom' digital camera

Good

Great handling, feature packed, great image quality, excellent macro function, good price

Bad

Intrusive noise at higher ISOs, purple pixel fringing, focus hunting at longer focal lengths, screen and viewfinder hard to see in bright conditions

Verdict

The Canon Powershot S3IS a few new neat features and tweaks that make it an interesting model and slight upgrade on its predecessor the S2IS

Price £330

Our score

8/10

Your score

?/10

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to) as well. Plus the camera records stereo sound to boot, so all in all a comprehensive package here too.

Other kit of note includes auto exposure bracketing, focus bracketing, flash power adjustment, intervalometer shooting (for, say time-lapse-style photography), and an in-camera stitch assist mode for panoramic snaps.

Handling is good, thanks to a traditional control layout that puts the still-image shutter release on the top plate embedded within the zoom control. The lens moves rapidly whilst zooming, traveling to (or from) wide to full 12x zoom in just under 1 second. The distinctive rocker style on/off/playback control joins the main mode dial on the top plate where the meat of the camera's main settings can be reached.

On the back plate, you have the tilt/turn/swivel LCD, a video-viewfinder with the movie shutter release alongside and the rest of the controls ranged down the right of the back plate. A four-way jog button, Menu and Set button provide navigation control, access and confirmation of settings in menus.

A FUNC(tion) button gets you into the main shooting options such as metering, white balance, My Colours and quality settings among others. Below it is the ISO/Rotate button, the Shortcut button (it can have a range of settings applied to it for fast switching at a single press) and a Display toggle control, which allows you change the information displayed on the screen (including an active histogram display and composition gridlines) or switching it off and activating the video viewfinder. Sadly, the video finder is quite hard to use, certainly not suitable for critical focus assessment and in bright conditions, both it and the LCD are a struggle to use.

Image quality is very good overall. The focusing had a few problems in both low contrast subjects, in some macro shooting situations (although the

Super Macro mode is stunning) and left me very frustrated on more than one occasion. Metering, as discussed earlier, is accurate and the camera's noise control is good in all but the ISO 800 sensitivity setting (you also get ISO 80, 100, 200 and 400 settings and a High Auto ISO mode) where it becomes intrusive.

Disappointingly the camera lacks a lossless or RAW recording mode but its SuperFine setting is excellent providing superb results virtually without JPEG artifacts. However, when you dial in the general level of softness, the lack of edge sharpness offered by the lens and the (sometimes quite obvious) purple pixel fringing, the otherwise good image quality shine is tarnished somewhat dropping it a point.

VERDICT

Canon's S3IS has generated lots of interest as even a cursory browse on the Internet will show, and given it's results and the £330 pricing, the S3 makes a lot of sense for those trading up from a basic digital compact but they don't want the perceived bulk of a D-SLR. The Canon Powershot S3IS offers a huge specification level, enough resolution for prints up to and over A3 in size, and provides great image quality, overall, so any of you interested in a long zoom and compact digital camera should put the S3IS very near the top of your list.