

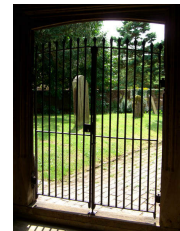
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Casio Exilim Zoom EX-Z1000 digital camera

Is 10 megapixels too much for a compact?

by Doug Harman published on 22 August 2006

The Casio EX-Z1000 is a remarkable-looking little camera that proves Casio can create stylish and pocketable digital cameras with the best of them. The headline-grabbing feature is surely the 10.1-megapixel top resolution setting with all those pixels crammed into a 1/1.8-inch sensor. Other key features include no less than 37 scene modes and the Z1000 provides some very neat touches in terms of handling. However, the lack of a full manual control is disappointing but offset by all those scene modes from which you can pick the mode that most closely resembles the shot your talking: portrait for portraits, scenery for scenery and so on. The sheer number of them means you can cater to almost any scenario, from fireworks and family portraits to sunsets and scenery. Other controls are enhanced with a neat display mode called "panel" mode. This takes up a thin strip down the right side of the 2.8-inch screen's real estate and allows you to scroll down nine key modes and features, quickly selecting them and all without having to dig into deeper menus. These nine options include the resolution setting, flash, AF type, self-timer, anti-shake (more on this later) ISO, white balance, exposure compensation (to +/-2EV) and the date and/or time. These options are accessed using a neat (and a tad too small for my fingers) four-way controller and its central "set" button. Information is displayed on the excellent, bright and adjustable screen. A clever Dynamic mode adjusts the LCDs brightness according to the ambient brightness levels you're working in. You can also activate a framing grid and have an active histogram display showing a combination of luminance and colour (RGB) information. Other controls include a tiny on/off button that despite being recessed and small I found I could still turn on accidentally. The shutter button just to its right is combined with the lens zoom control and this is



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actually very nice to use. The playback, capture and display buttons are neatly slotted onto a sloped edge on the top plate making them great to use while keeping them out of harms way. So, the controls are great and the handling is a great in terms of responsiveness too. The camera fires up and can start snapping in well under a second, the lens zoom is fast while moving in and out to the extremes of the 35-114mm zoom range. Moreover, a Snap Shot mode allows you to shoot within 0.002-second, by deactivating the nine-zone (or spot) AF set up, making shutter lag negligible. In short, using the Z1000 is great overall and the combination of build and handling make it very satisfying indeed. But, and there's always a but, there are a few issues. Sensitivity settings run through ISO 50, 100, 200, 400 and Auto with an enhanced 800 setting using the Anti Shake DSP mode, which rises to ISO 3200 when using the High Sensitivity BEST SHOT mode. While noise is well controlled at ISO 50 and 100 - images look almost perfect in terms of noise issues - from ISO 200 it is poor and at 400, it is very noticeable indeed with chroma noise being quite obvious as well. At ISO 800 and 3200, it's, well being kind, very noticeable. Images are actually slightly soft out of the camera (although sharpening can be adjusted) in the default setting. Some sharpening using software such as Photoshop works a treat if you don't want to add it in camera - I found a +1 sharpening (in camera) setting about best. Compounding the issue of noise however is the anti-shake DSP system, which is designed to help reduce camera shake problems. But it is a software solution (as opposed to an optical systems as found in competitors such as Panasonic that use a proprietary Optical Image Stanbilising (or OIS) system). Casio's Anti Shake DSP both sharpens the image if blurry and ads another level of automatic noise suppression. What you get as a result of using it is noisier images, with undeniably improved sharpness but with detail stripped away as noise reduction algorithms go to work. So, where has all this noise come from? It is a direct result of packing all those pixels onto

At a glance

What is it?

10.1-megapixel compact digital camera

Good

Good design and build, compact and easy to use, anti-shake mode with high sensitivity setting, 37 automated "BEST SHOT" (scene) modes.

Bad

Flash underpowered, noisy images in shadows and over ISO 200, purple fringing, detail loss due to noise suppression, marked barrel distortion at wide end of zoom.

Verdict

Casio try to hard to pack its latest compact

Price £299

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

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such a small sensor; Casio might have been better to use a 6-megapixel chip given the amount of detail that remains after noise processing! Another problem so many tightly packed pixels creates is increased purple fringing, which is plain to see on high contrast parts of all my shots. And finally, there's a lot of barrel distortion at the wide end of the zoom. Despite all these image issues, there are some plus sides: colour is well controlled, being natural rather than saturated by default (it can be adjusted though, as you'd expect), the auto white balance (WB) works well in all but tungsten lighting and the manual setting of the WB is fast to control and makes a huge difference. The built in flash works great as a fill-in in daylight or for closer subjects in doors, but its maximum range is only 1.9 metres, which means it is very underpowered. However, the redeye reduction mode it uses works a treat. All those images can be stored on either the very poor 8MB of internal memory or on SD/MMC external storage of which you'll need to buy a high capacity card, particularly if shooting at full resolution. In the Fine compression mode, for example, you'll get just one image on the internal memory!

VERDICT

This camera should have a lower resolution, say (the almost defacto) 6-megapixel resolution of most of its competitors. The race for bigger numbers has actually reduced the quality of the end result. So, at first the Casio Exilim Zoom EX-Z1000 looked a cracker both in terms of its design and build and its easy to use feature set. But once you start to get deeper, problems rear their head and I have to say left me very disappointed. If shooting in good lighting at lower ISOs (or making smaller prints than A4) then the image quality will not disappoint (though detail is still lacking). Once things get a bit gloomier or you shoot using the Auto ISO setting then images suffer, making the poster-sized prints this camera would otherwise be eminently capable of producing, compromised with image noise, purple fringing, and removal of detail.