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Canon EOS 1D Mk III digital camera

Does this adequately represent 20 years of EOS development?

by Doug Harman published on 13 August 2007

Canon announced its new professional DSLR with much fanfare and ensuring that everyone knew that (despite appearances) the Mk III was a new camera built from the ground up.

"The EOS-1D Mark III represents a complete reappraisal of everything Canon has learned over the past 20 years of EOS development", said Tsunemasa Ohara the Senior General Manager, Camera Development Center of Canon Inc.

On the face of it the camera looks similar to the Mk II model it supercedes, the lines of the camera across the pentaprism housing are typically Canon and, when you pick the camera up, apart from the weight, the attention to detail in terms of handling is obvious.

Distinct improvements over the Mk II include, finally single button access to features such as ISO control (which used to involve pressing and holding two buttons while rotating the command dial) now you press the button, release and spin the dial to the setting of choice. The only dual button "anomaly" that remains is for auto exposure bracketing where you still must press and hold the Mode and AF Drive buttons while spinning the dial.

And, in terms of buttons, there appears to be a daunting number of buttons around the camera, but anyone familiar with a Canon DSLR and particularly the EOS 1D Mk II, buttons and their positioning are familiar indeed.

The camera's magnesium alloy body has nice rubberised grips across the control surfaces making the camera feel sure footed in the, erm, hand, while the integral vertical grip, which houses duplicate controls and the main lithium-ion rechargeable battery pack adds even better handling characteristics and less welcoming, bulk.



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Despite the size and weight, though the camera's thoughtful control layout makes using the camera a real pleasure. For instance, on the back plate you find the new, large LCD. While bigger is better (the Mk II had a measly 1.8-inch screen for example) the 3-inch screen is difficult to use for assessment of exposure as everything looks, well, underexposed.

Only on computer do you get a proper idea of how the camera is doing on the metering front. And it must be said it's then you see how effectively impressive the 63-zone evaluative system really is.

Incidentally, Canon has now announced a firmware upgrade to help address the issue with the screen, among other minor tweaks. The camera's 19 cross type AF points are backed up by no less than 26 assist AF zones and you can link the metering to the AF point in use, but the AF was one area that the camera did not perform as well as I'd expect for a camera at this price.

For a kick off, the system would regularly try to focus on a background rather than the intended subject, even when the subject is large in the frame. It would also switch between trying to use a single AF point on one half press of the shutter release, then grouping if a refocus was initiated. Again things were not sure footed enough for me to be utterly convinced the focus was spot on where I needed.

Add to this a hit and miss performance when using the servo focus system when tracking moving subjects and it is rather disappointing. However, the bright, large viewfinder is super to use and the addition of a Live View mode, where you can use the large screen to help compose a shot, adds greatly to the usability of the Mk III.

In terms of features, rather disappointingly, you get four exposure modes: program, Aperture and Shutter Priority plus full manual control. Of course, there are plenty of exposure and flash

At a glance

What is it?

10.1-megapixel digital-SLR

Good

Handling, frame rate performance, build quality, low and high ISO image quality, feature set, metering

Bad

Servo AF not reliable, accurate exposure on LCD difficult, price, weight, limited exposure modes

Verdict

The Canon EOS 1D Mk III looks unrivaled in terms of its burst shooting prowess and noise performance at higher ISOs, however a hefty price tag is joined by a hefty weight of 1.33kg that might put you off

Price £3000

Our score

8/10

Your score

?/10

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bracketing settings to play with but the complete lack of specific subject modes is a surprise.

But the camera has no less 57 custom functions that provide a stunning level of customisable control over not just control of the camera but how images are recorded and achieved with no less than 156 settings.

In fact the camera is so rich in functions and settings there's not space for them all here, suffice to say, despite the complexity this camera is truly a photographers camera and one that can be tailored to the user yet still provide the sort of weatherproofed build and reliability demanded by top pro snappers.

But what of the image quality, how does this mammoth camera do the job of capturing the light? First impressions are rather mixed. The metering is superb (but hampered by the problems with LCD mentioned above) for example with spot, centre-weighted, evaluative and linked to the AF metering options providing scope for any challenge.

I had Canon's 16-35mm F2.8 L II USM zoom lens for this test and my images, particularly some silhouettes of combine harvesters working swathed in dust have been captured very well despite the challenging lighting. However, out of the camera images look rather soft although, like almost every other aspect of this camera, it can be tweaked up if required (or sorted later on PC in software); Canon has gone for smooth tones and accurate colours rather than biting sharp shots out of the box.

And it's worth remembering that you can shoot RAW and JPEG images simultaneously as well so you can bump up JPEG sharpness and await later processing of RAWs to provide any fine tuning is needs be.

As for noise, the new APS-H sized CMOS sensor means you can shoot from ISO 100 to 3200 and

have boosted ISO 50 to ISO 6400 extremes to play with - via custom functions - as well. And noise is remarkably low across the board. Shooting at anything between ISO 800 and 3200 would leave you with a image badly hampered by noise, here the new sensor and the DIGIC III image engine works wonders leaving image noise at levels, even at ISO 3200 that would be the envy of other as ISO 800.

VERDICT

The Canon EOS 1D Mk III looks unrivaled in terms of its burst shooting prowess and noise performance at higher ISOs. Ditto its handling, which, despite the weight is superb to use and easy to control thanks to very clear and simple to navigate menus, despite all the custom modes and adjustments on hand.

Overall, the good stuff is tempered by a couple of disappointments that include the LCD-exposure assessment issues and the focusing performance, which Canon have already started to address with the aforementioned firmware updates.

If you're thinking of upgrading from the EOS Mk II and you need the stunning speed performance of the new camera then you'd be hard pressed to find an excuse not to part with your cash, though you may need to get mortgage to do it.

If, however, that speedy performance is not such a critical factor, you might be better waiting until the camera is fully firmware upgraded, then jump in.