

<http://www.pocket-lint.com/review/2563/sigma-sd14-dslr-digital-camera>

Sigma SD14 DSLR camera

Can Sigma take on Canon and Nikon in more than just lenses?

by Doug Harman published on 29 August 2007

The SD14 updates Sigma's SD10 D-SLR and like its forbear, the SD14 eschews "normal" CCD or CMOS sensor technology using Foveon's X3 sensor. This uses pixel encapsulated in layers in the silicon that allows each layer of pixels to capture only one of the three wavelengths of light: red green and blue.

CCD and CMOS sensors use a matrix of coloured squares to "create" the colour in scene, the SD14 captures the natural colour as part of its hardware that, in theory at least, means better colour fidelity.

Rather craftily, Sigma adds the three layers of 4.68-megapixel sensors (one each for the red, green and blue pixels) to come up with its 14.1-megapixel resolution and while the camera certainly captures more than 4.68-megapixels of detail, it's certainly not anywhere near 14-megapixels of data. Opening an image in Photoshop and you get a simple 4.68-megapixel file size although it is replete with detail.

The opposite can be said if you use the camera's JPEG-Hi image interpolation mode that doubles the file size of shot images in camera when detail is smoothed away rather frighteningly. Better to do your image resizing in software on PC where you can control the way it is performed.

In terms of handling, the camera is a bulky old thing, similar in design style to the SD10 and featuring two mode dials on the top plate, along with a built-in flash and a shutter button that is surrounded by a command dial for altering settings.

Combining these two elements (usually they're separate) makes handling problematic if, say you half press the shutter button to focus then need to change the aperture or shutter speed without



...cont.

releasing your finger because you don't want to lose that focus/metering position for example. You can't!

This is similar to the way the Auto Exposure Lock (AEL) methodology works. Focus with a half press on a subject, then press and hold the AEL button without releasing the shutter button pointing the camera at the area you want to lock the exposure setting to, then recompose and refocus at the correct point - while still holding the AEL button) and then take the shot.

This requires both a feat of memory (at least until you get used to doing it) and a feat of finger gymnastics in order to accomplish. Other controls are on the back plate and surround the 2.5-inch, disappointingly low-resolution 150,000-pixel colour screen.

Performance wise, the SD14 is mediocre at best. Start up is speedy enough but there's a slight shutter lag and the AF is quite slow too, even indicating sharp focus when on occasion it certainly was not. The AF also had problems "choosing" which one of the five zones it would use, so much so I resorted to a single AF zone and recomposed as necessary to get it right more reliably.

Main camera setting menus are, well, basic, and look borrowed from a cheap, point and shoot compact and the one neat menu system that gets fast access to the ISO, resolution, white balance and image quality settings only lets you scroll one way through the options via the four-way jog buttons.

This means you have to cycle through all the options on offer to get back to a previous setting if you accidentally shot past it. A similar problem befalls the "FUNC-tion" button that cycles through drive modes, flash settings and the like, more on these in a moment.

Each press of the FUNC button moves to the next

At a glance

What is it?

14.6-megapixel DSLR camera

Good

Low ISO image quality, Colour rendition, Ease of use, RAW image quality

Bad

Performance, Hi-ISO image quality, Hi-ISO colour skew, Chunky design, Misleading resolution, AF foibles, JPEG compression/interpolation issues, Lack of sharpness in "SuperHi" (interpolated) resolution mode

Verdict

Sigma's update of the SD10 is this, the SD14 equipped with Foveon's X3 sensor that provides photo detectors buried within a silicone sensor to capture red, green and blue light at each pixel location. But performance problems, cost and limited features mar the new model

Price 1099 (Body only RRP)

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

...cont.

mode and you spin the shutter button surrounding command dial to change the mode, but you must remember which mode is up next. Again, feats of memory required until you're used to the way the camera works.

While the camera has auto exposure bracketing and exposure compensation settings, disappointingly, there's no such control over the built-in flash unit; you must buy an accessory Sigma flashgun to get at more advanced settings and controls. As if to emphasise this, turning to the Flash Photography chapter in the manual it simply reads to get the most from the SD14 "please use" one of the two available types of Sigma EF-500 flashgun!

In terms of image quality, I had Sigma's excellent 17-70mm F/2.8-F/4.5 wide-zoom lens and this is an excellent optic indeed. However, shooting in the wrong mode can compromise the sharpness and detail it can record. Use the lossless RAW (but frustratingly there's no RAW+JPEG mode) mode and you'll be okay. Switching to high quality JPEGs is fine, though jaggies become evident but go higher to the double-the-resolution SuperHI boosted mode and you loose detail as well.

Noise issues are not significant at ISO 100 and just starting to appear in shadows at ISO 200; by ISO 400 it's noticeable with evenly spread noise speckles and, at ISO 800, noise becomes obvious. And, at the extended ISO 1600 mode, it's very poor indeed.

Additionally, the higher the ISO the less accurate the colour becomes with greens and reds suffering most. The auto white balance setting performed okay in daylight but encountered problems indoors. Of the eight "usual" presets for white balance on offer (daylight, cloud, tungsten, etc.), I found none very inspiring and resorted to using the custom white balance setting when lighting issues became tricky. Again higher ISOs and the colour skews they seemed to enforce made things trickier still.

On the up side, the metering is simply sublime and performed well over the (rather overcast) days I played with the camera. Add to that the Foveon's low contrast performance where cloudy or grey overcast skies retained detail and of course, when the white balance got it right (or I used a custom setting) the superb colour performance.

VERDICT

The SD14 lacks any form of scene modes and other fancy photo trickery. This lack means the SD14 is as manual a DSLR as you're likely to encounter, and that's rather refreshing. Unfortunately, that freshness is quickly let down by sluggish performance and a series of issues (AF, noise, white balance, handling) that overall, combine to make the camera less a pleasure to use than it should be.

The SD14 looks and, more importantly, feels like a step towards another, more polished camera. Foveon enthusiasts will like it perhaps and the sensor is good at what it does, faithful colour capture. But given the price and weight of other issues and the fact there are cheaper and better overall DSLRs on the market, you should think hard before parting with your money.