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Nikon Coolpix S510 digital camera

Has Nikon improved on the S500?

by Doug Harman published on 29 November 2007

The Nikon Coolpix S510 updates the S500 and has the same basic feature set and handling characteristics (check the S500 test as well for specifics on some of those similar features) as that camera. However, the Face Priority AF and lens shift VR (Vibration Reduction) buttons have been removed from the top of the camera leaving just the on/off, shutter buttons plus a LED indicator that lights up when you turn the thing on.

The headline specification has changed only slightly from the S500 in that the new camera now boasts an extra million pixels in a tough, similarly stainless steel body in black, pink or silver colours. Once again, Nikon avoided the urge to cram a 10-million pixel sensor in so picture quality benefits by not having excessive noise problems, but we'll look in detail at that aspect of the new camera shortly.

The CCD sensor size employed is the same size as the S500s at 1/2.5-inch and the fast, 3x zoom F/2.8 to F/4.7 lens combines the excellent Lens-Shift Vibration Reduction (or VR) with a standard-for-the-market-sector 35-105mm focal range.

The VR technology (borrowed from Nikon's professional spec lenses) can be used across two modes: "On" (all the time) and "Response Priority" where shutter release takes priority even if the image is not fully stabilised. But because the button for accessing the VR modes has been stripped from the top plate (along with the Face Priority AF button) you have a less user friendly need to preset the VR modes in menus. Ditto the AF set up.

VR works as well in this model as in the S500 and is sophisticated enough to counter only vertical shake when the camera is panned horizontally in "On". In Response Priority camera response is according to Nikon "The S510 delivers the world's fastest response, boasting a power-up time of 0.7



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seconds, a practically imperceptible shutter release time lag of 0.005 seconds or less and high-speed auto focus performance. In addition, a new image processing engine actualises faster and greatly improved Face-Priority AF".

Nikon note the above is comment has the following caveat: "Among competing 8 effective megapixel class compact digital cameras equipped with optical vibration reduction as of August 30, 2007 (according to research conducted by NIKON CORPORATION), when set to 'eResponse priority' mode".

Hmm, well okay but there is still a very slight lag evident when VR is in "On" mode as the lens moves to compensate for any shake and by prioritising the shutter in Response Priority mode, there is a compromise to the effectiveness of the VR system. Otherwise, the camera is very nippy indeed.

But Nikon blurb aside, there are some very neat additions to the S510 over its forbear. For a start, a new EXPEED image-processing engine has provided some clever tweaks that make the Face Priority AF system more reliable and yes, it is faster and able to deal with faces that are more oblique in a shot.

Then the camera's "standard" 9-point AF system is backed up by a new, manually selectable 99-point AF set up that is superb and means you can focus on elements almost anywhere with in the central 2/3rds of the frame indicated on the 2.5-inch colour screen.

Like the VR modes, the AF system must be selected within the easy to navigate menus but I cannot help feeling removing the hard buttons for these modes is a step backwards since not everyone wants to fiddle in menus and this may mean they don't get the most of the cameras performance.

In-camera Red Eye Fix remains as does Nikon's

At a glance

What is it?

8.1-megapixel digital compact

Good

Looks good, image quality and detail, VR, screen, good pricing, responsive, specification

Bad

Rotary Multi Selector turns too easily, no optical viewfinder, image noise, no manual shooting options

Verdict

The S510 is so similar to its S500 forbear that it's easy to overlook the new model as a simple tweak but there is some significant new kit on board

Price £199

Our score

8/10

Your score

?/10

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D-Lighting system the camera's internal memory is boosted to 52MB and external SD/MMC storage has been enhanced to include SDHC storage as well. The back plate's button layout is the same as the S500 as is the Rotary Multi Selector that replaces the more "traditional" four-way jog dials. You spin the dial to dial through a list of animated menu settings; it can also be used to scroll through images in playback and to scroll menus.

As with the S500 however, while the menu wheel is intuitive and easy to use, it adds another level of menu operation into buttons that would otherwise be one click away from a setting. The revolving dial revolves too freely so until you get used to the wheel, overshooting a required menu option is still far too easy, wasting time and becoming frustrating until you get used to it.

There are no "true" manual controls other than +/-2EV exposure compensation so that's still disappointing, but given this camera's target market and the fact what buttons there were on the S500 have been further reduced, manual options are obviously not what Nikon thinks people want.

Given the new EXPEED image processing and higher resolution sensor, what of the S510's picture quality? The focusing system is excellent; the new face priority AF works well and struts its stuff well enough.

White balance control is excellent although mixed indoor lighting proved problematic with slight orange colour casts on some images taken indoors. Colour capture is natural (and can be tweaked, as can the white balance) while the 256-segment metering provides excellent exposure control, proving very reliable indeed. High contrast and heavily backlit subjects were handled with ease and overall, the camera's responsiveness (even with VR in the "On" mode) made the camera a pleasure to use.

As for noise, as with the S500, Nikon plumped to retain detail in its image processing and allow a controlled amount of noise to come through; you can see it in broad expanses of single colour such as skies, where it is evident and even in images as low as the lowest ISO 64. At ISO 100, 200 and 400 noise performance is okay but at ISO 800, 1600 and the top setting of ISO 2000, noise is an issue. Incidentally, the auto ISO range is restrained to ISO 64 to 1000 and the ISO 2000 mode can be selected in a separate "Hi ISO" mode in menus.

VERDICT

Overall, the S510 marks a small step up in terms of performance, image quality, resolution and processing but it is also a step down in terms of user control but there's an ace in the hole that I've not mentioned yet. And is its price. At £199.99, it is £50 cheaper than the introductory price of the S500 and makes it a very competitive camera indeed.

Brilliant build and pricing, big fat dollops of image quality and great features but with a few demerits in terms of user control, the Nikon Coolpix S510 is nevertheless well worth the money for anyone in the game for a well made high resolution compact digital camera.