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Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX3 digital camera - First Look

Sneak peek at the new snapper

by Doug Harman published on 21 July 2008

A brave stand by Panasonic sees the DMC-LX3 arrive without playing chase in the ever more pixel race. Panasonic has decided not increase the resolution (for the record, the LX3 is a 10-megapixel camera) at the expense of image quality but has created a new, "super high sensitivity multi-aspect CCD" for it's new high-end enthusiast compact digital camera.

I must stress to start off that the camera used for this First Look is a pre-production model, so its performance and subsequent images (some used here) may not be up to the standard the full production units could produce.

And so, apart from a slight softness to the images I've taken on it at the launch in Monte Carlo, they're lookin' darn good. The LX3 has a tough all metal construction and a rather attractive retro design in two liveries: black and silver, it is also novel in that it has been designed to produce superb image quality, according to Panasonic, and with the enthusiast firmly in mind.

A new Leica DC-Vario-Summicon ultra wide-angle 24mm (in 35mm film format terms) lens looks a cracker, almost double the light gathering power of the predecessor LX2's F/2.8 lens with an F/2 to F/2.8 maximum aperture range.

Coupled with a 24 to 60mm 2.5x optical zoom range and optical image stabilisation, the camera is designed to produce great landscape or broader scope images with stunning detail, and it seems to live up to the task. Apart that is, for that slight image softness mentioned earlier. However, I easily addressed that by adjusting the camera's default sharpness, but perhaps this more a reflection of the camera's pre-production status than any real problems overall: time will tell.



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But all that detail gathering power from the new lens would be in vain without a good sensor behind it and Panasonic has addressed this aspect of the LX 3 as well. Panasonic has specially developed a new, large, 1/1.63-inch, 10.1-megapixel sensor that provides a greater area on each pixel for the light gathering part for each photo site by reducing the peripheral wiring on each pixel from around 50% to just 5%.

This has created a sensor (according to Panasonic's figures) with a better dynamic range, boosting sensitivity by around 40%, saturation by around 35% (both when compared with Panasonic's own DMC-FX35 digital camera) and it all seems to work rather well.

The improvements to the sensor coupled with that new lens, mean noise is kept admirably low and allows you to shoot hand held in lower light levels without flash and without bumping the sensitivity up to unreasonable levels - you can get to ISO 3200.

In terms of handling and control, a neat manual switch on the lens throat allows you to quickly change between 4:3, 3:2 (akin to 35mm film aspect ratio and the most natural outlet for the new camera's images) and 16:9 widescreen aspect ratios.

This manual ethos stretches across to full manual controls and a nice mode dial on the top plate, which houses two custom modes as well as a great 24fps, 1280 x 720p HD movie setting with audio. It also houses another innovation, the new Intelligent Auto mode (or "iA") that is unerringly accurate at selecting the correct shooting mode for the scene presented to the lens.

The idea here is that a complete novice can pick up the camera and start shooting with the camera optimised for whatever subject they're shooting. There's an awful lot of other clever kit built into the LX3 too, not least of which is the new Venus Engine IV image processor and it is this coupled

At a glance

What is it?

10-megapixel compact digital camera

Good

Handling, design, build, iA, image quality, lens, manual control

Bad

Slight image softness (a pre-production foible, hopefully)

Verdict

The Panasonic Lumix DMC LX3 is a beautiful little camera. At last a manufacturer has created a sensor that is designed to provide high image quality, not noise

Price TBC

Your score

?/10

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to that new sensor that helps provide a lot of the finessing for the images once you've shot them.

Other key kit includes a 2.5fps frame rate, film simulation modes to enhance image "looks", a multi-exposure mode; manual, multi AF, face and tracking AF (the latter works really well particularly in the iA shooting mode) and a range of "system" accessories from ND filters to a retro leather case.

There's too much to go into in any detail here particularly as Panasonic were so nervy about the camera being a pre-production model so perhaps while not quite up to scratch at the moment, it still looks good to me.

VERDICT

The Panasonic Lumix DMC LX3 is a beautiful little camera that offers a host of features including MEGA O.I.S, Panasonic's optical image stabilising technology and a superb lens. And although this is a pre-production model, at last a manufacturer has created a sensor that is designed to provide high image quality, not noise.

I for one cannot wait to test a production sample and look forward to it immensely, but on this showing, it is going to be a winner Ö if the price is right.