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Nikon Coolpix P6000 digital camera

Can this challenge the G10 and LX3?

by Doug Harman published on 19 December 2008

Nikon's P6000 arrives with some very clever kit not least of which is the GPS data for "geo-tagging" images, where the location each image was made is stored as Global Positioning Satellite data within each image's exif data. This enthusiast level model updates and replaces last year's P5000 but is a much altered and improved model. The GPS functionality means you can view images with online maps such as Google Earth without the need to use third party applications to help you do so, for example. But the enthusiasts are not left with that alone. No indeed there's an improved and up-rezzed sensor offering 13.5-megapixels (from the P5000 12.1-megapixel count) but probably the most significant improvement is of the optical variety, with a new wide angle 28-112mm 4x optical zoom entering the fray. This is a much improved focal length range from the P5000's 35-123mm optic also boasting lens-shift vibration reduction or "VR" as Nikon calls it, adding around two stops of advantage to your shooting in low light or at longer focal lengths. The LCD is slightly larger too at 2.7-inches and an extended ISO sensitivity range now reaches ISO 6400. Handling is improved also, with a DSLR-like deeply sculpted handgrip providing a reassuring grip even when used one handed. An optical viewfinder has been retained and while it has a reasonable eye relief, easily usable with spectacles for example, it's quite basic and blurry to use, there is no dioptre control and you must have your eye exactly behind the finder to get a good view. It's better than nowt, but it seems a bit of an after-thought. Full manual shooting control includes the full PASM, just like the P5000 and you have the usual green point and shoot mode too. Dual user (customisable) modes are also available (all selected from the top plate mode dial) along with the usual scene mode selector. Here you get a new menu that provides the selection point for one of the 19



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modes that include the usual portrait and landscape settings as well as an image size mode and a voice annotation setting. The top plate mode dial also gets you into the camera My Picturetown mode that allows you to email images, directly via the camera's network capabilities to the 2GB of complementary space on Nikon's internet-based storage facility. Here you can put video of stills shot on the camera (once you've signed up), a neat idea and simple to use and set-up. RAW capture is included as you might expect in a camera pitched at this level but in a rather controversial (for some) move, they have introduced a new file format for the RAW files in conjunction with Microsoft. Image quality is very good with both white balance and metering working faultlessly for most of my testing times on the camera, particularly early one frosty morning where very bright conditions where a real challenge. Focusing works well too and it's nice to report, even in those very bright conditions, the LCD is eminently usable unless bright sunlight falls directly onto the screen, when the optical viewfinder became doubly useful, not just for saving battery power. The 13.5-megapixel images create Fine-quality images around 5.5MB where as the RAWs are around a whopping 20.5MB each, so a big memory card is the order of the day if shooting JPEG and RAWs together as I was. That new RAW file format is a frustration though as it takes some tinkering to get the things developed as not everyone has made updates for things such as camera RAW in Photoshop for example. Nikon supplies a basic RAW processor called ViewNX with the camera on disc, it's quite slow to use and only allows you to process the images as JPEG or 8-bit and 16-bit TIFFs that can lock up your computer as it does so. But the P6000 is not without some other more worrying image quality issues. Images are too noisy at ISO 800 and above. Noise is evident from ISO 400, which is a little disappointing but above 800 things get much worse; cramming those extra pixels on to the sensor has not been a great improvement over

At a glance

What is it?

13.5-megapixel compact digital camera

Good

Build and handling, low ISO image quality, easy to use, image stabilisation

Bad

Basic optical viewfinder, intermittent GPS, high ISO image noise, price

Verdict

The Nikon Coolpix P6000 is the top of the proverbial tree in terms of Coolpix models and boasts some very cool kit indeed. It's great to use and has impressive performance at the core and is well worth considering even if it is a bit pricey at £430

Price £429.99

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

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the P5000 here in my view. The fact you have VR, which can help you use lower ISOs than otherwise might be the case in lower lighting, say, but I'm surprised there's as much noise as there is. Add to this the noise reduction processing also mars the way colour and detail are handled bleaching the former and removing too much of the latter making things worse still. Having said all that, the low ISO image quality is superb with very low pixel fringing evident too. The new lens is a real bonus providing scope for more wide vistas and the like as well as having a great 2cm macro mode for stunning close up work. However you do get a fair amount of lens distortion when shooting at such close distances. Overall the lens is very sharp indeed providing plenty of crispness to the images, although the default sharpening is quite conservative, so you may feel extra sharpening is required on PC later or you might want to bump it up in-camera instead. The latter option provides more control but adds yet more to the work flow post shoot, so... There are a couple of other benefits on the P6000, for a start the small pop-up flash is nice as a fill-in but you have the option of accessory flash as the camera also sports a flash hot shoe, which adds scope. The manual controls needed for the target audience are there as we've seen but the simple control layout, with a combined shutter release and zoom lever, On/Off button sat just behind and the adjustment wheel for your right thumb all sit very neatly and are easy to use. That adjustment wheel has definite click stops so you don't have problems accidentally jogging a setting. On the back a Fn (function) button can be customised to select, say ISO or white balance whatever you prefer, while fast access to My Picturertown and manual focus control have their own buttons also alongside the LCD. Playback and menus are also activated here with the menu system keeping the refined heights of the DSLR camera from the same maker: easy to use and understand, with simple tabbed vertical pages to scroll through using the job buttons. These sit over the other side of the LCD and house the flash settings, self-timer,

macro/manual focus control and exposure compensation plus the 'OK' button to select or confirm settings and menu choices. All very 'standard' and will not phase anyone familiar with digital compact of any sort. However one gripe here is when switching between tabbed menu options, the menus go 'dark' momentarily which is irritating until you get used to it: I thought I'd broken the camera at first as the delay is something a little over half a second. The GPS functionality is nice to have but I found it does not work indoors and only intermittently outdoors, which is frustrating as it also drains the battery very quickly, so more work needs to be put in here I believe. The LAN connectivity is limited to simply uploading images to My Picturertown, so that's a bit of a disappointment and ditto the fact there's no continuous shooting in RAW mode.

VERDICT

And so when you look at the P6000 against rivals such as Canon's PowerShot G10 and the Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX3, you're left asking if this camera is a missed opportunity by Nikon? Yes, it's easy to use and handle, has innovative features (when they work, such as the GPS); the new lens becomes (probably) the P6000's highlight feature given the other foibles detailed here. Low ISO image quality is stunning but given the price and the other problems, is it enough? I don't think it is. As the old chestnut goes: On paper this a standout camera, but you can't take pictures with a piece of paper! No indeed. But while you certainly can get good results under the right conditions with the P6000 it has too many issues at too high a price and so drops points on this test.