

## **Digital vs. film: which is better ?**

**How can you tell if you should invest in a digital camera, or if a traditional film model would work just as well? This article intends to take a closer look at the differences between the two formats.**

Over the past two years, rapid advancements made in the field in digital photography have narrowed the gap between digital and film cameras. More people are buying the former. According to figures given by Canon Singapore, sales for digital cameras in Singapore registered the highest growth of 131 percent for 2001. For the past three months, Nikon Singapore also saw digital camera sales in Singapore surpassing that of its film cameras with digicam sales accounting for an approximate 60 percent of their total camera sales.

The catch-up in sales is reportedly due to the falling prices and strides in technology made in the digital camera space. Where a 2-megapixel digicam would once have been considered top of the line, you now have 5-megapixel-plus digicams like the Sony Cyber-shot DSC-F707 and Nikon D1x). Meanwhile, prices have fallen by almost half, with 2-megapixels, costing more than Rs 25000/- a couple of years back, now selling for around Rs 15000/-

Digital camera features have also improved considerably. Cameras makers have added useful enhancements such as advanced night shooting capabilities; preset camera settings for different situations (like Casio's Best Shot mode), better video and voice memo recording. Most noticeably is the convergence of digital cameras with other functions, such as MP3 playback and Web browsing capabilities.

Clearly, all these improvements, plus other conveniences of using the digital media, have made digital photography an attractive option for those looking for a new camera. But film cameras are not without their merit, too. Before you jump onto the digicam bandwagon, check out our comparison between the two types of cameras and decide for yourself which will suit your lifestyle needs best.

One of the biggest concerns users have about digital cameras is its image quality. When digital cameras were first introduced, most photographers felt that the image quality captured still falls significantly behind film cameras. One reason for that assessment could be due to the fact that the digicam technology used then was still rather immature and the resolution was only at 1 or 2 megapixels.

However, the situation has improved dramatically since. Not only has the sensor resolution of digital cameras gone up to as high as 5 megapixels, there have also been major enhancements made in the quality of image sensors as well as image processing algorithms.

The quality of images captured on digicams is dependent on several key factors, namely quality of the optical lens, image processor as well as the resolution, effective size and quality of the image sensors.

As the effective sensor size of most digital cameras is still smaller than 35mm films, the extent to which you can enlarge the picture is more limited for digicams than for film cameras. However, the difference in quality is hardly discernable for smaller print sizes.

Theoretically, the larger 35mm film size gives more details but the imaging sensors of some digital cameras are able to resolve more details than film. For instance, they are able to show the different details in a shadowed area compared to film which shows only a black expanse without capturing much details.

**Therefore: Images captured on some digital cameras are comparable to the ones from film cameras. For enlargements, though, the film camera has an advantage due to its larger imaging sensor.**

Where features are concerned, digital cameras certainly have an edge over film cameras. For example, one of the main reasons people choose digital cameras over film cameras is that the former stores images on memory media rather than film. Besides the savings in film costs, digicams do away with the hassle of buying and changing film since the memory media is re-usable.

The most impressive feature of a digital camera (as compared to a film camera) is the LCD display. This instantly lets you see what you have captured and acts as a large viewfinder. You can then choose to either keep the image or delete it on the spot, thus saving memory space.

In addition, the LCD display also makes shooting a difficult scene a lot easier with digital cameras than film ones since you can immediately review the effects of your camera settings on the shot and make the necessary adjustments accordingly.

One of the things digital cameras can do and film cameras can't is the voice memo and video recording. Although the resolution of these short movie clips is often comparable to poor video streaming quality, this feature offers an extra option to still image captures.

What of film cameras? Their only consolation is their simple user interface. Most of the time, it's just a matter of switching on the camera and shooting.

**Which means: Being able to see immediately what you shoot with your digicam makes it easy to produce good pictures, even for novice users. Using memory media instead of film is an additional advantage of digital cameras.**

The advantage of storing images on a memory media is that this makes it really easy to transfer the captured images onto a PC, especially since most digital cameras use USB interface for connection. You can then edit the picture, print it, send as attachment in an email or even put this up in online photo albums.

On the other hand, those not familiar with handling computers and who prefer to simply dropping the film at a nearby photo center may find the film camera a more desirable choice.

It should be noted that enhancements have been made in digital camera technology that allow direct printing of images from the digital camera (as in the case of Canon's CP-10 card-sized photo printer and the upcoming S820D printer). Also, more photo centers are beginning to offer printing services for digital images.

**Verdict: Depending on individual preference, a digital camera gives more flexibility in processing the image after it is taken while film cameras offer a straightforward alternative for people who just want to get the prints.**

While it is true that prices of digital cameras have gone down quite a bit over the past two years, they are generally still more expensive than traditional film units. A good film camera with 3x zoom and simple features usually costs about Rs 7000/- to 10,000/-, while a 2-megapixel digicam with 3x optical zoom can be expected to cost Rs 15000/- and above.

Extra flash memory media also adds substantially to the overall cost of the camera. Fortunately, prices of the media have dropped considerably in the past few months, leveling at almost Rs 50/- per MB for most types of flash memory cards.

***In Conclusion: If cost is a factor, digital cameras are definitely not as affordable as film cameras.***

*A short battery life is undeniably the Achilles heel of digital cameras. Due to the high power requirements of LCD displays, batteries are often drained completely within 2 hours of use. To make matters worse, some digital cameras use proprietary Lithium-ion rechargeable batteries, making it impossible to replace these with commercial ones in outdoor situations. The only solution would be to buy extra battery units which can easily set you back by around Rs 1500/- a piece.*

*In contrast, film cameras last much longer than their digital counterparts, and most film cameras use commercially available batteries which make replacements easily found.*

***To surmise: Until camera manufacturers find a way to reduce the amount of power needed for LCD displays or increase the capacity of current batteries, film cameras are ahead in this round.***

*As someone appropriately puts it: "Digital photography is here to stay. The need to input images into the computer manifested itself the day IBM showed the world its first PC. The omnipresence of the Internet and the wide use of the email network will ensure that the demand for digital images grows and evolves further."*

*But that does not mean that film cameras will be completely replaced. Digital and film cameras are complementary, and serve different market segments.*

*Generally, digital cameras will appeal to those who own a computer and who like to 'play around' with the pictures after they have been captured. Film cameras, on the other hand, cater to professional photographers who believe in the higher quality of film captures as well as those who just want to get the pictures taken and printed at minimum fuss and cost.*

*It has to be conceded that, at the end of the day, both types of cameras have different appeal and it is best left to the individual photographer to decide which one he wants.*

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