

Gift Guide: The best cameras for every budget

The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) -- Digital cameras have been popular gifts for a decade, but enthusiasm is waning, as most households already have one. The good news is that if you do know someone who could use a fresher model, it's hard to go wrong: Today's big-name cameras are almost uniformly good buys. Whether you're looking for a simple, compact point-and-shoot or a high-end digital SLR that accepts interchangeable lenses, here's a selection we think stands out from the crowd.

Best Budget Option:

Kodak EasyShare C195 (\$100)

Pros: It used to be nearly impossible to find a quality digital camera for just \$100. Now, Casio, Canon and Kodak sell them, with Nikon offering one that costs closer to \$110. Of these, Kodak's 14.5-megapixel C195 is the only one that has 5X optical zoom; all the others have a measly zoom factor of 3X. Whether you're shooting from the sidelines of a Little League game or snapping candid photos from across the room at a party, that versatile lens will make a difference.

Meanwhile, the camera's "Smart Capture" feature, which was borrowed from Eastman Kodak Co.'s higher-end cameras, automatically detects the shooting conditions and sets the camera to one of 21 scene modes. My test photos, which included close-ups with blurry backgrounds, looked decent, although I recommend turning the flash off indoors.

The camera has a large 3-inch display, a rarity on cameras this cheap. People can also select photos and movies on the camera so that they'll upload to sites such as Facebook, Flickr and YouTube when they plug the camera into a computer.

Cons: The C195 records standard-definition - not HD - movies, typical of cameras in this price range. It also takes AA batteries, not a rechargeable lithium-ion one, but some people might like the flexibility of being able to swap out dead batteries while on the go. It also claims less sensitivity in dimly lit conditions than competing cameras. Then again, just because another camera claims a higher level of low-light sensitivity, that doesn't mean it actually fares any better in those situations.

Best Mid-Range Point-and-Shoot:

Sony CyberShot WX5 (\$270)

Pros: Camera manufacturers crank out scads of models in the \$100 to \$300 range, so the selection of prettily designed cameras that shoot high-definition video is overwhelming. Still, the WX5 from Sony Corp. takes strong photos and also crams a bevy of attractive features.

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It can shoot sweeping 295-degree panorama shots, a boon if you find yourself in a scenic place. Bonus: the panorama feature is much easier to use than on competing cameras. The camera also enhances photos by playing up the bright parts while keeping the shadow areas rich, but not too dark. The camera also makes it easy to blur the background in a photo, a technique that will make even a beginner's pictures look more artistic.

It also shoots crisp video at full HD resolution (1920 x 1080). A dedicated movie button makes it easy to start recording quickly.

Design-wise, the WX5 is small and light, even for a point-and-shoot, with easy-to-navigate menus.

Cons: The buttons are tiny. It records HD movies as AVCHD files, which can be difficult to play back and edit on a PC. While the camera's 5X optical zoom will be sufficient for many, photographers who like to take scenic or sports photos might want a camera with more oomph, such as the Kodak EasyShare M580 (\$170), which has an 8X lens.

And it doesn't promise durability; other cameras in this price range such as the Pentax Optio W90 (\$299) or the Panasonic Lumix DMC-TS2 (\$399) can better survive being dropped, dunked in water and taken on cold expeditions such as ski trips.

Best Point-and-Shoot, Period:

Canon PowerShot S95 (\$400)

Pros: About as compact as a deck of cards, the S95 looks like any other point-and-shoot, but its photos are lovely enough that even people used to carrying bulkier, more advanced digital SLRs will be impressed. Although it's the same size as other cameras, the body feels particularly solid, well-made.

This camera from Canon Inc. has an unusually large sensor for a small camera, which means clearer, sharper pictures, especially in low light. It takes generally beautiful shots and does a better job of blurring the background than other point-and-shoots. The camera also shoots HD video (1280 x 720) and has an HDMI port, enabling people to connect the camera directly to a high-definition television. Serious photographers looking for a lighter camera will enjoy the various manual controls.

Cons: The S95's battery life is relatively short: Canon says it can take up to 200 photos on a charge, whereas competing models such as the Panasonic Lumix-DMC LX5 (\$399) claim to take up to 400. The shutter button is small. Also, the S95's 3.8X optical zoom - about what you'd get on a \$99 camera - might be too shallow for some people.

Best Digital SLR for Beginners:

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Nikon D3100 (\$700)

Pros: Nikon Corp.'s digital SLRs consistently take beautiful photos, and the company has made them easier to use, thanks to simplified menus designed to guide newbies. The 14-megapixel D3100, in particular, records full HD movies, something other DSLRs in this price category don't do. Just as important, the D3100's autofocus function works in video mode, something that's true of few other DSLRs, even Nikon's more expensive models.

Cons: The optical viewfinder - what you see when you put your eye to the camera - is relatively small. At its fastest, the camera can fire off three shots per second, which is actually slow compared with other cameras in its class. Still, the burst shooting will come in handy when capturing, say, your child's next soccer game. The screen is fixed and doesn't fold out of the body, which makes it harder to maneuver when capturing video.

Best Splurge for Serious Photographers:

Sony Alpha A55 (\$850)

Pros: Although the 16.2-megapixel A55 looks like a DSLR, it's technically not: While a DSLR is defined by its internal mirror that snaps open to let light in when you take a photo, the A55 has a translucent mirror that doesn't need to move because light can simply pass through it. That means the A55 focuses continuously whereas a DSLR loses focus in the instant its internal mirror flips open.

The A55 shoots an impressive 10 photos per second, takes gorgeous photos and records full HD movies, focusing continuously in both cases. The large viewfinder makes it easy to frame shots. A built-in GPS receiver tags photos with the shooting location. Like the WX5, it snaps panoramic photos and enhances highlights and lowlights. A less expensive version of this camera, the A33 (\$750), is available with 14.2-megapixel resolution, burst shooting at up to seven, not 10, frames per second and no GPS.

Cons: Again, the AVCHD file format for high-definition movies might cause playback and editing headaches. No optical viewfinder, although the electronic viewfinder is sharp, with 1.4 million-pixel resolution. Because the lens doesn't flip open, any dust or grime on it could affect picture quality. It's also relatively heavy compared with cameras such as Sony's less expensive Alpha NEX-3 and NEX-5 (\$550 and \$700, respectively, with an 18-55mm lens), which aren't quite DSLRs either, but do let photographers change lenses.

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