

Digital SLR photography

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DSLR Smart Buyer Test

Current figures indicate around 1,000 digital SLRs are sold every day in the UK. With Christmas approaching, talk is that demand could potentially quadruple. So how do you work out which camera is best for you? Do you go for a budget model and risk not getting the quality of results you want, or spend too much on a camera with a multitude of modes and functions you'll never need? In our *Digital SLR Smart Buyer* test, we try out four sub-£1,000 models at four key price points to discover what you're getting for your money. So not only will you know how well each performs, you'll also have a clear idea of which model is best for you

FEATURED DIGITAL SLRS

- Pentax K100 £550
- Olympus E-400 £700
- Canon EOS 400D £720
- Nikon D80 £900



DSLR Smart Buyer Test

CAMERAS UNDER £1,000

Pentax K100 £550

with 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6

The six-megapixel K100D was released in May 2006 and as such is the elder statesman of the group. It's only six months old, but has seen the arrival of several new models all boasting a ten-megapixels. However, it still has plenty to offer

HANDLING The K100D feels reassuringly solid and well made. Its thick rubberised handgrip provides a firm hold and the clean layout and well-marked buttons means it's easy to operate. The 2.5in LCD offers a bright display and the colourful on-screen menu system is very simple to navigate. It's all pretty straightforward to use.

FEATURES Don't get too hung up over the fact the Pentax only has six-million pixels as the resolution is good enough for A4-sized prints. If you don't normally print any bigger, then you don't necessarily need more resolution. The K100D has a good depth of features with an 11-point AF system and three metering options (multi-zone, spot and centre-weighted average). With beginners in mind, there is a full complement of exposure modes including subject-biased programs. There is plenty of room for experimentation with results, as the menu system allows you to adjust saturation and contrast, as well as apply digital filters such as sepia, black & white and soft-focus.

PERFORMANCE The K100D is easy to use and delivers consistent exposures. Image quality is very good with excellent colour rendition and high sharpness. Noise is well controlled too, only becoming a major problem from ISO 800 upwards. Where it falters is its speed of use at writing images. It's okay with JPEGs, but Raw files take several seconds to transfer to card. For beginners this probably isn't an issue but experienced digital SLR photographers may find it frustrating.

SMART BUYER VERDICT Don't write off the K100D from your shopping list based on megapixel count alone. It's a competent performer that would make a good first camera for the newcomer. At £550 with standard zoom, you're getting a great value package.



This high contrast scene is tricky for metering systems, with dark shadow areas and bright sunlight reflecting off the brickwork. The Pentax multi-zone meter had no problems at all.



The rear view reveals the large LCD panel, along with the control buttons and the on-screen menu system.

TECHNICAL ADVISOR: K100D

Shake Reduction (SR) system: Minimises blurred images by moving the sensor to compensate for shake.
Battery choice: The Pentax K100D uses four AA (or 2x CR-V3) batteries, so battery life will be shorter and flash recycling times longer than models using a dedicated lithium-ion battery. And you can always find spares or use rechargeable batteries.

TEST SCORE

Handling	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

VERDICT

★★★★★

Olympus E-400 £700

with 14-42mm f/3.5-5.6 ED

The ten-megapixel E-400 only arrived in the UK at the end of October so it's definitely the new kid on the block. Due to its small size, we're referring to it as the digital OM-1, a reference to the classic SLR that redefined 35mm photography in the '70s

HANDLING The first thing you'll think when picking up this camera is how small it is. In fact, at the time of writing, it's the smallest and lightest digital SLR in the world. Its style harks back to the days of the OM 35mm system, but it's packed with technology that's clearly from the 21st Century. If beauty pageants existed for SLRs, the E-400 would be walking off with the crown. The controls are very neat and clearly marked up so understanding the camera's set-up shouldn't take long. While it's a personal thing, I found the grip a little too small for my hand and meant I never felt confident holding it one-handed.

FEATURE The tiny body hides away a big list of features that will satisfy all levels of photographer. There are 31 shooting modes, including no less than 19 scene modes, with semi-automatic and manual modes for experienced users. The autofocus system is limited to three AF points while there is no less than 49 zones for the exposure system. There is no shortage of modes and special effects to try out, as well as the option to tweak colour saturation to produce vivid, natural or muted results.

PERFORMANCE Could the E-400 start a revolution much like the OM-1 did? You never know. The images from the E-400 used with the standard 14-42mm lens (35mm equivalent: 28-84mm) is excellent, with biting detail and brilliant colours. The 49-zone metering works a treat too, producing spot-on exposures even in backlit scenes.

SMART BUYER VERDICT Make no mistake, this little beauty deserves a place on your shortlist. Its results are better than those of the Pentax and on a par with the more expensive Canon and Nikon. We can see it becoming a favourite for photo-documentary work.



The small size and light weight of the E-400 makes it easy to hand-hold in low light. With E-series lenses boasting fast apertures, the E-400 could become a hit for reportage/travel.



The Olympus has a very neat control layout and the on-screen menu is very easy to use.

TECHNICAL ADVISOR: E-400

Highlight & shadow control: The E-400 has two exposure modes providing optimum results when shooting dark subjects in dark settings or light subjects in bright backdrops.
Supersonic Wave Filter: A high frequency sequence of vibrations to clean dust particles from the sensor. Dual slots: The E-400 boasts two card slots: xD and CompactFlash.

TEST SCORE

Handling	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

VERDICT

★★★★★

DSLR Smart Buyer Test

CAMERAS UNDER £1,000

Canon EOS 400D £720

with EF-S 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 II

The EOS 400D arrived in August and heralded the end for the EOS 350D, which is the best-selling digital SLR ever. The EOS 400D boasts a 10-million pixel sensor, as well as a number of other improvements, including a larger LCD monitor

HANDLING Although not as diminutive as the Olympus C-400, the Canon EOS 400D is compact and lightweight and while it's well made, the body is the most plastic of the four, so we wouldn't recommend you knock it about. The pronounced handgrip is a real bonus as it allows you to hold the camera one-handed without fear of dropping it and also helps to provide balance when you're using longer lenses. The control layout is very intuitive and the camera has been developed to appeal to beginners making their first steps into digital SLR photography.

FEATURE The EOS 400D offers a very broad range of features. There's a whole host of exposure modes, three metering options and a nine-point autofocus system that works with Canon's acclaimed USM lenses to give fast and silent focusing. These features only scratch the surface as a look at the camera's full specification list shows a depth of features that's unmatched at this price point.

PERFORMANCE The EOS 400D turns in a very tidy performance, producing sharp, well-exposed results. The standard 18-55mm isn't the best choice of optic, so we'd suggest an upgrade when you can afford it. The EOS proves to be very quick in operation in all areas and despite its relatively low price, proves itself as an accomplished picture-taking tool with bags of features in reserve for those wanting to experiment..

SMART BUYER VERDICT The Canon is a great choice for beginners who want a camera that's easy to use, but has the depth of features to allow the user to take more control as their confidence grows. It's also capable of meeting the needs of the experienced photographer.



The smooth gliding action of the 18-55mm zoom made it easy to shoot zoom bursts. The EOS 400D is packed with features for those who want to try something creative.

TECHNICAL ADVISOR: EOS 400D

DIGIC II: A processor that ensures images are transferred to the memory card quickly, which allows for rapid sequences to be shot.
Picture Styles: A selection of special effects that allows you to experiment and manipulate colours.
EOS Integrated Cleaning System: Dust removing system vibrates the sensor when you switch the EOS on and off.

TEST SCORE

Handling	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

VERDICT

★★★★★



As with most other digital SLRs, the majority of control buttons are located around the LCD.

DSLR Smart Buyer Test

CAMERAS UNDER £1,000

Nikon D80 £900

with AF-S DX 18-70mm f/3.5-4.5G ED

Since its launch a couple of years ago, the Nikon D70/D70s has proven to be an extremely popular digital SLR. In August, it was replaced by the ten-megapixel D80, which has received praise from amateurs and professionals alike

HANDLING The D80 is the largest and heaviest of the four, which provides an indication of its serious intent. In terms of handling, it's the most polished of the bunch, with a grip that your hand fits into so perfectly, that you could be forgiven for thinking it was made specifically for you. The camera exudes quality and in terms of build, it appears that no corner has been cut, because everything works so seamlessly. The control layout has been carefully thought out, with a neat arrangement of buttons and dials that are clearly labelled.

FEATURE Although this camera is aimed at the serious amateur/semi-pro, Nikon has included features such as subject-biased programs for less experienced photographers. It boasts a 10.2-megapixel sensor and a very comprehensive range of features, including an 11-point autofocus system; in-camera retouching and a built-in flash that uses Nikon's superb i-TTL flash system.

PERFORMANCE The Nikon delivers a consistently high level of pictures. The exposure system rarely produces an incorrect exposure and coupled with the swift AF and Nikkor optics, image quality is excellent. One area where the D80 scores especially well is when using flash, whether it's the integral flash or a hotshoe-mounted unit.

SMART BUYER VERDICT The Nikon D80 is a beautiful picture-taking machine that delivers in every department. It handles like a dream, boasts a full range of features and produces great results. It's fair to say that you'll get a similar quality from the Canon and Olympus, but if you plan to take your photography from a hobby to something more serious, then this camera's robust build and pedigree makes it the best choice.



Zoom bursts are very easy to do and can look striking, like this tree shot. I set the lens to 70mm, selected a slow shutter speed of around 1/2sec and as I fired, zoomed back towards 18mm.

The control system of the D80 is very neat with most of the controls found around the large LCD monitor



TECHNICAL ADVISOR D80

3D Colour Matrix Metering II: The multi-zone pattern in the D80 that evaluates the colours in the scene to provide more accurate metering.
D-lighting: A function that allows you to brighten up a subject that has been underexposed, for instance a backlit person, or to enhance contrast of an overexposed subject that otherwise looks too bright.

TEST SCORE

Handling	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

VERDICT

★★★★★

DSLR Smart Buyer Test Round-up

DSLR SMART BUYER COMPARISON CHART



MODEL	PENTAX K1000	OLYMPUS E-400	CANON EOS 400D	NIKON D80
PRICE (WITH LENS)	£550	£700	£720	£900
CONTACT	0870 736 8299	0207 253 2772	01737 220000	0208 541 4440
WEBSITE	www.pentax.co.uk	www.olympus.co.uk	www.canon.co.uk	www.nikon.co.uk
RATING	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
SMART BUYER VERDICT	A good buy if you're happy with six-million pixels. With the ten-megapixel Pentax K100D arriving in time for Xmas, look out for the K100D at bargain prices or in special kit	The Olympus E-400 is the latest SLR in the Four-Thirds system. Panasonic also has a Four-Thirds digital SLR while Sigma produces an extensive range of compatible lenses	The Canon 400D replaced the EOS 350D, which is the best-selling digital SLR of all time. The EOS 400D's sensor cleaning system has three different stages for removing dust particles from the sensor	The D80 is the first Nikon digital SLR aimed at the enthusiast that uses SD cards. The previous models, such as the D70, accepted CompactFlash. SD cards are also used in the Nikon D50
RESOLUTION (PIXELS)	6.1-million	10-million	10.1-million	10.2-million
SENSOR TYPE	CCD	Four-Thirds	CMOS	DX CCD
FOCAL LENGTH INCREASE	1.5x	2x	1.6x	1.5x
SHAKE REDUCTION	Yes	No	No	No
AF FOCUSING POINTS	11 AF points	Three AF points	Nine AF points	11 AF points
SENSOR DUST REMOVAL	No	Yes	Yes	No
MULTI-ZONE METER	16	49	35	420
ISO RATING	200-3200	100-1600	100-1600	100-1600
MEMORY CARD TYPE	SD	xD and CF	CF	SD
BATTERY TYPE	4xAA OR 2xCR-V3	Lithium-ion (BLS-1)	Lithium-ion (NB-2LH)	Lithium-ion (EN-EL3e)
DIMENSIONS (WHD)	129.5 x 92.5 x 70mm	129.5 x 91 x 53mm	126.5 x 94.2 x 65mm	132 x 103 x 77mm
WEIGHT (GRAMS)	560	375	510	585

OVERALL WINNER! OLYMPUS E-400



There are three SLRs claiming five-star status and rightly so as each has its own strengths. However, the Olympus E-400, which has just come on to the scene, pips the other two to top spot. Its great to handle, fun to use and produces first-rate images. What more could you want from a camera!

"The Olympus E-400 is great to handle, fun to use and produces first-rate images. What more could you want from a camera!"

