# Is My Camera Any Good?

## (or what camera should I buy?)

The immediate answer to this question is yes... or maybe no! It depends what you want it to do. Let's take three examples.

I want to photograph your family and friends, places I visit on holiday and record events in my life. I will look at most of these pictures on a computer or TV and maybe make the occasional small print.

> Any decent quality camera phone or compact camera is fine. It's light and easy to carry around; you cannot take a picture with a camera you have left at home because it is too big and heavy. It will cope with many everyday situations and produce viewable results and smaller prints.

I want to record all of the above but would like to photograph the interiors of places I visit, get a little closer to the action and hang the marvellous picture of the sunset I took on the wall.

> A better quality compact camera is suitable but a 'bridge' camera or DLSR may provide a bit more flexibility.

All of the above but I want to take photography a bit more seriously, maybe photograph wildlife, make some big blow ups and possibly sell a few pictures.

> You need a decent DSLR or high end pro compact.

What does all that mean?

**Compact Cameras.** Small light weight cameras that allow you to take photographs in 'point and shoot' mode. Most have zoom lenses and offer some degree of manual input to override the automatic system when it cannot cope.

**Bridge cameras** are cameras which fill the niche between digital single-lens reflex cameras (DSLRs) and the point-and-shoot compact camera. They are often comparable in size and weight to the smallest DSLRs. They are equipped with a zoom lens but do not usually have interchangeable lenses. Sometimes referred to as prosumer (professional – consumer) cameras they can produce very good results.

**Digital Single Lens Reflex.** DSLR cameras allow the photographer to actually see in the viewfinder what the camera is taking through the single lens via a mirror and reflex prism. DSLRs have interchangable lenses, can be very high quality and can cope with most photographic subjects – if you know how to use them.

Do I need megapixels? Digital cameras record a photograph via a sensor in the back of the camera in place of the film in a traditional camera. The term megapixels refers to the amount of data the sensor can collect. So more MP is good? Well generally yes but the quality and physical size of the sensor also has an effect on the quality of the picture. Just as cheap, low

quality, film was probably ok for many snapshots but rubbish for anything else so cheap sensors limit the quality of pictures.

Digital technology is marching onwards at a terrific rate. A few years ago a compact camera had a 1 Mb sensor and a pro camera 6 MB. Now some phones have 14 Mb cameras, bridge cameras can be 22+ Mb and DSLRs 36+ Mb so the figures are becoming meaningless.

Two other things to think about. Quality isn't just about sharpness and image size. Higher end cameras have a better dynamic range which means they produce a better range of tones and cope better with difficult lighting situations. They also reproduce skin tones more naturally and are able to shoot RAW format images which gives the photographer full control when editing the pictures. Now you may not be conversant with RAW image editing yet but that brings me neatly to the second point. If you have shot and award winning image on a decent camera you can always go back to that image as your knowledge increases and re edit it, submit it for publication or make a decent sized print from it but you will never be able to go back and put in quality which wasn't there when the image was captured.

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| Camera Phone (Good quality) | Personal use, amateur internet, publication in art or photo mags. | Can't cope with difficult lighting situations. No off camera flash. No viewfinder. Print size limited |
| Simple Compact | Personal use and amateur internet. Small prints | Can't cope with difficult lighting situations. No off camera flash. Poor large print quality. No viewfinder. |
| Advanced Compact or Bridge | Personal use and internet. Large prints. Top end cameras images may be acceptable for publication in magazines. May offer RAW image capture | Usually fixed zoom lens. Top end of this market offers a lot of quality for a reasonable price. Some have no viewfinder. |
| DSLR (Digital Single Lens Reflex | Personal use and internet. Large prints. Most cameras images are acceptable for publication in magazines Interchangeable lenses. RAW image capture | Supplied kit lenses are often lower quality than pro lenses. Can be complicated, easier to make mistakes. |
| Pro DSLR | Everything. Top quality lenses | Expensive, often heavy and complicated. |

As a rule of thumb the major manufacturers such as Nikon, Canon, Fuji, Pentax and Olympus all make very good DSLRs and bridge cameras. Generally their compact cameras are also good but the cheaper these are knocked out the lower the performance.

One word of warning. Unless you are confident you know what you are doing do not buy second hand. There are some great second hand bargains out there but models and specs change so quickly that it is easy to buy something that is five years old and contains out dated technology which is no longer supported by the manufacturer.

There is one awful truth in photography and that is that buying a better camera won't make you a better photographer. A good photographer will produce good photographs on a compact camera, a DSLR or a phone. The only difference will be what they can achieve in difficult lighting situations and, maybe, the technical quality of the final image. The key to improving as a photographer is to take photographs. To quote a golfer "It's a funny thing, the more I practice the luckier I get."*

*Attributed to Gary Player, Arnold Palmer & Samuel Goldwyn who said, "the harder I work, the luckier I get"