

Buying Guide: The best starter DSLRs right now!

Here are five great cameras for first-timer DSLR users--Updated for Summer 2009

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Getting bored with your point-and-shoot? Ready to grow as a photographer but afraid of all the technology? Here are some great low-cost DSLRs that will get you pro results easily.

DSLRs have the largest image sensors, and therefore will produce the best quality images of any digital camera. Interchangeable lenses give you entrée into a world of flexible picture-taking options that lets you run with the pros. And yet, if you are intimidated by the thought of too many controls to learn, no worries: The current crop of entry-level DSLRs are just as point-and-shoot easy as compact digicams.

The best news? Basic DSLRs cost under \$800 these days, and bargain hunters can find some models for under \$500, with a kit lens! That's just slightly more expensive than high-end compact cameras...but the results are a world better.

Here's a quick look at four cameras that I believe are a great way for snapshotters to enter the world of digital photography. All of these cameras have been designed with the snapshotter in mind, but have features that more advanced shooters can access--if they wish--to take more control over their images.

NEW FEATURE: What are the "Test results"?

Test results are a new feature to this article, and are based on objective measurements provided by [DxOMark](#)'s state-of-the art camera test facility, with their permission.

Each camera's sensor is measured for color depth (which indicates how smooth the transitions are between colors), dynamic range (the range of visible detail in shadows through bright highlights in the same scene), and low-light ISO. Low-light ISO determines which is the highest ISO that will produce acceptable levels of digital noise in an image. I present the data along with an explanation which is intended to help you understand each camera's performance. Note that we do

not yet have results for all cameras listed here but as new cameras are tested we will add that information.

Canon Digital Rebel XS



Canon EOS Rebel XS with EFS 18-55mm IS Lens: \$550. [Get current price.](#)

Overview: At 10 megapixels, the Digital Rebel XS is the fourth generation of the Rebel line and has been refined to the point where it offers a lot of bang for very

little buck . It's surprisingly small. Its CMOS sensor, designed by Canon, is claimed to offer exceptional overall image quality, and most tests we've seen confirm the claim. It's easy to use when set in auto mode, but offers a wide-ranging selection of Canon lenses and accessories for those who want to grow. While it's not as durably built as the mid-range, 10MP Canon EOS 40D, it offers the same resolution at a much lower price.

The juicy details: The smallest and lightest EOS DSLR to date, the XS backs up its auto-everything capabilities with a DIGIC III image processor that produces exceptionally clear and sharp images and performs well in low light. The first Rebel to boast live view (you can see what's going on live in the LCD monitor), the camera has a self-cleaning sensor, and you can operate it remotely via a PC. The XS has Picture Style settings, which allow users to change color saturation, contrast and sharpness in-camera.

The camera has a 2.5-inch LCD finder starts up in a quick 0.2 seconds, and has a shutter release time of 0.001 sec. The ISO ranges from 100 to 1600, with shutter speeds from 30-1/4000 sec, and flash sync at a fast 1/200 sec.

What's special about this camera? Its size (small), its pixel count (high), and its price (low). Usually, it's two out of three.

The system: An extensive range of Canon lenses from the mid-range "kit" zoom lens (kit lenses are typically 18-55mm, with smaller apertures. They are relatively inexpensive; quality is usually good enough for up to 8x10 prints) to a wide range of pro optics. Canon was the first camera company to offer image stabilization in its lenses, and offers a wide range of IS lenses if you are willing to pony up the extra cash. Most Canon lenses are extremely quiet and autofocus quickly and decisively.

Lab test results (Provided by [DxOMark](#)):

Maximum ISO for acceptable image quality: ISO 400

Maximum ISO for acceptable dynamic range: ISO 800

Color depth: Excellent (22 on a scale of 1-25)

Overall image quality: Very good (61.6 on a scale of 1-100)

The XS offers impressive image quality for the price. Acceptable images with a smooth range of colors are attainable up to ISO 400 for enlargements, and ISO 800 for smaller prints.

Who would love it: Soccer moms and NASCAR dads for all family shooting tasks because of its light weight and small size (and ease of use), enthusiasts, because of its resolution and manual overrides, and some pro shooters (like photojournalists, for instance), who can consider it a very capable, lightweight back-up unit for their high-end rig.

The next level: The recently introduced [Canon T1i](#) (around \$900) adds 720p HD video to the feature set and has 15MP resolution, but really, the XS's 10MP is

sufficient resolution for most uses. The T1i's larger 3-inch LCD makes it easier to view and share images. Basically, though, you're paying about \$350 extra for the video.

NIKON D60



[Nikon D60 10 Megapixel Digital SLR, body only](#): \$500. [Camera Outfit, with standard 18-55mm kit lens](#): Approximately \$600. Follow links for current pricing.

Overview: After a long run (for a DSLR), the Nikon 6MP D40 has finally been retired from the Nikon line (although [there may still be some available](#)). Its very capable replacement is the D60, a 10MP powerhouse in a small, lightweight body and many features that have trickled down from more advanced models. Nikon has put a lot of effort into squeezing the best possible image quality out of this camera, from a souped-up processor to a smart flash system that takes automation of Nikon's powerful flashes to a new level, resulting in better-exposed flash shots. And of course, when you buy any Nikon DSLR, it opens the door to Nikon's extensive, outstanding selection of lenses.

The juicy details: Of course, while the camera can cruise along in auto-everything mode, the fun begins when you start taking control. For beginners who want to upgrade their photos, the camera offers eight "Digital Vari-Program" options that adjust ISO sensitivity, white balance, sharpening, contrast, color saturation and hue, as well as aperture and shutter speed, automatically for specific types of shooting situations. (More advanced users can fine-tune each of these settings manually.) Retouch menu includes D-Lighting, which brightens shadow details; red-eye correction; trim to crop the image; and several monochrome options, and Quick Retouch. Standard shutter- and aperture-priority settings let you control either the shutter speed or aperture settings, respectively, while the camera does the rest to get an accurate exposure. Burst mode (2.5 frames per second) can go for 100 consecutive shots without filling the buffer. And it's all visible on a generous 2.5-inch monitor with 19x magnification of image previews so you can really check for focus and blur.

An explanatory menu system guides users to both the camera's commonly-used and more unusual settings. You can choose JPEG or higher-quality NEF (RAW) file formats, which can be fine-tuned using Nikon's PictureProject or Capture software. With a shutter speed range of 30-1/4000 sec, 1/200 sec flash synch, and a .2-sec startup time, this camera is ready to run with the big boys. Cool feature: A sensor detects when the camera is up to your eye and automatically turns off the LCD.

Tip: The 18-55mm kit lens offers excellent resolution for most snapshots and prints up to 8x10. However, because the D60 lacks an internal focusing motor, some older Nikon lenses may not focus automatically on the D40, D40x, or D60. They will focus manually, however.

What's special about this camera? While Nikon lenses are superb, the flash system is this system's killer app. The flash sync is 1/500 second--one of the fastest sync speeds available--allowing users to use flash as a shadow-busting fill light even in bright sunlight. You can use multiple off-camera flashes wirelessly, and control the output of each flash independently, for fine-control of on-location portraits and other multiframe applications, something that should get

even the most seasoned pro drooling. And of course, the Retouch in-camera image editing is impressive, too.

The system: Over 70 current-production Nikon lenses and teleconverters (including close-up lenses, fisheyes, superwides, long zooms, Vibration Reduction lenses, and super telephotos) are available (although some may not focus automatically), plus eight flash units, many with wireless operation.

Lab test results (Provided by [DxOMark](#)):

Maximum ISO for acceptable image quality: ISO 400

Maximum ISO for acceptable dynamic range: ISO 800

Color depth: Very good (22.5 on a scale of 1-25)

Overall image quality: Very Good (64.5 on a scale of 1-100)

Image quality is best at lowest ISO settings and deteriorates from ISO 400 on.

Color quality is very good throughout lower ISOs. We recommend shooting at below ISO 400 with this camera for best overall image quality.

Who would love it: First-time DSLR buyers who don't expect to go beyond that. Snapshooters can cruise in auto or grow in their abilities by experimenting with its For pros, it has enough features to qualify it as a worthy back-up camera, and since it is light and small it wouldn't add significantly to a pro's gadget-bag payload.

Coming soon: Nikon is about to replace the discontinued D40 with the just-announced [D3000](#), a new entry-level DSLR, which promises on-board how-to guides that will hold your hand through the picture-taking process, as well as sophisticated Nikon technology that will give you ideal exposures with little effort...and almost no lag time. It should be available in late August for a bit more than the D60.

Olympus EVOLT E-520



[Olympus EVOLT E-520](#): Approximately \$360 body only. A lens is necessary. We recommend the [14-42mm f/3.5-5.6 Zuiko lens](#) (\$205)

Overview: Olympus pioneered Live View, which allows you to see live images in your DSLR's LCD monitor, just like with compact cameras, and that feature can be found in the tiny E520. The E-520 is small and light, uses the four thirds format, which means it will also accept Panasonic and Leica DSLR lenses. And although it has plenty of modes, it also can be left in "Program" mode if you just

want to concentrate on taking pictures. The E-520 also offers Face Detection--the camera finds up to eight faces in a scene and automatically picks optimal focus, exposure and even color balance so the faces come out lookin' good. The E-520 has in-camera image stabilization, and you can buy adapters so you can use [Nikon](#) and other brand lenses.

The juicy details: The 10MP camera has Live View, which lets you see what's happening in the high-resolution 2.7-inch LCD monitor as it happens; there's an innovative Supersonic Wave Filter that shakes dust off the sensor, which reduces the hassle involved in cleaning it. The camera records RAW, JPEG, and TIFF image files, offers 28 exposure modes, and has an ISO range of ISO 100-1600, although we recommend staying with ISO 400 or lower.

There are extensive white balance settings, 20 scene modes, mechanical image stabilization, a fast burst mode of 3.5 seconds, which is a bit more than most cameras in this category, the usual variety of exposure modes, and a "Super FP" sync mode at a mind-blowing 1/4000 sec (use it only for fill flash). You can shoot up to 2.5 frames per second, at shutter speeds from 60-1/4000 sec.

What's special about this camera? Live view! Plus, virtual black-and-white filters let you control contrast between colors when shooting in monochrome mode, and there are lots of color quality control settings.

The system: : Olympus has been adding new lenses ranging from a 7-14mm fisheye zoom to a macro lens and a long 300mm f/2.8 superzoom for pro sports photography. A kit with the camera and an Olympus Zuiko 10x zoom, an 18-180mm super optic, is available. A wireless remote control is available, and some third-party flashes will work with the Olympus. If you already own Olympus manual film cameras, you can use your old OM lenses via the [OM F-1 Adapter](#).

Lab test results (Provided by [DxOMark](#)):

Maximum ISO for acceptable image quality: ISO 500

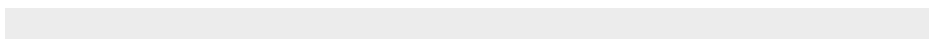
Maximum ISO for acceptable dynamic range: ISO 800

Color depth: Very good (21.4 on a scale of 1-25)

Overall image quality: Very Good (55.3 on a scale of 1-100)

Image quality is best at lowest ISO settings and deteriorates from ISO 500 on. Color quality is very good throughout lower ISOs. We recommend shooting at below ISO 500 with this camera for best overall image quality.

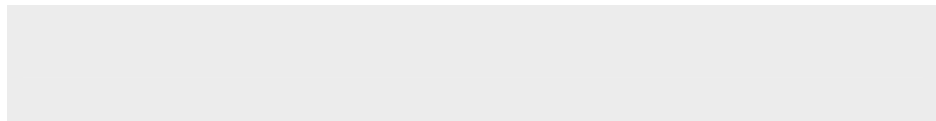
Who would love it: Travelers and anyone who likes to keep their system small and light. If you already own Olympus manual film cameras, unfortunately your lenses won't fit..



Pentax K2000



[Pentax K2000](#): Approx. \$500 with kit lens and flash.



Overview: One of the smallest and lightest DSLRs currently available, the 10.2MP Pentax K2000 boasts simple-to-use controls with a minimum of switches and dials. But it has advanced technology, like shake reduction, custom image functions, and an Advanced Auto Picture mode which is the DSLR equivalent of point-and-shoot, but very accurate. The camera also boasts a 2.7-inch LCD monitor, 16-segment multipattern metering and an 11-point AF sensor with 9 cross sensors working in the background to provide accurate exposures. For more advanced users, it offers manual control for, well, everything.

The juicy details: Beginners can simply put the camera in its green mode and start shooting. It's that simple. Press a button to flip up the on-board flash. The optical anti-shake reduction makes it possible to shoot in lower light without flash.

For more advanced shooters, as well as for those who want to grow as photographers, there are mode dials, a multi-function four-way controller, and switches that take you under the hood so you can tinker with focus, exposure, color balance and more. You can choose between standard JPEG format and the higher-quality RAW format. The camera can handle ISO 100-3200, and has a shutter speed range of 30-1/4000 sec. Focusing can be manual, spot or wide, and digital filters that include: Toy Camera, High Contrast, Soft, Starburst, Retro, Color Extract (N/A) Custom Image Modes includes Bright, Natural, Portrait, Landscape, Vibrant and Monochrome modes; Color Custom Image Modes include gamut radar and fine adjustment for saturation, hue, contrast and sharpness; Monochrome Custom Image Mode includes adjustment for film filter effects (green, yellow, orange, red, magenta, blue, cyan, infrared), toning (sepia warm/cool), contrast and sharpness (regular and fine adj scales).

What's special about this camera? It's simple, inexpensive, and small from a company known for producing [SLRs with staying power](#).

The system: Pentax has spent decades perfecting the art of lensmaking. And while you can get great shots with the kit lens that is bundled with the camera, the Pentax lens mount is compatible with just about any lens Pentax has ever made (although you may lose some automation with the older lenses). Explore [bargain used lenses](#)! The camera is bundled with a Pentax AF200FG flash, which throws enough light to supplement the small, built-in, flip-up flash.

Lab test results: Not available.

Who would love it: Students, beginners, travellers, and hobbyists who already own Pentax cameras and lenses, parents who want to get really good sports action shots of their kids, portrait shooters.

Sony Alpha DSLR-A230Y



[Sony Alpha DSLR-A230Y With standard kit lens](#) (shown): Approximately \$550.

Overview: When Minolta left the photo business in early 2006, many feared that would be the end of their favorite SLR system. But Sony bought the Minolta factory, hired Minolta's camera designers, and within five months produced the industry-shaking Alpha A100, which offered 10MP resolution at a price-busting sub-\$1000 price. We're now up to the third generation, with the A-230, which is the smallest, lightest camera in the Sony lineup. Offering the same 10.2MP resolution, the A200 is lighter and a bit faster and has a few under-the-hood refinements. If you own a Minolta AF SLR (digital or film) this camera is compatible with your lenses.

The juicy details: While the price is entry-level, the features are enthusiast-friendly: In addition to built-in SteadyShot image stabilization (which is compatible with all Minolta-mount lenses), the camera has a big 10.2 MP, 23.6x15.8mm APS-C CCD sensor with reduced noise and the ability to make poster-sized prints and to crop considerably and still get crisp prints. The camera also has a continuous Burst rate of 2.5fps, 9-point AF sensor, a 40-segment honeycomb sensing system for multi-pattern metering, shutter speeds 30-1/4000 sec and Bulb, a 2.7-inch LCD screen, the usual meter and white balance modes, ISO range up to 3200, and a pro-friendly Compact Flash card port. Finally, there's the Dynamic range optimizer, which Sony says recovers details in dark or bright areas of an image.

What's so special about this camera? If you own one or more of the millions of Minolta lenses out there, you already know the answer.

The system: In addition to all of those already-owned Minolta lenses, Sony has a full line (20-plus) lenses in the Alpha/Maxxum mount, many of which are made for Sony by Carl Zeiss.

Lab test results (Provided by DxOMark):

(These test results are for the A230's predecessor, the A200. The sensor remains the same, but the processing may have been improved. We include these results for your reference and will post A230 test results when they become available.)

Maximum ISO for acceptable image quality: ISO 500

Maximum ISO for acceptable dynamic range: ISO 800

Color depth: Excellent (22.3 on a scale of 1-25)

Overall image quality: Very Good (62.9 on a scale of 1-100)

Image quality is best at lowest ISO settings and deteriorates from ISO 500 on.

Color quality is very good throughout lower ISOs. We recommend shooting at or below ISO 500 with this camera for best overall image quality.

Who would love it: Minolta users, of course.

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