Digital Cameras

Nine lightweight, 7+ megapixel cameras well-suited for the trail

The G-9 from Canon is a powerful point-and-shoot, offering 12 megapixel resolution and a full array of manual controls. At 11 ounces, it's a great backpacker's alternative to a more bulky digital SLR.

By Wade Trenbeath

It's inevitable that people who hike become people who take photos of their hikes. Pictures are the guilt-free souvenirs you're allowed to bring home with you, and often expected to bring home with you from the more adventuresome excursions. The problem with taking decent pictures on long trips used to be weight. Who wants to give up valuable space in their pack that could be used for extra peanut butter or chocolate for six pounds of photo gear? Some of us simply bought bigger packs and brought both. But now there are several digital camera choices for those who want something lighter for the pack in the way of backcountry imaging.

The nine point-and-shoot digital cameras reviewed below all share features useful for hikers and backpackers. Each is small enough to fit in a jacket pocket or small backpack pocket. All of them shoot video with sound and all have an "anti-shake" function. The anti-shake function helps you get sharper landscapes and portraits even if you are a little shaky from the haul up the mountain. (If at all possible, carrying a small tripod will help even more.) All of the cameras have sensors that shoot photos with a resolution of 7 megapixels or higher. This is usually plenty of resolution for prints up to 15 inches wide. And, there's actually some nifty software out there that can help you create larger prints if you end up with a truly stellar shot.

The **Leica C-Lux 2** and the **Canon sd870** provide great results with a minimum of effort. With zooming that extends from 28-105mm, you can get all of camp in your shot without having to back-up into the brambles or off a cliff. Of the cameras on this list, these two sport the widest-angle lenses —a good feature to have when shooting panoramas. Both also do a really nice job with color. If you want a camera with more manual control these aren't the cameras for you, but they are a great choice if you want your shooting be easy-fasheezy. Both run on proprietary lithium rechargeable batteries that can generally make it through a three-day weekend—or roughly 200 shots with lots of reviewing—on one

The Nikon P5100 offers a full range of manual features, including shutter control, aperture control and manual focus. It also includes a "hot shoe" for an external flash. It offers 12 megapixel resolution and weighs just 7 ounces.

charge. Extra batteries are usually available where you buy your camera and run around $50.

For those seeking something small, but still want more control over your camera there are several strong choices as well. The **Canon a720** and the **Canon sx100** both offer a full-auto mode as well as Program Mode, Aperture Priority Mode, Shutter Priority Mode, and Manual Mode. If you want to learn some of these modes and how to manipulate them to improve your photos, these cameras are great to learn on. They don't give you quite the range of control that an SLR (single lens reflex) camera would, but they have enough to appeal to those of us who want more control. They both still have a full auto or "easy-fasheezy" mode, as well. The lens on the a720 runs from 35-210mm. And the sx100 has an impressive lens range in such a small camera: 36-360mm. Both of these cameras operate on 2 AA batteries, and many people use rechargeable batteries. Of all the cameras reviewed, the macro feature on the the sx100 performed the best (although all the models performed well in macro mode).

Several companies make compact cameras that give the photographer a chance to learn the manual settings and controls that they'll need if they decide to get a SLR or other serious hobbyist or professional camera in the future. These same cameras also appeal to experienced photographers seeking a compact camera with capabilities similar to their professional-quality gear. **The Canon G9**, **Leica D-Lux 3**, and **Nikon P5100** offer a full range of manual features: Shutter Control, Aperture Control, ISO control, and Manual Focus settings among them. The G9 and the P5100 come equipped with hot shoes so external flashes and studio lighting can easily be added. The Canon G9 and the Leica D-Lux 3 provide the option of shooting in "RAW" format —requiring a few seconds between shots while in this mode. All three of these cameras run on lithium batteries that are included with the cameras.

Most manufacturers also offer several variations on the designs profiled here at various prices. There are several nice models for $250 and less with many of

Photographer's Glossary

F/Stop (aperture setting)
The amount of light that the iris allows into the lens. A smaller F/Stop number will allow in more light a larger number allows less light in. This also affects the "depth-of-field" or area of focus the lens captures. The larger the F/stop number the more area of the frame that will be in focus besides the subject. For example if you used the f/stop setting 2.8 and focused on your friend's nose for a portrait their face will most likely be in focus, but everything beyond that would become blurrier as it moves away from the center of focus. If you were to shoot the same shot at F/stop 16 Everything in the frame would most likely be sharp, but you will need a much slower shutter speed to get the same exposure. Portraits are often shot with the aperture open so that the backgrounds aren't distracting and the attention is on the subject.

ISO (ASA from film)
The light sensitivity that the camera sensor is set too. Most point and shoot cameras have the least grain or "noise" at a setting of ISO 400 or lower. Most people prefer the results of 100 when available light makes that possible.

Megapixels
Most basically, the more pixels, the larger you can make prints. More pixels doesn't mean better pictures, just bigger prints.

RAW Files
Uncompressed image files that allow more control over the images in post production.

Choose a Digital Camera for the Trail

Leica C-Lux 2
7 megapixels
around $500
Easy-to-use point-and-shoot with great wide angle lens, good color. Warrantied for 2 years.

Canon sd870
8 megapixels
around $350
A dependable, quality camera for those who don't need a lot of manual controls.

Leica D-Lux 3
10 megapixels
around $600
A more advanced camera with ablity to manually adjust shutter speed, aperture and focus.

Canon G9
12 megapixels
around $500
A camera with a lot of manual features, for those interested in more control but still looking for a lightweight point-and-shoot.

Canon a720
8 megapixels
around $230
A great point and shoot for those wanting a little more control. Good macro lens for flower shots.

Nikon p5100
12 megapixels
around $400
Another lightweight, "almost SLR" point-and-shoot with an array of manual settings.

Canon sx100
8 megapixels
around $300
Similar to the a720, but includes an impressive zoom lens from 36-360 mm.

Canon a570
7 megapixels
around $200
Nearly identical to the a720, but with less zoom.

Canon sd1000
7 megpixels
around $200
Slim profile fits neatly in pack or pocket. Takes great pictures

the best features. The **a570** from Canon is virtually identical to the a720 only with a little less zoom, for around $200. The **sd1000** is a very nice ultra-slim by Canon that doesn't have the anti-shake, but does take excellent pictures, also for around $200. Nikon, too, has several other cameras in the upper $100s lower $200 with many of the latest features. Leicas generally cost more, but offer two-year warranties rather than the standard one-year and come with PhotoShop Elements.

It is getting easier to find compact cameras that take decent pictures. But that also means it's getting harder to choose one now that there are so many selections. Take your time and don't be afraid to tell a salesperson exactly what you expect from your camera and feel it out. And, as with any gear you plan to bring into the backcountry, be sure to "try it on" for a good fit. You don't want to be three days into the backcountry and discover that the buttons don't quite line up comfortably and holding the camera cramps your hand. A good camera is one you enjoy using.

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