# Sony

## Sony Alpha-900

The Alpha 900 represents in a nutshell the almost schizophrenic nature of Sony's digital camera division, which can market compact cameras with smile detection and a Playstation style user interface at the same time as this, perhaps the most pared-down, frill-free and unashamedly 'serious' DSLR we've seen in a long time.

You can't help feel that Sony's long-held worry that as a consumer electronics giant it will never be totally accepted as a serious camera manufacturer has been instrumental in shaping a flagship camera that studiously avoids the creeping 'gadgetization' of DLSRs and concentrates on old fashioned stuff like picture taking.

And hey, for the most part this is no bad thing; the Alpha 900 is uniquely approachable for a camera in this class, has the best viewfinder on the market and produces, as long as you don't venture into the higher reaches of the ISO range range too often, very appealing output indeed. It feels and acts like a camera - in stark contrast to many of Sony's compacts, which seem to be designed to act like a cross between a camera phone and a games console - without offering the utility of either. Looking through the huge viewfinder you get the full advantage of the full frame format; the engulfing view makes you feel totally involved in the picture taking process.

No doubt about it, there is much to like about the Alpha 900 - from the quality of images it produces to the extensive control over image parameters and, as I've already mentioned, the excellent, intuitive and uniquely user-friendly handling. The built-in image stabilization is a real boon and makes the Alpha 900 a no brainer purchase for anyone with a sizeable Minolta 35mm camera lens collection. The only 'frippery' I found myself missing was live view (we do a lot of work in the studio where magnified live view, when done well, can be a real time saver), though not everyone will care.

Of course we can't talk about the Alpha 900 without talking about its 24.6 megapixel sensor; currently the highest resolution you can get in a 35mm format body (borne out by the class-leading resolution figures in our tests). What real advantage that gives most users is harder to say, especially when you factor in the rather disappointing high ISO performance that is the inevitable consequence of such a high pixel density, and the demands it puts on any lens you put in front of it - not to forget the fact the immense files will choke all but the most powerful PC and fill your hard disk in no time. But let's not knock Sony's achievement; at low ISO settings the Alpha 900 offers more resolution than any other digital SLR on the market, period - and for serious studio or landscape shooters this, combined with the excellent dynamic range, makes it an appealing option at a (relatively) affordable price point.

The biggest challenge to the Alpha 900 is probably the as yet untested Canon EOS 5D Mark II, which promises a similar resolution and a bag full of features (live view, video mode and so on) at a price that's around 10% lower. There's no doubt that existing Sony SLR and legacy Minolta film SLR users now have a fitting flagship model to salivate over and save up for, but in the face of such strong competitors the Alpha 900 may have a tough job persuading anyone to switch systems for it.

In conclusion this is, more than anything else at this end of the market, a true photographer's camera, with at least one totally unique feature (the Super SteadyShot stabilization) and one that offers the best viewfinder and highest nominal resolution (and the lowest 'cost per megapixel, incidentally) in its class. It's capable of stunning results at up to ISO 400 (and is fine at ISO 800-1600 as long as you're not printing posters), and it is incredibly fast and responsive in use. If Sony had managed to keep the price nearer to the $2000 mark (even if this meant fewer megapixels) I think it would be flying off the shelves. As it stands it will, I fear, struggle to make a serious impression on anyone other than the Sony/Minolta faithful. One thing is clear, however: anyone who thinks a consumer electronics giant can't make a heavyweight photographic tool is seriously misguided.

As long as you take into account our reservations about the high ISO image quality (which we'd more easily forgive on a camera that wasn't the best part of $3000), the Alpha 900 is a camera that just, by the skin of its teeth, offers enough to gain our highest award.