

Terrific dynamic range and image quality are worth the wait, but our reward is tempered by slow shooting and write speeds

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3: *Is it ready?*

FUJIFILM FINEPIX S3 PRO IS HERE AT LAST



The newly released Fujifilm FinePix S3 Pro digital SLR houses the next-generation Super CCD SR II sensor, which promises a greater dynamic range than the competition. In my tests, this camera did deliver on dynamic range, but with its plodding performance, it's not a camera for everyone.

If you're looking for high-quality JPGs as large as 12 megapixels, an easy-access menu system for frequently used settings, Fuji Velvia- and Realia-inspired film simulations and sharp 2-inch image display, you're in luck. If you're looking for a built-like-a-tank camera with all the latest camera features, if you use mostly RAW format in your workflow, if you need to shoot fast action, consider the following info before making a purchase.

The Fujifilm FinePix S3 Pro looks similar to the S2 Pro, but its body and features have changed. Still loosely based on a Nikon N80 body with a standard threaded shutter release, the

The Fujifilm FinePix S3 Pro holds the highlights while maintaining detail in the shadows (top) in situations where the FinePix S2 Pro lost it (left). These images were exposed at f/4.8 for 1/90 second, ISO 100 equivalence.

S3 has an added 10-pin connector for remote release. There's also an added vertical shutter release, but without a command dial or AE-L/AF-L button, its usefulness is somewhat limited.

The S3 can be connected to a computer via FireWire or USB 2.0. For removable media, the S3 accepts CompactFlash, microdrives and xD cards rather than CF/MMC. The body is much easier to hold for extended periods, even with one hand, thanks in part to the new rubberized body parts and the slightly redesigned ergonomics.

The hottest new feature is the 12-megapixel Super CCD SR II sensor, which according to Fujifilm, delivers a 400-percent boost in dynamic range. That translates into roughly two stops of extra info (100-200 percent = 1 stop; 200-400 percent = 2 stops). There's always been debate over the use of interpolation in Fujifilm's Super CCD technology, but I choose to base my judgment on the quality of the images in print. Let me tell you, I haven't seen better quality JPEG files from any camera in a price category even close to the S3's.

The new Super CCD SR II performed well in shootouts with several camera models, especially in tests where I intentionally overexposed the shot by two stops (details in the April Bonus Content at www.ppmag.com). Time after time the S3 held detail in the highlights when the other cameras couldn't, and recorded more detail from shadow to highlight as well. (With the S3, it's better to expose for the shadows than the highlights.) Users will be pleased with this capability when faced with difficult exposures, such as recording a dark-skinned bride in an intricately detailed white dress.

This new standard owes to the Super CCD's having two kinds of photosites: the S-pixels with normal sensitivity, and



The properly exposed top image (f/8 for 1/250 second, ISO 200 equivalence), as compared to one intentionally overexposed by two stops for 1/125 second. The overexposed image still holds information in the highlights.

the smaller R-pixels with less than normal sensitivity. The menu system offers two dynamic range settings, Wide, which must be selected to gain increased dynamic range, and Standard, which turns off the extra set of photosites to yield results similar to previous Fujifilm camera models, but with better image processing and even lower noise. With the Wide selection,

the additional dynamic range settings are accessed through the Function menu. Auto selects the dynamic range based on scene contrast, Wide 1 increases dynamic range 230 percent, and Wide 2 increases dynamic range 400 percent.

Also new in the FinePix S3 Pro are the Fujifilm film simulation selections in the Function menu. Realia (F1),

specs:

Fujifilm FinePix S3 Pro

SENSOR: 12.3-megapixel Super CCD SR II
RESOLUTION: 4,256x2,848 pixels
METERING: D-TTL exposure metering; spot, center, 10-segment matrix
SHUTTER: 1/4,000 second to 30 seconds, bulb
FRAME RATE: 2.5 fps, maximum burst 12 shots JPEG, 7 shots RAW
SENSITIVITY: ISO 100 to 1600
FILE FORMAT: JPEG, DPOF-compatible CCD-RAW
FLASH: D-TTL, built-in flash with G.N. 12 (ISO 100), hot shoe, PC-sync connection, flash sync 1/180 second
PICTURE ANGLE: focal factor of about 1.5X for 35mm equivalence
LENSES: D-type Nikkor (all functions), AF Nikkor other than D-type (all functions except 3D Matrix Metering), non-CPU usable in manual exposure mode
STORAGE: CompactFlash type II, xD-Picture Card
INTERFACE: FireWire, USB 2.0
PRICE: \$2,499

intended for people photography, increases the dynamic range and yields natural looking skin tones. Velvia (F2) is geared for nature and landscape photography, and for scenes where the colors should really pop.

The Adobe (1998) color space is now available in-camera, but its use disables film simulation. Flash sync is 1/180; rear curtain, slow sync, and red-eye reduction modes, among others, are supported. Flash has been upgraded to D-TTL, and the built-in flash has a G.N. 12 (ISO 100) for coverage with 20mm or longer lenses. The battery system in previous Fujifilm SLRs caused some grumbling, because they used to use CR123 lithium

batteries in addition to AA batteries. The S3 requires just one set of four AA batteries, included with a charger in the box. This alternative to costly proprietary batteries that other camera manufacturers use is convenient. I recommend ordering a couple of extra battery trays to load just in case, although Fujifilm claims that in normal usage, including image review, one set of batteries will power about 400 shots.

The S3 Pro supports ISO equivalence as high as 1600 with far less image noise than other cameras. The FinePix viewer and RAW File Converter LE are integrated much better now, but they're a bit sluggish (albeit comparable to some of the other manufacturers' bundled utilities). Studio shooters and those who want better overall image control should use Fuji's Hyper Utility Software. I have generally used Adobe Camera Raw to process S2 files, bypassing the Fuji Software altogether, but S3 RAW files are not yet supported by ACR or the Adobe DNG converter.

Shooting speed, buffer capacity and write speed top the list of areas where the S3 Pro needs improvement. In Standard Dynamic Range mode, the Fujifilm specs claim 2.5 fps for up to 12 JPEGs or 7 RAW files; in Wide Dynamic Range mode, that slows to 1 fps for 6 JPEGs or 1.4 fps for 3 RAW shots. The time it takes to write the files from the

buffer is slower than with most cameras, and the buffer is less beefy as well. Some manufacturers offer upgrades to boost buffer capacity, and I hope Fujifilm considers doing this, too.

The S3 Pro's image review is somewhat slow, but the 2-inch, 235,000-pixel rear LCD is the most accurate and easy to see I've used. It's easy to navigate and zoom-in on images, and to view histograms for RGB and any color channel individually, a feature lacking in many cameras. The option to display flashing highlights makes it quick and easy to make exposure corrections.

Overall, the FinePix S3 Pro produces perhaps the best JPEG files I've seen, even from cameras with more megapixels. In a RAW workflow, there's no way to save files in a compressed format, so Wide Dynamic Range photos weigh in at about 25MB, Standard Dynamic Range files about 13MB. The auto white balance is also the best I've seen, although a custom WB is always best, and Fujifilm provides many quality WB presets. Most who have tried a Fujifilm DSLR have become Fujifilm shooters, but you'll have to consider what capabilities matter most to you—image quality or camera features. Once again Fujifilm has made a camera with industry-leading image quality, but lags behind in features and shooting speed. ■

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