

THE GOODS: PRO REVIEW

The Sony Alpha 100 comes up a winner. Competitive with pro models, it's much more camera than you'd think.

BY RON EGGERS

Top class

SONY ALPHA DSLR-A100



The Sony Alpha DSLR-A100 camera combines some of the best of Konica Minolta and Sony technologies, including Sony's new Bionz image processing engine and its proprietary dynamic range optimizer. This camera is comfortable to hold, easy to handle and much more camera than the first glance reveals. For one thing, it has a 10.2-megapixel CCD with maximum resolution of 3,872x2,592 pixels, which, in numbers at least, is competitive with professional DSLRs.

The A100 is competitive with pro models in other ways, too, like responsiveness. For about four weeks, I used it to for model shots, scenics, sunsets, and feature coverage of the Tet New Year celebrations in Southern California's Little Saigon. I never missed a shot because of shutter lag or focusing delay. And it's fast. Rated at 3 frames per second (fps), it came close. Using a 2GB Kingston Ultimate 100X CompactFlash card, shooting in the continuous mode, and with the camera set on single autofocus, I could fire off 156 to 166 JPEGs in 1 minute.

Most affordable DSLRs start slowing down or stop altogether after capturing a couple of dozen frames, but the A100 can capture an unlimited number of JPEG frames at its maximum speed. At about 45 seconds, shooting became a little erratic, but it didn't stop; it will continue to shoot until the media card is full.

As expected from a serious digital camera, the A100 can shoot RAW, in Sony's ARW raw format. It can also shoot RAW and JPEG simul-

All images ©Ron Eggers



The Sony Alpha DSLR-A100 has a complete selection of professional features and capabilities. It's fast, responsive and versatile.

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taneously. The speed wasn't quite as good shooting RAW—10 or 11 frames in 5 seconds in my tests. Thereafter, the capture greatly

The Sony Alpha has the shooting characteristics and image quality of a more expensive camera. Detail from a larger image (below) holds up well under close inspection. Exposure: 1/320 second at f/10, ISO 100.

slowed to about one frame every 2 or 3 seconds.

The A100 incorporates sophisticated Konica Minolta chip-based image-stabilization technology. Onboard intelligence recognized camera shake and nullified it with minute countermoves. Called the Anti-Shake system on KM cameras, this technology is referred

to as Super SteadyShot technology on the A100. According to the specs, it enables you to shoot two to three-and-a-half stops slower and still come up with sharp images. One to two stops is probably more realistic.

Chip-based stabilization technology works regardless of the lens in use, a serious advantage. However, it's not particularly effective with close-up and long exposures. Night scenes with shutter speed exceeding 1/4 second still require a tripod. A lighted camera icon in the viewfinder alerts you to camera shake, and whether the Super SteadyShot function would help with the exposure.

The 2.5-inch LCD is crisp and bright. You can set the A100 to display your camera settings onscreen when you shoot, and the information will automatically shift in the display to read correctly during horizontal or vertical framing. While the displayed info is easy to read, the readability of the menu—similar in structure to KM DSLR menus—is just barely acceptable.

Sony did it right with the camera layout and controls. Most of the important commands and options are accessible with one button or the sole dial. The A100's dial controls such functions and adjustments as white balance, ISO and strobe setting; with other cameras, these items are often buried in the menu or submenu. Pressing the button in the center of the dial displays the menu onscreen for the current dial setting—easy—and a one-button push accesses the drive mode and the auto-exposure lock.

The standard ISO range goes from 100 to 1600. A special Lo80 and Hi200 ISO assist prevents under- and overexposures in low-key and high-key scenes. Electronic noise wasn't bad at ISO 400, but was quite noticeable at 1600, particularly in shadow areas. Shutter speed ranges from 1/4,000 second to 30 seconds.

Exposure bracketing covers up to two



specs: Sony Alpha DSLR-A100

SENSOR: APS-C CCD

RESOLUTION: 10.2 megapixel (3,872x2,592 pixels)

METERING: TTL, with 9 selectable focusing points

SHUTTER: 1/4,000 sec. to 30 sec., bulb

BURST RATE: JPEG, 3 fps until card is full; RAW, 3 fps up to 6 shots

ISO: 100 to 1600; special Lo80 and Hi200 ISO

EXPOSURE MODES: automatic, program, aperture priority, shutter priority, manual and six scene modes (Portrait, Landscape, Macro, Sports, Sunset, Night View/Night Portrait)

WHITE BALANCE: automatic, preset, color temperature (2,500K to 9,900K) and custom

LENSES: Minolta A-Mount lenses, 1.5X conversion

FLASH: GN 100

STORAGE: CompactFlash, Type I and II, adapter available for Memory Stick Duo and Pro Duo media

PRICE: \$799.95 body only; \$899.95 A100K kit with f/3.5-5.6 18-70mm lens; \$1,199.95 A100H kit with SAL-18200 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 lens

stops in third-stop increments. Multiple flash modes include pre-flash TTL, which measures the amount of reflected light from the pre-flash to set the exposure; auto-flash, which fires only when the flash is needed; and fill-flash, which triggers the flash every time. The on-camera flash recycled in 3 to 4 seconds.

The focus frame has nine focusing points. In-focus points light up in red. You can focus on objects outside the focus frame by focusing on the intended object, setting the focus lock, and reframing the composition so that the primary subject is outside the focus frame. Push down the shutter release halfway to set focus, or press the special autofocus (AF) button in the center of the navigation wheel.

Sony has been the driving force behind Memory Stick removable media, but the A100 takes CompactFlash, Type I and II. The lithium-ion battery is rated for more than 750 frames. I filled the 2GB card with nearly 500 JPEG frames and had plenty of power left.

The A100 supports DPOF printing, making it possible to generate index prints and selective enlargements directly from the camera.

The Sony Alpha records a broad palette of honeyed tones with auto white balance. Exposure: 1/60 second at f/8, ISO 100. (Model: Chelsea Hunter)

The body alone has a suggested retail price of \$799.95. I've seen it advertised for less than \$700. The Sony Alpha DSLR-A100K kit includes the f/3.5-5.6 18-70mm lens and has a suggested retail price of \$899.95. The DSLR-A100H kit, which comes with a SAL-18200 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 lens, lists for \$1,199.95. Sony has paired with Carl Zeiss to develop a whole series of lenses for the A100 and subsequent bodies.

The sensor is APS-C size, so there's a 1.5X lens conversion factor. With its Minolta A-mount, the A100 takes most of

the Minolta lenses. The Sony will also take other KM accessories, such as flash units.

Usually I recommend a mere entry-level DSLR as a backup camera rather than a sophisticated system, but I have no qualms about recommending the Sony Alpha DSLR-A100 as the primary camera for any photographer who has a substantial investment in Minolta lenses, or any other photographer who doesn't need to match an existing system. ■

See bright light, action, low light and high ISO images from the Sony Alpha DSLR-A100 in Web Exclusives at www.ppmag.com.



THE BACKGROUND ON SONY

Minolta was one of the Big Five camera manufacturers and had millions of users. One of the first digital SLRs that I was able to shoot with extensively was the Minolta RD-175. It was big and bulky and the resolution was just 1.75 megapixels. But it was a digital single-lens reflex camera and it could take interchangeable lenses and a variety of professional accessories. I also shot with Minolta's RD-3000, a boxy DSLR based on Minolta's Vectis APS-format. Even though it packed only 2.3

megapixels, the image quality was excellent and the camera was quick and responsive.

I was disappointed when Minolta pulled out of the DSLR race. Photographers who had been shooting with Minolta film SLRs had been waiting for Minolta to release a DSLR competitive with Nikon's and Canon's.

Newly merged Konica Minolta reentered the DSLR field with the Maxxum 7D, which seemed to be what Minolta users had been waiting for. Then Konica Minolta decided to abandon the digital camera market altogether.

Sony acquired the Konica Minolta digital SLR technology and is developing Minolta-compatible digital cameras. In its history of electronic photography, Sony had developed the Mavica still video imaging system in 1981. There were major problems with still video, but the original Mavica was an innovative product in the development of filmless photography. Sony has continued to be an aggressive player in the arena of digital cameras.

—Ron Eggers