

Quicker than quick

Nikon D70 blurs the line between semi-pro and pro



The Nikon D70 responds amazingly fast and has the capacity to freeze any action, whether it be squirmy kids or whitewater sports.



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If you've been waiting for digital to come of age in a non-stratospheric price range before you take the plunge, get your swimsuit!

When I first picked up the Nikon D70, a chill ran up my spine. I've been working with digital cameras since their inception over a decade ago. I've worked with devices that look more like bars of soap and transformer toys than cameras. But now I held a real, solid professional digital camera in my hand that didn't cost more than a year's worth of car payments. The size, the feel, the balance, and the ergonomic array of makes-sense controls were all there. The

D70 simply felt like a classic pro Nikon.

The powerful Nikon D70 is going to turn some heads and change some minds in this industry. In my humble opinion, there has never been so much sophistication, technology, *and* natural feel in a camera that's well within the financial reach of most studios. The D70 Outfit—the D70 body and a made-for-digital 18-70mm (effective 27-105mm) silent-motor zoom lens—would be a welcome addition to any serious photographer's camera bag.

When you shoot with this camera, it doesn't occur to you that it's digital. There is very little to give it away. The response is so smooth and so immediate that the customary delay for autofocus and shutter release are virtually nonexistent. The biggest giveaway is that you aren't counting frames or changing film. A single 512MB Compact-

Flash card arms you with nearly 300 images (17MB each when opened) before you have to slip another matchbook-size card into the drive door, which is conveniently located just under your right thumb.

"Instant-on" is literal with the D70, as there's virtually no delay between turning the on switch and being ready to shoot. "Instant focus" also means what it says. The camera snaps obediently to whatever focus target you choose. Even in the midst of the flurry of continuous focus, the D70 dutifully fires the shutter immediately when you fully depress the shutter release.

If your experience and major objection to shooting digital is the lag time between pushing the shutter release and actually capturing the image, you will be amazed. In a month of shooting this camera, the only delay I experienced happened when I was

too close to the subject to focus correctly. (If you really want to shoot a subject out of focus, you will have to use manual focus).

There are way too many features to list in this review. Instead, I will list two production scenarios, wedding candid and team sports, that may pique your interest and get you out of your studio and into a camera store for a hands-on demo. But be warned: You may come out of the store with a gold and black box in your arms.

Scenario 1: Wedding/candid camera

After the formal wedding shots are in the can, the fun candid begins. You see a 4-year-old's arm elbow-deep in the punch bowl, trolling for strawberries. The lightning-fast focus and metering system wait for you to compose the shot. The zone-specific focus grid quickly hones in on the kid, while his mom, softly out of focus behind the boy, dies of embarrassment. You have to chuckle.

The bride is now making her rounds as the D70 tracks her around the floor. The shot is framed and you are ready. You've set the autofocus system to AF-C and assigned the tracking chore to the Dynamic area setting, so the system is following her every move. As she makes her way across the room to the chairs along the back wall, she kneels beside her grandmother's chair for a private moment. You pull the trigger, confident that the focus and exposure have followed the subject and both settings are right on the money. This is too easy!

Scenario 2: Basketball...it's only a game

Maybe so, but this is a playoff game. The score is tight, your team's point guard is in his zone, and so is your D70. You have dialed in the Digital Vari-Program to Sports for action-stopping, 1/8,000-second speed, while the camera's near-heat-seeking focus and metering stand ready to stop the action. You've set the shutter for continuous shooting, which gives you up to 3 frames per second with a burst sequence up to 14 full-size images without taking a breath. If you are lucky enough to couple all of this with Nikon's amazing new 70-200mm 2.8VR (Vibration

Reduction) Zoom lens, you're armed with nothing less than a vibration-free, rapid-fire machine gun system that will score the winning shots. Only Nikon's stealthy D2H (\$3,000, body only) can outscore the D70. Now it's down to the locker room for the victory celebration. Before the game, you placed a couple of SB600 flash units on top of the lockers and aimed them at the ceiling toward the middle of the room. Now, as the post-game celebration cranks up, you climb onto a chair in the back of the room and start logging the interaction and the interviews. You don't have to be frugal with your shots, as a single 1GB flash card gives you over 320 shots at the Fine setting, at 3,008x2,000 pixels.

You have the D70's built-in Speedlight set for Commander mode, so that every time you press the shutter release, it wirelessly fires the SB600s, no matter where you roam in the room, line-of-sight not required. The center-weighted metering system reads the light bouncing off the subject and compensates the total light package. Color balance can be very tricky, but the D70's Auto White Balance reflects the conditions in effect when the units fire. While other reporters and cameramen are densely packed around the coach and key players, you shoot from the back of the crowd using either zoom lens at your disposal. This combination of lenses has you virtually covered, from 18mm to 200mm (effective 27mm-300mm).

Pros and cons

With an affordable price, solid construction, immediate response, and tremendous burst power, this camera is in a class with few equals. The excellently written, thoroughly cross-referenced, and nearly exhaustive (and exhausting) user guide supports the buyer. A near dummy-proof system keeps you from shooting yourself in the foot. The D70 needs a lower ISO (perhaps 100). There's only one custom setting (internal, user-defined). There's also only one downloadable contrast curve (user-defined), which has to be downloaded from Nikon's Capture software.

The Nikon D70 is an excellent choice

for both photography students and seasoned pros (Outfit package \$1,299). For established Nikon owners, the D70 body (\$995) will accept all your AF, D, and DX lenses and most accessories. This camera will provide many years of excellent service with the enduring Nikon traits of rugged construction, precision, and advanced technology.

When you shoot with the D70, you'll realize that this is not just a digital camera, it's a natural extension of your creativity. □

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specs: Nikon D70

Sensor: CCD, 6.1 effective megapixels, (3,008x2,000 pixels)

Metering: TTL full-aperture exposure metering system, 3D color matrix, Center-weighted, Spot

Electronic shutter: 1/8,000 second to 30 seconds

Sensitivity: Auto, ISO 200 to 1600

White balance: Auto (TTL white-balance with 1,005 pixel-RGB sensor), six manual modes with fine-tuning, preset white balance, white balance bracketing possible

Autofocus: TTL phase detection; Single Area AF, Dynamic Area AF, Closest Subject Priority Dynamic Area AF

Flash: Built-in Speedlight, standard ISO hot-shoe; TTL and various control options with other Speedlights, flash sync up to 1/500 second

Lenses: All or most functions supported for DX, G-AF, D-AF, Micro and other AF Nikkor lenses (excluding lenses for F3AF)

Storage: CompactFlash, Type I and II, Microdrive

Interface: USB, Mass Storage and PTP selectable

Remote control: ML-L3 wireless remote controller (optional)

MSRP: \$995 body only, \$1,299 with 18-70mm DX lens kit