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THIS MONTH'S TESTS



Mid-range showdown

Six of the best DSLRs for under £1,000

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- ✓ Clean your camera



PENTAX K-7

DIGITAL SLR USER MAGAZINE
MID-RANGE
Test winner



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DSLR GROUP HEAD-TO-HEAD

MID-RANGE DSLR TEST

After a fortnight of tireless testing, **Dan Pluck** weighs up the merits of six mid-range cameras and with a blistered trigger finger tries to pick a winner

Boasting some high-end features normally found on 'prosumer' models and priced above £500, each of the six test models is considered 'mid-range'. Features that set them aside from entry-level cameras often include sturdier build quality, faster continuous shooting rates, an extended ISO range, flip-out LCD screens, HD video capability, more dedicated buttons, higher spec kit lenses and so on. They are generally

marketed at existing digital SLR users who have outgrown their entry-level models and want to move up to a camera that better suits their ability and level of enthusiasm. Having said that, most of the tested cameras have simple to use menus and shouldn't offer too steep a learning curve for a first time buyer who wants to confidently skip the entry-level models and go straight for the gravy.

I have no hesitation in recommending any of these six cameras to anyone who fits the buying criteria. They are all excellent cameras, representing years of development and refinement by their respective manufacturers.

There isn't a dud amongst them, but we all know that there will still be some models that will outperform others. We're here to find the king of the mid-range DSLRs, so here we go...

Panasonic Lumix GH1

» Street price: **£1000**

» Contact: www.panasonic.co.uk



The Panasonic GH1 represents a growing trend toward manufacturers offering mirrorless, interchangeable lens cameras that can be more compact than conventional DSLRs. The GH1 is easily the smallest and lightest camera in this test, but despite its diminutive size all the expected functions are easily available through buttons and dials on the camera body. Many of them are very small and I can't help thinking they will be unsuitable for big fingers or operation with gloves on. The general design of the camera is standard for a DSLR including a decent sized, comfortable grip. Body construction is outwardly all plastic with all external surfaces coated with a rubber veneer.

The Lumix's LCD screen can swing out to the left of the camera whilst its mount can freely rotate, also allowing it to tilt up and down or turn flat against the back of the camera to protect it when not in use. The electronic viewfinder gives a slightly artificial view of the world, but you can access menus and review images without taking your eye from the camera. Detail from the viewfinder is okay for everyday use, but there is an

element of 'shoot and hope' if you want to focus on a small, specific point, such as the eyes in a portrait. There's some lag time with the Panasonic's shutter, too, although we're talking about a fraction of a second.

When viewed on a computer monitor or in print the 12-megapixel images are superbly detailed, which is a relief after you've become accustomed to how they look in the viewfinder or on the GH1's LCD. Ultimately the LCD lacks the crisp details of those on the Canon, Pentax and Nikon.

The standard 10x zoom kit lens is arguably the greatest selling point of the GH1, focusing silently and covering 14 to 140mm. Though, the supplied lens hood fits quite loosely and is easily nudged off-axis, unfortunately resulting in black intrusions at the corners in some images.

VERDICT	
Features	★★★★☆
Handling	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	14/20



Glass and a half

The optically stabilised superzoom 14-140mm lens takes care of wide-angle all the way up to medium telephoto focal lengths. It's one of the most versatile kit lenses you can get.

Cool mode

The excellent iA mode allows the camera to automatically adjust settings to suit the scene, whilst Face Recognition helps the continuous focus tracking.



Canon EOS 550D

» Street price: **£700**

» Contact: www.canon.co.uk



Housed in the body of the 500D but stealing lots of tech from the 7D, the 550D is a half entry-level, half 'prosumer' camera. Externally the main changes between this and the older 500D are a slightly wider (3:2 ratio) LCD screen and a new dedicated live view/video button. The real advances are all under the hood. The 18-megapixel sensor delivers 5184 x 3456 pixel images and uses a gapless photosite design that, in theory, increases detail without introducing image noise. Video capability has been improved and can now shoot at a range of frame rates, maxing out at 30 at the highest 1920 x 1080 resolution.

At a time when users have been spoiled by 920,000 dot LCD screens, Canon up the ante with 1,040,000 dots. Reviewed images look amazing, but it is with the clarity of video playback that the new screen really dazzles. The menu system has the tabbed, colour-coded drop down lists used on all new Canon's and is simple to navigate.

Build quality is decent, but matches the lightweight feel of Canon's entry-level cameras. You need to move up to the

50D and 7D classes of Canon before you get ruggedly built, magnesium alloy body construction. As such, the Olympus and Pentax cameras in this line-up feel vastly more substantial.

The full resolution images from the 550D are excellent and noise handling is as good as it gets in this price bracket. Although some speckling appears at ISO 1600, you can go up to 6400 and still have fairly crisp details. The 12,800 option available through expanding the ISO range in the menus is, for me, a step too far but it's there as a last resort. Better a noisy image than no image at all, of course!

The 3.7 fps continuous shooting speed is noticeably slower than other cameras here, and is perhaps the only stat that reveals the 550D's 'advanced beginner' status.

VERDICT	
Features	★★★★☆
Handling	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	17/20



Viva la resolution

Borrowed from the pro-biased 7D, the sensor delivers enormous, class-leading 18-megapixel images with masses of detail. It's a potential sucker punch to the opposition.

Screen star

The screen comfortably out-resolves the other cameras in this test and closes the gap between what you see on the LCD and what you see on your computer monitor.



Nikon D90

» **Street price: £760**

» **Contact:** www.olympus.co.uk



Originally announced in Autumn 2008 the D90 is the 'old timer' of the bunch, but its future-proofed specifications mean it can compete well with the fresh talent. Body construction is a tangible step up in quality from the entry-level Nikons although the D90 is still externally all polycarbonate plastic. The rubberised grip is comfortable in the hand with a shallow indent on the lens-mount side that your fingertips sit firmly against. Button layout is simple and intuitive and there isn't the daunting array apparent on the Pentax K7, for instance. The menu system is old-school Nikon and although the list of customisable options might scare beginners, those looking for a step-up model will enjoy the extra options.

At launch, the D90 was the first DSLR to offer movie recording in Live View mode, so although it's a plus that it's here, other manufacturers have since upped their game with higher resolution and faster frame rate movie modes. Live View itself is basic on the D90 with slow, contrast detect autofocus, slow shutter response and no flip-out screen. For Live View the Sony a500 and the

Panasonic GH1 show them all how it's done.

It is worth mentioning the standard kit lens for the D90; the Nikkor 18-105mm VR. This is a cut above the average bundled lens with great optics, Vibration Reduction and a versatile zoom range. I consider this a major selling point for the D90 as some manufacturers, such as Pentax and Sony, choose to give their enthusiast-level cameras the same kit lens you'd get with their entry-level models.

Performance is good on the whole - solid without being stellar. There is nothing in the D90's images that disappoints but neither does anything jump out. Image size is what we would expect for a camera in this price bracket. Noise control is generally good too, but becomes a major problem by its ISO 6400 peak.

VERDICT	
Features	★★★★★
Handling	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	16/20



Get your kit on

The D90's standard kit lens is the excellent 18-105mm VR. With Vibration Reduction, this gives sharp contrasty details throughout its versatile zoom range.

Hot wheels

Two command wheels that fall neatly under your finger and thumb make shooting in Manual mode a piece of cake and mean you don't have to take your eye from the viewfinder.



Sony a500

» **Street price: £510**

» **Contact:** www.sony.co.uk



In terms of physical stature the Sony feels substantial in the hand, despite being one of the lightest of the bunch. Outwardly, the body feels quite plasticky, lacking the metal construction of the Pentax, whilst the rubber on the grip has an almost polished finish that is quite slippery compared with the rest of the cameras on test. The a500 uses the same menu system as all Sony's entry- and enthusiast-level cameras and it's perhaps the easiest and most user-friendly system of any DSLR. There is an entire sub-menu for the dynamic range options, allowing five levels of boosting as well as the in-camera HDR.

It is very difficult to find fault with this camera in operation, as it is genuinely a joy to use. The flip out screen allows you to easily shoot with the camera high above your head or down low to the ground with Live View activated. Also, Sony's shutter reaction time when using Live View is almost instantaneous which, along with the Panasonic which effectively uses Live View all the time, outclasses the equivalents from all the other test cameras.

There is only a single control wheel

making shooting in full Manual mode a little fiddly. Other test cameras, such as the Pentax and Nikon, have two wheels so you can freely adjust shutter speed and aperture at the same time.

The 12-megapixel images are quite standard in size for a camera of this class, with details and colours equal to the best here. Image noise is very low right up to ISO 800, beyond which speckling becomes evident. Depending on the subject I would be happy to push the Sony up to ISO 3200, but the 6400 and 12,800 settings are, in my opinion, unusable.

The 18-55mm kit lens handicaps the a500's performance, although decent results can be gained by applying in-camera sharpening and avoiding the lens' extremes of zoom and aperture.

VERDICT	
Features	★★★★★
Handling	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	16/20



Range rider

In HDR mode the Sony takes two differently exposed images, aligns and merges them to boost details in the highlights and shadows.

Going live

Shooting in Live View with the a500's tilting screen is made especially useful by its class-leading shutter response time.



Olympus E-30

» **Street price: £740**
» **Contact:** www.olympus.co.uk



In Olympus' DSLR line-up, the E-30 falls between the E-620 and the pro-aimed E-3. In fact, having been released after the E-3 there are some features here, such as the 12.3-megapixel sensor, that outperform the flagship model. The major concession is that the E-30 has a glass-fibre reinforced plastic body instead of the rugged magnesium alloy of the E-3. Having said that, this is a large, chunky camera that feels like it needs to be taken seriously. The rubberised grip is especially broad, which is great for me, but may make it hard for people with small hands to hold it comfortably.

The E-30's menu system is vintage Olympus and owners upgrading from older DSLRs will find themselves quite at home. For me the menu system is a little clunky with many genuinely useful options, such as the multiple exposure mode, buried in lists.

The flip-out LCD both tilts and rotates making it very useful for shooting with Live View. Also, the E-30 has vertical and horizontal digital spirit levels, which are useful for tripod-based shots. However, there is a noticeable shutter lag when shooting in

Live View so, unlike with the Sony a500, it is not best suited to moving subjects and can be aggravating in low light. AF speed with Live View deactivated is very quick, so I was never tempted to shoot in Live View unless it was otherwise uncomfortable to get my eye to the viewfinder.

The shooting mode dial includes an Art Filters setting where the E-30 applies one of 11 effects to the shot. These digital filters include Soft Focus, Film Grain and my personal favourite, Pinhole.

The Four Thirds sensor handles image noise well, but is best with the ISO kept below 800. Via a menu setting you can select 1/3 ISO stop increments, giving two additional settings between 400 and 800, which is where I pitched the E-30 most often when shooting in low light.

VERDICT	
Features	★★★★☆
Handling	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	14.5/20



Swing out Sister

The LCD folds flat against the back of the camera to protect it, but in use can both tilt and swivel to provide Live View from any jaunty angle.

Digital spirit level

Many tripods don't have bubble levels, but that's no problem for the E-30. Its built-in digital system is very handy for getting level horizons.



Pentax K-7

» **Street price: £800**
» **Contact:** www.pentax.co.uk



On paper the K-7 should be in a class above this group and at launch last year reviewers compared it to advanced models such as Canon's 50D and Nikon's D300. Now its price has settled down it's fairer to include it here amongst the enthusiast cameras.

Despite being one of the largest cameras in this group test, the K-7 is a lot smaller than the Pentax K20 it replaced. In construction terms the Pentax is the best of the bunch. The body is made from a magnesium/steel alloy, matching the specifications of pro DSLRs and all joints and openings are environmentally sealed to keep out dust and moisture. The vast array of buttons and dials on the back of the camera and the never-ending list of menu options make this a model for control freaks, and entry-level users may find it initially quite daunting.

After acquainting yourself with the basic functions you can delve into the K-7's more flamboyant options. As with the Sony, the K-7 offers in-camera HDR, where three exposures are shot and combined to produce a single image with enhanced details both in the highlights and the

shadows. Also the Pentax has options for composition adjustment where the horizon can be straightened by up to one degree (a surprisingly large change, in practice) or moving the whole view vertically or horizontally by micro adjustments. This is done with physical movements of the sensor, using the same mechanism that controls the in-camera shake reduction.

The K-7 shoots 14.6-megapixel images, outperforming all but the Canon in this test group. Noise is in line with the best up to ISO 800, but is relatively strong beyond that.

Though not class leading, video performance is excellent, although the mode dial to activate it is a little fiddly in operation.

The 100 per cent viewfinder coverage is a welcome feature and takes any guesswork out of composing each shot.

VERDICT	
Features	★★★★☆
Handling	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	17/20



Dynamic trio

Shooting and combining three different exposures, the K-7's HDR mode produces images that simulate an extended dynamic range. It's excellent for controlling high-contrast scenes like sunsets.

Forged in metal

Pentax have designed the K-7 with demanding photographers in mind. The magnesium alloy construction protects the guts of the camera from knocks and bumps, and it makes the K-7 the nicest-feeling of all six here.



Check out the table for all the essential stats on this impressive collection of DSLRs



Panasonic GH1

Canon EOS 550D

Nikon D90

Sony a500

Olympus E-30

Pentax K-7

Price	£1000	£700	£760	£510	£740	£800
Resolution	12.1 MP	18 MP	12.3 MP	12.3 MP	12.3 MP	14.6 MP
File Types	JPEG, Raw, AVCHD	JPEG, Raw, MOV	JPEG, Raw, AVI	JPEG, Raw	JPEG, Raw	JPEG, Raw, AVI
HD Video	Yes, 1080p	Yes, 1080p	Yes, 720p	No	No	Yes, 720p
ISO Range	100-3200	100-12,800	100-6400	200-12,800	100-3200	200-12,800
Focus Modes	One Shot AI-Servo AI-Focus	Single servo Continuous servo Auto selection, Man.	Single Continuous Manual	Single Continuous Manual	Single Continuous Manual	Single Continuous Manual
Viewfinder	EVF 100%	Optical 95%	Optical 96%	Optical 95%	Optical 98%	Optical 100%
Metering Types	Intelligent Multiple Spot Centre-weighted	Evaluative Partial Spot Centre-weighted	Matrix Centre-weighted Spot	Multi-segment Centre-weighted Spot	ESP Centre-weighted Spot	Multi-segment Centre-weighted Spot
Storage	SD/SDHC	SD/SDHC	SD/SDHC	SD/SDHC/Memory Stick	CompactFlash/XD	SD/SDHC
Shooting Rate	3 fps	3.7 fps	4.5 fps	5 fps	5 fps	5.2 fps
Exposure Comp	1/3 EV step ± 3 EV	1/3 or 1/2 EV step ± 5 EV	1/3 or 1/2 EV step ± 5 EV	1/3 EV step ± 2 EV	1/3 or 1/2 EV step ± 5 EV	1/3 or 1/2 EV step ± 5 EV
LCD	3.0-in, 460k dots	3.0-in, 1040k dots	3.0-in, 920k dots	3.0-in, 230k dots	2.7-in, 230k dots	3.0-in, 920k dots
Image Stabiliser	In body	In lenses	In lenses	In body	In body	In body
Shutter Speed	60secs-1/4000sec + B	30secs-1/4000sec + B	60secs-1/4000sec + B	30secs-1/6000sec + B	60secs-1/8000sec + B	30secs-1/8000sec + B
Dimensions (wxhxd)	124x90x45mm	129x97x62mm	132x103x77mm	137x104x84mm	142x116x75mm	130x96x72mm
Weight	385g	530g	620g	597g	730g	670g
Website	www.panasonic.co.uk	www.canon.co.uk	www.nikon.co.uk	www.sony.co.uk	www.olympus.co.uk	www.pentax.co.uk

Our Verdict

What we liked	+	Video usability, kit lens, portability	+	Image resolution, LCD resolution, refined menu and button layout	+	Good all-rounder, simple button layout, kit lens	+	Superb Live View functionality, flip-out screen, simple menu, in-camera HDR	+	Professional feel, articulating LCD	+	Build quality, fast continuous shooting speed, high image resolution
What we didn't like	-	Image noise handling, slow shutter response, slow max shooting rate, price	-	Lower build quality than others here, slow max shooting rate, fixed LCD screen	-	Outdated video mode, fixed LCD	-	Build quality not up to scratch, poor kit lens, no video mode	-	Slow AF in Live View, no video mode, image noise at high ISO ratings	-	Image noise at high ISO ratings, kit lens, price, fixed LCD

Verdict: which camera takes the crown?

Going by the scores alone this is a straight tie between the Canon EOS 550D and the Pentax K-7. If you could take the build quality and speed of the Pentax and combine it with the specifications of the Canon you'd have an awesome camera.

For holidays and general outdoor use I would prefer the Pentax K-7. It offers solid versatility and has a feature set that carries no weak points. For more sedate, indoor use

or even studio purposes the Canon EOS 550D would be better as there's less need for durability, but image quality is fantastic.

Sitting on the fence gives me a glorious view, but I've got to pick a victor. I'm going with the Pentax. It is a true mid-range DSLR, setting itself completely apart from entry-level models. In fact it could suit many professional photographers, especially if used with Pentax's DA* (star) range of lenses.

NEXT MONTH Two heavyweight 'prosumer' DSLRs don their gum shields and go the full 12 rounds

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