

Tips for buying and operating a digital camera

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So, you're planning that big trip. Maybe the kids have bought you an anniversary cruise to the Caribbean.

It would be nice to have some of those instant digital pictures to show off when you get back home. Or maybe you'll be wild and crazy and email a picture or two from your exotic locale.

First you'll need a digital camera. And you couldn't fill a thimble with your understanding of those new-fangled devices. It will be okay. You don't need a college degree to purchase and use a digital camera; you just need a few tips.

Tip #1: As an average camera user, you do not need more than a five megapixel camera (mega means million and pixel means picture cell). Unless you are planning to show or sell your work or print 8 X 10 photos, you do not need the higher megapixel cameras. In paying more for such a camera, you would be wasting your money. Worse, if you do buy a high pixel camera and you are using an older computer, your computer's memory will not be able to cope with the amount of information you will be downloading from your camera and it will crash.

Tip #2: Beware of the camera with "digital" zoom. This is not a good thing. You want "optical" zoom, a true zoom that works more like a film camera zoom lens.

Digital zoom blows up the centre of the picture causing "pixellation," which is a nasty thing that happens to pictures that are blown up too big for their pixel count. Pictures get blurry and if you look closely, you'll actually be able to see the pixels as tiny little squares of colour. That is not attractive.

If you can find a mid-range camera with 10X optical zoom, you are looking at a camera worth having. It may say it has top end "digital" zoom, but that's okay. That means that once it has zoomed to its max optically, then it will push the zoom a little farther digitally.

Tip #3: Determine how much control you want over your camera. Have you ever used a 35-millimetre film camera? Did you adjust settings like shutter speed, aperture, ISO, or white balance? Do you even know what those things are?

If not, you would want a mid-range camera with minimum manual controls and lots of "scenes." Fixed scene settings on your camera are like little miracles. If you are on the beach, shoot using the beach or snow scene setting, in a candlelit room use the candlelight setting, in a museum use the museum setting. Even pros will find handy these packaged scene settings, which set the necessary formula for the user with one twist of the dial. Brilliant. But by all means, if you are familiar with the inner workings of a camera, choose the one with Shutter and Aperture Priority and Manual Settings. You will be comfortable with their ease of use. But be prepared to spend a few more dollars.

Tip #4: Judge the feel of the camera in your hand. Believe it or not, you will take a better composed picture with a camera that fits your hand well. Go to a place like London Drugs or Future Shop or McBain's Camera and hold the cameras. Then choose the one you like to hold, that feels balanced in your hand. And, of course, whose price feels good on your wallet.

Tip #5: Look for a camera whose "onboard" flash (the flash that pops up or pops open when needed) is far from the camera's lens. Otherwise you will get terrible red eye in your pictures. All cheaper point and shoot cameras have this problem because of the close proximity of flash to lens.

Red eye can't be completely avoided but if you are computer savvy, you can use your camera's software which more than likely came equipped with a red eye reduction tool. If not, turn on as many lights as possible before taking an indoor shot or shine a flashlight in your subject's eyes first to shrink the pupil.

Tip #6: Consider package deals that sell both a camera and printer fitted with a docking area for your camera. These are very practical and affordable, but as to the camera, you must take what you get. A major advantage is that you won't need a computer to print your pictures.

Tip #7: Buy the extras. Yes, you do need to buy more "memory cards." These are the cute little square or rectangular-shaped gizmos that wedge inside your camera. They store the pictures you take. And, yes, they fill up.

If you do fill up the memory card in the camera, and you can't download your photos, your picture-taking days are

over until you buy another one. And you don't want to miss that shot of hubby hoisting himself onto a donkey's back, do you?

Tip #8: Buy from a reputable place. Some good deals can be had on eBay, but it may be a better idea to deal with a local store, rather than a complete stranger thousands of miles away.

Tip #9: Read the manual. I teach onboard cruise ships and I can't tell you the number of times I have said this. When making a decision on your new camera, look at the manual. If it looks like a dissertation on the last days of Pompeii and you just don't have the time, then pass.

Instead, choose a camera with a simple, straightforward manual. And read it, especially if you want to surprise the folks back home with an email picture of you having the time of your life. Your manual will tell you how to do that.

Tip #10: Learn to use your camera before you leave for your trip. You may think you will read the camera manual and learn to operate it once you get on the plane, but I guarantee those good intentions will go the way of free airline meals. But if worst comes to worst, just set the camera to Auto and fire at will.