Panasonic's Little Gem

John Henshall looks at a compact digital camera which can produce truly professional quality images

Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar in Germany introduced the Leica camera to the world at the 1925 Leipzig trade fair.

Originally designed by Oskar Barnack in 1913 as an exposure testing device for his 35mm movies, the Leica camera was to become the miniature camera which changed the direction of photography.

Over the years the bulk of camera manufacturing has moved from Germany to Japan. The Japanese were captivated by the German precision skills in optics and engineering.

Today those early cameras have become much sought after collectors' items. And there are no more avid collectors than the Japanese.

It is natural therefore that the design of some of today's Japanese digital cameras gain inspiration from those early German marvels of optical and mechanical precision.

At the same time as the Leitz company was growing in Germany, Konosuke Matsushita founded a company in Japan which made electrical products under the National brand name.

Matsushita has since grown to become the largest Japanese electronics producing company, employing over 334,000 people and having a revenue of more than 74 billion US Dollars in 2004–2005.

In Japan the company also produces home appliances and renovation services. But we know it best for its international brands such as Technics … and Panasonic.

When a company with Panasonic's clout gets into digital camera design and manufacturing you know its products will be serious contenders at the forefront of the market.

These days there are so many compact digital cameras that the choice is truly bewildering. Where twelve or so years ago we would have given major attention to a new digital camera having just 640 x 480 pixels, there are now so many digital camera models on the market that the chances of even a significantly good design being recognised can be somewhat remote.

Fortunately a little gem of a compact digital camera from Panasonic has been recognised and in fact is so good that it has won our Photo Industry Award 2006 for the Best Digital Compact Camera.

ABOVE: The Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX1 at actual size.
BELOW: The Vario-Elmarit lens is not the only Leica link.

So what makes a camera the award-winning best in its class? To find out, I asked Panasonic to send me the camera so that I could put it through its paces.

Enter the Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX1. The Lumix brand name is said to come from a an amalgam of the words 'luminance' and 'mix', signifying the meeting of optical technologies supplied by Leica and digital technologies added by Panasonic.

This Lumix camera has a Leica-designed 4x DC zoom lens and a decidedly Leica look and feel to it.

In many ways the DMC-LX1 is reminiscent of the first Leica, which is why I have photographed it alongside one of my Leica 1s which – at 80 years old – still function perfectly. No wonder today's manufacturers want to emulate the success of the Leica.

The first digital feature which makes the Lumix DMC-LX1 stand out is its sensor, which is has a 16:9 widescreen aspect ratio – the first digital still camera to use this format.

A switch on the lens barrel enables switching to the conventional 3:2 ratio of 35mm film, or the 4:3 'Academy' format of old film and television screen proportions.

But using 4:3 would be like buying a modern widescreen tv set and just watching your old VHS recordings on it, wasting the extra coverage on each side.

At the 16:9 setting the camera has 8.4 megapixels – 3840 x 2160. That's slightly more than a Canon EOS 30D DSLR with 3504 x 2336. Mind you, at £499 list including VAT, the DMC-LX1 costs more than some DSLRs. Quality, precision and miniaturisation such as this only comes at a price. However, I have found it as low as £282.44 on the Internet.

At the 3:2 setting the sensor delivers 7.1 megapixels. It does this by cropping the image to 3248 pixels long, whilst retaining the 2160 pixel width.

At the 4:3 setting the images are 6 megapixels – 2880 x 2160 pixels.

After initial tests I shot everything at the 16:9 setting, having fun experimenting with the new wider format. Why throw away those lovely pixels? You can crop later if you wish.

Turn the camera sideways and you have a new taller 9:16 format. Try doing that with your 16:9 television set!

During a recent trip to China, this little beauty lived in my shirts' top pocket, from where it was instantly available to capture the unexpected in less time than I could get the DSLR out of its bag.

The pictures on the next two pages show how much fun I had pushing the Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX1 right to the limits. Handheld shots of a quarter to half a second at night? It sounds impossible but they really are sharp, thanks to Panasonic's Mega Optical Image Stabilisation and a reasonably steady hand. The camera's ability to shoot in any light and mixed light is also very impressive.

If you shoot seriously you'll undoubtedly want to shoot raw files and this is where most compacts fall down with JPEG only. But not the DMC-LX1.

The DMC-LX1 has the ability to record raw images, as well as JPEGs and TIFFs, and for me this is one of its most important advantages.

Set the camera Quality to 'RAW' and in fact it saves both raw and JPEG versions – useful for a quick look. The on-board JPEG processing is very good but cannot compare with a raw file carefully processed in Adobe Photoshop CS2 using Camera Raw. That is how all my DMC-LX1 images were processed.

The problem with capturing raw files is that they can take an age to save to the SD memory card. At first I used an 'Integral' SD card and each image took twenty seconds to write to the card.

When I switched to one of the latest Lexar Professional 133x cards the write time dropped right down to two seconds.

The moral of this story is simple and clear. Don't waste your money on generic cards. Buy the best. They only cost a lttle more. You're a professional, you need the best. Any less is a false economy.

Another big plus for the professional is 'PASM' on the DMC-LX1's dial – Programme, Aperture priority, Shutter priority and Manual modes. And this is real Manual control. It's easy to set aperture and shutter speed by nudging the joystick on the back of the camera.

The LCD actually gives a live preview of what the image will look like at the selected manual settings. And – would you believe it – there are viewfinder grid lines and a histogram too.

The Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX1 is a serious piece of truly professional equipment. It's exactly the compact digital camera we've all been dreaming about. And now that dream is alive.

After initial tests I opted to shoot everything using the 16:9 aspect ratio setting. For some subjects, such as this plaque, that results in excess space left and right – just as you would see if the plaque was on tv, being displayed on your widescreen tv set. The excess space is not necessarily a bad thing because it allows room to superimpose text, if required. For a picture library this could be an advantage. To show the plaque and its case a square crop is what is needed for this product – even smaller than 4:3 aspect ratio. The enlarged section below is at 200% – 150 pixels per inch – and shows the incredible quality of the Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX1's sensor, together with the 4x Leica DC Vario-Elmarit zoom and Panasonic's image stabilisation. This was a hand-held shot with an exposure of 1/100 sec at f/2.8 and ISO80 sensitivity, with the lens set to its widest angle.

The John Henshall's Chip Shop archive is online at
www.epi-centre.com

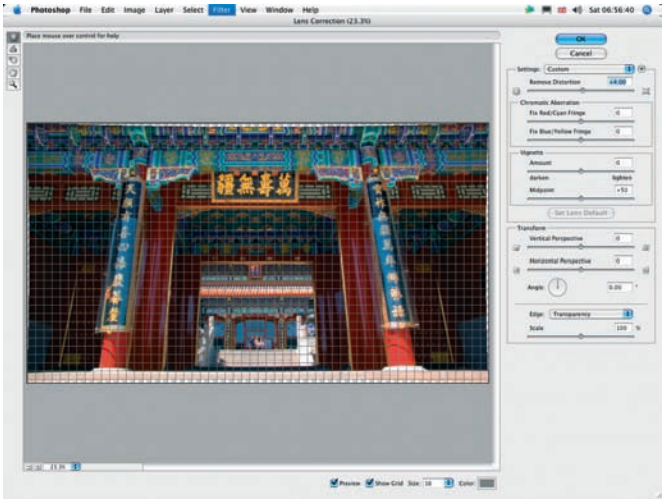
Annelies enjoying Champagne in British Airways business class at 37,000 feet. A difficult exposure against very strong incoming sunlight. Camera held aloft from adjacent seat. Framing guesstimated. Forced flash 1/60 sec f/2.8 ISO 80, 28mm equivalent.

Kathleen in an old guard tower on the Great Wall of China at Mutianyu. Natural light from open window opposite. The fog 'filter' is real – the tower was shrouded in cloud. Hand-held camera steadied against a wall and using the camera's Panasonic Mega O.I.S. Image Stabiliisation. Half a second f/4 ISO100, 28mm equivalent.

RIGHT: No he isn't drunk or drugged – this is China. He's just talking on his cellphone. Note that he has removed his shoes so as not to soil the seat. 1/4 sec f/2.8 ISO200, 28mm equivalent. Hand-held using the camera's built-in Image Stabilisation.

Summer Palace, Beijing.
1/160 sec f/4 ISO 80, 28mm equivalent.
Slight barrel distortion corrected in
Adobe Photoshop CS2.

LEFT: Enlarged section from the shot at bottom right on previous page at 200%. Bear in mind that this was hand-held for a quarter of a second. Note that some noise is visible at ISO200. ABOVE: The lens shows slight barrel distortion at its widest angle but this is corrected easily using a 'Remove Distortion' setting of +4.00 in Filter > Distort > Lens Correction… in Adobe Photoshop. TOP: The resulting distortion-free wideangle shot.



Beijing street and taxis at night. Hand-held shot through car windscreen. 1/5 sec f/2.8 ISO200, 28mm equivalent. This beautiful little camera really will cope with every challenge it is presented with. It's an absolute delight.