# IS DIGITAL RIGHT FOR ME?

You've seen the ads, you've listened to your friends brag as they pretend to understand what they are doing. Now you would like to know "Is digital photography right for me?"

There are no quick answers to this question. Sure, you can spend a bundle, and brag at the next cocktail party. But then, when you run out of camera memory (or battery power) somewhere in the suburbs of Cairo (NY or Egypt), you may well be wishing you had a 35mm point-and-shoot to grab those pics of your spouse riding the camel (at the Catskill Game Farm).

**Personal Computing**
It all started with the personal computer – you got hooked on e-mail and web-surfing. Now you want to send photos to your nephew in Cleveland, or illustrate your annual, boring Christmas Letter with fuzzy images of your dog and children (Fido is on the left).

If you are serious about getting into digital photography, there are a few things you will need BEFORE you buy a digital camera. They are:

- A reasonably functional PC (Windows 98 and above) with adequate hard drive space to store photo images.
- A CD Burner to copy photos from your hard drive to a CD Rom for permanent storage
- A decent color InkJet printer, supply of color cartridges, and some decent photo-quality paper.
- A friend whose been there, done that.

When you buy that digital camera, it will come with a USB cable to connect to your PC, and some image management/editing software – to adjust contrast and brightness, maybe even crop the image. No matter what brand of camera you buy, you will need a few other items:

- **Some NiMH rechargeable batteries.** NiMH stands for Nickel Metal Hydride – which is more reliable than NiCad (Nickel Cadmium). Sure, they might throw in a pair of Lithium Ion batteries to start you off, but unless they are rechargeable, you will be plunking down $10 here and there for more power.
- **A battery charger.** You should be able to find a One-Hour charger with four (4) NiMH batteries for around $30.
- **Extra memory chips for the camera.** It gets confusing here – there are SmartMedia, CompactFlash, SecureData, MemoryStick, etc. out there. The manufacturer will start you off with a free chip, but it will be too small for your purposes. Buy a 128 Megabyte or larger chip to augment your storage capacity.
- You might also want a Card Reader/Writer that handles multiple format memory chips (something in the $30 range) – so you can transfer photos to your PC via one chip, while taking pictures with the other chip – or glomming a copy of your buddy's photos which will undoubtedly be in a different memory chip format.

# COMMON SENSE ABOUT DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

The commercials will claim you can fix any photograph with a few clicks of the mouse. Don't believe it. If you start with a blurry, out of focus, overexposed image, you can hope to improve the brightness and contrast level somewhat, but it will still be blurry and out of focus.

You may be able to take reasonably good photos in a brightly lit room WITHOUT the flash, but you will have to hold the camera very steady, and hope your subjects are not dancing at the time. Bear in mind also that the built-in flash on your digital camera will only reach about 10 to 15 feet away.

Get closer to your target – compose the picture in the viewfinder – avoid distracting backgrounds (like that telephone pole growing out of Uncle Herbie's head. If you are shooting a group of people, ask them to act like they like each other, and get closer together. The faces are what matters (unless you are a podiatrist, don't worry about getting their feet in the picture).

## FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS

Your digital camera will have an auto-focus target area, usually dead-center in the viewfinder. If you are shooting two people side by side, chances are the camera will focus on the building behind them. To avoid this frustrating development, aim at one person, and slightly depress the shutter release, then re-center the pair and continue to press the shutter release. This should force the camera to focus at the right distance.

## SUBJECT MOTIONNNNNNNNNN

Your camera may have different "program" settings, like one for landscapes, one for portraits, one for sports. What this means is that it will offer a combination of shutter speed (yes, a digital camera has one) and lens openings (those f-stops which let more or less light into the camera).

Figure on buying a digital camera with a 3:1 zoom, and an f 2.8 lens opening. Landscape photos do not involve subject motion (except in California on occasion), so the landscape setting figures you want as much "depth of field" as possible. That is, get the foreground and distance both in focus.

Portrait photography figures you are shooting someone within 10 feet of the camera, and you do NOT want distant buildings to share in the prominence. Sports setting means you want the camera to use as fast a shutter speed as possible, to catch your niece doing that 100 yard dash. Bear in mind that digital cameras have an infuriating delay (unlike film cameras, which just jam), so aim ahead of your target and click the shutter a split second before she reaches the finish line.

## LIGHTING

Once thing all photographs have in common is lighting. Digital or film, what you are recording is the light bouncing off the subject. Direct flash on the subject will give you a clear image, but the more interesting photos occur when you don't use the flash, but hold the camera rock-steady (yes, a tripod is permitted) as you rely on the ambient lighting. Faces have more of a three-dimensional quality when illuminated from the side.

Direct flash in a dark room also results in the cursed **RED EYE.** This occurs when the irises are dilated, giving you a chance to shine a light into the blood-enriched retinas. With a digital photo, you can fix this after the fact by either substituting a black dot for the red blob, or pasting in a facsimile eyeball of the correct size and color, depending on the image editing software you use.

## BACKUP, BACKUP, BACKUP

Until you get comfortable with your digital camera, and are sure it is reliable, take along a 35mm film camera with you on your trips – especially expensive trips to foreign lands. You probably won't be taking your desktop PC with you to Nairobi, and may have trouble recharging your batteries overseas (those *&^*$# British Colonialists and their infernal plugs). Take along your extra memory chips and extra 35mm film, or you will spend a fortune at the tourist trap stores.

When you get back home, transfer your photos to your PC, then burn a CD as you build up your photo inventory. A typical 650 MB CD-Rom should be able to hold 2,000 high-resolution photos.

## YOU SEND ME

Your original photos will probably be stored in JPG format on the memory chip – and the file size can be up there. A typical 1.2 megapixel JPG is about 300 Kilobytes (5 of them would fill a floppy disk). An average 2.1 megapixel JPG would hit about 450 KB, and so forth.

Don't ruin a friendship by trying to e-mail a dozen of these big files to your friend who has a dial-up modem. Ten photos might tie up his phone line for an hour. Instead, use your photo editing software to make a lower-resolution copy of the photos that matter (e.g. an 800 X 600 image can also be compressed by your software down to 50 KB). You will also want to downsize your images for use on your family website, because you only get 5 to 10 megabytes of space from AOL et al..

## ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Before you plunk down $300 or more on a digital camera, buy an inexpensive flatbed scanner for your PC. $79 should get you a device that can make high-resolution copies of your drugstore 4 X 6 photos – and these will be higher quality than the CDs the drugstores offer you at time of film processing.

It's all about "dots per inch". Set your flatbed scanner at 1200 dpi, and a 4 X 6 photo will wind up as 4800 X 7200 dots – or 34 megabytes. Too many dots? Then set your scanner at 300 dpi, and your 4 X 6 will wind up at 1200 X 1800 dots or 2.1 megapixels. *Get the picture?*

## HPPHOTO.COM

There are several free services out there that offer on-line storage of digital photos. Kodak has OFOTO - which lets your friends grab digital copies of your images for free at one-fourth the resolution, or lets you buy full-resolution images via the Internet.

But my favorite is www.hphoto.com which gives you 100 Megabytes of on-line storage space for JPG or GIF files. Hewlett Packard is one of the leaders in InkJet printing, so they figure chances are good that you will be using up their ink and paper when printing. HPPhoto lets you and your friends share photos in their original high-resolution.

## PRINTING COSTS

Figuring in how many full-color photos your $30 inkjet cartridge can handle, and the price of quality photo-grade inkjet compatible paper, a typical 8 X 10 could run you $2 in supply costs. Your printer may come with a useful utility program to arrange three 4 X 6's on one sheet of letter-size paper, meaning those 4 X 6's could be up to 65 cents each. You can save somewhat by finding sales on paper (Staples for example, has decent store brand photo paper), but don't try to save with no-name inkjet cartridges. The ink is never as good as the manufacturer's own product, and the cartridge can gum up your printer.

The foregoing are all opinions of www.1ceman.com - your own experience may differ, and you may have more money than he does to go overboard with the new $1,000 gizmos. Be my guest.