

# STAR QUALITY

## Two leading lights take to the centre stage

WORDS & PICTURES RAY ALLEN

Enter stage right two of the new starlets in the camera business; the natty little Olympus 3030 Zoom, with its 3x optical zoom, and the Nikon Coolpix 990 with its excellent build quality and lovely twisty lens. Enter stage left the leading man, our tester, determined to run the duo through their lines and come up with a grand finale.

### Features *What do the cameras offer?*

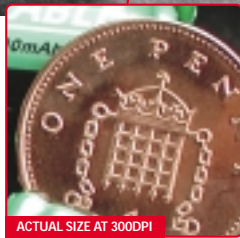
#### Olympus 3030 Zoom

This 3.34 million pixel camera generates 2048x1536 images. Its 3x optical zoom has a focal length equivalent to 32-96mm on 35mm and there's also a 1-2.5x digital zoom. The aperture range is from f/2.8 to f/11.

Its metering a multi-pattern system with a spot metering option and exposure is auto with a choice of manual overrides. You can also adjust the ISO setting between 100, 200 or 400. Focusing is also automatic with manual override, should you need it.

#### Nikon Coolpix 990

Like the Olympus, this has a 3.34 million CCD which again creates 2048x1536 images. There's a 3x optical zoom lens which offers a longer equivalent focal range of 38-115mm on 35mm. The digital zoom goes up to 4x, but quality suffers at this magnification. Four metering modes including 256 segment matrix, centre-weighted, spot and spot auto are on offer plus four exposure modes. The autofocus works on contrast with five area multi autofocus or sport autofocus choices. There's also auto white balance in matrix mode. This Nikon has a metal tripod mount, unlike the Olympus.



### Handling *How easy are they to use?*

#### Olympus 3030 Zoom

This camera is a joy to use and hold. Based on the 2.1 million pixel 2000/2020, Olympus have refined the design on each model to give us the 3030, which is the best yet. Solid and practical to carry around, the 3030 has a traditional camera feel and the button layout is superb with everything in finger or thumb reach. Startup time is around 3.5 seconds. This Olympus is no slouch when it comes to saving images; you can take a sequence of images almost straight away – even in standard mode. Both cameras feature an eye adjuster for spectacle wearers, but the LCD viewing is better in sunlight compared with the Nikon. It's not as heavy as its competitor, coming in at 300g compared to the 390g Nikon.



#### Nikon Coolpix 990

Build quality is excellent. The main grip is rubber-coated to give a solid feel and the twist lens can give you added flexibility when taking shots from high or low viewpoints. Startup time is just slightly quicker than the Olympus, and you can shoot at up to 1.5fps until the buffer is full (two to three shots) then it takes just under four seconds to be ready again. The main problem with this camera is image composition; the LCD and real image viewfinder show only about 85% of the final image, which takes the edge off this superb camera. The Nikon fares better in low light situations and the feature count is higher with more tweaks than the Olympus.



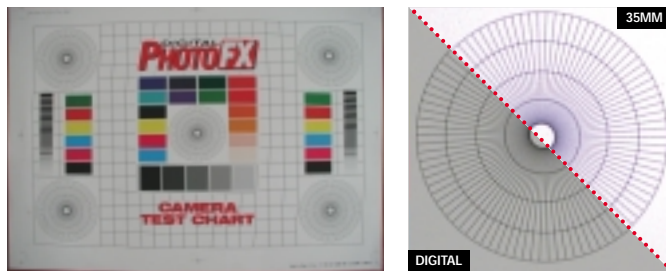
## Test pictures *What's picture quality like?*

### Olympus 3030 Zoom £800



As expected, fine detail is high which means bigger prints. Images have uniform sharpness – even up to the edges. The Olympus is better suited for landscape

work over the Nikon due to the wider lens. As both cameras have the same pixel count, overall detail for both cameras is about the same.

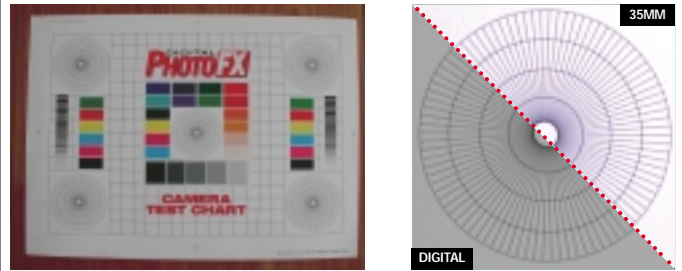


Colours are solid and vibrant and punchy skin tones are faithfully reproduced on both cameras. Telling the cameras apart just by looking at our colour test card is very difficult, so this gives us only two categories to compare the cameras under – exposure and focusing. The Olympus generally gives superb exposure, with an occasional slightly over-exposed image. Focusing is very good. As the viewfinder is much more accurate than the Nikon, using the focus lock gives predictable results. As from the scene above, the Olympus has a wider lens than the Nikon and barrel distortion is above average.

### Nikon Coolpix 990 £850 (standard pack)



Although it gives a more powerful zoom performance, our only concern is with the image viewfinder. It gives a false view of the scene, as proved with a shot of our test card. The LCD screen gave the impression of an edge to edge picture, but the actual file shows us the extent of its inaccuracy.

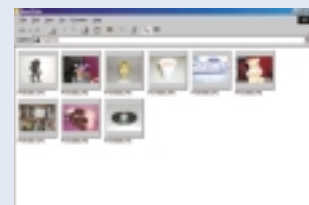


As with the Olympus, colour is superb. Very little will fluster this Nikon when it comes to focusing. The only time to watch it is if you use the focus lock feature; make sure it focuses on what you intend it to, as the LCD viewfinder is inaccurate. As you can see from the wide/tele test shots, the Nikon will have more zoom power over the Olympus. Something else to watch for is when you set it on an tripod it appears to be straight and true at first, but when you twist the lens, you find the viewfinder shows the image slightly askew, so constant tripod adjustment is needed. On a wide setting, barrel distortion is high.

## CARDS & ACCESSORIES

### Olympus 3030 Zoom

Two lithium batteries are supplied to get you up and running along with a 16Mb SmartMedia card, camera strap, basic instruction book with full in-depth detailed instructions in PDF format on the CD, Olympus' own software suite with serial and USB drivers (USB Mac drivers seem to be absent from the CD so our test was unable to use the USB to transfer images to our Mac), USB cable, serial cable, audio/video cable (PAL only) and, the most important, IR remote control. This camera will use optional lenses that Olympus produce.



### Nikon 990

Nikon give you stacks of software including their own software to extract the images, FotoStation for creating a photo album for your pictures and Adobe Photoshop 5.0 LE. A 16Mb CompactFlash card, lens cap, neck strap, video cable (PAL and NTSC), USB cable (no serial option). Four alkaline batteries are also included. Nikon make a range of optional lenses for the 990. Both cameras have a socket for external flashguns.

## ★ OVERALL VERDICT ★

Both cameras give superb results and represent the limit of current technology for home and semi-pro use. The Nikon has the most features and, if macro is your thing, will be the best choice. The Olympus has enough manual overrides to make it almost as flexible as the Nikon. Making a decision is hard, given both can produce great images, but on ease of use and a slight edge in sharpness and exposure, the Olympus gets the dressing room with the big star on...



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