

Convenience and artistry

MiniDV Camcorder
Sony DCR-PC9

by Peter Dudar

The DCR-PC9 MiniDV camcorder is Sony's update of the DCR-PC5, and to a great extent it's still a PC5—with expanded battery capacity, MPEG movie capability and USB connectivity. Mind you, it now weighs in at 17 ounces, four ounces less than the PC5, and also costs considerably less than its predecessor.

But the guts of the system are still the same: a Carl Zeiss 10X optical zoom lens, a 1/4-inch 680K pixel CCD imager, a 180K pixel color viewfinder, and a 2.5 inch swivel screen LCD display with touchscreen controls.

Both price-wise and feature-wise, the PC9 now delivers a serious counter-punch to its main rivals in the pocket cam category, the Canon Elura2 MC and the JVC GR-DVP3.

TOUCH SCREEN SYSTEM

The PC9's LCD touch screen system has an upside and a downside. Menus and submenus are displayed index card style. Once you get the hang of it, cruising through the options seems more intuitive than the button-and-wheel systems employed by Canon and JVC. Spot metering can be done by simply pressing the appropriate point on the LCD image.

The downside is that it's hard to see anything on the LCD in bright daylight. The situation is further complicated by the lack of an exposure button on the camera body to enable quick adjustments through the viewfinder. Both Canon and JVC provide exposure buttons—with the Sony, you have to flip open the LCD (which ups battery consumption), go into submenus, guesstimate the adjustment (since the LCD image is washed out), flip the LCD shut, and then see what you've done by

checking the viewfinder again. If you're always going to shoot on Auto—no problem.

Being primarily an auto cam, the PC9 provides a slew of consumer AE (auto exposure) modes and in-camera effects, but no means to explicitly set either the aperture or shutter (aside from a slow shutter mode).

Manual focussing can be activated quickly via a button on the cam body.

SIGHT AND SOUND

The PC5 developed a reputation for producing pretty decent images in good light and mediocre results in low light. The PC9 has the same lens (F 1.7 - 2.2) and the same CCD imager. The CCD's HAD Technology reduces low-light video noise, but it can't realistically be expected to perform like a 3 CCD system when the light fades. This cam has a minimum illumination rating of 5 lux, versus 7.50 (Low Light program) for the Canon Elura. The PC9 performs quite nicely for its size, and will sometimes produce images beyond its ap-

parent capabilities; just don't expect to consistently get results comparable to higher end camcorders.

Mini-size cams don't come with stuff like built-in neutral density filters or zebra pattern controls, so seriously consider getting UV and ND filters. Sony sells a VF-30PK/S Polarizing Filter Kit for \$99.99.

When you're down to 0 lux, you can use the PC9's Super NightShot infrared mode. Images will be monochrome, vignetted, and strobe if the cam or subject move, but you'll feel like you're on an espionage mission while shooting.

And speaking of cam movement, the PC9 has a pretty decent image stabilizer.

Attached microphones on DV cameras are notoriously sub-standard, and built-in mics on mini-size cams are housed right in the body, the better to pick up motor noise. The DCR-PC9 is capable of CD-quality recording (48 kHz, 16-bit) and has a mic input, so if you require good location sound, invest in a decent external mic. Even so, keep in mind that the cam has no record level control, just an indicator that you're recording in 12 or 16-bit mode.



Use **MEMORY MODE** to grab MPEG sequences (up to 60 sec.) or JPEG images from tape, as above. You can also shoot stills (640 x 480) directly to the memory stick, or record MPEG movies (up to 15 seconds at 320 x 240) on the stick. Then plug into your PC or Mac via the new USB connector, and drag the files onto your drive or into an e-mail.

USB, JPEGs, MPEGs

With the PC9's newfound USB connectivity, Mac users can finally retrieve files from Sony memory sticks, and PC users can forget about using torturously slow serial interfaces. (Canon's cam predates the Sony and JVC models—its users need an accessory to connect via USB.)

In Fine mode, the PC9 produces 640 x 480 pixel JPEGs—at 1/6 compression, with a resulting file size of about 100 KB. That means you can get around 40 images max on the supplied 4MB memory stick, versus about 1300 on the maximum available size of 128 MB. (The JVC can output 1024 x 768 stills.) Besides shooting directly to the stick, you can also freeze and capture images internally from miniDV tapes; or from external devices by using the input connector.

For action sequences, you can automatically shoot nine stills sequentially (0.5 second intervals) and display them contact sheet style.

So just how “fine” are PC9 still images—well, they may be good enough for Web use, but you won't be framing them for gallery display.

You record an MPEG sequence to the memory stick as you would to tape, only with the cam set to Memory mode. The sound, in this case, is mono. And as with stills, you can also record movie data from tape or external sources.

The cam shoots up to 60 seconds of video in E-mail mode (160 x 112 resolution), or up to 15 seconds in Presentation mode (320 x 240). And it can convert up to 60 seconds from tape.

Captured at a frame rate of 25 FPS and at 320 x 240 resolution (a pretty standard size for high- and med-res movie trailers on the Web), these movies are quite acceptable for online use. The PC9's JPEGs and MPEGs are compact enough to e-mail as is—it's a delight to shoot and then send them off within minutes.

Figure you'll get up to 40 seconds at 320x240 on the supplied 4MB memory stick, versus 21 min. 20 sec. on a 128 MB stick.

Note: the progressive shutter system on this cam works only with stills.

You can use the LCD to click through your assets six at a time—in this mode, the index displays the first frame of each MPEG.

POWER

To compete in the consumer arena, manufacturers tend to shortchange you on 'accessories'. Like Canon, Sony no longer supplies an AC adapter/charger with the cam, just an AC adapter. This means battery packs have to be charged on the cam-corder, rendering the cam unusable while doing so. Sony charges \$249.99 for a charger.

Since one hour tapes are the standard, I figure cams should come with a battery that actually lasts one hour. The new NP-FM30 InfoLithium battery on the DCR-PC9 has 30 percent more capacity than the one supplied with the PC5. Using the same artificial yardstick as other manufacturers, Sony estimates that you can shoot up to 115 minutes with this battery. It'll never happen. In real world shooting conditions, expect the NP-FM30 to last less than an hour.

That said, seeing as this cam is primarily a mobile device, you'll want more batteries anyway. The NP-FM50 should get you over the one hour mark. The FM70 and FM91 provide more capacity, but add bulk to one side of the cam. So you have to decide if size or duration is your priority.

CONVENIENCE AND ARTISTRY

The DCR-PC9 may be intended as a convenience for the upscale consumer or business person, and that it is. And maybe it's a vital lifestyle accessory.

But having a capable DV device always on standby can also give you a creative jolt. You probably see things in passing that should be put on tape—that you know will be gone tomorrow. Or maybe you get flashes of insight—ideas that absolutely have to be tried out now. Just grab the cam, and do it. After all, masterworks can be built from small ideas. 🍷



SONY DCR-PC9

Specifications

MiniDV Recording
Advanced HAD CCD (1/4" - 680k pixel gross)
Horizontal Video Resolution: up to 500 Lines
Carl Zeiss Vario-Sonnar Lens (F: 1.7 - 2.2)
10X Optical/120X Digital Zoom
2.5" Precision SwivelScreen LCD Display (211k pixels)
Touch Screen System; Exposure Touch Pad (24 steps)
Precision Color Viewfinder (180k pixels)
Super SteadyShot Picture Stabilization
Minimum Illumination 5 Lux
Super NightShot Lux Infrared System
Memory Mode with Memory Stick Digital Storage Media; MPEG-1 Movie; VGA 640 x 480 Still Image Resolution
12-Bit/16-Bit PCM Digital Stereo with Audio Dub
InfoLithium Battery with AccuPower Meter System
Stamina Power Management System (using optional NP-FM91)
i.LINK DV Interface (IEEE-1394): bi-directional
Video actual 340K pixels; Still actual 340K pixels
f (Focal Distance) 3.3-33mm
Shutter Speeds: 1 / 4 - 1 / 4000 (in AE mode)
Filter Diameter 30mm
16:9 Wide Mode
Analog Recording Input
Power Consumption (VF/LCD/VF+LCD):
2.7W/3.5W/3.8W
Dimensions (WxHxD): 2-3/8" x 4-1/8" x 3-7/8"
Weight: 1 lb. 1 oz.
Supplied Accessories: AC-L10 AC Adapter, NP-FM30 InfoLithium battery, Wireless remote control RMT-814, Stereo A/V cable, Lens cap, 4MB Memory Stick Digital Media, USB Cable, MGI PhotoSuite software (Windows/Mac), Video Wave software (Windows)

Pricing

MSRP \$1899.99

Sony
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