

TEST BENCH

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HD CAMCORDERS

Oh Mr Spielberg, I've got Hollywood in my hand

As people start to make the switch to High Definition viewing, HD camcorders that promise you sharper images are falling in price. We give six a screen test

Sales of high definition (HD) televisions are on the up as manufacturers promise us ultra-realistic images with amazing detail. However, as only one in 20 Europeans pays for HD satellite or cable channels, many of us have nothing to watch in high definition.

With an HD camcorder, though, you can create your own HD footage for home viewing, and the latest models boast advanced technologies to help boost the quality of your video and give home movies a touch of Hollywood glamour. As HD camcorders rapidly become the norm, prices are falling fast.

If you don't own an HD television, it pays to instead buy a standard-definition camcorder costing as little as £200, which shoots perfectly good footage onto hard disk, tape, memory card or miniature DVD. However, video from even the best standard camcorder can look blocky and pixelated on any HD television with a screen size larger than 30in.

We tested six HD camcorders that can be bought at prices ranging from less than £400 to a little more than £700. All can record in the highest (1080) HD resolution for use with Full HD televisions. However, footage looks nearly as good on HD-ready sets — which can be much cheaper — and can be played back on traditional televisions, albeit without HD's extra detail.

There is a variety of recording media, among which the cheapest HD camcorders use affordable memory cards (8GB from £25).

These are easy to swap between camcorder and computer but have limited capacity — an 8GB card holds about an hour of best-quality HD footage, as opposed to a 40GB hard disk's typical five hours. Despite their capacity advantage (30GB-60GB in our test), hard disks are slower, heavier and bulkier, and if you misplace or drop the camcorder, you may end up losing hours of footage.

Blu-ray recording is convenient if you have a Blu-ray player, but the discs are pricey — from £20 for a one-hour disc — and the Hitachi player here was relatively heavy and slow. Some "hybrid" camcorders (the Canon, Sony, JVC and Hitachi on test) provide more than one type of recording medium.

All the camcorders reviewed here have a 2.7in or 2.8in screen, and most have a 10x zoom lens. All shoot still photos (from 2Mp to 4Mp) with flash, but quality is poor compared with a stills camera. Other features worth having are an optically stabilised zoom (to reduce camera shake), face detection for sharper portraits, and soft skin mode to go easy on more mature faces. Some camcorders now also record in full Dolby Digital surround sound.

While all these camcorders have an HDMI connector for HD-television playback, only the Sanyo came with an HDMI cable (they cost from £10). All the camcorders connect to a computer for downloading footage, but editing HD video requires software such as Pinnacle Studio 11 Plus (£40) and at least 2GB of computer Ram.

Be warned, editing HD video can be frustrating even on fast computers and requires lots of storage.

JARGON BUSTER

HD (High Definition) A new video system that offers up to four times the detail of traditional TV

HDMI An HD television connection that relays both sound and video in one cable

SDHC (Secure Digital High Capacity) A version of the SD memory card designed for video recording. Available in capacities up to 32GB, and the smaller microSDHC format

1080 The highest-quality HD video signal, comprising 1,080 lines of picture information

Prices of reviewed camcorders include Vat but not delivery



Some of the latest HD camcorders have features such as face detection for finer portraits

HIGH PERFORMER ★★★★★



Canon HF10 — typically £700, or £570 from www.amazon.co.uk

Easy to use, with many advanced features

The HF10 combines SDHC recording (see Jargon Buster, below left) with a generous 16GB of internal memory. Its slim (380g) case looks stylish, with curved lines and a shape that feels effortlessly natural to operate, whether you're left or right-handed. Buttons are few and far between, though the onscreen menus are simple to access and use, and there's a joystick to control various options, including soft skin mode and manual exposure. Image quality really is a triumph. The 12x lens (longer than most here) is effectively stabilised, but a speedy Instant AF feature can be a bit hit-and-miss on pinpoint focus, though in general everything looks fine. The only aspect that isn't bang up to date is the stereo (rather than surround) sound.

SMALL AND SMART ★★★★★



Panasonic HDC-SD9 — typically £700, or £549 from www.johnlewis.com

Compact, ambitious, not always easy to use

Panasonic's latest ultra-compact HD camcorder packs helpful extras aplenty, including face detection and soft skin modes, and the ability to record audio in Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound. The SD9 is light (337g), easy to hold and efficient. It can fit about two hours of top-quality video on an 8GB card. The image quality is decent enough — generally sharp and presenting impressive red tones. The crisp 10x zoom lens is well stabilised to reduce blur, but its range is a little conservative. One area in which the SD9 falls short is its buttons — far too many of them are crammed in under the screen. The joystick is also positioned awkwardly, making it tricky to access without finger-twisting gymnastics.

TOUCH OF CLASS ★★★★★



Sony HDR-SR10E — typically £650, or £504 from www.rgbdirect.co.uk

Intelligent camcorder with innovative touches

At the heart of this solid (480g) camcorder is a 40GB hard disk. You can also record onto Sony's own Memory Stick Duo cards, similar in size but more expensive than (incompatible) SDHC media. A touchscreen menu system means fingerprints on the LCD, but at least the menus are intuitive and easy to use. The Sony's innovative features include face detection for sharp countenances, Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound and 4Mp photos. It's all fronted by a 15x zoom lens — the longest on test — which, fortunately, has an optical stabiliser. Consequently, image quality is first class, as is focusing. The SR10E will impress those who want maximum recording space without too much bulk.

OFF COLOUR ★★★☆☆



Sanyo VPC-HD1000 — typically £479, or £378 from www.elitegadgets.com

Is it a camera or is it a camcorder?

Fitting snugly into one hand, the Sanyo can record 4Mp still photos or HD video onto the same SDHC card. Shutter release, zoom and menu controls sit conveniently beneath the thumb (ideal for both left or right-handed users), and the device is the lightest (311g) on test. However, in spite of the full 1080i resolution, the video quality, with its muted colours, is distinctly below par. Also, as the focusing isn't always accurate, footage overall doesn't impress on the big screen. Photos aren't great either, and the 10x zoom often makes images worse — whether still or video. This cheap, simple-to-use combination of digital camera and camcorder aims to provide the best of both worlds, but all too often misses.

MARATHON MAN ★★★★★☆



JVC GZ-HD5 — typically £900, or £724 from www.pixmania.com

Superb video quality but sluggish menus

Although housing a huge 60GB disk and an SDHC memory card slot, the JVC GZ-HD5 can store just five hours of full-quality HD movies on its hard drive alone. Picture quality through the stabilised 10x lens is exemplary, while colour is so vivid that it makes even dull scenes jump out at you. Focusing can be a little unreliable at longer zoom settings, and quality falls off a little in low light, but otherwise the HD5's image quality can't be beaten. Buttons are kept to an absolute minimum, placing more reliance on the menu system, though unfortunately, the menus are slow to react to the small joystick, so navigation can be a pain. The GZ-HD5 also packs a surprising amount of weight (480g) into its slight frame.

FEELING BLUE ★★★☆☆



Hitachi DZ-BD7 — typically £900, or £624 from www.purelygadgets.co.uk

A disappointing Blu-ray debut

Now that the rival HD-DVD format has been abandoned you might be tempted to buy this, the world's first Blu-ray camcorder. It can record using either mini Blu-ray discs or its built-in 30GB hard disk, but it was slow to start recording when using Blu-ray. The BD7 can also shoot standard-definition video onto cheap DVD blanks (from £5 for 10), making it the most flexible camcorder here. Image quality through the 10x zoom was slightly better than expected, with bright, punchy colours, though the focusing was occasionally unreliable. Performance was underwhelming in low light, so we can't recommend the DZ-BD7 for evening use. It's also heavy (630g), with outdated styling and pretty average build quality.