



**HIDDEN POWER:** 'Super' wide angle  
**PANASONIC LUMIX FX500** £260

The FX500's 25mm wide-angle captures nearly double the normal viewing area of a standard lens and is an outstanding addition to an already impressive compact. The camera's brushed metal finish is excellent and the shape and controls make it easy to handle, although the tiny joystick controller feels awkward. Beginners can set it to "intelligent auto" mode and simply start shooting, while photo experts can use the "quick menu" controls to tinker with the settings. The "intelligent ISO" feature is good at handling harsh lighting, and the picture quality overall is good with strong, vivid colours.

**VERDICT:** The wide-angle lens would be no disgrace on a pro camera — great for sweeping landscapes, cramped interiors or narrow city streets.  
 www.panasonic.co.uk  
 ★★★★★



**HIDDEN POWER:** Wi-fi  
**NIKON COOLPIX S52c** £210

The ability to upload shots to the internet without going through your PC sounds a winner, but you'll either need to be signed in at a wireless hotspot or, if on a home network, leave your computer running — and even then you can only e-mail your snaps to Nikon's website at less than full resolution. Subtract the wi-fi and you're left with an ordinary 3x zoom compact with unexceptional picture quality. The case is a little slippery to handle; a big 3in display on the back is great for shooting and playback but doesn't leave much room for the controls; and it's all too easy to put your finger over the lens when shooting.

**VERDICT:** Setup is tricky, finding a hotspot is a hassle and in practice you'll still need to use a computer.  
 www.nikon.co.uk  
 ★★★★★



**HIDDEN POWER:** 4GB internal storage  
**SONY CYBER-SHOT DSC-T2** £171

Most compacts come with piffling amounts of memory built in, but the T2 boasts 4GB — enough to store hundreds of high-resolution shots. Having to open the lens cover to power it up can be awkward, and any adjustments from the standard setup have to be made via the touchscreen LCD, which can be tricky at first, but it soon becomes second nature. Sony's autofocus is the best in this class, and the near absence of shutter lag — the time between pressing the button and actually capturing the scene — makes this a true "snapshot" camera. Picture quality is only fair, though, with good colours but definition on the weak side.

**VERDICT:** 4GB sounds amazing until you realise the same memory on a card costs £10. But overall quality impresses.  
 www.sony.co.uk  
 ★★★★★



**HIDDEN POWER:** HD movie mode  
**SAMSUNG NV24HD** £160

Many compacts double as camcorders, but the Samsung promises to shoot in 720p high-definition video — much sharper and more vivid than conventional footage. You'll find the control system, which uses rows of buttons to highlight icons on the screen, either clever or maddening. Blink and smile detection software offer novelty value. The quality of the still pictures isn't bad but colours can look muted and overexposed. The many "photo styles" offer a range of effects, though. It comes with a wide-angle lens, although the 3.6x zoom limits its telephoto range.

**VERDICT:** HD video definition is clearly better than standard, but moving subjects look jerky. Stills performance is only average, and not helped by quirky controls.  
 www.samsungcamera.co.uk  
 ★★★★★



**HIDDEN POWER:** Waterproof to 33ft  
**OLYMPUS MJU 1030 SW** £200

Most underwater snappers resemble a reject from an army surplus store, but unlike the 10ft depth limit of most waterproof cameras, the Mju 1030 not only works at a class-leading 33ft but looks just like any other super-slim camera, and a particularly smart and stylish one at that. The 3.6x zoom is great for everyday shooting, and if you don't know where to start, an on-screen guide will tell you what to do. If you already know your megapixels from your metering patterns, the adjustments are just a couple of button clicks away. Great camera, great pictures.

**VERDICT:** You can drown it, drop it or crush it and the Olympus soldiers on. It's so pretty, though, that you might want to wrap it in cotton wool.  
 www.olympus.co.uk  
 ★★★★★



**HIDDEN POWER:** 7.1x zoom  
**RICOH R8** £200

Budding paparazzi won't need to fiddle with telephoto lenses — the Ricoh's 7.1x super-zoom cleverly packs down into the compact's body. The camera's plain, slab-sided design lacks style, but the controls are well thought out. Keen photographers will love the "adj" (adjust) joystick on the back, which provides quick access to common photo tweaks and works really well, as do the efficient and logical menus. The picture quality's patchy, though: colours are good but the definition's variable, undermining those clever features and pro appeal.

**VERDICT:** The lens combines both wide-angle and telephoto capability, but overall the R8 is a less than impressive performer.  
 www.ricohpmc.com  
 ★★★★★

# CLEVER COMPACTS

Six innocuous cameras, each packing a high-tech secret. But are the hidden powers worth seeking? Rod Lawton reports

**E-MAIL FROM AMERICA**  
 Mark Harris  
 IN SEATTLE — NEW TECH CITY

Airlines aren't having a great time of it in the US. The hike in oil prices has turned profits into losses. Looking back, I suppose we could have foreseen that it was all too good to last. In the boom times, there was a new carrier starting up almost every week. A couple of years ago, I flew from Orlando to San Francisco on a low-cost airline called Song. With a funky crew who sang the safety instructions, personal audio playlists and a high-tech entertainment system featuring live TV and quizzes among passengers, Song offered non-stop stimulation from wheels-up to unbuckling my seatbelt. After a few hours of this I was exhausted. Unsurprisingly, Song sang

its last "emergency exit" chorus soon after. What we really want is for the airlines to get us from A to B in the company of a brainless movie and a gin and tonic. The tinkle of ice cubes melting in a glass — now there's a soundtrack I can get behind. And one other thing — e-mail. A few hours of peace and quiet is ideal for getting to grips with the inbox. One of the positive side effects of the credit crunch is that airlines are fighting harder for passenger loyalty. Despite tough market conditions, American Airlines has just launched internet access for passengers on 15 of its aircraft out of New York, allowing anyone with a wi-fi computer or smartphone to surf the web, send



e-mails and even stream video for a flat fee of \$12.95 (£6.50) per flight. Internet access is at speeds reaching 1Mbps, which is fast enough to support Voip (voice over internet

protocol) phone calls using software such as Skype or Google Talk. Or it would be, if American Airlines wasn't blocking talk services for fear of air rage among passengers. I used a similar in-flight internet service a few years ago. Boeing's satellite-based Connexion system was priced identically, allowed the use of Voip phones and worked seamlessly over the oceans as well as land. Connexion lasted only two years before Boeing admitted that a market for the service "had not materialised". Hopefully, things will be different this time and internet in the air will become a standard service for all passengers.  
 seattle@sunday-times.co.uk

**SPEEDO AQUABEAT**  
 Price to be confirmed, www.speedousa.com

**WHAT IS IT?** The first MP3 player from Speedo, the swimwear specialist, promises a nine-hour battery life and holds up to 250 songs in its 1GB memory. The earplugs fit snugly to form a waterproof seal, and Speedo claims the unit works safely down to 10ft depth. Some smart details set the Aquabeat apart from rival waterproof models: the player floats for easy retrieval, there's a short earphone cord so it won't tangle you up, and the few, large buttons make it easy to control without interrupting your dip.

**SHOULD I BUY ONE?** Swimming can be a tedious exercise, so anything that helps the lengths slip by is welcome — and this looks to be the best-designed swimmer's MP3 player. And as it's out now in the US for \$145 (European pricing is to be confirmed), it shouldn't break the bank.



**OVEI MEDIA POD**  
 From £50,000 www.ocus.com

**WHAT IS IT?** An isolation pod for home cinema and gaming perfectionists. Settle into the reclining chair moulded to your body shape, seal the door, wait for the climate control system to kick in, then select your entertainment from the built-in PSS (including high-definition Blu-ray disc drive), PC with a 24in widescreen monitor or MP3 player dock hooked into a surround sound system, free from all outside distractions.

**SHOULD I BUY ONE?** If you've got a large bank balance, a dislike of sharing, the patience of a saint and an obsession with detail, by all means. Just remember that because every aspect of the Ovei is customisable, from the interior trim to a lighting system with 16,000 variations, it will take at least eight weeks for your bespoke podule to be assembled.



Prices shown are the best found online