



Ask the experts

Digital vs film SLRs

I'm trying to decide whether to give up my Best Buy Canon EOS300 film SLR and go digital. However, none of the digital SLRs in your June report scored five stars for picture quality, so should I assume that they have some way to go to match the performance of film SLRs in this area?

DAVID BICKNELL, IPSWICH

There's no easy answer to whether you get better picture quality from a digital or film SLR: it depends on many factors. But on print sizes up to 12 x 8 inches, there is very little difference. Film photos developed in the traditional way do show more detail than digital photos but most high-street and online photo-



David Bicknell: better picture quality from a digital or film SLR?

processing services now use digital photo-developing machines to develop photos from film cameras as well as digital models. So if detail is important, you may want to get your photos developed traditionally.

Surface water rebate

Is it true you can get a discount if surface water from your property doesn't go down your water company's drains?

I don't remember reading anything about this in *Which?*

JOHN CASSINGHAM, CHOLSEY

We have mentioned this in *Which?* but not recently, so it is well worth pointing it out now. Surface water includes rainwater and other water that drains on to your ground from activities such as washing your car.

Any surface water that ultimately runs into a water company's drains is taken away and treated, and customers have to pay a charge. But if you can prove that your surface water doesn't end up in a public sewer, you are eligible for a rebate. The rebate ranges from £9.44 to £37, depending on your sewerage company – contact it if you think you might be eligible (the number is on your bill). Rebates can't be backdated. For more information, go to www.ofwat.gov.uk and type 'surface water' in the search box.

Electricity usage

My daughter has received a quarterly electricity bill for £900. Her electricity company says she is just a high user but

Which? focus on Passports

Biometric passports

Can you tell me more about the new biometric passports?

The biometric British passport, or ePassport, looks very like the current one (see photo, top right). But it has extra security features, including a chip that stores your facial biometrics – basically, measurements recording the distance between key points on your face, such as the eyes, nose, mouth and ears.

The first biometric passports were issued this February and they will continue to be phased in gradually during 2006. You can use a standard passport until it expires. But for travel to the US, passports issued after 25 October 2006 must be biometric, with a digital photo – a separate photo laminated into your passport will not be valid.

Unexpired machine-readable passports issued before 26 October will still qualify for the visa waiver programme, so most British citizens won't need a US visa. For more information, go to www.usembassy.org.uk.

A machine-readable passport is one where your name, date of birth, nationality and passport number are contained in two lines of text at the foot of the photo page.



Left Photos must now meet stricter international standards for the new facial recognition technology to work. For example, your photo must show you on your own, looking straight ahead, with a neutral expression (no smiling), mouth closed. If you wear glasses, lenses must be free from glare and frames mustn't cover the eyes. Visit www.passport.gov.uk for full details or phone the Passport Adviceline on 0870 521 0410. Your application could be rejected if the photo doesn't meet the new criteria.

Lost passports

What happens if I lose my passport or it's stolen?

Report the loss immediately. If it's lost or stolen in the UK, tell the UK Passport Service and your local police. If you're abroad, tell local police and the nearest British embassy, high commission or consulate; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk) has location details.

Damaged passports

Some pages have got torn. What should I do?

It's best to get a replacement, otherwise you may not be allowed to travel. A damaged, defaced or altered passport won't be returned, so copy pages with stamps and visas on, in case you need to renew them, too.

Children on passports

My child is on my passport. Is this still OK?

Your child can continue to travel on your passport provided that it hasn't expired and you don't need to change any details. But once you do renew, new rules mean that you now have to apply for a separate passport for



Your consumer questions answered by our experts, plus your chance to share your experiences with fellow Which? members



James Tallack
Services research assistant
Answers this month's questions



Ayesha Lawrence
Services research assistant
Gives advice on passports

as she works full-time and lives in a one-bedroomed flat, we don't see how this can be right. Is there a way of working out how much electricity her appliances are using?

JAN CARLSEN, LONDON

You can work it out yourself but it's a bit long winded. You divide the wattage of the appliance by 1,000, multiply the answer by the number of hours the appliance is switched on for, and then multiply that figure by the electrical unit cost – on your bill. Alternatively, the Energy Saving Trust (EST) can provide free estimates of how much various appliances cost to run and help you carry out a free 'home energy check'. Visit www.est.org.uk or phone 0845 727 7200.



Far left The Best Buy Nokia 6030
Left The Philips C13, which will no longer work on O2

Turn appliances off properly when you're not using them – the EST calculates that gadgets left on standby waste more than £740 million worth of energy (resulting in four million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions) in the UK a year.

Entitled to subtitles
Which of the DVD recorders in your May report can record subtitles? This is of interest to people with hearing problems.
F STURM, BY EMAIL

The Best Buy Panasonic DMR-ES20, Sony RDR-GX310 and Sony RDR-HXD710 can all record subtitles from digital TV, as long as subtitles are turned on during recording. The cheaper Goodmans GDVDR305DVBT also has this ability but this model didn't do as well in our tests.

The RNID has an online shop (www.rnidshop.com) that sells audio-visual and other products for people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Phone dilemma
O2 has said that four mobile phones, including my Philips C13, will not work from the beginning of this month. Can anything be done to keep these phones working? If not, can you suggest an alternative basic phone at an economic price?
KEN GRIFFITHS, SOLIHULL

O2 says these older phones (which, as well as the Philips C13, include the Philips C12 and Diga, and the Motorola M5388) are not compatible with the technology that supports some more recently introduced benefits for pre-pay customers, such as free minutes or texts. You may qualify for a free or discounted replacement phone from O2. If so, we'd suggest the Nokia 6030. Alternatively, you may be able to use a pre-pay Sim card from another network in your existing phone. Contact O2 for information about having your phone unlocked (to work on another network) and any unused credit refunded.

your child, too. Child passports last five years and cost £34, or £70 if you need one in a rush. Children need an adult passport once they turn 16. Children travelling to the USA must always have their own passport, whatever their age.

Renewing passports
How far in advance can I renew?

You can renew a passport up to nine months before it expires. Your new one will be credited with any unused time (in whole months) left on your old passport on the day the new one is issued. You can renew a passport if your last one was a standard adult ten-year passport, it's undamaged, you still have it and you don't need to change any details. Allow three weeks for the application to be processed.

Your say

Share your stories with fellow members

Illness abroad

Medical treatment abroad proved a godsend for many of you, when we asked for your experiences of being taken ill on holiday

What you told us

'In Peru the Tourist Doctor Service responded within minutes. Service was superb. The doctor explained possible causes of my illness, gave lots of advice and prescribed medication, and followed up with two calls to check I was OK; all for US\$40 (about £22)!'
LORRAINE, SURREY

'In Tunisia a thrombosis landed me in hospital. I was reluctant to leave my wife alone, but the hospital happily helped out. We had a private room with TV and bathroom. Our insurance covered everything.'
RON, ST ANNES

'I can't speak more highly of the way my wife, Jennifer, was treated at two hospitals in Thailand after she had a brain haemorrhage. All the facilities were first class and the medical teams were fantastic. Thankfully, she's now recovering very successfully.'
JOHN, RICKMANSWORTH

'I get very bad travel sickness. Luckily, the French ferry had a doctor on the crew. He gave me an injection and I felt well enough when we landed to drive to our destination. On a later trip to Ireland, doctors weren't part of the crew, which I found worrying.'
ANDREW, GWYNEDD

Next month

Share your stories of airline food with fellow members

■ letters@which.co.uk
■ Letters, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH

SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

You can contact us by email or post

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