

Nikon's Beautiful D200

John Henshall eulogises over the near-perfection of Nikon's new bargain-priced DSLR

Handling the new Nikon D200 DSLR at its official launch in Marrakesh, Morocco, at the beginning of November 2005, I could tell that this was something very special. Unfortunately, the samples we saw in Marrakesh were pre-production and – frustratingly – we couldn't use them to capture images.

It seemed like a long wait until the review camera arrived, just in time for Christmas 2005. Unfortunately, the delivery note says I have to return it.

The D200 feels at home in your hands as soon as you pick it up for the first time. From then on the experience only gets better. The camera looks good, feels well built and handles like a dream come true.

This report isn't going to tell you where all the controls are. For that you need to look at the product shots or download a catalogue.

Suffice it to say that I find them all to be in just the right places.

Of course I tried to break the camera as soon as possible. Not to break it physically, you understand, but to test its picture-capturing abilities to the limits. But, though I have tried all types of the most difficult subjects, so far I have failed to find any subject or lighting that this camera cannot cope with.

The exposure system and Auto White Balance have never failed to give me excellent results, whether the subject be a landscape with a thin sliver of bright sunlight, the setting sun itself, mixed daylight and tungsten, or a 2810 second exposure of the night sky.

Only extremely low colour temperature artificial interior light is beyond the range of the Auto White Balance, though the orange images then produced are not unattractive. I prefer to set a manual white balance of 2800K in such situations, however. The true colour temperature of domestic tungsten lamps, reflected off furnishings and walls, is probably nearer 2500K but the 2800K setting gives a pleasant slight warmth to indoor pictures. I find this a much more natural look than unnatural-looking flash.

The D200 sits between Nikon's consumer D70 and its professional D2x DSLR. So



what is the D200 – consumer, enthusiast or professional?

In my view, the D200 is a very worthy professional camera. When the price of £1300 (including VAT) is taken into account, there is no doubt that this is a bargain-priced professional DSLR.

The viewfinder is bright and sharp, with all the information you need, including remaining exposures and ISO setting. I particularly like the menu facility to switch on grid lines, which help avoid irritating sloping horizons.

AF points are clearly indicated in the

viewfinder and quickly selected using the right thumb on the big multi-selector button on the back of the camera. There are eleven AF points, covering a large area of the frame, and these can be used either together or individually.

Comprehensive controls cover all the focus options.

I find the matrix metering so reliable that I leave the camera in that mode. So far I have never had a poorly exposed shot, no matter how challenging the subject.

There is a built-in pop-up flash. I guess this smacks of 'amateur' but I'm not ashamed to say that there are times when I find this a useful feature.

There's a multi-exposure facility and a built-in interval timer. I would prefer to be able to select extra-long exposure times. Cable releases have gone high-tech – and high-cost – these days. What happened to the universal threaded type which could be locked down for time exposures?

The Nikon MC-30 'remote cord' costs about thirty quid. I improvised for my shot of the sky, by cutting a rubber eraser off the top of a pencil and using adhesive tape to hold it in position holding down the shutter-release button.

I lined up the shot through the viewfinder, put the lens cap on, taped the rubber in place, then removed the lens cap to start the exposure. It all worked perfectly.

In common with all other Nikon lens mount DSLRs, the D200 uses a sensor which, at 23.6 x 15.8mm, is just under half the full-frame area. This smaller sensor results in an apparent magnification of the focal lengths of the lenses used. So a 17–55mm zoom acts as though it is a 26–83mm zoom.

But packing 10,036,224 pixels (3872 x 2592) into this small area means that each photosite is miniscule. Small photosites don't have as much charge-holding capacity as do larger ones. Photosites on a larger sensor, or on one which has fewer pixels, can be bigger.

The smaller the photosite, the lower the signal-to-noise ratio. This can result in noisier, or more grainy, images. In my tests last year I found the Nikon D2x to be the noisiest at high ISOs and this may have been due to the high pixel count on its half-frame sensor.

For this reason, I was particularly interested in how the camera performs at the higher ISO settings.

Even at ISO1600 the D200 produces fine images, with noise well controlled. The ISO range goes on up to 3200 but now in more useful one-third stop values – known as H0.3, H0.7 and H1.0.

High ISO noise reduction kicks in at ISO800 and above. Selecting 'High ISO NR' in the menu further increases the amount of noise reduction applied.

This suppression of noise does make the high ISO images more acceptable, though it is not without some trade-off as images can look over-smoothed.

Noise in CCDs accumulates during long exposures and that is why I wanted to photograph the clear night sky at

Ascog, on the Isle of Bute.

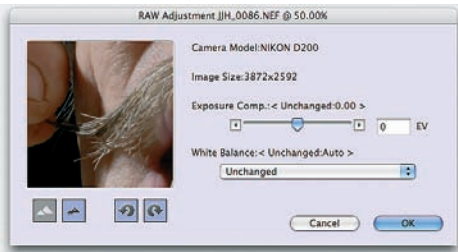
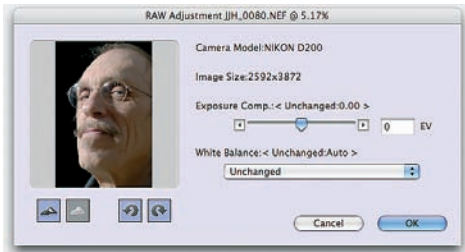
I attempted a two hour exposure but the battery ran out after three quarters of an hour. I reserve judgement on the special EN-EL3e battery the D200 uses.

Long time exposures need almost as long after the shot to process the image within the camera before saving it. I'm not sure that happened when the battery went flat but at least the image was saved to the CF card. The result is quite impressive and noise isn't bad.

The LCD panel is like the one on the D2x: big, bright and beautiful. Just make sure you use the histogram, though. It's very easy to be deceived by the gloss and brightness of the image on the LCD.

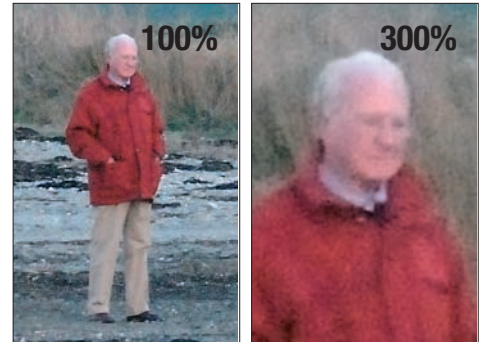
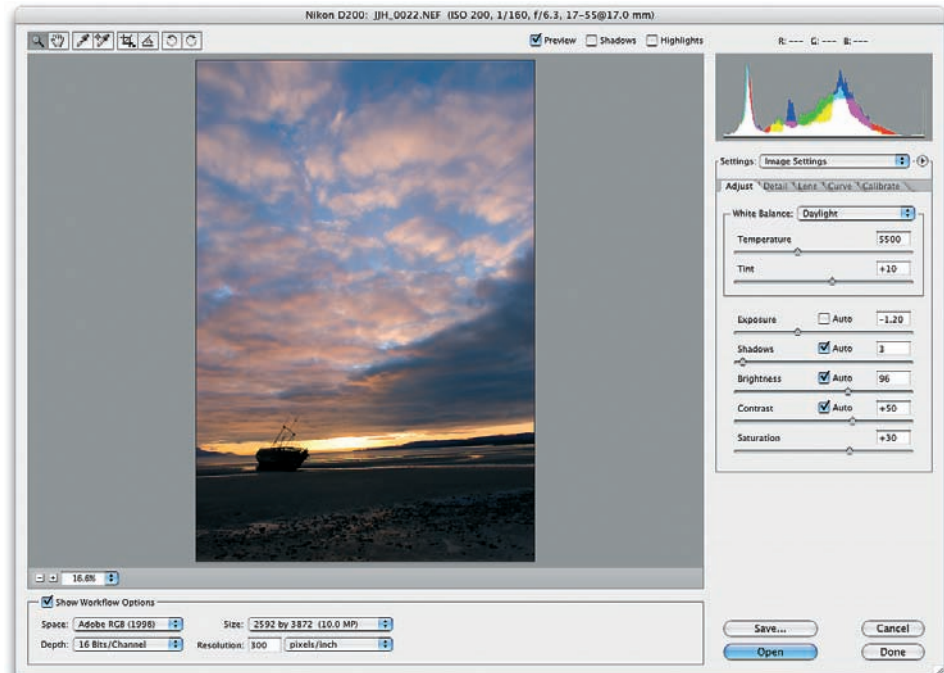
Well, if you haven't already decided to order a D200, read on next month.

RIGHT: The D200 has the ability to reproduce fine detail without any visible signs of colour aliasing. Noise is well controlled, though its suppression at high ISOs does cause a rather strange loss of fine image detail. The camera's ability to capture and record high contrast images is quite superb, as the sunset picture illustrates.



ABOVE: Nikon's *NEF* (Nikon Electronic Format) *Plug-in* for Adobe Photoshop is one of the most irritating pieces of software I have ever had the misfortune to come across. It is every bit as bad as the D200 camera is good. It takes all of 28 seconds for the above box to come up when you attempt to convert a raw file using a 1.3GHz Macintosh Powerbook. It then takes a further 28 seconds to convert the image. Even this might be tolerable if it was not for the laughable controls the plug-in offers. All you can do is zoom in from a thumbnail of the full image to 100%, rotate the image, adjust exposure and colour temperature. There's no histogram. It's a joke – and not a funny one as I spent an entire night acquiring images this way. No wonder people just use JPEG.

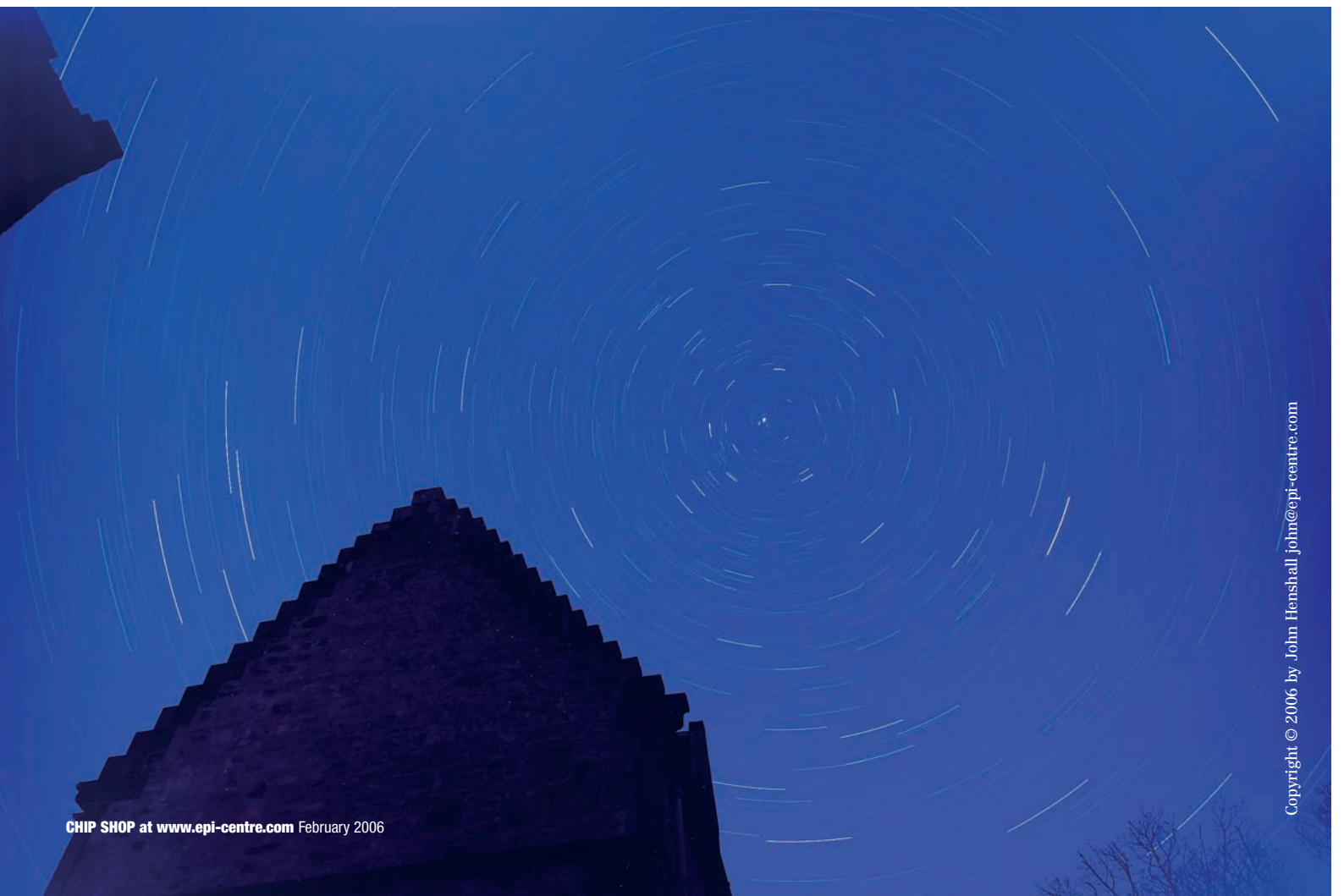
BELOW: At the end of January 2006, the cavalry arrived in the form of the new *Camera Raw* for Adobe Photoshop. *Camera Raw* is free to download. Thank you Adobe for another piece of professional software. Nikon also has Nikon Capture 4 Editor & Camera Control. Version 4.4 includes support for the D200 and can be used for batch processing and other image editing functions. Nikon Capture 4 is not supplied with the camera and will set you back around another £90. My advice is to use Adobe Photoshop CS2 and Camera Raw.



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Every week John Henshall receives many calls from readers who want information from back issues which they no longer have to hand. John enjoys speaking and helping in person those who read his Chip Shop every month but, to avoid having to print out and mail previous articles, these will in future be made available online at www.epi-centre.com

John Henshall's Chip Shop



FAR LEFT: When Adobe Camera Raw 3.3 became available I reprocessed this sunset image with much more pleasing results. The original JPEG is below. 17–55mm zoom at 17mm. 1/50 sec at f/6.3. ISO200.



LEFT: Auto White Balance gives good results in this example of mixed daylight and tungsten illumination. A 100% section of the same shot is shown above. 17–55mm zoom at 55mm. 1/50 sec at f/2.8. ISO800.



TOP RIGHT: Delayed action shot using overhead tungsten candelabra, table and standard lamps. White balance set to 2800K, rather than using the Auto setting, which does not work below 3200K. 17–55mm zoom at 17mm. 1/15 sec at f/2.8. ISO800. The image quality is excellent, as the 150% detail of two of the most distant of the diners shows. Note candle flame.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A single open studio flash and white polystyrene reflector were the only sources used for this portrait of Salvador Dali – or is it Rasputin? In fact it's fellow photographer Jay Myrdal donating his face and hair to DSLR science. Note the way the D200 handles flesh tones and the highlight in Jay's glasses. 80–200mm zoom at 100mm. 1/250 sec at f/22. ISO100.

BOTTOM LEFT: Clear sky and no light pollution on the Isle of Bute prompted me to try a long time exposure to see if the build up of sensor noise was tolerable. A Vignetting setting of –70 in Adobe Camera Raw 3.3 cured the corner shading. 3/4 hour at f/5.6. ISO100.

