

Nikon D700

Like the larger and more costly D3, Nikon's D700 offers full frame, and the same 12MP sensor, with superb low light capability. David Kilpatrick puts it to the test

The Nikon D700 offers full frame format in a compact body, with a 95% viewfinder, outstanding high ISO performance, and 12MP with an unassailable per-pixel image quality. With the imminent launch of the Sony Alpha 900 – 24.6MP in a compact full frame body with 100% finder view - and Canon's promise of an 'EOS 5D Mk II' this month at photokina, the market position of the Nikon D700 will shift, although it is mainly the price point and not the feature appeal which is likely to change when its rivals hit the market.

Coming in at around £1000-£1200 cheaper than a Nikon D3 with the same superb CMOS sensor, how the D700 prices up depends on whether you want the vertical grip, which boosts shooting rates to 8fps from a standard 5fps. Discounts mean that the list price is not proportionally reflected in street prices. In practice, you save about £600-700 by getting a D700 and grip instead of the rugged, environmentally sealed D3, with its 100% finder and even faster sequence shooting plus twin CF card slot.

If you are a D300 owner interested in moving to full frame FX format, the decision is easy. The D700 has a user interface almost identical to the D300, making the switch effortless. You can work with the two cameras side by side, and not have to remember a different sequence of buttons or menu commands for settings.

D3 owners looking for a second full frame body at low cost, as a backup, will find the D700 different from the D3 in many operational details. Basic functions, like reviewing and magnifying images, use an unrelated sequence of actions. Because the two bodies have dissimilar user interfaces, as well as a different battery type and accessories, the D700 is no substitute for a second D3 body in a

Right: Nikon D700 with 24-70mm f/2.8 G AF-S Nikkor lens attached.

Below: Size comparison, D700 body (left) and D3 body (right).



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Below: With failing light and fast moving groups of people, ISO 800 was set for this shot, taken at 70mm, 1/250 at f/8 – a very safe overall setting. Despite the high ISO, perfect detail is held in the embroidery of the shawl.



Below: This old coal hatch in my wall keeps weathering year by year. I use it as a test for sharpness as it has so much natural fine texture. Shot with the 24-70mm sample lens I received with the D700.



working outfit.

For the new buyer, the big question will be the lenses you own. The D3 body is nearly £3000, and if you happen to have some older full frame Nikkors there's a temptation to think they might perform well and risk buying the body alone. In fact, not all older Nikkors will prove up to it, and only relatively new or current lenses are encoded in the camera's database of shading corrections.

So, buying a new lens well matched to the full frame body – whether D3 or D700 – is almost essential for those who own classic full frame optics. The recommended standard lens is the 24-70mm f/2.8 G AF-S Nikkor. It's a four-figure purchase. If you only have the price of a D3 body in your budget, you can probably

afford a D700 with 24-70mm.

This, I suggest, is a much better buying decision, because you will get the quality the FX format offers from the moment your camera arrives. If your style favours wide angle shooting, you could equally well opt for a 14-24mm f/2.8 – which I consider to be a better lens optically than the 24-70mm.

Of the older lenses you may own, think yourself lucky should one be an 80-200mm AF-S f/2.8. This predecessor of the new 70-200mm f/2.8 design has proved itself superior on FX format, and prices have risen on the used market as a result. The 70-200mm may be sharper in the centre for DX digital format users, but it falls off at the edges on full frame.

Other lenses worth trying on the D700 (or

D3) include all standard 50mms and macro lenses, prime apochromatic teles, and fast or extreme wide angles. Generally, routine quality zooms made for full frame film are not going to cut it. Do not bank on your 24-120mm providing a cheap solution out of the store cupboard to get a D700 body into use!

Software and files

Nikon has replaced Capture NX with NX2, but this is not a free upgrade, and only a trial version is included with the D700. If you are a D3 owner, you might reasonably think that, since the file formats of the D700 precisely match those of the D3 and the sensor is the same, your existing copy of Capture NX will do just fine.

It won't. By changing the file tags, Nikon has

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Below: Shooting at ISO 800 in natural light, colour saturation and noise-free sharpness are both retained while the large sensor format gives a subtle depth of field control. 24-70mm at 70mm, 1/60, f/6.3.



prevented Capture NX and earlier installations of View NX from converting D700 Raw files.

So, to the cost of any D700 purchase, NX2 (over £100 for the full version, around £79 for an upgrade from NX) must be added, unless you prefer to use Capture One Pro, Photoshop ACR, Lightroom, Aperture or another alternative. Since these other programs include free updates to add new camera types – from all makers – Nikon’s policy of a fairly expensive upgrade, just to enable processing Raw from one single new model, is a hidden cost which must be borne in mind.

The superior colour given by Capture NX/NX2 is no longer a big issue, as Adobe has made camera profiles, and a camera profiling kit, available to suit all programs able to access .DNG standard ICC profiling. Lightroom and Photoshop, with ACR 4.5 final release, now include an entire set of Nikon-like profiles for the D700, imitating the in-camera settings.

Full frame advantages

When using the D700, I was restricted to the 24-70mm lens. Even so, I found it very versatile. I felt that with the larger viewfinder (than DX 1.5x cameras) my ability to view the frame and compose good pictures was improved.

The real difference lies in the depth of field – or lack of it – and the 3D quality this can give to images. There is just something different about full frame shots.

Another small merit is that dust is smaller relative to full frame! You get more real estate for the dust to land on, but the dust has less relative effect on the picture.

In short ...

The Nikon D700 offers all the image quality and high ISO benefits of the D3. It could not be used in pouring rain, which the D3 will survive; it doesn’t have the pro capacity battery pack; it only has one modest CF slot; the viewfinder is not a true 100%; it is a full frame D300 not a lightweight D3.

At present, the Canon EOS 5D remains on the market at around £700 less. It lacks the ability to customise AF for different lenses (the D700 has front/back focus correction) and it cannot go to ISO 25,600 or shoot at 5fps. It has a comparable build quality and size. It’s been on the market for over three years, which is a long time for a DSLR. Even so, this is the price benchmark – around £1200 not £1800.

Sony’s Alpha 900 is £2000, and the 5D Mk II replacement for the 5D is £2300. Nikon should be offering strong incentives on the D700 toward the end of the year.

It is generally agreed that the Nikon 12MP CMOS FX sensor is the best all round full frame solution to date. The D700 gives you this sensor at a reasonable price, in a body which is well suited to travel and general photography; it is not an obtrusively large DSLR, and a sensible kit need weigh no more than a D300 outfit.

If wide angle work is your thing, options like the 14-24mm Nikkor or Sigma’s excellent 12-24mm f/4.5-5.6 take you places where the DX 1.5x format finds it difficult to go. If you normally shoot long teles, the D700 is clearly not the camera for you; bar a small loss of quality at ISO 3200 and 6400, the D300 will handle long lens shooting better.

Nikon D700

- 12.1MP full frame sensor
- Image Sensor Cleaning
- ISO100-25,600
- Supports DX lenses, (5.1MP with DX lens)
- 14-bit A/D conversion
- Same ultra-fast startup and shutter lag as D3
- Expeed image processor
- Kevlar/carbon fibre composite shutter
- 51-point, 15 cross-type auto focus sensor
- 95% coverage, 0.72x magnification viewfinder
- Auto focus calibration for up to 20 lens settings
- 5fps continuous with auto focus tracking
- Optional MB-D10 battery pack increases burst rate to 8fps
- 3ins 922,000 pixel LCD
- Around £1700