



Have we reached the end of the megapixel race?

By Denis Glennon

Megapixels have become the digital camera market's equivalent of Dr Peter Randell's horsepower or torque – a single metric that buyers and sellers latch on to doggedly, despite the fact that it has little to do with a camera's overall performance. Over the last five years camera manufacturers have been pushing up the megapixels on each new model regardless of whether these increases resulted in better quality images. Mostly they did not.

Throwing more megapixels at a camera's sensor is somewhat like adding a turbocharger to a small engine on a car with lousy breaks and dodgy steering. The number of megapixels in a sensor is just one of a number of aspects that define how well the camera will produce stunning images.

Having larger pixels in a sensor, rather than more small ones, gives better light gathering capability and this translates to better lowlight performance, better colour accuracy and usually a better dynamic range, all of which are good for better photographs. As camera manufacturers cram more pixels onto a given sensor, no matter the size, these pixels get smaller and smaller; not what we want for high image quality.

Despite a number of manufacturers devising technologies to try and overcome this problem, it is typically this reduction in individual pixel size on a sensor that decreases its capacity to collect light (digital data) and this reduces its sensitivity. How many megapixels is enough?

The truth is that about 6 megapixels is enough to make a very nice 8" x 10" print! More megapixels can mean larger prints or more room for cropping but who is making larger prints these days except professional photographers? With many compact cameras offering up to 24x times zoom

ranges, exactly how much cropping do you really need? Ask most working professional photographers and they will tell you 12 megapixels is all they need for 90 per cent of their work.

Keep in mind that with the increasing megapixels come corresponding increases in file sizes. Shooting hundreds or even thousands of 12 megapixel images means you need larger memory cards, more space eaten up on hard drives and more time sorting and editing - all for images that are likely to end up being viewed at no larger than around 1000 x 800px, on your new iPad, or about half a megapixel!

Next time you are tempted to purchase that 21 MPx DSLR camera, pause and see how it stacks up on its low light performance, dynamic range, high-definition video, on-board image processing hardware and the lenses available for it.

In following articles we will have a look at a number of camera equipment options from the compact to the top-end, more exotic models. They will be low on jargon and "techy" stuff and high in practicality. ▶

Denis Glennon is a self-taught professional photographer, meaning he makes all the mistakes himself. His photography seeks to convey the intrinsic value of the natural world, hence his deep interest in nature and wildlife photography. A visit to his website www.denisglennon.com will not disappoint. Whilst there, have a look at his wonderful photo safaris to Africa.

