

First Impressions – Nikon D3 & D300
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Nikon has announced two new DSLRs – the full frame sensor D3 and the D300 with DX size sensor. I had the opportunity to use these two cameras over a 3-day period in late October. I found the cameras to be substantial improvements over the D2xs and D200 respectively.



Both cameras share a number of new features:

- 3.0 inch 920,000 dot LCD screen
- 51-point autofocus (15 cross-type AF sensors)
- 1005-pixel color matrix metering system
- Live View shooting modes (2)
- Picture Control settings
- 14-bit NEF raw files (optional)
- HDMI (High Definition Multimedia Interface) output

D300

The D300 feels the same as the current D200 in size and the arrangement of the controls. The D300 adds an automated sensor cleaning system that can be automatically initiated at power on/off or on demand. One of the most useful advancements on the D300 is the ISO setting from 200 – 3200, with EV adjustments down to ISO 100 and up to ISO 6400. At up to 8 frames per second (with the optional MB-D10 Multi Power Pack), the camera provides high-speed shutter operation. The MB-D10 provides battery compatibility with the EN-EL4(a) battery from the D2x / D3. The D300 provides a 12.3 megapixel CMOS sensor – an increase over the 10.2 megapixel CCD sensor in the D200.

I found the D300 to be a pleasure to use. I attached a range of lenses to the body, including the 28-70 /f.2.8 lens, the 70-200 VR, 200-400VR, and 600/f4. It was a very cloudy, dark 3 days in Yellowstone National Park with periods of heavy snow, rain, and sleet - perfect conditions for testing the high ISO capabilities of the cameras.

With the D300, I was able to photograph bison, elk, coyote, pronghorn, geese, eagles, and landscapes in varying light conditions. ISO settings ranged up to 3200, with the images portraying very low color noise. I was not able to process Nikon's raw image format files (NEF) since I did not yet have any software that would open those versions. I was particularly interested in processing the 14-bit NEF files to see what the tonal gradations looked like. The one issue I had was creating images in 14-bit mode, as it slows the frame rate on the D300 camera to approximately 2.5 frames per second. Nikon says that issue is addressed by using the previously mentioned MB-D10 power pack.



D3

The Nikon D3 is their first full frame (23.9 x 36mm) CMOS sensor DSLR camera. With a frame rate at up to 9 frames per second, truly exceptional high ISO performance, and a shutter rated at 300,000 cycles, the D3 may become the workhorse in Nikon's lineup. I used ISO settings as high as 6400 in the 3 days I used the cameras with astounding results in terms of noise reduction. The images had a natural feel in most cases. Given more time with the camera, I would test the adjustability of the noise reduction settings, as some images seemed unnaturally smoothed. I expect a less aggressive noise reduction setting would provide more natural results in some images.

I was very pleased with a number of features on the D3 – including the focus settings, the speed of focus, the information displayed in the viewfinder, and the 100% coverage through the viewfinder. The view through the viewfinder is different also, not showing preset focus points in the screen. Instead, the focus point glows red when a new point is chosen or the shutter is depressed halfway. I was particularly happy to see two full size compact flash card slots in the camera, allowing three options for recording images on the cards: a) write images to both cards at once, b) write RAW on one card and JPEG images on the second, or c) fill one card with images in whatever format one chooses, then writing to the second card when the first is full. I imagine this will address one of the most frustrating situations – waiting while the buffer writes images to fill a card before manually switching to a newly inserted compact flash card.

I must say that switching between the D300 and D3 caused me to adjust my images based on the 1.5x magnification factor on the D300. Looking at the same scene with the same lens on the D3 really shows the difference in shooting a full frame camera.

I expect I will be ordering at least a D3 when the process for Nikon Professional Services (NPS) members commences in early November; I may also order a D300 to take advantage of the high ISO capability and 14-bit processing it offers vs. my existing D200. The advantages of the D3 are too great to ignore vs. the D2x, and I feel the D300 should be the second camera in my bag. They both look like winners.



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