

Reader's verdict

AFFORDABLE HI-DEF CAMCORDERS

Once upon a time, a camcorder that could record in high-definition would break the bank, but nowadays you can buy one for under \$1,000. We help our reader find out if the price is too good to be true. **By Matt Hanson**

In his spare time Phil Edmonds is a budding filmmaker. As a modern foreign languages teacher he often visits friends in Spain and France, and he has begun to feel that his aging videotape-based camcorder is no longer up to the job. Having recently bought a high-definition television, he wants to upgrade his camcorder to make the most of it. The high price tag of 720p and 1080p (full high-definition) capable camcorders has put Phil off buying one in the past, but with prices dropping he feels that he is ready to take the plunge. He's looking for an inexpensive model that doesn't skimp on features.

Phil Edmonds

AGE: 24

OCCUPATION: Teacher

LOCATION: Southampton

OUR MISSION: To help Phil find an affordable camcorder for filming his home videos in high-definition



TOSHIBA CAMILEO PRO HD

Price \$389

(www.oo.com.au)

Web www.toshiba.com.au

What you get...

Display 2.4in LCD
Resolution 1,280x720
Digital photos 8 megapixels
Zoom 3x optical

At first glance Phil wasn't too impressed with the look of the Toshiba. "It's a lot squarer than the other camcorders. I wouldn't say it is bulky, as it fits in my hand, but it doesn't feel as comfortable as the others," he remarked. Phil didn't come all this way just for the aesthetics, however – it's how the camcorder performs that's important. Zooming in on a distant object was the first test, and Phil was very pleased with the results. "The fact that it has an optical zoom,

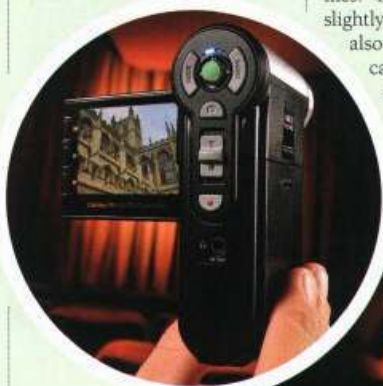
"Optical zoom, rather than digital, means that you don't lose quality"

rather than digital, is great as you don't lose any quality," he said, though after a pause he conceded that "it would be nice if it had a higher zoom [for getting closer shots], but at this price I know you can't expect too much."

Recording footage was as simple as pressing the red record button, and Phil was pleased with the quality of the LCD screen, which allowed him to see what he was filming clearly. There wasn't anywhere to attach an

external microphone, so he had to make do with the one built into the camera. Although this was small, the sound quality wasn't too bad.

The Camileo Pro HD can take still photos at a resolution of 8 megapixels, and comes with a flash for night-time photography. "Taking photos is a bit tricky with this camera," observed Phil. "You'd think that pressing the 'camera' button would change the screen layout to inform you

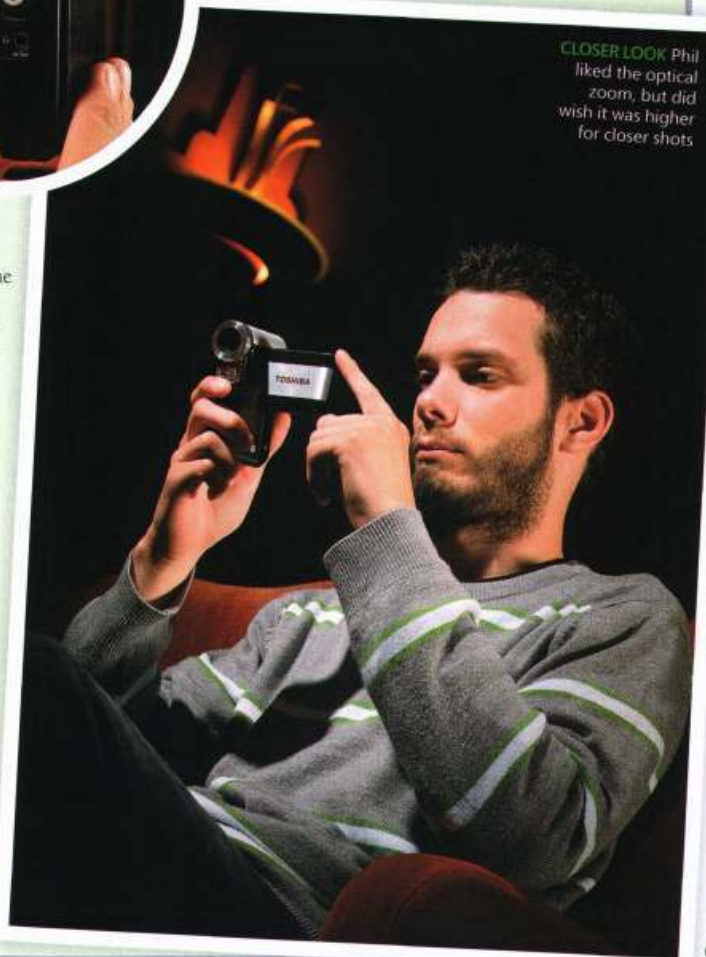


that you're in still photo mode, rather than taking the picture straight away". Although the pictures didn't come out as well as they would have with a dedicated digital camera, Phil liked having the option of taking photographs. "This will be good for my holidays."

"The menu is nice and easy to use," said Phil as he played back the footage he'd just taken. All photos and film are kept in the 'My Works' section of the menu, and you can view thumbnails of the media before you play it back.

To view the films you can play them back on a high-definition television using the cables provided, or copy them onto your PC. Phil had no problem doing this; he simply plugged it into the USB port and copied them over using Windows Explorer. "I like the fact that I don't have to install any software to view my files." The picture quality was slightly grainy, but it was also incredibly detailed. "I can see what's written on that poster in the background," Phil pointed out. "That's pretty impressive."

VERDICT: "This is a nice camera for the price, and the video quality is pretty good. I love how simple it is to use."



CLOSER LOOK Phil liked the optical zoom, but did wish it was higher for closer shots

BUY STUFF READER REVIEW

AIPTEK AHD 300

Price \$277
(www.dealsdirect.com.au)
Web www.aiptek.eu

"This is nice to hold," commented Phil as he picked up the Aiptek AHD 300. Weighing it in his hands he noted that "it's quite light, which is good for taking it on holiday." Although he liked the weight of the camcorder, it did give him a bit of concern. "It doesn't feel as robust as the Toshiba."

It's true that the build quality of the AHD 300 isn't as good as the other two camcorders, but then it is the cheapest in the test, and also the one with the best specs. "I'm impressed that it records in 1080p, unlike the others that

only record in 720p," commented Phil. "I suppose that's why it doesn't feel as solid as the other ones. Compromises have to be made

for the price." Phil made a good point. The price for this 1080p camera (which doesn't quite record in full 1,920x1,080 high-definition)



is really impressive. You would feel more comfortable taking this to the beach on holiday. But would it withstand the knocks and bumps of travelling? Phil tapped the case. "I'm not so sure."

The LCD screen layout and menu system was very similar to the Toshiba. "This is a nice screen. I can see what I'm recording clearly," said Phil. On the big screen the footage Phil had shot looked really good, if just a little bit jerky, with even the smallest details being picked up, thanks to the high resolution. One area that let the AHD 300 down, however, was the lack of an optical zoom. Instead, the camcorder has digital zoom,

SANYO XACTI HD700

Price \$800
(www.shopbot.com.au)
Web sanyodigital.com

"Wow!" exclaimed Phil as he picked up the last of the camcorders on test. "I like the feel of this." What impressed Phil so much was that the Sanyo Xacti combines the ergonomic design of the Aiptek AHD 300 with the solid build of the Toshiba Camileo Pro HD. "It doesn't feel like it would break easily, which I was worried about with the Aiptek." The thing that

stood out most of all for Phil was the price – around \$500 more than the others. "Let's see if it's worth it," said Phil as he began the test.

"The screen is really nice," said Phil as he prepared to take some footage. The high quality of the screen meant that Phil was able to get a better idea of how his footage was going to turn out. The optical zoom also impressed: "This is great. I can zoom in on distant objects with no loss of picture quality." Once Phil zoomed in as far as the optical zoom would go, it

began zooming in digitally.

One nice feature is the Movie Motion Compensation function, which slightly crops your picture to eliminate the shakiness often found with hand-held cameras, giving a steadier image. "This is a good feature, as it means I don't need a tripod to get a steady shot." Phil gave the camera a bit of a shake, and it compensated well.

The Xacti comes with a dock that is used to connect the camcorder to the PC via USB, or to a high-definition TV via component or HDMI. Whilst this is a good way of keeping the camcorder safe whilst displaying movies, it was more of an effort to

copy the videos to PC. "With the others I simply had to connect them via a cable, but with this



What you get...

Display 2.7in TFT
Resolution 1,280x720
Digital photos 7.1 megapixels
Zoom 5x optical zoom, 12x digital zoom

and the difference in quality is quite obvious. "With optical zooms, the lens is doing the hard work so the picture remains sharp," explained Phil. "With digital zoom it's just increasing the pixels, so you end up losing some of the advantages of having such high resolutions."

VERDICT: "Although lacking a few features, the price is fantastic."



What you get...

Display 2.4in LCD

Resolution 1,440x1,080

Digital photos

8 megapixels

Zoom 2x digital zoom
in 1080p resolution,

4x digital zoom at 720p



I have to place it in the dock, connect the dock to the computer through USB, and then plug in the dock! It's a bit long winded." As soon as he saw the quality of his footage, however, all of Phil's reservations were forgotten. "That is really impressive."

VERDICT: "It's more expensive than the others, but you can see why. Superb."



And our READER'S FINAL VERDICT IS...

SANYO XACTI HD700

Price \$800 (www.shopbot.com.au)

Web sanyodigital.com

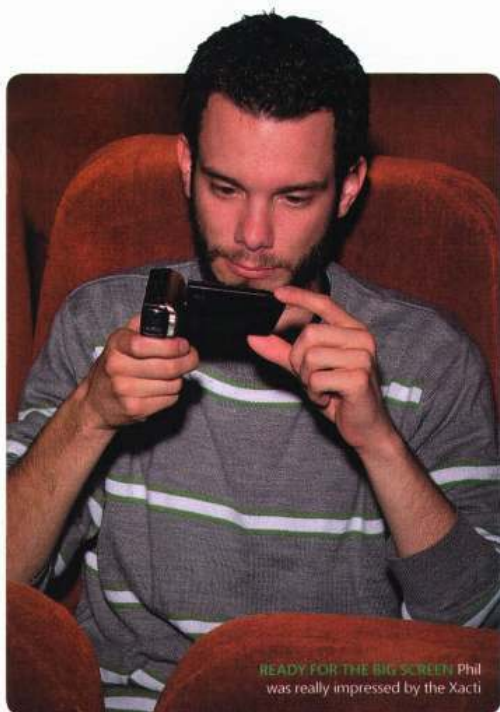


"Choosing which camera should win has been really difficult, and all three have got something going for them. For the Toshiba it is the price and build quality that I liked the most, the Aiptek has the high resolution and fantastic price whilst the Sanyo is just an all-round quality piece of technology.

"I think one of the main reasons I'm so impressed by all of the camcorders I have tested is because I have been used to my standard-definition camcorder. The difference in quality between that and the high-definition models is amazing. I don't think I could ever go back to standard definition.

"In the end there can only be one winner, though, and after a lot of deliberation I've gone for the Sanyo Xacti. Whilst I liked the Toshiba, I thought that the design wasn't great. I'm not so shallow as to say it doesn't look as good as the others, but it was the way it felt in my hand as I was filming. The square corners made it less comfortable to hold than the others, and if you're filming for a long time than this could be a problem.

"Similarly, I really liked the Aiptek and I thought the price tag was great. To get a 1080p camcorder for only \$277 is really impressive. The main thing that stopped me from choosing it as the winner was its lack of optical zoom. The picture quality wasn't quite as sharp as the others (though it was still impressive), but if you just want a hi-def camera that's cheap enough to carry with you, I heartily recommend it.



READY FOR THE BIG SCREEN! Phil was really impressed by the Xacti

Just don't drop it – it feels like it would shatter!

"In the end, I had to go for the Sanyo Xacti. I know it's nearly \$500 more than the others, but at around \$800 it's still good value. The amount of features that come with it, from

the motion control to light measuring modes, means that the footage really is a step above the others. I also like the fact that it comes with all the necessary cables, which saves you having to buy them separately."

Our opinion

With all the cameras on test here you're getting very good value for money. For under \$1000 you can get a high definition camcorder, which would have been unheard of this time last year. Although they lack some of the features of more expensive models, their price means that you don't have to be an enthusiastic future Spielberg to justify buying one – they're perfect for family celebrations and holidays.

The model that you should go for depends on what you want out of it. If you just want a no-frills camcorder to take out and about with you

then you can't go wrong with the Aiptek, but if you don't have a 1080p television to display your footage, you may be better off with the Toshiba, which only records in 720p but has slightly better image quality. If you want your movies to look their best, and you don't mind spending a bit more, then you should go for the Sanyo. Whichever model you choose you can be guaranteed a great piece of technology for relatively little money.

Many thanks to Martin and The Little Theatre, for the use of the cinema.