

First Look Nikon D3x

Nikon rounded up an astonishing year by announcing the launch of its highest spec DSLR yet, the awesome 24 megapixel D3x. Prior to our full test, here's a taste of what it can do **WORDS** Terry Hope **PICTURES** Uzair Kharawala

In terms of a surprise then Nikon's latest DSLR launch didn't really cut the mustard, since it must have been one of the most heavily anticipated models of recent years. However, with regard to what the new D3x actually appears to deliver this can justifiably be said to be one of the launch highlights of 2008, albeit right at the tail end of what turned out to be a momentous year for the company.

This is the camera that many pros have been asking for, and it's the model that is set to build upon the extraordinary success of the D3. At first sight the D3x appears identical to its slightly older sibling, which, particularly for those who might find themselves using both models, has to be a good thing. The big difference, of course, lies in the sensor that has been employed and the influence it's had on the camera's performance, and this is what most professionals will be interested in.

The D3x employs a new Nikon FX-format CMOS sensor with 24.5 effective megapixels covering an area of 35.9 x 24mm. As well as

doubling the resolution over the D3, Nikon has optimized the pixel characteristics to provide a higher S/N ratio and wider dynamic range by securing a greater amount of light received by each pixel, thereby - in theory at least - reducing lost highlights and shadows and ensuring smoother tone reproduction with minimized noise.

The incorporation of a new chip, which Nikon insists is its own design, has led to the provision of a smaller ISO range - 100-6400 - than the original D3 although, in fairness, the new camera is clearly a model which is designed to be doing a different job. One suspects that the D3x's strengths will lie in the provision of stock photography and studio shooting, where ultimate quality is the name of the game and high speed shooting is not generally a requirement. Those who want to sample the benefit of 24 megapixel Nikon resolution will have to pay for the privilege however, since, at around £5500 body only, it works out at roughly twice the price of its close twin.

LEFT: This shot was taken during Oz's studio workshop with the D3x, with an SB900 used inside a Lastolite Ezybox diffuser providing the frontal lighting. The quality of the result can be seen in the detail recorded in the model's skin

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Shooting with the D3x

While it may be one of the most hotly debated camera launches of recent years the real analysis of what the D3x has to offer has to come from those who have already had the chance to try the camera out in the field. Uzair Kharawala was given an early model and decided to take the camera off to the top of a mountain in Switzerland where he hoped to exploit some of the cleanest air on the planet and to test out the D3x's handling of difficult, high contrast conditions. He also had the chance to use the camera extensively during his workshops at Nikon Expo and so had experience of using the camera in two very different environments.

"When I tested out the D3 I used it on a shoot in a capsule on the London Eye," says Uzair, universally known as Oz, "and so I wanted to come up with something which would similarly put a little pressure on me time-wise and which would give me some interesting conditions under which to test the camera. I decided to take a short trip to Switzerland to try out some high altitude shooting and to see how the camera's new sensor could handle the high contrast range provided by bright sunlight reflecting off pristine white snow."

The first setback arrived when Oz reached his location only to discover that the weather had closed in and visibility levels were low. "It was the worst weather for three weeks," he says. "We were scheduled to take a helicopter trip 3500 metres up into the mountains to get ourselves into position, but the weather was so poor that they weren't flying." Instead Oz and his team had to take a train to get themselves into the area where they wanted to be and then try to cope with the blizzard conditions they experienced there.

"It was pretty hopeless to be honest," says Oz, "but then I saw a small chink of blue

RIGHT: Using non professional models Oz set up some test images on the mountainside, using a couple of Nikon SB900 flashguns - one on-camera and one from the side fired through an umbrella - to boost the failing light levels

in the sky some distance away and eventually there was a break in the clouds and we got a bit of sunlight at last." The shooting period lasted only for around fifteen minutes or so, but it allowed some images to be set up which featured the killer combination of blue skies and pure white snow.

"It was a good test of the camera in many ways," says Oz. "I had to work quickly and it was interesting to see how easy it would be to work with the new model, having had experience of the D3. In fact it just felt completely natural: I was so confident that I would know what I was doing that I didn't even take the manual with me. Ultimately I will be using both the D3 and the D3x in my wedding and portrait photography business and it's comforting to know that when I'm under pressure I won't find it an issue to switch between cameras. Everything is in the same place and the menu system is exactly the same and so when you are working under pressure it's very easy to move between them."

Oz opted to meter in manual mode, since the conditions would have been testing for any automatic metering system. "The snow was reflecting the sunlight and there was so much contrast around," he says. "I also wanted to mix in a little off-camera flash which needed to be taken into the equation, but once I'd taken my readings and worked out the exposure the results were excellent. The new sensor has a very good dynamic range and was capable of holding detail both in shadow areas and in the highlights, and the snow came out looking beautifully white."

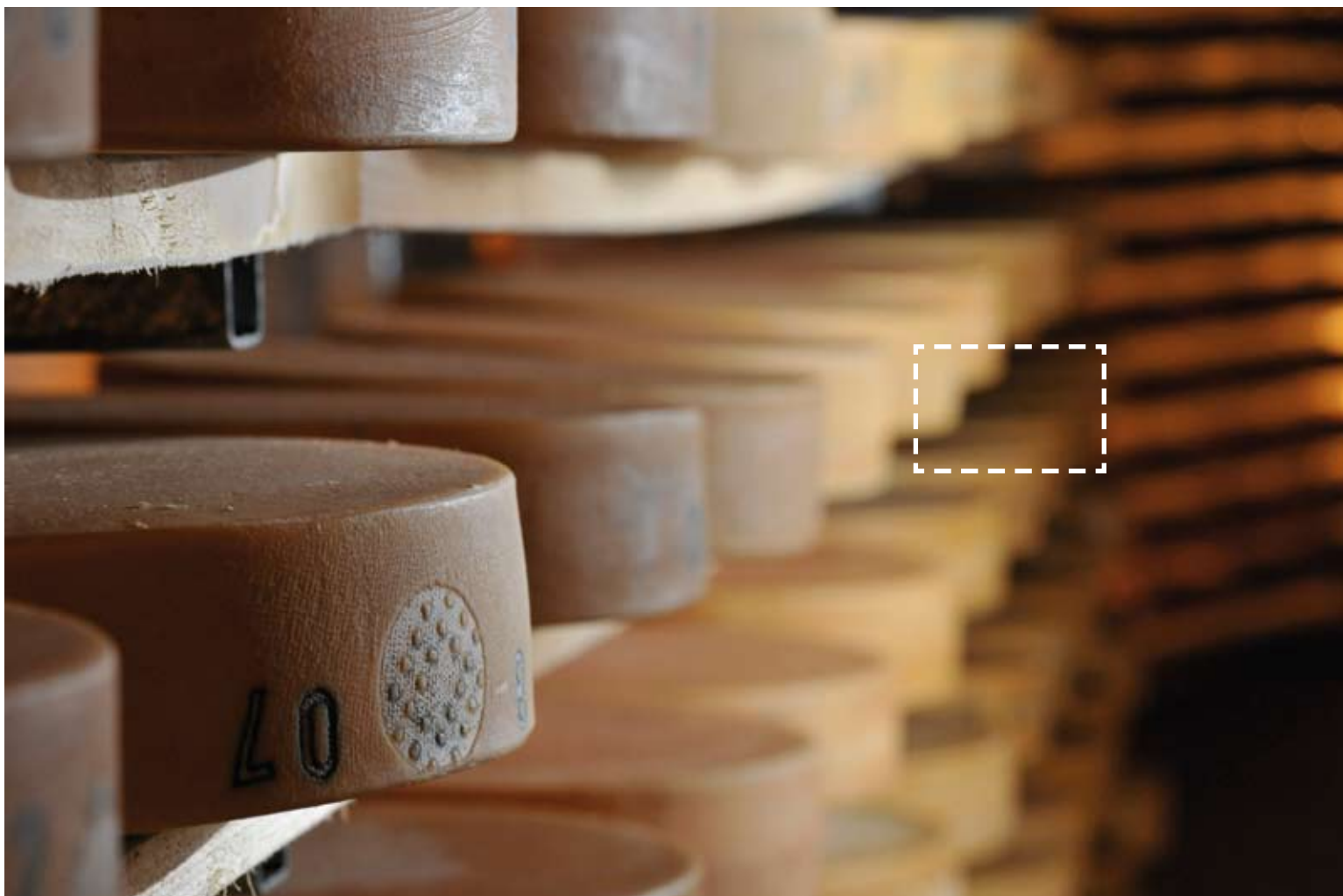


"The snow was reflecting the sunlight and there was so much contrast around"



ABOVE: As the sun made a brief appearance the contrast levels in the scene soared and yet the D3x's sensor was able to cope and to hold detail in both the shadow and highlight areas

RIGHT: Once again an off-camera SB900 flashgun has added a touch of sparkle to this shot, and the D3x has coped well with the contrast level in the scene



After losing the light again Oz headed inside to carry out a shoot around a cheese cellar, which was dark and atmospheric and challenging in different ways. Working with ISO speeds up to 1600 Oz used available light but also set up some shots where off-camera flash in the form of the SB900 was again mixed in, and once more the results were striking, to the point where the owner of the cellar begged some images to use in his next catalogue.

"At the highest ISO speed I used I would say that the noise I was getting was equivalent to what I would have expected from the D3 at the same setting," says Oz. "In other words it was minimal and the pictures were completely usable. What really impressed me, from this and the other shoots that I have done with the D3x, was the resolution that I was achieving. I've pulled up the files to 100% and the detail is astonishing, particularly at the ISO 100 setting, and I would say that it's approaching medium format in terms of quality. At a time when the trend is for wedding albums to get larger I can see real and positive benefit for this kind of resolution in my work."

Other observations from Oz were that battery life was good - the same battery kept the D3x going all day up on the mountain, while the intense cold had no effect on the delivery of power. As an aside Oz notes that the photographer will

need to get used to carrying a lot of extra memory around with them since file sizes - particularly when shooting a mix of RAW and JPEG - are massive, and cards will get filled rapidly.

The D3x was equally at home in the studio, as Oz set about putting it through its paces in his workshops. Here it wasn't the weatherproofing being given a testing, more the ability of the camera to deliver high resolution files and, once again, the results were striking. At 100% enlargement detail in the skin of models was almost too good - every pore was visible and the file sizes would have been plenty for most end users, including picture libraries and advertising clients.

We'll look forward to giving the D3x a full test next month but in the meantime the first results look highly encouraging. It's been a long time coming but Nikon appears to have a flagship on its hands which will tempt a lot of photographers who have the need for ultimate resolution from a portable camera. The price tag will deter some who could, perhaps, make better use of the strengths of the original D3, but for those who are making their living in some of the areas where the D3x will excel, the likelihood is that the cost will be far from a deal breaker.

Contact: www.fotosf.com



TOP & ABOVE: As the weather deteriorated in Switzerland, Oz headed inside to set up some images in a cheese store. The quality of the results can be seen in this enlargement from a shot taken at ISO 1600

"I've pulled files up to 100% and the detail is amazing"

● A multi award winning photographer, Uzair Kharawala is one of the UK's top social photographers and he's also a regular speaker at some of the largest photography conventions, trade fairs and shows. New UK dates for his 'Portraits for Profit' workshops have been released. Please log on to www.nikon.co.uk/training for more info.