

Format	Price	Optical Zoom	Audio	Exposure	Shutter	White Balance	AE Modes
SmartMedia	£600	1-4x	Mono	Automatic	Auto variable	Auto tracking, manual switching	None

View to a

The life of the home web page designer just got easier with Sharp's introduction of the VN-EZ1 Internet Viewcam. Darren Lock spins a web of intrigue

Everybody loves a gadget and the new Sharp VN-EZ1 could easily be described as the gizmo of the moment. Sharp has described it as an Internet Viewcam and it is aimed at those of us with a busy internet social life.

Cruise control

Utilising the latest MPEG-4 digital compression system, the EZ1 can be used to take highly compressed digital videos or as a digital still camera. The cam uses SmartMedia cards, so you don't even have to worry about buying blank video tapes.

Initial impressions of the EZ1 suggest this camcorder is something special. It has a compact, space

age design and fits snugly in your hand. The futuristic silver casing features a lens body which can be adjusted within a near-360° range and a 1.8in colour LCD monitor is located at the back of the unit. As there is no viewfinder, you have to use the monitor to frame your shots.

Most of the unit's controls are located above the LCD screen. Here you will find a power switch, a mode select switch, the menu button and rocking control which takes care of zoom and the sound volume. At the front of the unit, the shutter control can be found, just where the forefinger of the right hand would naturally fall. Very ergonomic, unless of course, you are left-handed!

A firm rubber moulding is fixed around the right hand side of the unit and provides adequate grip. The speaker and power input is located on the left side of the camcorder. A sliding panel at the bottom of the unit gives

access to the SmartMedia card and the battery compartment. In terms of design, this is a little bit of a faux pas, as when you want to access the SmartMedia card, there is a real danger of the batteries falling out of the camera.

Accessory slot

The unit comes with a 4Mb SmartMedia card but cards of up to 32Mb in size can be used with the EZ1.

In movie mode, there are five resolution modes to choose from. The lowest resolution is LP which allows 17mins of footage to be stored on the 4Mb card and around a minute can be stored at the S-Fine resolution. Normal mode can store up to seven minutes of footage, so if you want high quality videos you will need to invest in a new SmartMedia card.

All videos are recorded at 160x120 resolution. Depending on the resolution mode, the videos also have a frame rate of between 1fps and 15fps, so you will hardly be the next George Lucas using the EZ1. Recorded footage is however, adequate for web use, with colour being represented

realistically, though motion is slightly jerky.

There are two image resolution modes to choose from when using the cam to take still images. In Normal mode, you can fit 72 images on a 4Mb card at a resolution of 640x480. In Fine mode, only 36 images can be captured at 640x480. As you can imagine, this is no megapixel camera so the image



The VN-EZ1 is a compact little package almost good enough to eat!



Digital Effects

None

Insert Edit

None

Viewfinder

None

LCD Screen

1.8in colour

Image Stabiliser

None

Weight

240g inc batteries and SmartMedia card

Still

quality isn't comparable to a dedicated digital still camera. The still images are small, a little fuzzy and not what you'd expect from this kind of camera.

Free and easy

Using the unit is a breeze. The onboard menu system is clear and easy

to pick up and the onboard file management system is fully featured. It is just a matter of powering the unit up and pointing it at the desired target – it's that simple. Accessing the files from the SmartMedia card is also easy to do but instead of connected the EZ1 to your PC's COM port, Sharp have utilised another means of file transfer.

The EZ1 comes complete with a Flash Path floppy disk adaptor. Basically, the SmartMedia card is put into the floppy disk adaptor then inserted into a PC's floppy disk drive.

File transfer is fast and the PixLab Media Browser software uses a similar Windows file browser to access the contents of the FlashMedia card.

Video files are saved in Windows ASF (Active Streaming Format) which means they can be easily embedded into HTML files. They can be read by other Windows users who have DirectX 5.0 and above installed on their PCs. These files can also be sent to others via e-mail, though if you have any Mac-owning friends, they won't be able to access them.

The Sharp VN-EZ1 is a great little package though it will be quite interesting



The VN-EZ1 is a great little package, though it will be interesting to see if this technology catches on'

Sharp's Internet Viewcam produces excellent images to spice up your web pages

to see if this technology catches on. Aimed primarily at the internet user, it doesn't yet have the output quality of an equivalent digital still camera or a digital camcorder in the same price range but then, it isn't meant to compete with them.



Corner kick

Not all PC owners have TV or video capture cards, but one potential problem for the Internet Viewcam is that it might appeal only to those who do. And they wouldn't need one.

The EZ1 is a brilliant piece of technology but like the Sony Mavica, there is a danger it will be relegated to being a very expensive executive toy!

Saying that, however, the EZ1 shows that digital video-making could very easily turn the corner and do away with conventional blank tapes. Who knows, maybe in another couple of years, Sharp may develop a digital camera of sufficient output quality which uses SmartMedia cards. Now that would be worth waiting for! ●



SHARP VN-EZ1 £600

EASE OF USE



FEATURES



PICTURE PERFORMANCE



VALUE



Minimum system requirements:

PC 133MHz or higher, 32Mb memory, 75Mb hard disk space, 800x600 16-bit display, soundcard and Windows 95/98 with Internet Explorer 4.01

CU VERDICT 85% **CAMCORDER**
5.0/5.0 (AVOID)

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