

WIRED

What Would You Do With 80 Million Pixels?

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Phase One IQ180

•Digital Cameras and Camcorders •\$47,990 base, \$55,470 as tested •Phase One

Reviewed by Jon Snyder Email Author · May 3, 2011



Cameras are like paintbrushes — they're just creative tools with no inherent magical powers. No amount of megapixels or sexy German lenses will make you a better photographer.

But you can certainly make some pretty badass pictures with a \$50,000 paintbrush.

Meet the IQ180, the new digital back from Phase One, a Danish company known for making high-end medium format camera systems for professional photographers. This most recent addition to the Phase One fleet boasts an 80-megapixel sensor, the highest resolution sensor the company has ever offered.

We got the chance to test it for a week. It's remarkably easy to use, and it's capable of capturing more image detail than you'll likely ever need. Quite simply, it's one of the sickest camera systems you can buy for any money — and we're talking about some serious coin here. For \$47,990, you get the back, the body and a Schneider Kreuznach 80 mm LS f/2.8 lens.

What you're left holding is the photographic equivalent of a Bentley-Ferrari pickup truck — it's sexy and elegant and expensive and you're kind of afraid you're going to run it into a tree, but its virtually limitless utility makes it capable of handling almost any job.

The images produced by the 80-megapixel digital back are massive — upwards of 500MB each. If you were to pull a file straight out of the camera and print it out at full print resolution, your image would be about 34 inches wide. That amount of depth adds a level of clarity and definition to your images that's truly stunning.

Like most camera systems in this price range, the Phase One IQ180 is made for professional commercial photographers, or any other lucky souls who can afford to buy one. But it's not just some precious totem of exclusivity. It is most definitely a workhorse meant for long hours in the studio and on location.

To pull the images off this camera, you have to use Phase One's software — either Capture One DB, which comes with the camera, or Capture One Pro. If you've already got the software, the company is issuing updates to support the new IQ series hardware. The MacBook Pro I used during testing has a 2.53GHz Core i5 processor and 4GB of RAM, and it could manage the files just fine. I wouldn't want to open up more than four images simultaneously without more RAM, though.



Capture One Pro on the Mac.

The Phase One IQ180 uses a 645 format body, and if you've ever used a medium format 645 body, you'll know your way around this camera. For our testing, Phase One also sent a couple of Schneider Kreuznach prime lenses (a 55mm and a 110mm) in addition to the 80mm that comes with the camera.

But the IQ180 digital back is the real star here. It's one of the easiest-to-use pieces of photographic capture equipment that I've ever laid my hands on. It powers on quickly, and the 3.2-inch touch screen comes to life. Four giant buttons come up on the display: one to play back your images, one for your ISO adjustment, one to adjust white balance, and one for a menu screen, which leads you to other custom settings.

The responsiveness of the touchscreen is as fast as my iPhone 4, and it's easy to see even outside in sunlight. Remarkably, the camera back only crashed once during a week of testing, and it wasn't during a shoot — I had to reset it when it got hung up while I was formatting some CF cards.

I used it in the field on several editorial assignments for print and online, and I took it to my friend's house for some casual shooting at an Easter brunch just for fun. Image capture was super fast, whether it was tethered to my laptop or sending files directly to a CF card. To tether it, all I had to do was turn on the capture software, plug in a FireWire 800 cable to the camera and the images started popping up on my laptop's screen as I shot. I thought for sure that setting up a tether was going to be more difficult than that.

Also, if you want to run it untethered, you can flip through your shots on the camera by swiping your finger. You can double tap to zoom in to a 100 percent view of the image where you can test for sharpness.



I shot more than 900 frames during the testing period, and I found the camera to be extremely reliable. The last thing you want to worry about while you're working is whether your gear is going to behave properly, and in any every situation, I was able to concentrate on the creative task at hand and just forget about the tech. Never once did I have to stop and try to figure out some complicated technical issue, interrupting my work flow. Never once did I get the feeling that it was too much of a hassle to have taken outside of the studio (though I probably wouldn't take it to the beach for fear it would get gunked up with sand).

I should note that it's bulky, and that the motor drive isn't as fast as my 35mm. But if you're used to using 645 medium format systems, the bulk and speed won't be a surprise. Plus, this guy isn't supposed to be waterproof or shoot five frames per second — it's supposed to be the easiest-to-use hi-definition still camera system you can get. And it does a pretty great job at that.

When the test kit first arrived at my desk at Wired, I posted a photo of it on Instagram to do a little bragging. I tried to be funny by captioning the picture, "But does it come with Instagram?"

One of my photographer friends posted an astute comment in rebuttal: "But does it come with a client base?"

That's the thing — this camera is really only accessible to you if you're a pro with enough assignments to cover the cost. The rest of us will just rent one to use for a few hours on an as-needed basis.

But, if you want to rule Instagram and you have 50 grand lying around, you certainly couldn't do any better than this.

WIRED Huge, badass 80-megapixel files let you see skin pores from 20 paces. Big touch screen with a simple interface. Solid build. Remarkably easy to use — provided you understand the mechanics of photography, as is the case for any serious camera.

TIRED When shooting untethered, the batteries are sapped faster than Bukowski's beer supply — you get two, but you'll have to keep a backup charged and swap them often. Best to pre-format your cards before heading out on a shoot.



Photos: Jon Snyder/Wired.com