

camera review

Fujifilm X100

RRP: \$1299

Old-school design feels like film – only better, write **Ewen Bell**.

Wondering why Fujifilm would release a large-sensor retro camera with a fixed prime lens delivering an effective 35mm view? It's a common problem for technology companies operating in a crowded DSLR market: you can make some truly fine hardware and even some great lenses without grabbing a serious slice of sales. Canon and Nikon remain dominant, partly due to the legacy of owning the lenses, and partly because they offer the most complete imaging systems on the market.



The X100 looks great, and works even better

DP Deputy Editor, Lisa Perkovic

Lisa began work as a photographer at a studio specialising in children's photography. She has since worked as a travel writer and photographer, and her work as a freelance travel writer for publications including the *SMH* and *Sun Herald*, *Luxury Travel*, *Vacations and Travel* and *Get Up and Go* magazine has taken her around the world with camera in hand. A prolific blogger, you can check out more of Lisa's professional photographic and editorial work at lisaperkovic.com



So what does a company like Fujifilm do with all that technology invested in sensors and image processors? They target a growing niche for novel camera designs that are jam-packed with technology, but finished to the highest quality of build. To make another APS-C sensor camera really stand out from the pack, Fujifilm has gift-wrapped their best technology to look like something old and easily overlooked.

The X100 could have been a tragic failure had it delivered mediocre images, something similar to digital compacts. By embracing the retro look and feel, Fujifilm put themselves right under the spotlight where any failing will be judged harshly as the product of folly. But to their credit, this camera delivers on the dream, with a generous sensor and fine lens working in harmony to capture sensational images.

The X100 doesn't lack for features, value or style. This is the camera that Leica should have built.

New for old

Across a wide variety of lighting conditions, the X100 performs superbly, with a maximum shutter speed of 1/4000th of a second and the ability to shoot wide open at f/2. In low light, the sensor reveals some genuine depth of talent, producing rich skin tones and lovely exposures. You can capture RAW images with or without the JPEG versions, the built-in flash can be augmented with an external unit, and dials for shutter speed and aperture are elegantly simple.

Fujifilm has skipped the usual scene modes, sports functions and other gimmicky "features", opting for a design that pays a little respect to the photographer. Useful controls such as an AE/AF lock, customisable function button and exposure compensation dial are within easy reach of the shutter button.

Embracing digital technology in an old-school camera design has led to some interesting opportunities for the Fujifilm geeks. The optical viewfinder offers a

representative view of the camera's fixed 35mm perspective, but with the added bonus of an electronic overlay that feeds information to your eye. This overlay takes over the viewfinder under special conditions, such as focusing in macro mode or manual focusing, to deliver an electronic viewfinder instead.

You can slip between the optical viewfinder and rear screen at will, lock out the optical entirely, or let the camera detect when you're eye-balling the optical option and switch automatically. In fact, these permutations are the most complicated aspect of the camera.

By default, the customisable function button gives you quick access to ISO settings, and a natty little selector control for your thumb lets you browse and choose. You can dedicate the function button for almost anything you like, from movie-mode to depth of field preview to autofocus modes.

Get a grip

I was really excited when I first got my hands on the camera and saw the tactile controls for aperture and focus running around the lens barrel. With glee I switched off the autofocus and spent the next few minutes spinning the focus ring around. And around, and around. Regrettably, this doesn't feel anything like a real manual focus lens, and demands a lot of patience to wind between distant subjects and up-close range.

I'd go so far as to say the manual focus is an elaborate bit of decoration, designed primarily to placate that part of the photographic brain that insists on having access to fully manual controls – even though we'll probably never actually use it. Indeed, the autofocus is excellent, delivering assertive focus lock without undue delay. Even in low-light conditions, the system works surprisingly well.

The best use of the manual focus control is found when shooting macro. I can grab an initial focus range with the auto setting, then lock off the focus and make manual adjustments from there. This scenario makes the focus ring a little more useful.



Bright sunlight is a mixed blessing for the X100. The electronic overlay struggles to generate contrast, in which case you lose sight of exposure data and the framing guide. With a maximum shutter speed of 1/4000th of a second, you can happily expose in bright conditions, even at an aperture of f/2.

Well, unless you're on aperture priority that is. A bug in the current firmware restricts the fastest shutter speed to 1/1000th of a second under some situations, which is too much light on a sunny day for shooting with the widest aperture. This is just one of many such quirks slated for fixes in the next firmware revision. Better response from the manual focus ring and making the menus more logical are also rumoured to be on the list.

Quiet quality

You can put the X100 into a stealthy silent mode, removing all the beeps and faux clicks from the digital heart of the camera. When you hit the shutter it releases a gentle little click, not unlike the sound of a disposable camera, and instinctively I look for the wind-on wheel to advance the film to the next frame. Old habits die hard.

It also passes the cappuccino test, where I shoot my daily caffeine intake with the aperture wide open at f/2 and engage the maximum macro. The lens reveals a touch of softness when pushed to the limits, but

VERDICT

Don't let the modest retro styling fool you, because packed inside is some of Fujifilm's best technology. A quality fixed lens fronts a serious sensor, with direct and effective controls to suit photographers who know what they want from a camera.

RATING

9/10

Love It

- Image quality is just the duck's nuts
- Retro design is seductively disarming of shy subjects

Like It

- F/2 prime lens shooting the equivalent of 35mm is lovely
- Dials and external features are well thought out
- Electronic overlay to the optical viewfinder is funky

Less Impressed

- Manual focus is dreadful
- Menu functions are as retro as the camera design
- Firmware bugs need a little bit more development

DYNAMIC RANGE

One of the unique features of the X100 is subtle control over the dynamic range of the sensor. You can dial in greater detail in the shadows or highlights as required. The default settings give good protection from blowing out highlights. These different curve responses, combined with colour saturation and tone variations, are the basis for different "Film Simulations", intended to mimic the qualities of traditional Fujifilm products like Velvia and Provia.

only a little. Plenty of DSLR lenses that cost more than this camera fare far worse.

The amount of noise made online about the menu and firmware bugs is a good indication of how good everything else on the camera really is. When you start hearing comments about setting the Auto ISO function or the video being limited to 720HD, there obviously isn't much else to complain about.

At just under \$1200, the X100 offers excellent value. The 12MP sensor seems a little modest these days, but the lower pixel density contributes to the overall image quality. Anyone who understands the joy (and limitations) of walking around with a fixed 35mm should look closely at this camera. Photojournalists and streetwise artists will love it, for all the right reasons.

DETAILS

Manufacturer: Fujifilm

RRP: \$1299

Fixed lens: 23mm f/2-f/16 (equivalent to 35mm)

Processor: Dual CPU EXR Core

Sensor size: CMOS 12.3MP

Sensor size: APS-C

Weight: 445g

Media: SD/SDHC/SDXC cards

Who's it for: Experienced photographers looking for quality frames without the DSLR.

Website: fujifilm.com.au