

Fujifilm FinePix S9500

Fuji's new 9 megapixel 'bridge' camera makes you two feet taller – and also keeps your knees clean

When is a Digital Single Lens Reflex camera not a Digital Single Lens Reflex Camera? Why, when it is a 'bridge' camera of course.

Bridge suggests that a camera is a 'prosumer' model, on the cusp between a true DSLR and the models only amateurs would use.

The Fujifilm FinePix S9500 is a prosumer bridge camera that aims to look and feel like a DSLR.

Unfortunately neither 'bridge' nor 'prosumer' are particularly elegant descriptions. And the FinePix S9500 is not a DSLR, though it certainly does look like one because the pop-up flash housing looks reassuringly like a real pentaprism housing.

So exactly what is the S9500?

Well certainly it's **Digital**. It also has a **Single Lens**. But **Reflex** it's not, because there is no mirror to direct the image up through a pentaprism to the eyepiece for focusing. So I guess we could call it a DSLC – Digital Single Lens Camera.

There's something else that this, and cameras like it, don't have: a shutter. Well, not a mechanical shutter anyway, opening and closing just in front of the image sensor. Instead, it's electronic.

The absence of a flipping mirror and mechanical shutter mechanism means that cameras such as this have far fewer moving parts to go wrong. So they should be a whole lot cheaper.

The reason why they do not need a mirror or mechanical shutter is because they use a type of sensor which produces a continuous or 'live' image – like a television camera. So they can display a 'moving' image on an electronic viewfinder.

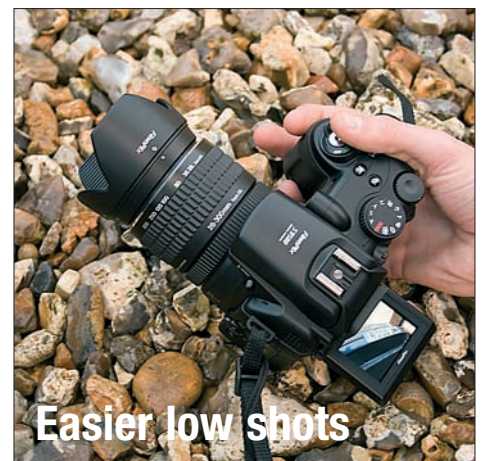
This leads to some other neat possibilities. In the case of the FinePix S9500 there are two electronic viewfinders. One is behind a familiar eyepiece, complete with dioptre correction. The other is on a larger colour LCD screen mounted on the back of the camera.



Fujifilm's FinePix S9500 is a sturdy little DSLR-type 9 megapixel camera with a 10.75x non-interchangeable zoom lens which has a 35mm film equivalent focal length range of 28–300mm. The widest aperture is f/2.8 at the wide end, reducing to f/4.9 at the telephoto end of the zoom – but the minimum aperture is only f/8. The larger collar around the lens barrel is for manual zoom control; the smaller one is for manual focus. The ISO equivalence ranges from 80 to a very useable 1600. The camera handles very nicely and produces images with Fuji's legendary colour quality. The big question is: can it be real competition for the true DSLRs?



Easier high shots



Easier low shots

This picture of Katherine Taylor was made using studio flash. I asked Katherine to wear the white shirt to find out how well the camera could cope with both bright white and normal flesh tones in close proximity to each other.

Raw File Converter LE, supplied with the camera, translated the 18.3MB Raw file into a 50.8MB 3648 x 4864 pixels TIFF file. That is, of course, interpolated – something I certainly never asked the software to do – to a file large enough to cover A3 at 300 pixels per inch. In other words an even larger file than from a 17 megapixel camera.

The image has been down-sized to 2516 x 3580 pixels for use here full page.

The settings for this shot were 1/1000 sec and f/8 at ISO 80. Note that f/8 is the smallest aperture which can be set. This is quite a limitation.

My thanks to Katherine for her endless patience while I tried a multitude of different camera settings.

Her reading matter is a 1637 atlas of Britain by William Camden, to be sold by Sothebys in London on 9 May 2006.





A dull winter day at the outdoor market needed almost all it could get: 1/125 sec at f/4.5 and an ISO of 800, yet the fluorescent tickets are well handled.



The FinePix S9500's Auto White Balance produces acceptable results in difficult mixed light conditions.



ABOVE: The FinePix 9500 does not fight shy of the most saturated colours, reproducing them with the superb quality we have come to expect from Fuji. BELOW: Even on a dull winter day the colours are accurate and bright using auto White Balance and the exposure spot on. 1/125 sec and f/4.5 at ISO800.



Which viewfinder you use is simply and easily selected by a button marked EVF-LCD (Electronic ViewFinder-Liquid Crystal Display).

This is a good example of a designer using lateral thought to make the most of the advantages which an electronic viewfinder confer.

But Fuji's designers have used the electronic viewfinder to remove some other irritations.

One of the problems with LCD screens on the backs of cameras is that you can't see them very easily when shooting high or low angle shots.

With most cameras you either need to be taller, to get the high shots, or you get your clothes dirty, by kneeling or lying down, to get those dynamic low angle shots.

The designers have developed a neat mechanical solution to these problems by providing a double-hinged LCD screen which can be angled upwards about 90 degrees for low shots, or around 45 degrees downwards for taking high shots.

There are trade-offs, of course. The LCD screen is smaller than it could be if fixed to the back of the camera and the facility only works when the camera is used for landscape or horizontal shots.

When the camera is used in portrait mode it's back to the usual remedies – ladders or dirty knees – because the double-hinge then swings in the wrong plane. Mind you, the hinged viewfinder does then become rather good for seeing around corners.

Apart from this, careful thought has been given to the design of the camera, which has some more nice touches.

The manual zoom is more important than might at first be apparent. Most power zoom lenses aren't really zooms at all but a series of pre-set focal lengths and if you try to set a precise focal length it proves impossible. Of course a manual zoom also lengthens time between battery charges.

I did have reservations about the manual focus option – until I discovered the focus magnifier, which gives a 'live' enlarged close-up of the centre of the image to assist focus accuracy. In fact I preferred to use this method as I found the autofocus somewhat average at times.

Ready time from switch on is fast and shutter latency is the fastest I have

come across for a camera of this type.

With a huge pixel count, and presumably somewhat limited processing power, the camera has a quite slow shooting rate of about 1.5 per second. This is limited to five frames before the inevitable wait for writing to the card.

To be of serious use for professional photography, a digital camera must have the facility to save images as Raw files. This enables you to make decisions – such as white balance and exposure – using specialised software after the shoot, rather than the camera making the decisions for you at the time of the shoot.

The software used to process Raw files may be Adobe Photoshop, Phase One Capture One Pro, or other dedicated software provided by the camera manufacturer. Unfortunately the formats of different Raw files often differ, so the software used has to be suitable for the files in question.

The Fuji FinePix S9500 does have the facility to acquire Raw files, though these cannot be acquired using Adobe Photoshop or Capture One Pro at the moment. Fuji provides **Raw File Converter LE** software and this has to be used with its FinePix Viewer software, which is also bundled with the camera.

Unfortunately, shooting Raw with the S9500 is not a good experience. Raw images take a full ten seconds to write to the CF card and an agonisingly long time to convert to TIFF. To make matters worse, Raw File Converter LE has no provision to make adjustments to the image. To be honest, you might as well shoot JPEGs with the S9500.

Even switching the camera to capture in **CCD-RAW** mode is a mission. In the Menu you have to go down to find **Set Up**, then scroll down in that menu until you come to **CCD-RAW**, then select **On**.

It would be much more convenient if this could be accessed via the **Photo Mode 'F'** button, which gives fast access to all the other Quality settings.

The **Fujifilm FinePix S9500** is a fine camera capable of producing pleasing images. But, unless you particularly need a camera of this type, I really feel that you would do better to put the money (around £450 street) towards one of the low-priced real DSLRs, such as the Canon 350D or Nikon D50.