

Sony Handycam HDR-CX7

Editors' rating:
Excellent
8.0
 out of 10

The good: Excellent video and performance; impressive still photos for a camcorder; adequate manual controls; docking station included.

The bad: No wind filter; USB on dock only, not on camcorder; doesn't include Mini HDMI cable; no viewfinder.

The bottom line: As the flash-memory-based equivalent of the HDR-SR7, the Sony Handycam HDR-CX7 serves up the same pleasing performance and quality as its hard-drive cousin.

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Join me, if you will, along the slow march toward the obsolescence of tape in video. We've definitely got a long road ahead of us, but it's fun to notice how much camcorders have changed already. On the one hand, tapeless camcorders such as Sony's Handycam HDR-CX7 give product designers the freedom to make smaller, sleeker camcorders. On the other hand, we've yet to see a model that records in the AVCHD format, as this one does, match the quality of the footage we've seen from tape-based models using the HDV format. However, for an AVCHD camcorder, this does produce very nice video, and will likely blow your socks off if you're used to a standard-definition camcorder.



Though it's been on the market in various camcorders for a while now, the AVCHD format has been slow on the uptake in software for editing and playback. Lori Grunin's recent blog post outlines which software titles are compatible and notes whatever glitches she has found when using those programs. Ultimately, the easiest way to watch your HD video is still a direct connection to your HDTV, but there is a modest, and slowly growing, list of software out there if you like to watch on your computer or edit your footage.

Sony's designers definitely made the most of the fact that the HDR-CX7 records its video to MemoryStick Pro Duo cards. The camcorder is little more than a lens and LCD screen in terms of size, though that's both a positive and negative thing. Sure, you can fit the CX7 into almost any bag, and even a large jacket or sweatshirt pocket, but the ergonomics of the grip are a little off. It's certainly more comfortable to hold than Panasonic's SD-based HDC-SD1, but since there's no eye-level viewfinder, I often found myself holding it higher than I would some camcorders, and at a slightly odd angle. Also, since your hand basically covers the right side and top of the CX7, Sony was forced to put a handful of buttons on the left side, behind the LCD screen. That's never a very good move, since you can't readily see that spot when you're shooting, and if you do need to use one of those buttons while capturing video, you'll likely shake the camera horizontally while pressing it. Of the buttons placed there, the backlight compensation button is probably the most worrisome, since it's highly likely you'll use it on the fly, while most of the others would be used before or after shooting.

As usual, the HDR-CX7's main interface is its LCD touch screen. Even though the LCD is 2.7 inches in size, it still felt a bit small as a touch-screen interface. The main virtual buttons are big enough, but ancillary buttons, such as the OK button in the upper-left, or the X (cancel) button in the upper-right of some screens are rather tiny. On more than one occasion, I accidentally hit one of the bigger buttons when trying to hit the tiny ones. Combine that with the fact that the touch screen requires such an extensive tree of



submenus, and the thrill of a touch-screen interface starts to wane pretty quickly. Still, some people say they like this kind of interface, so make sure you try it out in a store first to see if you like it before you buy.

Following a recent trend in camcorders, the CX7 doesn't include a minijack microphone input. If you want to add an accessory mic, you have to use one of Sony's in the CX7's Active Interface Shoe (aka proprietary hot shoe), which provides an interface and power for accessories. You have two options to send video to your TV directly from the camcorder. You can either use a mini-to-full-size HDMI cable, or use the composite AV breakout cable included with the CX7. Given that they are rather rare right now, it would've been nice for Sony to include the special HDMI cable, as Canon does with the HG10. A third option is to use the dock, which has the same composite AV out as the camcorder, as well as a component output (also via a breakout cable), and a Mini USB jack to connect to your computer. I was surprised that Sony didn't include a normal-size HDMI jack on the dock. It would've been a really nice touch.

Sony did include some great features though, such as the automatic lens cover, flash for still photos, and a nice complement of manual controls. While it doesn't include the SR7's shutter speed control, the CX7 does have the same exposure shift; manual, indoor, outdoor, and auto white balance; Spot Focus and Spot Metering; Super SteadyShot optical image stabilization; and Super NightShot infrared mode for shooting in the dark. Since the CX7 doesn't include Sony's CAM CTL dial (as the SR7 does), you have to adjust focus on the touch screen, which isn't quite as nice as the dial, but works well nonetheless.

Since the HDR-CX7 records its video to a MemoryStick Pro Duo card, you should plan on buying at least one high-capacity card. On a 4GB Pro Duo card, the HDR-CX7 can fit 32 minutes of best-quality, HD video. Stepping up to an 8GB Pro Duo ups that to a little more than an hour. By contrast, the HDR-SR7 can fit up to eight hours of the same level footage onto its 60GB hard drive.

Footage from the CX7 is very nice. The camcorder's Zeiss T lens is very sharp and Sony's Super SteadyShot does an excellent job of taming hand shake. Its 10X optical zoom might seem tame next to the 30X+ zooms now finding their way into lower-end models, but at a 400mm 35mm-equivalent on the telephoto end (in 16:9 mode), it's got plenty of reach. Plus, by keeping the optical zoom range within reason, you get more reliable stabilization across the entire zoom.

Both the autofocus and metering systems perform quite well, adjusting quickly to changes in subject, lighting, and environment. I was particularly impressed with the autofocus' ability to keep up with changes in zoom and quick changes between near and far subjects. The camcorder's white balance does a very good job. While colors aren't quite as neutral as I've seen in some other models, it's still very close and colors are well saturated and look realistic. Still images are definitely above average for a camcorder. Depending on the shooting conditions, you should be able to get pleasing letter-size or smaller prints.

As long as you don't mind the limited software compatibility and added cost of buying a few high-capacity Pro Duo cards, Sony's Handycam HDR-CX7 is a really nice AVCHD camcorder. As software catches up and flash memory prices continue to drop, it will only become that much more attractive, and the smaller physical size that goes along with a flash-based camcorder will wow your friends and make it more practical to have your camcorder with you when you want it. If Mini-DVDs appeal to you more than flash-memory cards, Sony also makes the HDR-UX7, which can record AVCHD video onto 8cm DVDs and is very similar to this model, though not quite as small in size.