

shoot review: sony hvr-z5u

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Lower model number belies newer camcorder.



Sony strikes again. No sooner had I reviewed the PMW-EX1 than the HVR-Z7U appeared. No sooner had I reviewed the Z7 than the PMW-EX3 appeared. I've just reviewed the EX3, and guess what? Like clockwork, there's another new handheld HDV camcorder to consider: the Sony HVR-Z5U.

Four innovative handheld HD camcorders in a year. A record, no doubt, that will stand for some time, but what's with the lower model number? Did Sony slip and forget to introduce the Z5 before the Z7? Given this veritable cascade of handhelds, has the company simply lost count?

Ordinal nomenclature aside, the skinny on the Z5 is this: It's a Z7 with a fixed lens. If you read my review of the Z7's features and capabilities

(digitalcontentproducer.com/hdhdv/depth/sony_hvr_series_0101) or its handling and behavior in the field (digitalcontentproducer.com/cameras/revfeat/video_sony_hvrzu), you already know 90 percent of what you'll need to know about the Z5.

In other words, like the Z7, the Z5 has three 1/3in. progressive ClearVid CMOS sensors (45-degree tilted pixels) using Sony's advanced Exmor on-chip A/D conversion (one per column) and dual noise canceling for low-light capture with less noise. Menu items and picture-profile settings are nearly identical: same novel choice, for instance, between 24p over 1080i (with pull-down) or 24p native progressive recording, among the usual HD and DV frame rates. The stunning XtraFine 921,000-pixel LCD and high-res, LED-illuminated color viewfinder (1,227,000 pixels, a third more than the LCD) are the same, as are the InfoLithium batteries and optional (but oh-so-cool) HVR-MRC1 module that dual-records HDV or DV files to CompactFlash (CF) cards. The Z5 even goes the Z7 one better: It displays a CF card's remaining recording time in the viewfinder.

And last but hardly least, the new Z5 shares the Z7's superb ergonomics. As you can see from the pictures, weight and size are remarkably similar. So I'm going to dedicate this review to what's new and different in the Z5 as compared to the Z7.

In an unexpected throwback to the classic mid-1990s Sony DCR-VX1000, the Z5's top-loading cassette door has returned to the same side as the controls. In another nod to the VX1000, the new Sony G lens is 20X compared to the 12X of both the HVR-Z1U and the Carl Zeiss zoom supplied with the Z7. But while the VX1000's optical section (zoom and prism) accounted for half its length (ditto Z7), the Z5's occupies two-thirds its length. Which raises the question: Is the Z5 a camcorder wearing a new lens, or is a new lens wearing the Z5?

Sony's 2006 absorption of Konica Minolta's still-photography business — the essential building block of its Alpha line of digital SLRs and lenses — brought fresh expertise in lens design. (Sony also has a large stake in the lens manufacturer Tamron, which once collaborated with Konica Minolta.) The resulting synergy, which produced the G lens series and large-aperture Alpha lens series for still photography, has now resulted in a G lens for the Z5 — a first for a Sony camcorder.

Sony's goal was a 1/3in. zoom that is wider, longer, better corrected for chromatic fringing, and more tightly knitted into the camcorder's overall functionality. In each of these endeavors, it appears, the company has succeeded. Using more extra-low-dispersion glass and aspheric surfaces than ever before in a built-in zoom for 1/3in. sensors, Sony has achieved the shortest focal length yet: 4.1mm, surpassing the previous champ, Panasonic's venerable AG-HVX200, with its Leica 4.2mm-55mm (13X) zoom.

Maximum aperture is f/1.6 at the 4.1mm wide end and f/3.4 at the 82mm tele end. This is more than two stops of light loss due to ramping, the price paid for a 20X optical range in a super-compact design. At full wide, 4.1mm and f/1.6, an object touching the front of the lens barrel (lens shade off) is in focus. Amazing. At 82mm and f/1.6, minimum object distance from the front of the lens



The Sony HVR-Z7U (top) is the basis of the new HVR-Z5U (bottom).



Parent and offspring: from left, the venerable HVR-Z1U, last year's Z7, and the new Z5.

for focus is a little more than 3ft., which is about what you'd expect.

The G lens has three rings: focus, zoom, and iris — all electronic. The focus ring spins infinitely. This is not a hybrid mechanical zoom like those on the EX1 and Z7. The zoom ring, however, mimics the feel of a mechanical zoom. It has one speed with no artificial soft transition at either end, so its successful use relies on the operator's skill and sensitive touch.

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