

DSR-PD170

Stuart Little reviews Sony's replacement for the PD-150 DVCAM camera



Around our way we usually have to wait until 25 December before receiving our Xmas presents but those nice people at Sony contrived to deliver an early, albeit temporary, present on the eve of Xmas in the form of a Sony PD-170P camcorder for evaluation.

The camera was delivered in a very sturdy flight case which had compartments for the camera itself, a wide-angle lens, two lens hoods and miscellaneous extras such as a small Infolithium L series battery.

Camera Overview

The Sony DSR-PD170P camcorder is an enhanced version of Sony's DSR-PD150 camcorder. It still retains certain basic features like the 3 x 1/3" CCDs but has many new features.

The 12x zoom can be operated in three different ways - by turning the ring on the lens barrel, by operating a touch-sensitive lever at the side of the camera or by operating a control on the top of the camera carrying handle which has two speed settings. On the left-hand side of the camera body is a large switch with which you can select two built-in Neutral Density filters (or ND OFF).

Controls

I don't give a second glance to any camera that does not enable me to switch off its AUTO features and happily the PD170 has an AUTO LOCK function which when switched off enables the manual setting of features like iris, gain, shutter speed, white balance, etc.

Just behind the ND switch is a similarly-sized switch for selecting AUTO, MANUAL or INFINITY focus settings; there is also a PUSH Auto focus button located just underneath this.

Just behind these is a button-activated wheel for manually selecting the IRIS setting.

Features under test

Generally I chose to test those features that I particularly value plus a couple that I rarely use myself but I know are valued by many practitioners.

The gain can be manually set to 0, 3, 6, 9, 12, 15 and 18db and I tested each of these settings in a gloomy kitchen. Even at the 18db setting I was not able to detect any appreciable noise.

The next feature I looked at was the SuperSteadyShot. I'm a bit old-fashioned when it comes to consideration of this particular development on cameras, feeling that camera technique should be the ultimate goal for achieving steady camera work.

Nevertheless I tried it out and was able to demonstrate a modest positive difference when shooting hand-held with the feature switched on. More importantly there did not appear to be any downside trade-off in the footage I shot.

Garden Tests

For my next test I procured the services of my wife. Having inveigled her into the garden I pointed the camera straight at her with her head and upper torso against a mixture of background houses and the sky. With a full sky background pressing the BACK LIGHT compensation button resulted in slight under-exposure of the subject but with half and half houses and sky the BACK LIGHT performed beautifully.

I don't have an AUTO FOCUS function on the cameras I use professionally and I regularly counsel students on the filming skills courses we run not to use this feature when filming. However for the purposes of this



article I steeled myself to switch on this function on the PD170 and was pleasantly surprised at how relatively unobtrusive this technological 'advance' has become. Although for the sort of professional work that I do I have never missed not having AUTO FOCUS I suspect that I might well bow to its convenience in certain circumstances if I found myself using a PD170 or similar camera.

More on Controls

One feature I very much do use is a ZEBRA and the PD170 provides two levels of ZEBRA - 70% and 100% indication and I found that the 70% setting suited me perfectly.

AUTO EXPOSURE can be finely graduated between -4 and +4 settings and is easy to operate. Setting the white balance manually is also an easy task and the PD170 provides a 'one push' button or 'outdoor' and 'indoor' settings. Although I did not test this on the PD170, I

subsequently had the opportunity to test the white balance settings on the consumer equivalent Sony VX2100 (belonging to one of our students) during one of our filming skills courses, and not only did the camera get it spot on using manual settings (as one would expect) but on AUTO setting it consistently guessed the colour temperature pretty accurately.

Little Extras

I was particularly impressed with the provision of a x0.7 wide-angle converter lens as standard. This comes in its own natty little black bag and is easily fitted to the front of the existing lens after removal of the latter's lens hood - an additional section of hood is provided so that a proper hood can also be attached to the wide angle lens. In use I detected no loss of picture quality having tested its performance both in handheld mode and in conjunction with the full optical zoom.

In the LCD colour swing-out panel (which can be revolved and set back into the camera body with the screen display facing out - very neat!) one can select standard 4:3 mode or 16:9 mode whereby the top and bottom of the frame are blanked out letterbox style both in the display and on the recording.





Additionally the black and white high-resolution viewfinder remains active when the LCD panel is open.

When playing back a tape recorded on the PD170 I noted that the data code readout on my monitor indicated that the auto iris was self-adjusting in closer-than-normal steps, e.g. it not only indicated the standard f-stops such as f2.0, f2.8, f4, etc. but also in-between steps such as f2.4, f3.4, etc. These in-between steps are also accessible via the manual iris control.

Sound Improvement

The sound recording system on the PD170 is a fully professional three-pin XLR system. In front of the carrying handle is a control panel which enables the selection of the on-board mic or else one or two external mics.

A single external mic can be used on Channel 1 with the input spread over the two audio channels or, of course, two external mics can be used (Channels 1 and 2) to record in stereo. Each channel has its own separate controls, and mics can be self-powered or powered from the camera. Additionally the volume recording level can be optionally monitored in the LCD viewfinder although the user also has the options of plugging-in headphones or using the built-in speaker.



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As is often the case the manual had clearly not been translated into English by a native English-speaker and, although designed for the PAL version of the camera, I did spot one bit of NTSC-specific technical data. Although this did not hinder my understanding of the camera operation I do wonder why Sony cannot afford to hire a native English speaker to proof read the manual!?.

Overall Impression?

The principal criterion is whether I would be happy to use it on a professional shoot and the answer is most certainly yes. The quality of picture and sound is professional/corporate standard and, in spite of its sophistication, I found the camera remarkably easy to use.

I was able to access and use its functions very quickly and without any head-scratching (and I much appreciated the nice touch whereby a lever with which to open and shut the lens hood aperture replaces the traditional, eminently loseable, lens cap).

Additionally it is very light and easy to hand hold and, whilst its small-size makes it far less obtrusive than a full-size pro camera, it still not only 'looks the part' but does not sacrifice too much quality compared to its full size 3 x 1/2" CCD brothers; I would be perfectly happy to use it along side our full-size pro cameras. b

Note: Stuart Little is a director of KLA Film and Video Communication and is an approved trainer for Swanrose video training courses in London.

Photon Beard