Panasonic Lumix S1 review: the mirrorless heavyweight

I was at Photokina in Cologne last fall when Panasonic, Leica, and Sigma held a joint press conference to announce their L-Mount Alliance. Uniting around Leica's existing lens mount, the trio made a commitment to rapidly flesh out a new ecosystem of lenses for full-frame mirrorless cameras. On that same day, Panasonic also announced its first cameras for the category, the Lumix S1 and the higher-resolution Lumix S1R, both of which stood to benefit from the lens-making muscle of the new alliance. Thus, instead of confronting doubts about its lateness to the full-frame mirrorless world relative to rivals like Sony and Nikon, Panasonic made its debut with the promise of having three times as many dedicated lens makers for its system.

I've been testing the 24-megapixel Lumix S1, paired with Panasonic's versatile 24-105mm F/4 L-Mount lens, for a few weeks. That kit costs an eye-watering $3,400, and has the weight and size of a classic DSLR pro shooter. So we can immediately dispense with the notion of it being a hobby camera for all but the burliest and wealthiest of photography enthusiasts. Some might even question why a mirrorless camera (a category which has always been about shrinking dimensions and heft) of such mighty stature would be appealing, and this review is going to serve as my answer to that reasonable query. After my time using the Lumix S1 to shoot the OnePlus 7 launch event in London, along with a couple of headphones, I'm professionally smitten with this unashamedly pro camera.

Verge Score 8 out of 10



Good Stuff

- Superb image quality and sharpness
- In-body stabilization plus OIS in the lens make anyone a steady shooter
- Weather-sealed, rugged construction
- USB-C, touchscreen, and fast EVF make smartphone users feel at home

Bad Stuff

- Really, really chunky
- Control scheme isn’t as natural as Nikon’s
- Sony’s A7 III and Nikon’s Z6 offer better value

Two big things justify the Lumix S1’s size for me.

First is the in-body image stabilization (IBIS) that Panasonic provides. This physically shifts the sensor inside the camera in order to counteract unsteadiness from the photographer’s hands. The larger the sensor, the more powerful the motors required to move it, and at this full-frame size, IBIS is a non-trivial matter. Nikon’s Z6 and Z7 and Sony’s A7 III have it, for instance, while Canon’s EOS R does not. Panasonic is well known for having excellent IBIS in its Micro Four Thirds cameras, which are hugely popular for high-quality video, and that remains true in the Lumix S1. The 24-105mm lens also has optical image stabilization (OIS), which works in sync with the in-body sensor shifting to give me two different safety valves when shooting in suboptimal conditions.

> *Panasonic’s optical and in-body image stabilisation at work. All the gyrations are to offset hand shake from the photographer.* *pic.twitter.com/XMmjRFvehY*
>
> *— Vlad Savov (@vladsavov)* *June 18, 2019*

You can get away with a smaller body and smaller lenses if you skipped IS, but I’ve done that with DSLRs in the past and find it a bad compromise. If you’re already carrying a dedicated camera with you, don’t you want to make the most of it? The increase in weight and size with the Lumix S1 is incremental, whereas the broader flexibility that its stabilization provides makes the difference between being able to capture an event while shooting handheld and not. At the OnePlus event, I was able to comfortably slow my shutter speed down to capture darker scenes without going overboard with the ISO.



The other big plus for me with the S1's design is the weather sealing and general ruggedness of its materials. Granted, this is not a feature unique to Panasonic, as most pro cameras are built to endure, but the Lumix S1 feels rigid, dense, and resilient in a way that really reassures me about its long-term durability.

Every button, dial, and physical toggle seems made to last multiple lifetimes. I'd expect as much from a pricey piece of equipment, and Panasonic delivers. The company's also initiated a Lumix Pro membership scheme, which leverages its global supply and repair network to get you priority turnaround times on servicing, loan gear when necessary, and maintenance wherever you are. This, in combination with the promise of Sigma and Leica's aid in expanding the range of L-Mount lenses, should help nudge a lot of otherwise circumspect professionals toward giving Panasonic's full-frame system a chance.

My approach to pro photography is an unashamedly lazy one. If I can shoot an entire car show with just a Pixel, I definitely

will, and most of my photography nowadays is done on smartphones, simply because they've become good enough. I feel acknowledged by Panasonic's touchscreen inclusion on the S1, which functions exactly as the one on my smartphone.

A very serious pro camera that's nevertheless forgiving to neophyte users

When composing a shot, I can tap on my desired focus point, and, when reviewing pics, I can swipe between them and double-tap or pinch to zoom in and out. At the same time, there's still a joystick under my right thumb to adjust the focus point mechanically while using the electronic viewfinder. And, of course, I have programmable dials at the front and rear of the right-hand grip. It's an embrace of the new while retaining what's good about the old.



Another friendly gesture toward the smartphone generation is Panasonic's embrace of USB-C for both image transfer and charging. The S1 accepts SD and XQD memory cards (I really would've preferred two SD slots, as on competitors like Sony's A7 III), though I rarely had to open its memory compartment,

because it transfers data over USB-C. So yes, the 2019 solution to my MacBook's dearth of input ports is using the camera itself as a card reader. I also had no reason to open the battery compartment, because the S1's 3,050mAh battery accepts fast charging via USB-C Power Delivery. Panasonic does include a wall charger with the S1, which is to be expected with a camera of this level and price, but not always the case, as we've seen with the A7 III.

Panasonic loves USB-C almost as much as I do

The battery lasts a reassuringly long time. I wasn't able to use up even half of it on any individual shoot, and I love being able to just top it up with my laptop's charger. Extra batteries will still be part of the accessory entourage for photographers in more demanding circumstances, but this move toward USB-C really helps streamline things for people like me. On most occasions that I might want to use the Lumix S1, I could happily just throw the camera into my backpack and not worry about carrying its battery charger or some other proprietary bit of equipment.



The word that keeps coming to my mind when thinking about the Lumix S1 is “forgiving.” Its IBIS plus OIS combo gives me leeway for sloppy handling or slower shutter speeds, while its fast, accurate, and readily legible touchscreen and EVF — augmented with a fluidly animated horizon line — also help ensure painless image capture. And its construction gives me confidence that it’ll survive the bustle of a busy trade show while slung around my neck (even if said neck might end up sore from the camera’s considerable weight).

I can no longer justify the inconvenience of carrying a camera with *just* an APS-C-sized sensor inside it. Smartphone cameras have become good enough for almost all my personal and professional needs, especially over the past year with Google’s Night Sight and Huawei’s unbelievable P30 Pro low-light and zoom heroics.

If I’m going to deal with the burden of a dedicated camera, I want the full-fat bokeh, infinite resolution, and extensive Lightroom pliability that only full-frame sensors can achieve. The Lumix S1 ticks these boxes. When I shoot with it, I’m reminded of Hasselblad’s extraordinary X1D rather than anything even close to a pocketable camera. In simple terms, it performs like the big and brawny shooter that it is.

Let’s illustrate what I mean about this camera’s forgiveness by taking a poorly captured photo as an example. The ISO 6400 shot below is obviously overexposed, but a quick highlight recovery in Adobe’s Lightroom makes it instantly look usable.





A closer crop of the same shot would suggest nothing of my misaligned camera settings. One subtlety that will be hard to perceive here, but is very much present: the Lumix S1 manages

to capture the color temperature difference between the bluer black of the background screen and the redder black of OnePlus CEO Pete Lau’s hair. There are also a couple of stray strands of hair that you’ll be able to see if you zoom in really close.



What follows is a selection of the dark scenes I was trying to capture with that ISO 6400 in the first place. Yes, there’s detectable graininess when you zoom in close (tap each image to expand it), but it’s well handled by the Lumix S1 and the lasting impression I get is of the fine detail this camera is able to pick up in areas that would otherwise appear to be black. This is the difference that full-frame cameras make, and since most companies are using more or less the same Sony sensors, you’ll find similar excellence across the board with the new breed of mirrorless full-frame shooters.

You can start with the 24-105mm and go a very long way before you absolutely must have another lens

I’m really impressed with the versatility and consistent sharpness of Panasonic’s 24-105mm lens. It’s supposed to be an

all-purpose, do-everything piece of glass, and it really lives up to that. At the OnePlus event, I'd have been better served by Panasonic's 70-200mm F/4 zoom lens, which also has OIS and carries Leica certification. And for high-end street photography, there's an F/1.4 50mm prime, also certified by Leica but lacking OIS. Those are just the beginning of Panasonic's portfolio of L-Mount lenses, but the overriding point is that you can start with the 24-105mm and go a very long way before you absolutely must have another lens.

To wrap up, below are a few more examples shot with the Lumix S1. I pretty much never had to adjust or correct the camera's white balance, and I also found its auto ISO setting, when I wanted the convenience, trustworthy. The speed of operation of this camera is hard to fault, as it can go from off to capturing a pin-sharp image about as fast as I can pull it up to my eyes to compose a shot. The autofocus is fast and reliable, and my only difficulties with the S1 arose from its bulk and unfamiliar ergonomics. If I have to nitpick (and, at this price, I do), I find Nikon and Sony's placement of the power switch faster to access, and I might have appreciated chunkier buttons on the rear of the S1 for easier operation.

You'll notice that I haven't addressed the Lumix S1's video capabilities in this review, and that's for two reasons. Firstly, it's because I can't do that task justice, as I'm not a video pro. But more importantly, Panasonic already commands the respect of most YouTubers and video producers with its smaller-sensor Lumix line, and its Lumix GH5 is widely rated among the best 4K shooters you can buy.

The purpose of the full-frame Lumix S line is as simple as it is ambitious: Panasonic wants to assert itself a leader in professional still photography just as it is with prosumer video. On the evidence of the Lumix S1, I think the company has a good shot at earning the credibility it aspires to.

And yet, for all the positives I've laid out in this review,

Panasonic still faces a major hurdle when it comes to price. The Lumix S1 offers comparable strengths and advantages to Sony’s A7 III and Nikon’s Z6, however both of those cameras are hundreds of dollars cheaper, while benefiting, respectively, from Sony’s head start in this category and Nikon’s longstanding reputation as the maker of the most trusted pro cameras, alongside Canon.

I’m genuinely tempted by the Lumix S1, and Panasonic has done everything it can to entice and reassure potential customers with its L-Mount Alliance and Lumix Pro support scheme. For its advances in making high-end photography less challenging, the Lumix S1 earns my admiration, though I might wait a while longer to see how the full-frame mirrorless contest shakes out before committing to a particular system.

Sample images by Vlad Savov

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