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Action Cameras, for When a Smartphone Won't Be Able to Keep Up

Review: Five Action Cameras From GoPro, Sony, Garmin, Drift and Ion

By ROY FURCHGOTT MARCH 12, 2014

THANKS to smartphone cameras, we are privy to the most mundane details in the lives of our friends, from the cinnamon bun on the breakfast table to the temperature gauge on the car dashboard.

But some people do, in fact, lead exciting lives. They sky-dive, ski and race bikes — and capturing the moment with a hand-held smartphone probably isn't the safest way to do it.

That may explain the rapid sales growth of action cameras, those small cameras that can be mounted on helmets, handlebars or even the end of a surfboard. While sales for other kinds of cameras have dropped, action camera sales grew 37 percent to 1.3 million in 2013, according to market analysts at the company NPD.

That consumer interest has led dozens of companies to jump into the market, producing remarkably similar models. Most offer 1080p high-definition images, an LCD screen, Wi-Fi and waterproofing and cost from \$300 to \$400.

They're similar, but taking some of them for a test run shows they're not the same.

GOPRO HERO3+ BLACK (\$400) GoPro has become the biggest name in action cameras, largely because of picture quality and ease of use. The flagship GoPro Hero3+ Black can record in ultra high-definition or 4K resolution, which may not mean much unless you are among the few to own a 4K television. It also has a professional mode called

ProTune if you want to do serious fine tuning before shooting and touch-ups in editing after. To add an LCD screen costs an extra \$80 and it comes with one flat and one curved stick-on mount and a remote wireless on/off switch.

SONY HDR-AS30V (\$250) Sony's action camera has a GPS and can add location and speed statistics to your video. It has software that helps stabilize your shots, and software that makes the picture sharper and more colorful. It is fussy to set up, and although it has an LCD screen for its menus, it won't show video. You need to link to another Wi-Fi device, like a phone, to see what the camera is shooting. A newer model, the AS100V, is due soon. Sony's action camera may have the widest range of accessories, including a \$100 cradle with swing-out LCD that makes the AS30V look and act more like a standard camcorder, albeit a tiny one.

GARMIN VIRB ELITE (\$400) The Virb not only has a GPS, but it can connect to a heart rate and cadence monitor. Your videos can have a dashboard show things like speed, distance and heart rate, making it a natural for cyclists, kayakers, skiers and other athletes. It can be set to automatically record when you are moving and stop when you stop. It can be controlled from other Garmin products, like the Zumo motorcycle GPS and sports watches. It is a bit larger and heavier than some others, so it might be better on a handlebar than a helmet. It also had more setup problems than the others, but eventually ran fine.

DRIFT HD GHOST (\$300) The Ghost HD has a feature called video tagging that lets the camera run continuously, then save a segment afterward. If you stick an awesome jump on your snowboard, press the menu button after you land and the camera will save 30 seconds to 10 minutes of previous video, then go on continuously recording. A remote on/off switch is included. You can save as many clips as your card can hold.

ION AIR PRO 3 (\$350) The Ion Air Pro is one of the lighter cameras, and it vibrates when switched on or off, making it easier to be sure you are recording. It has few buttons, which makes it easy to use with gloves, but that also means it needs to be plugged into a computer to adjust settings. It lacks a screen, so you have to link to a phone or tablet by Wi-Fi to see what you are shooting. It does offer a free 8GB of video cloud storage, though.

When poring over camera specifications, battery life would seem important, but the actual working time you get can differ greatly from the specifications from the camera makers. Turning off the LCD, GPS or other features can extend battery life, but do you want

to compromise on those features?

Remember that you will need to budget for accessories when you buy a camera. At the very least, you need a fast memory card. While the cameras all come with at least one stick-on mount, specialty attachments, like handlebar mounts, suction-cup mounts and others are extra. Although most cameras come with editing software to unwarp the wide-angle video, a \$50 program, ProDrenalin, makes it simple to remove distortion, touch up color and remove camera shake.

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