

## TEST BENCH

EDITED BY MARK HARRIS

## DIGITAL PHOTO FRAMES

## Oh darling, I didn't even see you take that one



## Show off those photos that lie forgotten and unseen in your PC with these smart displays

If it's true that a picture paints a thousand words then most of us have the visual equivalent of several encyclopedias tucked away inside our computers. The digital photography revolution has enabled us to take more photos than ever before, yet only a fraction of them are ever printed out, and many are never even viewed a second time.

Now, though, there is a way to rescue your memories from electronic oblivion without needing to find the money to print out hundreds of pictures. Digital photo frames use the same type of LCD screen that is found on cameras, laptop computers and some flat-screen televisions. They vary in size from miniature photo keyrings to poster-sized, wall-hanging monsters, although the most popular versions (more than a million were sold in the UK last year) have screens between 7in and 10in, measured diagonally, as with televisions.

While size is clearly important, a screen's resolution should also be considered. The more pixels it has, the sharper the pictures will look; even the sharpest frames tested here (with a resolution of 800 x 600 pixels) have only about half a million pixels in total. In comparison, a typical digital camera can create images comprising six or seven million pixels, so you shouldn't expect your photos to look as smooth and detailed as they do when printed on good photo paper.

All LCD screens work best in the shade; detail and colour tend to wash out if there's too much ambient light, and they can become almost unusable in direct sunlight.

In reality, then, digital frames are more about convenience than image quality. All those tested accept a memory card straight from the camera, as long as it's of the most common SD (Secure Digital) type. All except the Parrot frame also support Sony's Memory Stick format, and some can handle other, less commonly used formats such as Compact Flash and xD-Picture Card.

The frames can display images straight from the card, and in many cases the images can also be stored on an internal memory. All the frames here, bar the Parrot and Matsui, have 128MB of storage — enough for dozens of snaps. The Parrot

has only 32MB, while the Matsui has no integrated memory.

You can also transfer images from your computer via a USB cable and often from a USB key. A few frames have wireless technologies such as wi-fi and Bluetooth. Wi-fi lets you grab images from your PC or online web galleries, but both technologies can be tricky to set up.

It's up to you how you view your photos — you can either display one static image or opt for a continually changing slideshow. You can also choose how long each photo is shown for, the type of transition between images, and in some cases even whether there is background music or commentary, though only the Kodak and Jessops frames have a sound feature.

Most frames allow you to rotate images to fit the frame, but only the Philips and Parrot can automatically compensate if you turn the frame itself. None of the tested frames is ideal for wall-hanging, and all need to be plugged in to work, except for the Philips, which with its one-hour battery is markedly heavier than the others. All the frames drew less than 10W on test, so costing a mere few pence a day to run, but the absence of a power switch on the eStarling and Matsui frames proved annoying.

Finally, before you start shopping for digital

photo frames, check that you haven't already got one. Many Panasonic TVs and DVD players have built-in SD memory card slots that enable them to work as photo players. Almost all digital cameras have a connector that allows direct playback on a television, and a select few even use the latest HDMI connector that provides superb picture quality on high-definition televisions — something that none of these dedicated frames can even approach.

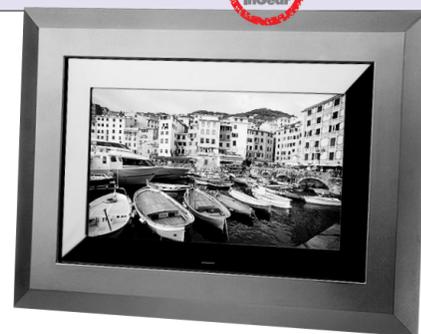
## JARGON BUSTER

**Auto rotate** Some frames can automatically keep pictures the right way up when you rotate the frame

**Resolution** The more pixels a screen has, the sharper your photos will look. An 800 x 600-pixel screen has five times as many pixels as a 410 x 234-pixel display

**Transitions** Digital frames offer a range of fades and cuts between features. You can choose which they use and their timings

## WIRELESS WONDER ★★★★★



**Kodak Easyshare EX1011 (10in)** — typically £150, or £119 from [www.lambda-tek.com](http://www.lambda-tek.com)

## High-quality wireless pictures at a low price

As a 10in frame gives more than 50% greater viewing area than an 8in frame, this display is great value. It connects wirelessly to your computer via wi-fi, and setup was easy (it's important not to lose the remote control, though). You can stream images, videos and — with the latest Windows Media Player program — music from your PC, and display online images from [www.kodakgallery.com](http://www.kodakgallery.com). The 800 x 400-pixel display looked bright and colourful — nearly as good as the Jessops, but portraits had a slightly unnatural tint. It sounded better than the Jessops, but did occasionally stutter on higher-resolution video, and made a high-pitched whine in operation. Still the best all round, though.

## NET RESULTS ★★★★★



**eStarling WiFi (8in)** — typically £200, or £150 from [www.ebuyer.com](http://www.ebuyer.com)

## Future-friendly frame with e-mail and web features

Although it has card slots, the wireless eStarling is best used with wi-fi and the internet. The complex setup worked well from a PC, but failed with an Apple Mac. Once activated, you control the eStarling primarily from a website, uploading images one by one, or choosing them from online galleries. The frame has its own e-mail address to which anyone can send e-mails with photos attached. But in tests sending pictures from the frame didn't work, and its own controls were sluggish. Worse still, images on the 800 x 600-pixel display were only average, with good detail but cold colours and glittery edges. It's a smart new way to share digital photos, but also frustratingly complicated to use.

## BLACK TO THE FUTURE ★★★★★



**Jessops High Resolution (8in)** — £100 from [www.jessops.com](http://www.jessops.com)

## Basic frame with a few bugs but superior image quality

At half the price of the eStarling, but with a similarly sharp 800 x 600-pixel screen, the Jessops frame offers much, including the best image quality on test. Subtle details were well rendered and colours were punchy and natural, although our landscape test image looked flat. It can play MP3 music and video clips, although in tests only the AVI video format could be made to work. While the sound is tinny, it's not terrible, though music occasionally stuttered. As image copying from a memory card was slow, PC users will be thankful for the mini-USB connection for moving files in bulk — although this didn't work with an Apple Mac. Minor niggles aside, the Jessops frame is a safe choice.

## MEMORY PROBLEMS ★★☆☆☆



**Matsui PF-A701W (7in)** — £40 from [www.currys.co.uk](http://www.currys.co.uk)

## A budget frame with a screen to match

This digital photo frame costs about the same as buying and developing a handful of traditional film canisters in the high street. This small, neat model from Currys and PC World has a low-resolution 480 x 234-pixel screen and is the only frame on test not to have internal memory, showing images directly from a memory card or USB key. Although this made it the easiest frame to use among those tested, and it loaded and displayed images quickly, photos looked dull and had blocky, jagged edges. There is no power switch and the frame's stand feels flimsy. Cheap it may be, but with image quality this poor the Matsui is difficult to recommend.

## BIG AND BEAUTIFUL ★★★★★



**Philips 10FF2M4 (10in)** — typically £200, or £168 from [www.pixmania.co.uk](http://www.pixmania.co.uk)

## Hefty, well-made photo specialist

Philips has been making photo frames for longer than most, and it shows in this competent, if pricey, frame. The 10FF2M4 has a high-resolution 800 x 480-pixel display and features such as auto-rotating images and a choice of magnetic surrounds in different colours. Image quality was good, with rich, smooth colours and excellent detail. It can take a while to get used to the controls at the back, but they helped with applying effects such as sepia toning. The Philips also has the best transition effects, such as curling pages and jigsaw fades. The built-in battery (one hour of playback per charge) makes this frame heavy, otherwise it's a reliable, but costly, class act.

## FEELING BLUE ★★☆☆☆



**Parrot DF7220 (7in)** — typically £115, or £111 from [www.b4udirect.com](http://www.b4udirect.com)

## Beam photos from your cameraphone

This Bluetooth-enabled photo frame might ring some bells with mobile phone snappers. Pairing your Bluetooth phone (or laptop) with the frame takes moments; you can then slowly transfer images — a cameraphone snap took less than 10sec, a 10Mp photo more than a minute. The Parrot's menus were the best on test, images rotate automatically as you turn the frame, and it's the only one tested that lets you rearrange snaps. But the 410 x 234-pixel screen is a real letdown with its 6in viewing size, and dire images that suffer blocky edges, mushy detail and washed-out highlights. Ultimately, you may be better off just showing your snaps on your cameraphone.