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Some questions and answers will be printed in the next issue, and whilst we will do our best, we cannot guarantee to answer every email received.

CAMERA CORNER

This article is one of a monthly series about digital photography, written for Coastrider by David Stokes of Photogenics Costa Blanca.

Shooting Modes – the Mode Wheel

Last month I looked at how to go about choosing a new camera. I said in that article that it is always easier to work a camera with a mode wheel (seen in the picture). But what does this wheel do, and what do the symbols on it all mean?

The mode wheel selects the mode for shooting the photo. If your camera is a compact without this wheel on the top of the camera, you will need to use the menu button on the back.

A lot of people see the word 'Auto', which is the setting it is usually on when you take the camera out of the box, and think 'that's easy, the camera will do it all for me', and just leave it there. But even if you are not interested in photography and just want to take snaps of the holiday or the family, exploring the other options on your camera will be well worthwhile. In future articles I will be discussing how

to make better pictures in different situations – landscapes, portraits, pets etc., but first it is necessary to have a little understanding of what the camera will do in the various shooting modes.

Auto Mode

If you select the 'Auto' mode, as the name implies the camera will do everything automatically. So, if you are taking a photo of a landscape on a sunny day you can be sure that the exposure will be right, and as long as you compose the photo well and don't shake the camera, a well exposed and focused photo will result. However, in Auto mode the camera works on a set of averages. So, it will focus on the nearest object in the photo, which might be a chair rather than Auntie Ethel who was the real star of the shot. It will also expose the photo based on the average level of light over the whole picture, so important areas where it is a bit darker will be lost in the picture. If you are at Silverstone, Lewis Hamilton will be coming along too fast and will be blurred.

So, in essence, for a static scene, with even light, Auto will be generally okay. Otherwise, you should look to the next level of modes, which is the 'Scene Modes'.

Scene Modes

On some cameras all the scene modes are selected on the mode wheel, others you select 'scene' on the wheel and then choose from a list in the menus on the screen. If there is no wheel it will be all done in the menus.

Each camera has its own selection of scene modes, and these days more and more are being added. However, the most common are portrait, night, landscape, and sport.

In these modes the camera also works automatically, but you have told the camera what type of photo you are taking. So, in Sport Mode, for example, it will set a faster shutter speed to stop action. In Portrait Mode it will look for a face and focus on it, and in Landscape Mode it will give a deep range of focus so that everything in the picture is sharp.

Using the Scene Modes produces better results than Auto in many cases. But you are still letting the camera make the decisions, and it is still working on averages. So, for example, when you photograph a Watford FC winger plodding down the wing, and you choose Sport Mode it may be sharp, but will it cope with Hamilton at 200mph?

Manual and Semi-automatic Modes

The next level of modes is the semi-automatic modes. In the picture you can see other modes on the wheel labelled P, A, S, and M.

M is Manual Mode, which is not semi-automatic, and which means you make all the decisions manually; the camera does nothing automatically. This needs a lot of knowledge, and is beyond the scope of this article.

S (TV on Canon cameras) is Shutter Priority. You select the shutter speed and the camera does the rest. So, if you are at Silverstone, you are able to set a faster shutter speed than the camera will choose on Sport Mode, and you will get Hamilton nice and sharp.

A (AV on Canon) is Aperture Priority. Aperture determines how much of the photo is in focus, and gives you more scope to make the real subject of the photo stand out from the background.

P is Program Mode, in which the camera does everything auto-matically, except for settings you choose before taking the photo. In practical terms, the only real value of P is to stop flash. If you take a photo on Auto Mode the camera will use the flash if it deems it to be needed. In Program Mode it will not use flash. So, for example, if you are at a wedding you can put your camera on 'P', and not worry about upsetting the Vicar with the flash going off.

I will be discussing these modes in more detail in future articles. In the next article in December, in anticipation of the Xmas festivities, I will be discussing ideas for better composing of photos of people.

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