

Grand Slam Results, Low-Ball Price

PANASONIC'S PV-GS400 DELIVERS PROFESSIONAL-QUALITY VIDEO PERFORMANCE AT A COST EASY FOR CAMCORDER ENTHUSIASTS TO BEAR.

By Tyson Heyn

Ever since the first camcorders debuted in the early 1980s, a chasm has existed between the quality found in professional- and consumer-grade video cameras. And we're not talking about a sandbox-sized chasm—this is on the scope of the grand canyon.

One of the core reasons there has been such a disparity between video cameras that cost pros as much as a new car and consumer-oriented models which are priced less than a home computer lies in the technology used to capture video images.

While mass-market camcorders have relied upon a single chip ("CCD") to record the entire picture to tape, pros have instead opted for much pricier video cameras that use 3 CCDs to capture all of the fidelity and richness of an image. While one versus three CCDs may not sound like a big deal, it makes a huge difference when it comes to taping 30 frames of video per second.

PANASONIC BREAKS THE 3CCD BARRIER

Panasonic, a top manufacturer of both professional- and consumer-grade video cameras, has of course long been aware of this. Thanks to the ongoing march of technological progress, the company has now been able to marry ultra high-end 3CCD technology with consumer-friendly features into a package that can be easily welcomed into nearly any video enthusiast's budget.

The PV-GS400's video quality easily exceeds any consumer's expectations: colors are rich and sharp while definition and resolution are at the high end of the spectrum. Outdoors, the sky retains a deep blueness rather than washing out into a drab whiteness as usually found on consumer camcorders. Indoors, the manually adjustable white balance feature helps retain color warmth and vibrance. Low light performance is very good overall; note that a light is \$70 extra.

We are also impressed with the hands-on feel of the camera. Weighing less than two pounds, this camcorder can be characterized as a mighty midget since if it were any smaller or lighter, it would most likely be characterized as unwieldy. Nonetheless, the PV-GS400 is still able to pack in a huge 3½" external LCD monitor and color viewfinder.



MANUAL OR AUTOMATIC: YOUR CHOICE

Another upside to Panasonic's PV-GS400 is the range of manual controls available to the user at his or her discretion. Typically, consumer camcorders are built to be dummy-proof, meaning that focus, exposure settings, and a myriad of other functions are beyond the user's control.

Panasonic offers a compromise more typically found on those professional-grade video cameras running in the \$10,000+ range. You can rely on the PV-GS400 to handle all of the picture imaging automatically, choose to manage all of the functionality yourself, or strike a buffet-style balance by picking and choosing the features you want to control.

BONUS: INTEGRATED HIGH-END DIGITAL CAMERA

If the video quality weren't enough, the icing on the cake is the PV-GS400's integrated 4-megapixel digital camera. This is high enough resolution to allow for 8"x10" prints that rival the quality of film-based cameras. An embedded flash pops up automatically when low light situations are at hand.

An SD memory card stores the still camera's images, which can be downloaded directly from the camcorder to a PC. Expect to store around 400 photos at a time on a 512 Mbyte memory card, which can be found at retailers for around \$100.

FINAL WORD: HIGH-END PERFORMANCE & TOP VALUE

Panasonic's PV-GS400 carries a suggested retail price of \$1,499 but can be found 'on the street' for considerably less. Given the camcorder's arsenal of features, ease of use, and versatility, it's practically a crime to store your family's once-in-a-lifetime memories on anything less.

PRODUCT SNAPSHOT

HIGHS: Fantastic recording quality; high-performance integrated still camera; excellent manual controls; big screen.

LOWS: Voluminous but low quality manual lacks needed depth; camcorder's external casing easily scratched.

IN BRIEF: There's no valid reason not to make the Panasonic PV-GS400 your next combo camcorder-camera.

RATING: ★★★★★ (out of 5 stars)

FOR MORE INFO: www.panasonic.com. Now available in stores and online. Suggested Retail Price: \$1,499. (Commonly available for several hundred dollars less.)