

GEAR & GADGETS



NIKON 50
With Instagram-style filters built in and a low-light setting to automatically enhance images that rivals the iPhone's "Night Mode," Nikon is "integrating into the ecosystem that smartphones have created," said executive vice president Jay Vannatter.

In the Lens of The Beholder

Evolving smartphone tech is putting camera brands on their heels, forcing them to adopt smarter features that teens, social influencers and new parents crave

BY ALLISON DUNCAN

SCROLL BACK to the early days of Instagram and you'll find a graveyard of poorly lit selfies and dated duckface snapshots—all a far cry from the elevated social media content savvy creators send out today via their "Pro"-level iPhone 11s. Now, as the online influencer market passes \$8 billion annually, popular camera brands are looking for a way back in: Call it the "If you can't beat 'em join 'em" approach.

"In the future, artificial intelligence will tell you which of the 200 shots you took on vacation in Venice is best and then auto-enhance the image, and the software pretty much gets it right," said Thomas Berolzheimer, who rotates between upward of 10 cameras as he snaps shots for the 1.2 million people who follow his wife, Julia Engel, on Instagram. "If camera companies don't figure this out, they'll be irrelevant."

They're working on it. In their latest launches, brands like Nikon and Leica are adopting features that have historically been smartphone selling points. The goal: convincing a younger generation to invest in

top-end camera equipment that aids in producing premium content or, in the case of new parents, simply documents life's milestones.

"iPhones made high-quality content creation accessible to consumers," said Christina Cooksey, head of creative production at Brooklyn-based branding agency Red Antler. Helpful features, said Mr. Berolzheimer, include Apple's Smart HDR, which marries multiple photos into one perfectly exposed shot, and Portrait mode, which automatically adjusts depth of field.

Now as those consumers make the jump from amateur to pro photography, they're finding equipment that feels familiar to the phone they started with. New cameras are smaller and lighter and less complex than previous models, allow users to proficiently edit images on screen and can seamlessly share them to social media, all "while simultaneously retaining some of the deeper tech and quality," said Ms. Cooksey.

It also helps that photo technology doesn't age at the same speed as smartphone technology does, with devices becoming quickly irrelevant once a new model arrives. And buying the latest iPhone tech, rather than investing in lenses and other

top-level accessories, does little to increase your skills as a shooter.

Meanwhile, the coming Nikon Z 50 (from \$860, nikonusa.com) includes a variety of filters and special effects (think: "vivid" to brighten the colors of your image) that can be previewed in real time and applied to both photos and videos. Similar to the iPhone 11's "Night Mode," which creates brighter photos in low light thanks to a larger sensor and the smartphone's wide-angle camera, the Sony a6100 (from \$750, sony.com) increased its native ISO sensitivity, its way of brightening an image digitally, to create cleaner images in dimly lit settings.

Zeiss will soon introduce its ZX1, the brand's first digital camera and first overall since 2005, with fully integrated Adobe Photoshop Lightroom. The embedded software will let photographers adjust images like a pro directly on the camera's screen, instead of on a computer. And Leica, which in 2016 partnered with Chinese smartphone manufacturer Huawei on its P20 Pro phone, will next week debut its new SL2 (from \$5,995, us.leica-camera.com), which can be controlled by just three buttons and competes with the usability of smartphones.

All four innovative devices also come with Bluetooth or Wi-Fi image transfer, which can quickly move large files and high-resolution shots from your camera to your computer or phone, helping you edit and share your content more quickly.

More people are developing an eye for photography thanks to iPhones, said New York lifestyle blogger Lindsay Silberman, who uses a Canon EOS Rebel T6i. "Professional cameras have to mimic the features of an iPhone if they want to steal that share of the market."



LEICA SL2
A three-button layout eases in smartphone shooters.



ZEISS ZX1
Lets you shoot, edit and share your high-res shots easily.

SNAPPER'S DELIGHT / WHY THE ZEISS ZX1 STANDS OUT

When Zeiss set out to build its first camera since 2005, the ZX1, it found inspiration in the familiar, intuitive image editing and connectivity of a smartphone. "It's the best example I've seen of a company building a camera from the ground up," said photographer Thomas Berolzheimer.

The ZX1 allows shooters to edit RAW format images directly on the camera's 4.3-inch screen using integrated Adobe Photoshop Lightroom software and upload favorites to the internet via Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or USB.

With 512 GB of built-in storage, the camera has space for up to 6,240 RAW files or more than 24,000 JPGs in full resolution. The idea? To optimize a shooter's workflow, and Mr. Berolzheimer said he's "dying to try it." Alas, the ZX1 release date has not yet been confirmed. A Zeiss spokesperson said they'll be making an announcement "in due course." —A.D.

No Need for a Rain Check

The latest waterproof materials will keep you comfortable and dry, without that swampy feeling

RAIN JACKETS may keep you dry—it's literally what they're designed to do—but even the best tend to feel crinkly and suffocating, creating a clammy environment beneath your outer layer that practically negates the water-repellent technology you paid extra for.

When a water-repellent fabric isn't breathable enough, the moisture from your body gets trapped inside the fabric and condenses against the skin, explained Gregory C. Rutledge, Ph.D., lead principal investigator for the Advanced Functional Fabrics of America, a non-profit headquartered at MIT. "The trick to these fabrics is finding the balance of resistance to liquid penetration from the outside, while allowing water vapor from inside to escape."

Brands are finally nailing that equilibrium. Breathability depends on how much open space exists between a fabric's fibers, explained Mr. Rutledge. As science advances, researchers have been able to fine-tune those microscopic holes and craft lighter, more comfortable outdoor gear that still stands up to the elements.

Until now, The North Face (like many outdoor



The North Face Futurelight L5 LT climbing jacket. \$450, thenorthface.com

brands) has largely used Gore-Tex. That breathable membrane is made from a hydrophobic, or "water-hating," film that has been mechanically stretched to open small pores that let vapor out without letting water in; it's then bonded to a fabric. But the brand's new Futurelight material uses a process that creates minuscule holes in the fibers of the fabric, a method that can be applied to designs—such as ski bibs and pants—of any weight, stretch, durability or texture.

Fabrics made without films "are typically softer and more flexible, as well as less expensive, easier to work with, and less environmen-



The Filson Reliance rain jacket with Polartec NeoShell. \$395, filson.com

tally sensitive," Mr. Rutledge said.

Futurelight debuted in October in products from the North Face's sport-specific collections: the Flight Series for runners, Summit Series for climbers and Steep Series for skiers.

Similarly, Polartec's NeoShell tech can be found in designs like Filson's Reliance Jacket (\$395, filson.com), and Outdoor Research's AscentShell technology is used in the brand's popular Interstellar climbing shell (\$299; outdoorresearch.com). Each leans on its own methods to create pores to dump the heat without building the humidity between your skin and the fabric.



The Arc'teryx Alpha SV jacket with Gore-Tex Pro for alpine conditions \$785, arcteryx.com

In 2020, Gore-Tex is set to release an upgrade to its Pro fabric technology, debuting three new fabric membranes that prioritize stretch, ruggedness and breathability. The Arc'teryx Alpha SV Jacket (\$785; arcteryx.com), designed for alpine conditions, will be one of the first pieces to feature it.

These jackets were designed to stand up to the harshest elements, so you won't have to worry about the weather while hiking or climbing. And you can show up to work on a rainy day without having completely sweat through your clothes. —Ashley Mateo