

Review: Can a smartphone camera do it all?

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An Associated Press reporter demonstrates the camera on the HTC myTouch 4G Slide smartphone from T-Mobile during a product review in San Francisco, Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2011. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

If you're anything like me, your cellphone and its built-in camera is always on you, while your digital camera gathers dust at home.

This wasn't always the case. Just a few years ago, phone cameras with a lowly 1.3 megapixels were the norm, and photos came out pixelated and poorly lit. No way would you have thought of ditching your regular camera for one of those.

But as smartphone makers have increasingly realized the potential of the built-in camera, there's been a deluge of phones with cameras that can match - and sometimes outperform - low-end dedicated devices in a snap.

A new entrant to the market should inspire some more competition in the phone camera sphere: The myTouch 4G Slide smartphone, made by HTC and available through T-Mobile.

It has an 8-megapixel camera and plenty of the settings you'd find on a normal digital camera. The device takes crisp, bright photos and is simple to use. With it in hand, you'll be missing some pocket camera features, but mostly you'll be apologizing to your increasingly dusty digital friend.

The phone runs Google's [Android operating software](#) and costs \$200 with a two-year [service contract](#).

Although you can easily find a cheap digital camera that can take higher-resolution photos than the myTouch, the phone has a lens that gathers more light, which makes for better shots in dim lighting. Indeed, I generally found the phone's built-in flash too blinding and got better results by simply using the camera's night setting.

It's also very quick to take photos. On lots of cellphone cameras, there's a lot of shutter lag, which refers to the irritating gap between when you press the shutter button and when the camera actually takes a photo. T-Mobile touts the myTouch's camera as having "zero" shutter lag. The camera records continuously when the camera application is open and grabs the frame that corresponds with when you pressed the button.

Indeed, it was better than nearly all cellphone cameras I've tried, and it's on par with Apple's iPhone and the Pre, made by Hewlett-Packard Co.'s Palm division. But there did seem to be bit of a gap, especially when taking action shots.

The myTouch's biggest issue, sadly, is the same one you encounter on virtually all [cellphone](#) cameras. There's no optical zoom, which is where

the camera lens moves closer to subjects. To conserve space and cut down on moving parts, cellphones generally include optical zoom's dumb cousin, digital zoom. That's a software trick that simply magnifies what the camera sees, without making images as sharp as they are with optical zoom.

Unfortunately, this makes it difficult to take detailed shots of far-away objects. Using the myTouch on a canoe trip, ducks and a blue heron snapped at a distance looked like pitifully tiny parts of a larger scene. Cropping the photos and zooming in on my feathered subjects made them look pixelated.

That said, the myTouch's camera is quite good for close-up shots. I took plenty of sharp, bright shots of my friends with the phone. And when using the camera's macro, or close-up, setting, I was able to capture some great photos of textured objects such as a woven bicycle basket and brightly colored ones including flowers in a planter.

As is the case with standalone digital cameras, the myTouch's camera includes facial recognition and smile-and-blink detection, as well as preset "scenes" for doing such things as taking portraits or action shots.

One cool feature is a mode for HDR, or high-dynamic range. The iPhone has one, too. It shoots several images with slightly different exposure settings and combines them into one image with richer colors. I got some cool shots with this setting in particular.

And if you're into videos, it will record high-resolution clips, too.

Mostly, I found myself switching back and forth between the auto and manual modes. It was nice to let the camera decide which settings it thought were best, but I also liked to play with the exposure, contrast and various color filters.

I found the camera performed best in moderate and bright light - a well-lit office or outside on a sunny day. On some of my canoe trip photos, colors looked somewhat washed out in very bright sunlight. Perhaps that could be fixed by tweaking the settings.

The phone includes an 8-gigabyte microSD memory card, which provides plenty of space for shots. There's also 4 GB of memory on the phone.

In places where I had access to T-Mobile's new high-speed [4G](#) network, I could quickly upload photos to Flickr and Facebook, something I couldn't do easily from a point-and-shoot camera.

Of course, the myTouch is also a phone. In general, it performs its phone-related tasks well. It runs version 2.2 of Android, rather than the latest version for smartphones, so it doesn't get some of the latest features and speedier performance. But with its fast dual-core processor, the device only hiccupped a couple times while I was using it. Its touch screen, which measures 3.8 inches diagonally, is plenty spacious as a camera viewfinder and a display for webpages, emails and games.

In a day full of talking, checking and sending messages and taking photos, the phone's battery held up nicely. It's rated for up to 10 hours of talk time.

Probably the most glaring mistake overall is its slide-out keyboard, which was difficult to type on because the keys are not elevated enough. The phone doesn't even really need a physical keyboard anyway, as it includes Swype's excellent touch-screen keyboard software, which lets you slide your finger from letter to letter to type.

Here's an idea: Perhaps the next version of the myTouch could swap the keyboard hardware for a lens with optical zoom. That would make the

phone's great camera even better and tempt me to leave my trusty [digital camera](#) behind for good.

More information: Update: In an Aug. 10 review of the myTouch 4G Slide smartphone, The Associated Press erroneously reported that the Android software running the device isn't the latest version for smartphones. The phone does use version 2.3, the most recent release.

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