

# Review: 4 camera app alternatives to Instagram

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This undated screenshot provided by Microsoft shows Photosynth, which lets you take 360-degree panoramic photos that become interactive on a smartphone or computer screen. While it's wildly popular and the target of Facebook's \$1 billion takeover deal, Instagram isn't the only camera app. (AP Photo/Microsoft)

(AP) -- I'm one of the millions of smartphone owners addicted to Instagram, the free camera app that makes tweaking and sharing photos miraculously easy. While it's wildly popular and the target of Facebook's \$1 billion takeover deal, Instagram isn't the only camera app worth having.

I've been hooked on taking photos on my [iPhone](#) and sharing them using Instagram since I bought my first iPhone last fall.

With Instagram, I can make my photos look better by using one of the app's 17 pre-set filters to adjust lighting, color and other things. I can then share my enhanced photos on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or Instagram's own social network.

But Instagram has a limited range of filters and camera effects, and it isn't always easy to edit pictures with it.

I've had a chance to test a wide range of Instagram alternatives during choice picture-taking opportunities over the past few months, including my sister's wedding in Hawaii in December and a trip to Lebanon this month. I also had my phone for shots along the streets of New York, where I live.

Of the dozen or so I tested, here are four I find myself using over and over again:

- Photosynth by [Microsoft Corp.](#) Free. For iOS only (Apple's iPhone, [iPad](#) and iPod Touch).

My favorite among the ones I tried, Photosynth lets you take 360-degree panoramic photos that become interactive on a smartphone or [computer screen](#).

The app guides you as you stand in one place and capture photos in all directions. Then it stitches those images together to create a sphere-like panorama that viewers can scroll around in and zoom in and out.

You can share the panorama on Facebook, Twitter or Photosynth.net.

It takes a bit of practice, and it's not an app I would use every day. But I found that in the right setting - such as Roman ruins by the sea in Byblos, near Beirut, or my sister's beach wedding - the results can be

breathhtaking.

It's a great way to capture a panoramic landscape such as mountain views, beaches or bridges. Plenty of examples - and inspiration - can be found on [Photosynth.net](http://Photosynth.net).

- TiltShift Generator by Arts & Mobile. Free for basic features, 99 cents for higher resolution and album upload. For iOS only.

Tilt shift is a camera effect that blurs the edges of a picture, creating an optical illusion that makes everything in the photo look miniature.

Instagram has that feature (it's the droplet icon when you are taking or editing a picture). I prefer TiltShift Generator because it gives you more control.

You can control where and how much blurring to produce. You can also determine how much darkening around the corners you want to produce a vignette effect. You can also adjust the saturation, brightness and contrast.

Pictures turn out gorgeous. Some of my favorite iPhone pictures during my trip to Lebanon were taken with this app. The effect makes houses high on a mountaintop and a courtyard fountain stand out in my images.

- Hipstamatic by Synthetic LLC. \$1.99 for basic features, with 99-cent add-ons to give you more imaging options. For iOS only.

I had a hard time figuring Hipstamatic out, but it's worth making the effort.

Unlike most filtering apps, you don't adjust a photo after you've taken it. Instead, you choose different virtual lenses, flashes and film beforehand,

and you can't change the setting after you take the shot.

The app is not very intuitive, the settings are hard to keep track of and the accompanying guide isn't very helpful. But I was able to catch on after a friend gave me a tutorial. Once you get a sense of which virtual lens works best under which conditions, you can create stunning photos.

In Lebanon, in fact, I ended up taking most of my pictures with Hipstamatic because of how it gave life to street scenes that would have looked gritty otherwise. Its "Helga Viking Lens" gave the yellow dust filtering through the streets a romantic feel, and its "John S" lens transformed crumbling ivy-covered pre-war buildings with a retro-cool blue.

- PhotoToaster by East Coast Pixels, Inc. Free version called PhotoToaster Jr. Full version costs \$1.99 and gives you more choices and control. For iOS and Android devices.

I love the ease of flipping through filters on Instagram until I see one that makes my photo pop, but sometimes I want a little more control over the specific effects.

PhotoToaster lets me do both. You can apply preset filters such as "Tuneup," "Pro," "Happy" and "Chill." You can also tap a button and have more precise control over exposure, color temperature, light and other settings.

I often brighten up a photo with PhotoToaster before importing it to Instagram. You can't fix an underexposed shot in Instagram, for example. But with PhotoToaster, my shot of a beautiful but dimly lit wisteria vine crawling up five stories of a building became infused with light.

None of these apps replace Instagram's addictive ability to let you instantly share pictures with friends and strangers alike.

Photosynth is probably the closest to having its own social network for sharing results, but you must go to its website and images are limited to the 360-degree panoramas. You also don't have a circle of friends you regularly exchange images with.

The other apps are more tools for enhancing your photos, which you then take elsewhere for sharing.

That includes taking them to Instagram.

Don't think of these alternatives as replacing Instagram. These apps supplement and enhance the Instagram experience and can make [sharing photos](#) on [Instagram](#) a lot more versatile and fun.

**More information:** One of Mae Anderson's Photosynth's images from Byblos, near Beirut:  
<http://bit.ly/Jo6UYj>

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