

Review: How cloud photo services match up

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About a year ago, I lost hundreds of photos and videos when my computer was stolen. I'm determined not to lose my picture files again.

I've already backed everything up to an [external hard drive](#), and have been looking at online photo storage services as an additional option.

Unlike external hard drives, online photo services protect your collection from physical theft and disasters such as fires. And unlike general online backup or storage services, photo sites typically offer features specifically for photos or videos, such as the ability to create galleries, easily share them in applications or on [social networking sites](#), and make prints or books of them.

Unfortunately, I've found there are no hard-and-fast rules about what [users](#) can expect from photo backup sites. So I'm still debating which service I'm going to choose. But here are some of the features I'll be considering as I weigh my options:

-Amount and cost of storage. This varies widely from [site](#) to site. Yahoo's Flickr service, for example, offers 1 terabyte of photo and video storage for free, which is enough for about 500,000 average-size photos. Google Plus and Shutterfly offer unlimited storage for free.

Other sites give a much smaller amount of [free storage](#) - or none at all. With PicturereLife and StreamNation, users get just 5 gigabytes for free, although users can get more free storage by doing things such as referring other consumers to the services. SmugMug gives users no free-

storage option. Instead, SmugMug charges \$40 a year for unlimited storage.

Some sites with small free-storage options, including Picturelife and StreamNation, offer extra storage for as little as \$5 a month.

Note that even on some of the nominally free sites, users can wind up paying significant amounts if they exceed certain limits. One terabyte of data is a lot, but if you exceed that amount, you could find yourself paying Flickr \$500 a year for the second terabyte of storage.

-Automatic backup. Since my main purpose is to back up my photos, I want a service that will automatically upload pictures from my computer and my handheld devices. Not all photo services do that.

Some, such as Shutterfly, don't offer automatic backups at all. Others will only automatically backup pictures stored in particular places or taken in particular apps. Flickr, for example, has an app that runs on the iPad and iPhone that will automatically save to its service any pictures you take on those devices. But it doesn't offer a similar feature for pictures users upload to their desktop computers from devices such as their digital SLR cameras.

Companies such as StreamNation and Picturelife offer more comprehensive automatic backup options.

-Supported formats. Most images that people shoot are saved as JPEG files. But there are numerous other formats for images, including GIF, PNG and EPS. Most notable of these alternative formats are RAW files, which are typically uncompressed and unprocessed and have been adopted by professionals and hobbyists who want to maintain as much control as possible over their pictures.

All the sites I surveyed support JPEG files and many support other formats. But the types and number of formats they support vary from site to site.

At one extreme is Pictur life, which says it supports 100 different types of image files. At the other end is Shutterfly, which only supports JPEGs. SmugMug falls in between, supporting JPEG, PNG, GIF, RAW and TIF files.

Note that some sites - including Google Plus and SmugMug - charge extra to support RAW files.

-Video support. I shoot a lot of videos on both my smartphone and my digital camera, and I'd like those backed up, too.

Fortunately, most photo services I surveyed offer support for videos. But the sites vary widely in the size of videos that they will allow users to upload.

Shutterfly offers free [storage](#) for up to 10 videos of no more than 300 megabytes, or about 5 minutes each. Flickr allows users to fill up their free terabyte of space with an unlimited number of videos, but only if they are shorter than 3 minutes or smaller than 1 gigabyte. StreamNation offers no set limits on file or video sizes.

-Recovery options. The ideal backup service allows users to quickly and easily recover their files should they ever need to. The ease of restoring your data from the photo backup services is another thing that varies site to site.

If you want to retrieve all of your photos from Shutterfly in full resolution, your only option is to pay the company extra to mail them to you on a collection of DVDs. Sites such as Pictur life and SmugMug

only allow you to download discrete groups of your photos at a time, whether gallery by gallery or month by month.

Google, by contrast, allows users to download all the pictures they have stored on Google Plus through its Takeout feature.

-Sharing options. One advantage of having your photos stored online is that, in theory, you can easily share them with others. But some sites make this easier than others, particularly with regard to sharing photos on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

It's easy on Google Plus to share photos with other Google Plus users. But the service's website and iOS app lack a "share" button that would allow users to send pictures or videos to other social networks. Flickr has a "share" button on its website, but the feature can't send files directly to Google Plus. And StreamNation lacks any kind of share button at all.

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