

What You Need in a Camera

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Here are the features that you need your camera to have, in order to do ethnographic work.

A. Exposure control:

1. Allows manual exposure control (typically as an override to automatic exposure)
 - a. Choice of shutter speed, aperture, and ISO
 - b. Enough choice to work in all circumstances
2. Choice between fully automatic (including without flash), aperture priority, and shutter priority
3. Built in light meter (they all have them)
 - a. *But know what type!!*
 - b. Spot meter helps a lot, but multi-section matrix is ideal
4. The camera should allow easy exposure compensation

B. Lenses:

1. Moderate wide-angle to moderate telephoto (35mm to 140mm equivalent; 28mm to 200mm is better)
 - a. Close-up / Macro a nice touch, but not essential
2. Wide choice of aperture (lets you control depth-of-field)
3. Easy, controllable focus
 - a. If automatic: should have a manual override
 - b. Ideally: should have a depth-of-field preview

C. Decent direct-eye viewfinder (not just LCD)

1. You really can't see well enough through an LCD
2. Viewfinder makes it easier to stabilize your camera.

D. Flash

1. Fill-flash (at least)
2. Adjustable external flash is a plus (for low light)
3. Ideally: Flash compensation

E. IF DIGITAL:

1. Sensor large enough to minimize noise (ideally a "C" size at least)
2. High enough low-noise ISO to shoot in low light
3. Color temperature:
 - a. Auto white-balance
 - b. Set-able white-balance
4. Histogram display
5. Filter attachment system and the following filters
 - a. ND grad (1 stop and 2 stop)
 - b. Polarizer
6. Spare storage chips and batteries

F. IF FILM: (*I do not recommend this!!!*)

1. Filter attachment system and the following filters
 - a. Color-correction (81A, 82A, 80A, FLD)
 - b. Polarizer (circular or otherwise, as needed)
 - c. ND grads (1 stop and 2 stop)
2. Extra film and batteries

Current Cameras That Work

Cameras are always changing, so today's suggestions may not work tomorrow. In particular, there used to be a few high-end point-and-shoot cameras that were adequate for ethnographic work, but that's no longer the case. Manufacturers have removed viewfinders, removed control options, etc., in an effort to preserve their market share against smartphones. Most current compact cameras are just toys.

On the other hand, there are now new types of cameras: mirrorless, Micro 4/3, etc, that provide lots of control in small packages. These are worth exploring, to see if they have the controls that I mentioned above

Here are some current possibilities (as of May, 2015):

- Any DSRL (*digital single-lens reflex*)
 - Canon
 - Sony
 - Nikon
 - Minolta
 - Olympus
 - ...
- Almost any contemporary mirrorless interchangeable lens camera:
 - Sony NEX or Alpha
 - Fujifilm X (*get the T1, if you can afford it*)
 - Olympus
 - ...
- Selected advanced compact cameras, such as the Canon G series (*such as the G16, at left*) or the Canon SX series (*such as the SX170, at right*).



Note that the G16 has a viewfinder while the SX170 does not. The G16 also has a better battery, more controls, and – very importantly – a larger photo chip. You'll thus get much better pictures with it, with less noise. That said, price matters. The SX170 (or the Nikon, Sony, etc equivalent, if one exists) is pretty much the minimum camera you'll need.