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Shutterbugs on the Web

James Turner

Photography has made huge strides since the days when a casual picture involved glass plates and standing still for minutes at a time.

Today's digital cameras trump even instant cameras by giving us sharp images ready to be stored - and zapped around - by computer.

One thing that hasn't changed: the desire of people to share their photos with others. Enter the Web. Some sites, like Ophoto (www.ophoto.com) focus solely on processing, printing, and sharing. To use the service, you put your undeveloped film in a mailer and send it off.

About a week later, you get an e-mail saying your prints are ready to view. When you log on to the Web site, you can view thumbnail images of your pictures. You then select which pictures you want printed, crop and color-balance them online, select a print size for each photo, and place your order. The pictures are mailed back to you along with the negatives.

The first two rolls of processing are free, after which it's $2.95 a roll. You'll also pay 49 cents a print for 4-by-6-inch prints, and $1.49 per order for shipping via first-class mail.

You can't get a digital copy. The company doesn't allow downloads of the images. But you can upload photos from your digital camera and have them printed on high-quality film stock. The same print and shipping charges apply.

The philosophy of these sites is that people want only a few prints from each roll. Ophoto certainly bases its pricing on that assumption. If you order prints of every picture on a 24-exposure roll, you'll pay nearly $16.50 by the time you're done.

Other sites, such as Shutter fly.com, offer similar services and pricing. In general, the sites that process film for free do not allow you to download images (only order prints). Conversely, sites that charge for processing (such as the new online options being offered by Wal-Mart and Kodak) tend to offer high-quality image downloads for free.

With scanners running about $60, ink-jet printers producing outstanding copies, and new printer paper offering longevity rivaling that of professional developers, Ophoto and its competitors will appeal to those who want to share pictures on and off the Web, but don't feel up to installing and using a scanner.

For digital-camera users who want their pictures professionally printed, try Mystic Color Lab (mysticcolorlab.com). Simply e-mail images to the site and you'll be mailed photos at a cost of about 45 cents per print.

Also new on the Web-photo scene: the Kodak Smart Picture Frame. This product, sold by about a dozen retailers, is designed to allow people to share and view pictures without owning a computer.

Basically a picture frame with a built-in computer, the Smart Picture Frame lets users insert a memory card from a digital camera and instantly view photos. Once loaded into the StoryBox, photos can be shared with others across phone lines, or sent to Kodak to be printed. Users can also download pictures from other users, or subscribe to content "channels" that provide news, weather, and other information. The high price ($350) and subscription fees (about $5 to $10 per month after the first six months), however, will likely make this a fringe product.

James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web user.

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