North Valley – Ask the TechnoFile – Apr/May 2008

Q. I had to move with my job and now live on the opposite side of the country to my family and friends. I would like to use a webcam so I can still get to see them. I am not sure what to buy or how to make it work.

A. Great idea, I have relatives 6000 miles away in the UK and use one for the same reason, I have a new baby niece and so far have only met her online! It's obviously not as good as face to face but it's the next best thing when you are so far away. There are lots of options for webcams; major brands include Creative Labs, Logitech and Microsoft. You can find their products at all the big stores and online. They all have various models that have an increasing number of features and corresponding price tags. Just like still cameras webcams have varying resolutions and quality, some have built in microphones (a good idea) some are smaller and more suitable for laptops.

Before you set off to buy a webcam remember that they will work over your internet connection. You and whoever you plan on talking to (and seeing) will need a good, high speed broadband internet service – dial-up wont cut-it!

Once you have your webcam installed you will need to use a service to make your video calls. You will need the same service on both ends. The easiest way to go is with your favorite IM application. Most if not all the common ones now allow video calls e.g. AOL and Windows Live Messenger. Another option that I have used successfully is Skype. Setup with all the services is pretty straight forward so you should be up and running in no time – have fun!

Q. I am in the market for a new camera. I have been comparing various features and the one I am not sure about is Image Stabilization. What is it, how does it help me and do I need it?

A. In my humble opinion the simple answer is – Get It! I had my first image stabilized camera over 6 years ago and I now wouldn't consider one without this capability. Essentially what it does is try to reduce/remove the effects of hand shaking. There are various methods used and some stabilize the lens others the sensor. The mechanism moves the lens elements or sensor to oppose your movements. It's not going to help if you are pretending your camera is a cocktail shaker but for most normal operations they work really well.

The primary benefits are in the areas of zooming and low light shooting. The further you zoom in to your subject the more any movement is magnified by the distance. One degree of rotation doesn't sound very much but at 100 yards that will magnify to over 4 feet of movement, at 200 yards its more than 8 feet and so on. Thus you can see how any shaking is not good for long distance photos.

When shooting in good bright light the shutter speed will be high enough to freeze action and also therefore any effects of camera shake. As the light diminishes the shutter speed gets slower and the effects of shake become more pronounced. As illustrated by the issue of zooming, the distance or focal length also plays a part but for the average medium angle photo (approx 50mm) it is commonly felt that a speed of 1/60s is the minimum for hand held shots without blur. Image stabilization helps by effectively increasing your shutter speed 2 sometimes 3 stops i.e. you can shoot at 1/15 or even 1/8 without too much blur.

If you really want a razor sharp photo with long telephoto or low light shots then there is no substitute for a tripod, however, Image stabilization will really help.