

PICTURE PERFECT PRINTING

By Ashley Kramer

Digital photos tend to be displayed online or on digital photo frames, so it's ironic that getting photos printed has never been easier. Photo kiosks are just about everywhere, retailers will whip out prints on the spot and online photo print services will drop prints into your mailbox in a matter of days. ▶▶

WITH ALL THESE options available to consumers, the home photo printer has had to evolve to become even more adept at running off high quality colour prints. As Ted Gibbons found in a *PC World* printer test in November 2009, it's nigh on impossible to match the in-store or online cost of printing standard sized photos by running them off at home, so the main advantage of printing your photos yourself is the sheer convenience. Feel like printing some photos for the family? Just hit the print button and hey presto – photos in minutes.

This of course presumes that the printer is simple to set up, user friendly, versatile and most importantly, that it prints photos a photographer will be proud of.

While we like the idea of having an A3 photo printer at home, they're expensive to buy, consume loads of ink on the big prints and take up a heap of space. Most people will seldom if ever need to print anything bigger than an A4 print, so we ran three A4 photo printers through the wringer to see which model deserves that valuable space on your desk.

A4 PHOTO PRINTERS



GREAT BUT GREEDY:
The HP produces deeply saturated prints but is thirsty for ink.

HP Photosmart Premium C309g

HP'S C309G is a fully featured multifunction photo printer with scan and copy capabilities and plenty of connectivity options. In addition to USB, the C309g also offers Bluetooth, Wireless, PictBridge and Ethernet as well as two memory card slots and a front mounted USB port. If you can't find a way to connect to this printer, you're probably living well off the grid.

The C309g is a good looking unit, finished in glossy black with a textured top panel. It's big, however, so be aware of its space requirements. It scores high marks for user-friendliness by offering a 3.45 inch touchscreen for setup, copying, scanning, ink monitoring and diagnostics. The touchscreen is easy to use, with fast, clear menus. It works like a charm, right down to offering virtual keyboards for Wireless and Bluetooth setup. HP's Snapfish.com web printing service can be accessed from the screen as well. The touchscreen swivels, but this doesn't help tall users see the screen clearly. There are two front trays, a main tray and one for smaller photo paper, which is handy as it allows the printer to be simultaneously loaded with plain and photo paper.

The HP Solution Centre software takes a while to load but offers a user-friendly interface.

In addition to the usual ink monitoring and troubleshooting functions, there are short animated video clips that show how to manage tasks such as loading paper and cartridges or scanning onto a memory card. HP's software uses Windows Live Photo Gallery to sort, edit and print photos. Of course, you're asked to set up a Windows Live ID to really get the most out of the printer (no thanks) but fortunately you can use the application without having to sign up online or you can just print directly from PC applications.

Wireless setup from the touchscreen was quick and prints were rolling in short order. The C309g is a five colour printer (black, photo black, cyan, magenta and yellow). Plain-paper prints in black and white or colour were crisp and photo print quality was generally very good indeed. Sharpness and detail levels on HP's Premium Plus paper were excellent and photos displayed the deepest colour saturation in our test. There's a tendency for certain prints to show a mild green hue in light brown, beige and grey areas.

On the downside, the HP displayed alarming ink consumption. Loaded with five fresh cartridges, it managed to print only twelve 4 x 6 inch and four A4 photos plus a few pages of A4 black and white text before

surrendering with an empty cyan cartridge. HP seems to have a problem with either the ink use or the ink monitoring of this series of printers because its B109a tested late last year had similar issues. A look online showed that these cartridges are available in standard and XL versions, with the XL at twice the price compared to Canon and Epson cartridges. It seems that the cartridges supplied with the C309g may be of a very low capacity. Supplying printers with "starter" cartridges is just going to frustrate users. In this case it raises doubts about the running costs of the HP C309g and causes it to be marked down in this test, which is a shame because it's a very good unit in other respects.

AT A GLANCE

- User-friendly touchscreen.
- Deepest colour saturation in group.
- Worrying ink consumption.

HP PHOTOSMART PREMIUM C309G

RRP incl GST: \$349 Contact: hp.co.nz

A multitasking and user-friendly printer with plenty of connectivity options. Let down by scary ink consumption.

6.0





COMPETENT BUT COMPLICATED:
The Epson makes a great job of prints but wireless setup is overly complex.

EPSON Stylus Photo TX710W

EPSON'S TX710W is a sizable and well put together multifunction photo printer. Its gloss black finish, silver highlights and flashing blue LED strip ensure that it's the best looking of the three units in the test, if that's an important consideration for you.

The TX710W has a 2.5 inch LCD screen to allow access to setup, diagnostics, scanning, copying and the like. The screen is smaller than the HP's and isn't touch enabled but it swivels (along with the control panel) to allow it to be clearly seen when the printer is placed on a desk. Connectivity includes wireless, USB, PictBridge, Ethernet and two memory card slots, one of which accepts Compact Flash cards, which will be appreciated by users of older or high-end DSLRs. There's also an optional Bluetooth adapter available.

Unfortunately, setup was a frustrating process. Epson's software loaded easily but connecting the TX710W to the wireless network and getting any computer on the network to see the printer was an exercise in futility. I'm convinced this wasn't due to anything on my side, because two other reviewers I know have had similar issues with Epson printers in this series. Moving to a USB cable had the TX710W humming along in no time at all. The software suite isn't as visually slick as HP's software but it includes

no less than fourteen applications covering everything from colour profiles to optical character recognition. The Easy PhotoPrint image editing and print application offers a surprising amount of control over images.

The TX710W is a six colour printer with light magenta and light cyan alongside black, yellow, cyan and magenta cartridges. Like the other two units in the test, the Epson has separate plain and photo paper feeds, contained in one ingenious albeit fiddly tray. DVD/CD printing is also on offer.

The frugal Epson was the polar opposite of the HP in terms of ink consumption. It arrived with an almost empty cyan cartridge, which needed to be run dry. After printing twenty-four 4 x 6 inch photos with four A4s thrown in for good measure, the Epson was indicating that the cartridge was very low but it was still happily printing everything I sent at it. The other cartridges were showing only moderate ink use. When a cartridge does run out however, the TX710W gets irritatingly insistent about buying Epson ink online.

Using Epson Ultra Glossy photo paper, the TX710W's photo print quality was the best in the test by a small margin, with the highest levels of sharpness and detail retention. Colours were well saturated and contrast high but prints weren't quite as vivid as the HP.

Extra saturation and contrast can be dialled in via the software but the results can be a little hit and miss, with some prints ending up with too much contrast. It's definitely worth experimenting with the options in the print dialogue boxes. Monochrome photos had a moderate cold-blue tint to them, while black and white text output didn't match the sharpness of the other printers.

Epson's TX710W is a very competent photo printer, with much to recommend it. On the other hand, it's the most expensive printer on test and buyers are paying for wireless connectivity. If it wasn't for the apparent problem with the wireless setup, it would have scored higher than it did.

AT A GLANCE

- Frustrating Wi-Fi setup.
- Good ink-cartridge life.
- Competent but pricey.

EPSON STYLUS PHOTO TX710W

RRP incl GST: \$399 Contact: epson.co.nz

A good-looking and very effective multifunction photo printer but the wireless setup problems are a concern.

7.0





CANON iP4700

FAST BUT SINGLE FUNCTION:
The Canon is speedy at printing but is just a single function device.

BEING THE ONLY POPP (Plain Old Photo Printer) in the test, Canon's iP4700 is more compact than the HP or Epson multifunctions, which is worth noting if space is at a premium and you don't need scanning or copying functionality.

The iP4700 is finished in the ubiquitous gloss black and doesn't seem to be quite as well built as the HP or Epson units, which may be a reflection of its smaller form factor. There are no screens, touch or otherwise on any of its panels, so there's no simple way to print directly from USB sticks or memory cards, which means these slots and their associated convenience are absent. Thus the iP4700's connectivity options are limited to USB with PictBridge available for direct printing from compatible digital cameras. It's a five colour printer with black, photo black, cyan, magenta and yellow cartridges.

The basic connectivity choice makes setting up the iP4700 relatively straightforward because no wireless network interaction is involved. Be sure to follow the printed Getting Started guide because there are a few manual steps involved with the print head installation and subsequent alignment. Canon's software bundle is comprehensive

and includes the MyPrinter application, which controls day to day settings, maintenance and troubleshooting. There's also Easy PhotoPrint EX (which is a good basic application for image editing), Easy WebPrint EX for printing portions of webpages and CD LabelPrint, which is used with the supplied disk tray to print on CD and DVD disks. The Solution Menu application ties them all together in a single menu.

There are two paper trays, a bottom mounted plain paper cassette and a rear photo paper tray, which is convenient as it allows both types of media to be loaded at the same time. Only three sheets of sample Canon 4 x 6 inch photo paper were supplied with this printer but being a hoarder, I happened to have a box of Canon A4 glossy paper and a stash of premium glossy 4 x 6 inch sheets on hand.

Printing speed was quick, with the Canon whipping out 4 x 6 inch prints substantially faster than the HP or Epson (A4 print speed was neck and neck with the Epson though). After printing the same amount of photos that drained an ink tank on the HP C309g, the Canon was still raring to go, showing minimal ink use on its status screen. The iP4700's print output is sharp, with high resolution and good

detail retention but the HP and Epson have a small advantage here, most easily noticed on the finest details such as the tiny hairs on the edge of a leaf. The iP4700's prints also seemed a little subdued compared to the other two; not at all washed out, just not as bright or saturated.

The Canon is a smaller, less expensive and far simpler proposition than the Epson or HP units on test, which will appeal to some. It's photo output is good but the other two printers have a marginal edge in terms of vibrancy and sharpness. There's really not much in it though and only the pickiest of users will notice.

AT A GLANCE

- No direct printing from memory cards.
- Highest 4 x 6 inch print speed.
- Minimal ink consumption.

CANON iP4700

RRP incl GST: \$279 Contact: canon.co.nz

Less expensive and complex than the multifunctions, but doesn't seem to match the outright image quality of the other units.

6.0

Conclusion

ALL THREE PRINTERS proved reliable, with not one misfeed or jam over the duration of the test, which bodes well for user satisfaction. There were two issues that were frustrating, however – the HP's ink consumption, which may be due to low capacity cartridges and the Epson's wireless networking, which seems to be more widespread than the review unit. Either way, this is something users need to discuss with their retailers before buying. Getting assurances of assistance or satisfaction if things do go awry would be high on my list of priorities.

HP and Epson addressed one of my pet peeves by including a USB cable in the box while Canon doesn't include one (Epson even throws in an Ethernet cable). Perhaps the theory is that everyone has this specific cable lying around but this isn't the case and I wonder how many buyers the omission has caught out over the years?

Having printers like these on hand gives users the ability to print photos at their convenience and to be confident that the results will look professional. They also offer the practicality of crisp plain-paper printing. All three units are capable of printing photos that can match or exceed the quality delivered by some commercial sources but Epson's Stylus Photo TX710W gets the nod for the best photo print quality of the three printers on test.

Home Printing vs. Professional Printing

As I mentioned earlier, printing standard 4 x 6 inch (10x15cm) photos at home is inevitably going to be more expensive than having them printed commercially. However, when you start ordering commercial enlargements, the equation is less weighted in their favour. A look online showed 8 x 12 inch (20x30cm) prints ranging from \$4.95 to \$7.95; a big increase over the approximately 20c per print for 4 x 6 inch photos. In reality, the vast majority of photos will be printed at the smaller 4x6" size because they're easy to share and display. Most people will save the A4 prints for their treasured shots, which will then be framed or mounted in an album.

All your prints should look great but it's these special shots that deserve the very best treatment and that's where home printing can be a better bet. While the results from commercial printers are generally very good, I've seen some feeble efforts over the years, with washed out

and inaccurate colours or strange tints being the most notable. If you're thinking of having large prints done (or indeed any prints), it's worth placing a small trial order first. Don't make the mistake of sending off a huge pile of images only to be disappointed.

If you're printing at home, you're in control of the final output and you can get incredibly consistent results. The key is to get to know your printer and computer inside out. While advanced photographers use powerful image editing software, the average photographer edits and prints images in the application that comes with their camera or printer. Some of these software suites are a little limited in their capabilities, so it can be worth investing in a copy of Adobe's Photoshop Elements, which has huge functionality, without the complexity and cost of the full-blown version of Photoshop.

Whatever image editing application you use, read the manual until you understand it and then run some experiments. See what the results look like with various settings – sometime the "enhanced", "vivid" or "corrected" options don't look as good as standard despite their implied improvements. Other printers really benefit from having extra contrast or brightness dialled in. Unfortunately the only way to find out what works is through trial and error, so be prepared to run off some duplicate 4 x 6 inch prints to gauge the results. There's a temptation to print all shots borderless but photos usually look more professional with a frame of some sort, so consider printing them with a border.

It's a good idea to run your printer occasionally, even if you've got nothing important to print. Yes, it uses ink but a printer allowed to sit idle for long periods is more likely to need cleaning or alignment, which consumes even more ink.

As much as I hate to admit it, I've found it's best to use genuine ink cartridges and the manufacturer's own paper. The results are simply more consistent. The better quality photo papers inevitably look better than the less expensive ones, so an "Ultra Glossy" premium paper will produce better prints than an "Everyday" paper. If you see a block of 100 sheets of the good stuff on special, grab it because you'll use it eventually. The same goes for ink: pick up what you can at the best price.

While it takes a little more effort to print at home, the consistent results on those larger shots can well be worth it. **PCW**

A4 PHOTO PRINTER SPECS & PERFORMANCE

Make & Model	PCW Rating	Inks	Connectivity	Max Resolution	Multifunction	6x4" Average speed*	A4 Average speed*	RRP incl GST
HP Photosmart Premium C309g	6.0	5	USB, Ethernet, PictBridge, Wireless, Bluetooth, Memory Card	9,600 x 2,400dpi	Yes	82 secs	217 secs	\$349
Epson Stylus Photo TX710W	7.0	6	USB, Ethernet, PictBridge, Wireless, Memory Card	5,760dpi	Yes	83 secs	136 secs	\$399
Canon Pixma iP4700	6.0	5	USB, PictBridge	9,600 x 2,400dpi	No	62 secs	137 secs	\$279

*At best photo quality.