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A complete history of the camera phone

By **Simon Hill** Published May 13, 2022

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Cameras in phones are ubiquitous. Few of us see the need to carry a dedicated device for taking photos or videos anymore, and digital camera sales have slumped. But how did we get here? Let's take a look at the history of the camera phone.

Samsung Sharp built the first camera phone

The first cell phone with a built-in camera was manufactured by Samsung and released in South Korea in June of 2000. The SCH-V200 flipped open to reveal a 1.5-inch TFT-LCD, and the built-in digital camera was capable of taking 20 photos at 350,000-pixel resolution, which is 0.35-megapixels, but you had to hook it up to a computer to get your photos. The camera and the phone components were essentially separate devices housed in the same body.



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There's a strong argument that the first real camera phone was produced by Sharp and released in Japan by J-Phone (now SoftBank Mobile) in November of 2000. The J-SH04 could take photos, like the one on the right (from [Japanese site Showcase](#)) at 110,000-pixel resolution or 0.11-megapixels. The real difference between it and the Samsung SCH-V200 was the fact that the J-SH04 allowed you to send your photos electronically. Here's how the [BBC reported on it](#) back in 2001, the comments are priceless.



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First U.S. camera phone – Sanyo SCP-5300



It was November 2002 before the U.S. adopted the crazy Japanese trend with the Sanyo SCP-5300 on Sprint. It cost \$400 and it featured a chunky clamshell design. With a 0.3-megapixel capability, it could capture shots at 640 x 480 pixels. The one pictured on the left comes from this [IGN review](#). The Sanyo SCP-5300 also had a basic flash, white balance control, self-timer, digital zoom, and various filter effects like sepia, black and white, and negative colors.

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By the end of 2003, camera phones were really taking off in the U.S. and over 80 million had already been sold worldwide. We even covered the trend by reporting

that [camera phones rival DVD players sales](#) back in November 2003. The good news for consumers was that quality was rising and prices were dropping.

1.3MP arrives with Audiovox PM8920

Continuing to push the camera phone trend, [Sprint released the PM8920](#) in July of 2004. It was the first phone in the U.S. to feature a 1.3-megapixel camera capable of capturing 1280 x 960 pixel resolution shots. Not only could you share these pictures wirelessly, they were good enough to print as well. It had a dedicated camera button and a decent variety of settings, including a multi-shot option for taking eight quick photos in a row, and the ability to record your own shutter sound. It was available for \$150 after rebates (\$299 RRP).



By the end of 2004 the camera phone was riding high. Canalsys reported that over half of the phones sold worldwide in the first 9 months of 2004 had cameras in them, and two-thirds of all the phones shipped in the third quarter were camera phones. Leading the way was Finnish manufacturer, Nokia.

2MP in the Nokia N90



In 2005 the Nokia N90 landed to take the camera phone to new heights. Not only did it boast a 2MP camera, it also had Carl Zeiss optics, autofocus, and an LED flash. It will probably be best remembered for that rotating screen, which gave it a camcorder feel. Here's our [Nokia N90 review](#) from back in the day.

Sony steps it up

The main competitor for Nokia in the camera arms race was Sony Ericsson. Carrying Sony's Cyber-shot digital camera branding there were quite a few decent releases intended to steal Nokia's camera phone crown, not least the Sony Ericsson K800i released in 2006. It had a 3.2MP camera with auto-focus, image stabilization, and a Xenon flash. The photo on the right was taken with the Sony Ericsson K790i variant which had the same camera.



Nokia naturally retaliated with models like the 3.2MP N73, but in 2007 the feature phone reached its pinnacle.

5MP in the Nokia N95



Samsung produced the first 5-megapixel camera phone, but the first one to prove really popular was Nokia's N95. It was a chunky slider packed with features, but none were as impressive as that 5-megapixel camera with the Carl Zeiss lens. It took beautiful photos and it could record video at 30 frames-per-second. In fact, 5MP remained as a high-end standard for several years. Sadly for Nokia the smartphone revolution was just around the corner, and our [Nokia N95 review](#) bemoaned the lack of a touchscreen. A good camera would not be enough to keep Nokia on the rise.

To put it in perspective, the original iPhone hit the market a few months after the N95, in June 2007, and it had a 2MP camera with no flash or auto-focus and no video recording capability.

8MP from Samsung

In 2008 the Samsung i8510, also known as the [INNOV8](#), held the first 8MP camera to hit the market, but in design terms Samsung was copying the wrong company.

This release looked like part of Nokia's N range, but these designs were growing steadily less popular. Nokia followed suit with the N86, but it was LG that released the first touchscreen camera phone with an 8MP camera. It was called the LG Renoir.



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The race for megapixels continued and Samsung hit 12MP first with the M8910 Pixon12 in 2009. It was soon bested by [Nokia's N8](#) in 2010 and the 16MP Sony Ericsson S006 at the end of the year.

Smartphones stall the camera's progress

The race to improve the cameras in phones stalled a bit as smartphones took off. The iPhone proved that there were more important features than the camera. It was also vital for manufacturers to produce slim, attractive devices, and the really powerful camera phones up to that point had all been seriously chunky. Some exasperated commentators also tried to point out that the quality of a camera is about more than just the number of megapixels. This series of [photos by Lisa Bettany](#) compares different iPhone models.



3D flop



Both HTC and LG tried to jump on the 3D bandwagon in 2011 and released phones with dual 5MP cameras capable of taking photos or capturing video in stereographic 3D. As it turned out, there was no real demand.

Most manufacturers seemed to be getting the message. The focus was shifting to software features that would offer extra value for people interested in photography.

The rise of software features for cameras

We've had Photo Sphere from Google and Panorama mode from Apple. BlackBerry came up with Time Shift and there was the oddly-named Zoe from HTC. We've also seen more filters and effects baked into the various mobile platforms, but these are largely things that apps have offered for a long time now. They're great for people who want to spend the time getting into them, but most of us forget those kinds of novelties pretty quickly. What we really want is good point-and-shoot functionality to capture life in all its spontaneous glory.



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Bigger and better

As HTC tries to convince us that a 4-megapixel camera is enough in its [HTC One](#), Nokia is re-igniting the battle with a typically ferocious assault. High-end smartphones, like [Sony's Xperia Z](#) are maxing out at 13-megapixels. Even Samsung's camera focused S4 variant, the Zoom, only has a 16-megapixel sensor (although the optical zoom is its key feature). The [Nokia Lumia 1020](#) has a 41-megapixel camera in it. This is how it compares to the iPhone 5 (the photo on the left is mislabeled as iPhone 4).

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Whether we actually need the cameras in our phones to be too much better than they are now is debatable, but you could say that about a lot of tech. The [Chicago Sun-Times publicly sacked photographers](#) and expects iPhone-toting reporters to take their own photos. That may not be the wisest decision, but the fuss it generated was more focused on the skills of the photographer than the equipment. It's not unusual for a [professional photographer to use an iPhone](#), and it's far from the most powerful camera phone on the market.

The future for camera phones

The [Lumia 1020](#) looks set to be the best camera phone on the market for some time to come. It's worth mentioning that Nokia's first 41-megapixel camera phone was the [PureView 808](#) in early 2012, but because it was stuck on Nokia's old Symbian smartphone OS (the same one as the N95), sales were nothing special. Windows Phone is a lot better, but it remains to be seen how many people will be tempted in. In any case, you can be certain that the camera phone war is far from over. Things are just heating up, in fact. Samsung's [Galaxy S4 Zoom](#) is coming and the [Sony i1](#) could be a contender later this year.

Editors' Recommendations

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