

# Sony Xperia 1 II review: For phone filmmakers, these cameras will be hard to beat

With a \$1,200 price tag, Sony's new flagship brings more mirrorless camera features to your pocket.

When I told someone about the Sony Xperia 1 II, their first reaction was "Sony still makes phones?!" Granted, this phone isn't aimed at the masses like an iPhone 11 Pro or a Samsung Galaxy S20. Sony is after creative types who want more control over their photos and videos. That's why the company packed the \$1,200 Xperia with controls and tools from its popular Alpha line of full-frame mirrorless cameras, and that's what I'll be looking at exclusively in this piece.

On paper, the Xperia 1 II seems like most other Android flagship phones powered by a Snapdragon 865 processor. It has a 6.5-inch 4K OLED screen, 5G (outside of the US) and on the back is a wide angle main camera, an ultrawide-angle camera and a telephoto camera -- all of which have a 12-megapixel sensor.



But there are things that set this phone apart. For instance, the telephoto lens has the full-frame equivalency of a 70mm lens -- meaning it's actually a telephoto lens! (Normally, when companies say their phones have telephoto lenses, they are really somewhere between 52 and 56mm.) There is also a physical shutter button on the phone which is quite handy in-use. There are also three preloaded apps that take full advantage of the camera. One is the basic Xperia Android camera app. The other two are Photo Pro and Cinema Pro, which give you detailed controls over every aspect of your phone's photo and video capture.

To my delight these apps allow the Xperia 1 II to operate more like a camera than a phone. This made me wonder how good these cameras actually were, especially at video capture. To find out, I made a short film with the phone and I was very impressed.

## **I made a film with the Cinema Pro app**

The best way to talk about and test the Xperia 1 II's video quality and the Cinema Pro app was to go through the process of making a film. So I wrote, shot and starred in the 4-minute film called I, Robber, which you can watch below. Every shot was captured using the Xperia's Cinema Pro app and I had a blast using it.

While shooting my film, the physical shutter button on the Xperia 1 II made it easy to record myself even when I couldn't see the screen. The Xperia 1 is also small when compared to mirrorless cameras, and it allows me to put it in different locations for unique shots and perspectives. For example, for one scene I taped the phone to the inside of a cabinet door.

The left side of the phone has no buttons and is relatively flat meaning that the phone can stand on its own... mostly.

Unlike other apps that offer video centric controls, Cinema Pro has a detailed yet approachable layout. Its minimal menus are very straightforward and all major settings are available at a glance. Things like shutter angle, ISO, manual focusing are simple to adjust and you can automate a focus pull between two subjects -- which is such a pleasure to watch.

Videos are recorded in an H.265 codec with 10-bit color. 4K video out of the Cinema Pro app is sharp, especially off the main 24mm camera. Resolution and frame rates top out at 4K 60fps or HD at 120fps. I should note that since Cinema Pro videos have a 2.39:1 aspect ratio, it doesn't actually record at full 4K UHD. Instead, you have to use the native Xperia camera app to capture true UHD in a 16:9 aspect ratio.

But Sony can add improvements to the Xperia 1 II that would make it more helpful. For one thing, I wish there was more "pro," in the Cinema Pro app. It would be great to zoom in on the viewfinder to manual focus or have focus peaking. A true flat video profile would be nice, too.

If you're filming outdoors, you need a neutral density filter in order to keep from getting overexposed videos. Since the aperture is fixed, the only way to adjust exposure is by changing the ISO and shutter angle. On a really bright day, I often bottomed out both the ISO and shutter angle and still had an overexposed image. One hack I learned was to shoot at 4K 60fps (or HD 120fps), which exposes each frame shorter than filming at 24fps. It's not ideal, but sometimes it would bring the exposure to a manageable place.



There are times I went to reshoot a scene and had to guess what my settings were for the original take. Access to ISO and shutter speed metadata for clips I already shot, even if it is only available in the project file, would be another great tool. Adding a histogram to the Cinema Pro app (instead of just the Photo Pro app), and additional tools like a waveform and zebras would all be helpful, too.

I realize my wishlist actually sounds like the feature list of the third party video app Filmic Pro. While added tools to Cinema Pro would be great, I do understand that Cinema Pro and Filmic Pro are two fundamentally different apps and part of what I like about the former is that it's quite simple. If I used Filmic Pro when I was a young scrappy filmmaker I'd be overwhelmed. Whereas Cinema Pro offers a solid place to get my feet wet and get what's in my head captured as video.

## **Photo Pro app and Eye AF transform the Xperia 1 II into a mirrorless camera**

When we think about phones that take great photos, like the iPhone 11 Pro or Google Pixel 4, they stand out because they can capture a moment, process it and optimize it to create a single picture that looks as outstanding as possible. After you tap the shutter button the phone's computational photography chops does the rest. For

many people, that's all they ever want out of a phone camera.

But for people like me who want more creative control, the Xperia 1 II is a real damn treat. I get access to advanced controls and can interact with them like a regular camera.

If you are already into the Sony Alpha camera ecosystem the Photo Pro app will immediately look familiar because it essentially mimics a Sony Alpha camera. There are controls for metering, focus, exposure compensation and more. I can dial in shutter speed and ISO and there's even an onscreen histogram and horizon level.



The best feature is Eye AF which is an autofocus tool borrowed from the \$3,500 Sony A9 camera. Eye AF can identify a face in your frame and then lock in on your subject's eye. It is jaw-dropping how well this works on the Xperia.

This feature is also supposed to work on animals, which sounds fun and it was something I was looking forward to. Unfortunately, despite numerous tries, I never got the eye focus box to pop up for my roommate's cat Cheddar. My video producer tried it on his dog Max and the green box didn't pop up on his eyes either. I'm working with Sony to figure out exactly what's going on.

## Xperia 1 II photos are great

Whether I was using the default Xperia camera app or Photo Pro, I was able to capture consistently good photos with the Sony Xperia 1 II. Pictures had lots of detail, wonderful colors and accurate focus.







Even indoors and in medium and low light situations, the Xperia 1 II produces photos with low image noise that look natural. Take a look below at the photo of Cheddar the cat. The kitchen has a mix of warm and cool lighting as well as bright areas and heavily shadowed ones. Cheddar's fur has wonderful detail and his white fur highlights aren't blown out.







The only place I'm disappointed is with the selfie camera, which takes only average-quality photos. Image quality is a big step down compared to the rear camera and there is a beauty mode that smooths the skin and enlarges eyes to a point that is too extreme. Some people might prefer this, but I'm not one.





## The Xperia 1 II costs \$1,200

Ultimately the Xperia 1 II's triple-rear camera and preloaded camera apps are tools that made my pursuit of filmmaking and photography feel more legitimate on a phone than the LG V60 or even the iPhone 11 Pro.

But the phone's \$1,200 price tag is certainly not for everybody. If you are deep in the Sony Alpha camera ecosystem then the Xperia 1 II is definitely worth considering, especially if you have the budget. Sony has a preorder deal where if you buy the phone it comes bundled with a pair of Sony WF1000XM3 wireless headphones that cost normally \$230. If you are interested in the Xperia, I'd definitely take advantage of that.

As a journalist and scrappy short filmmaker, the phone costs too much for me and I imagine for a lot of other people too. Still, using this phone was a great experience and perhaps Sony can port over these great camera tricks into cheaper phone models in the near future.

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