



Which iPhone is best for photography? Breaking down Apple's current lineup

Summary

The article describes the camera features of Apple's current iPhone lineup. The iPhone 17 Pro and Pro Max have the same camera setup, while the iPhone 17e has a smaller sensor and lacks some of the advanced features found in the other models.

By Mitchell Clark Published Mar 2, 2026



Image: Apple

With Apple's latest iPhone 17 series, the company's lineup has more options than before, from the iPhone Air to the iPhone 17 Pro Max (and we can't forget the budget iPhone 17e). While there are many things that set these phones apart, we're going to look at how the phones are for photography, and how they compare to each other.

How do Apple's new iPhones compare?



There are more subtle differences that we'll cover, but the biggest differences between cameras for the Air (left), iPhone 17 (middle) and iPhone 17 Pro (right) are obvious just from looking at them.

Image: Apple

Comparing the cameras on the iPhone 17, iPhone Air, iPhone 17 Pro, and iPhone 17 Pro Max is relatively simple; for most people, the main differences will be in the number of cameras each phone has. The Air has a single wide-angle camera, and the

same model is found on the iPhone 17, though paired with an ultra-wide camera. The 17 Pro adds an additional telephoto camera, providing the most range and flexibility.

There are several shared components between the phones. The 17 and Air's main cameras, for example, are the same, as are the wide-angle camera on the 17 and 17 Pro. And for photography, they have the same set of features, including the Camera Control button, customizable Photographic Styles that give you more control over how your photos look and a portrait mode with adjustable computer-generated bokeh.

The iPhone 17 Pro's main camera is much larger than the one on the standard 17 and Air

Despite the commonalities, there are still benefits to going Pro. Besides the addition of a 100mm equiv. telephoto camera, the main camera also uses a much larger Type 1/1.28 (71.5mm²) sensor, compared to the Type 1/1.56 (48mm²) sensor used on the standard 17 and Air.

The additional area means it will gather more light, so it won't have to dip into the long exposure low-light mode as often, and can provide better image quality and more real bokeh in ideal lighting conditions. The Pros' main cameras also have a slightly wider focal length at 24mm, rather than 26mm.

	iPhone Air	iPhone 17	iPhone 17 Pro
Main (wide)			
Sensor resolution / size	48MP Type 1/1.56 (48mm ²)		48MP Type 1/1.28 (71.5mm ²)
Focal length (equiv.)	26mm		24mm
Aperture	F1.6		F1.78
Ultra-wide			
Sensor resolution / size	—	48MP Type 1/2.55 (23.5mm ²)	
Focal length (equiv.)		13mm	
Aperture		F2.2	
Telephoto			
Sensor resolution / size	—		48MP Type 1/2.55 (23.5mm ²)
Focal length (equiv.)			100mm
Aperture			F2.8

Finally, there's the Air, which only has a single 26mm wide-angle camera. Apple includes a "2x" mode that [crops in](#) on the 12MP in the center of the sensor to provide a bit of additional reach, but if you like to shoot subjects that are far away, or like the look that ultra-wide images provide, you may want to consider other options. However, if you only use the main camera, you're not giving anything up versus the standard 17.

What about the selfie camera?



Image: Apple

For this generation, Apple introduced a brand new selfie camera which, thankfully, is included on all of its new phones. The new design is larger (though it's not clear by how much), higher-resolution and square. While it doesn't seem like the phone uses the whole sensor at once, it allows you to switch between portrait and landscape selfies without having to physically rotate your phone.

Is the Pro Max better than the Pro?

For photography, no; the iPhone 17 Pro and Pro Max have the same camera setup. This hasn't always been the case; the iPhone 15 Pro Max's telephoto camera had further reach than the one on the smaller model. However, this time around, you don't have to give up any photography features to get the more pocketable phone (unless you truly feel you need the 2TB storage option that's only available on the Max).

If you're interested in the Pro line, be sure to check out [our deep-dive article](#) that covers all the changes to its cameras and video features compared to the previous generation.

iPhone 17 versus iPhone 17e



If you look at [Apple's spec sheet](#), it'd be easy to think that the budget-oriented iPhone 17e's single camera is the same one used by the standard iPhone 17; the company calls them both "48MP Fusion Main" cameras, after all.

The iPhone 17 (left) has more than just an extra camera compared to the 17e (right).

Image: Apple

However, the one on the 17e is substantially smaller, coming in at 23.5mm² (which you might recognize as the same size used by the more expensive phones' secondary and tertiary cameras).

The smaller sensor again means that the phone will have to work harder to capture clear photos in low light, and that images from it taken in ideal lighting conditions won't be as good as ones from the newer phones. That's especially true given that it's only optically stabilized, rather than having additional sensor stabilization like the mainline iPhones.

A few other limitations compared to the 17s and Air: the 17e doesn't have the next-generation portrait mode that lets you adjust what the main focus of the image is and what's blurred out, nor does it have the more customizable Photographic Styles. It also lacks the Camera Control button and uses the old selfie camera, meaning you'll have to turn your phone to get landscape portraits.

What about the iPhone 16?



As usual, Apple has stopped selling the previous-generation Pro phones, but is still selling the standard iPhone 16 for around \$100 less than its launch price. Its main camera will be the same as the standard 17's, but its ultra-wide camera is a smaller (23.5mm²) 12MP model versus the 48MP one used by the current-gen. Like the 16e, it uses the older selfie camera.

Last year's iPhone 16 has the same main camera as the new iPhone 17, but ultra-wide shooters beware...
Image: Tucker Bowe

What else should I consider?

There's a lot of things to consider when you're buying a phone beyond its photographic capabilities. For example, the iPhone 17 Pro Max has a massive battery and a giant screen, both of which could be handy on days when you're taking a ton of photos. The Pro phones also have a litany of video features, such as the ability to record ProRes Raw and Log footage.

Meanwhile, the iPhone Air is substantially thinner than the other options, which could be nice if you prefer a phone that doesn't take up a ton of pocket space. And, of

course, there are countless Android options with their own sets of strengths and weaknesses. But you should now at least understand how the cameras on Apple's current-generation phones stack up to one another.