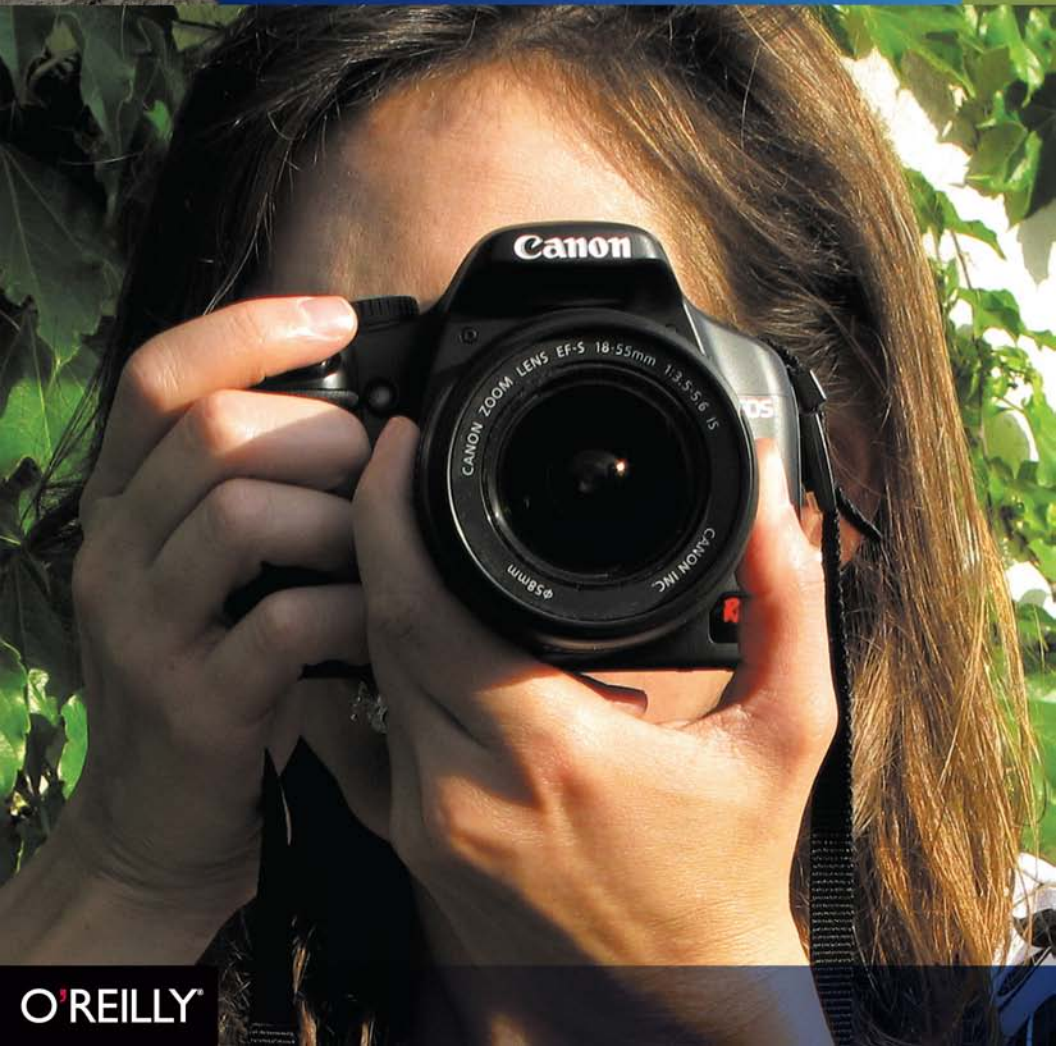


Practical photography advice
you can take anywhere



The Canon EOS Digital Rebel XSi/450D Companion

BEN LONG



O'REILLY

The Canon EOS Digital Rebel XSi/450D Companion



Unlike other camera guides, this book offers a complete, portable class on digital photography, tailored for people who use the Canon Digital Rebel XSi/450D. Rather than just show you what the buttons do, it teaches you how to use your camera's features to take great photographs—including professional-looking images of people, landscapes, action shots, close-ups, night shots, and more. With Ben Long's creative tips and technical advice, you've got the perfect field reference to help you capture stunning pictures anywhere, anytime.

- Take creative control and go beyond automatic settings
- Learn the basic rules of composition, and when and how to break them
- Capture decisive moments, even with fast moving subjects
- Use all the exposure options your camera has to offer, so you can face any lighting challenge
- Learn about different lenses, and the best time to use them
- Understand the options for shooting RAW, and whether it's right for you

Ben Long, producer and videographer, is the author of *Complete Digital Photography*, and several other books, including *Real World Aperture*, and the *Apple Pro Training Series*. He maintains the Complete Digital Photography website (www.completedigitalphotography.com).



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Rebel XSi/450D
Companion



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BEN LONG

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The Canon EOS Digital Rebel XSi/450D Companion

by Ben Long

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Finally, thanks to Dennis Fitzgerald for ushering this project through all of the rigamarole required to make a book, and to Colleen Wheeler for concocting the idea in the first place, and for being so helpful in bending it into its current shape.

Preface

Before we get to how cool your Rebel XSi/450D is, I want to clear up an important issue: Why in the world do you need this book? This camera comes with a very detailed manual, so you might be wondering why you should slog through another big batch of pages.

If you've already looked at the manual that came with your camera, then you've probably discovered that it details each and every button in reasonably clear language and it's well-organized, leading you from simple features to more advanced ones. However, knowing what each button on your camera does won't necessarily mean you can shoot great pictures. Personally, I know the basic concept of a paintbrush, but I can't paint a decent painting to save my life. To use a creative tool well, you must understand both the technique and the craft of the tool, as well as have some sense of artistry when you use it.

That's the idea behind this book. While the automatic systems in the Rebel XSi/450D mean you can shoot snapshots that are almost always properly exposed and possessed of great color, if you want to go further and create images that express something more than a simple documentation of an event, then you need to know something of the art of photography. This book is intended to serve as a full-on photography class, one that covers everything including technical matters and exposure theory, composition theory, and how to find images and expand your visual sense. However, unlike a regular photography class, the class presented in this book is built specifically around the XSi. That means every concept is written about in terms of the XSi/450D's controls and features.

By the way, for those of you outside the United States, please excuse my XSi-centric terminology in this book. Unfortunately, Canon gives the same camera different names in different parts of the world. So, in the United States, it's the Rebel XSi; in most other parts of the world, it's the EOS 450D; and in Japan, it's the Kiss Digital X2. For the sake of readability, we decided not to refer to the camera as the XSi/450D/Kiss, because that's simply too cumbersome and distracting. So when you see *XSi*, *Rebel XSi*, or *Rebel* in this book, know that I'm still talking about your camera (assuming you have a Canon Rebel XSi/EOS 450D/Kiss Digital X2—oops, I was trying to avoid that).

Automatic cameras are great because they do a lot of the work for you, but sometimes you must take manual control and make decisions on your own. This Rebel XSi companion will walk you through all the basic photography theories that apply to any camera—whether film or digital—and that you need to understand to be able to fully exploit the capabilities of the XSi.

So, by the time you're done with this book, you'll not only know how all the XSi's controls function, but you'll also know how to recognize a good photo and how to use the XSi's controls to represent that subject as a compelling image. In other words, you'll be a better photographer, whether you're shooting simple snapshots or aiming for something more.

I realize once you start using this camera, you probably won't be able to resist taking lots of pictures. This is a good thing; one of the great advantages of digital photography is that it doesn't cost you anything to shoot. Because your storage media is reusable, and because there's not an expensive chemical process, you can shoot for free, making it easy to practice and experiment. The freedom to practice will do more to improve your photographic skill than anything else. However, all that practice and experimentation can also mean that you'll soon find yourself mired in a huge number of images. Managing the editing, output, and long-term storage of all of these files can be daunting, but there are a few strategies you can employ to ease your workflow. I've covered these in a bonus online chapter "Workflow: Managing Your Post-Production," available at www.oreilly.com/catalog/9780596520861.

This book has been great fun to write, largely because the XSi is a fantastic camera. At one time or another I've had my hands on just about every digital SLR made, and I own several that I shoot with all the time. For the last few months though, I've been shooting almost exclusively with the XSi. The camera's image quality is top-notch, and the compact design and excellent interface make it a lot of fun to work with. I had been expecting that once this book was done, I'd go back to my usual camera, but I'm going to keep my XSi, and I expect it will become a regular part of my shooting kit.

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Getting to Know the Rebel XSi

SHOOTING SNAPSHOTS USING FULL AUTO MODE

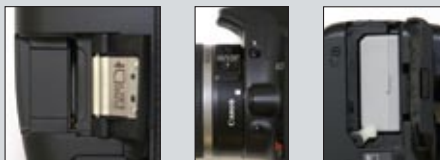


If you're new to the Rebel XSi, then you're probably much more interested in doing some shooting than in reading a book. So, in this chapter I'm going to quickly get you up to speed on the camera's automatic features so that you can get out the door right away and start using the camera. One of the great things about the XSi's design is that you can use it just like a point-and-shoot camera and then activate more sophisticated controls as you need them. This first chapter explains the fundamental concepts of camera and photographic technique that we'll build on through the rest of the book.

BEFORE YOU CAN SHOOT WITH THE REBEL XSi

If you haven't yet set up your camera, you need to do a few things before you can shoot with it. Fortunately, the XSi's manual is very good, and you can learn everything you need to know about setup by reading the following sections of the manual:

- While the camera battery may have a little charge when you first unpack the camera, it's best to give it a good refueling before you head out to shoot. Read pages 24-26 of the Rebel XSi manual to learn about charging and installing the battery.
- You'll need a Secure Digital (SD) memory card for your camera. The Rebel XSi does not ship with a card, so you'll need to buy one. Any photography store or electronics store should carry them. You can learn how to install and remove the card on pages 31-32 of the XSi manual.
- A lens must be attached to your camera. If you bought the Rebel XSi kit, then you probably got an 18-55mm lens. If you bought the body-only package, then you should have bought a lens separately. You can learn how to attach and remove a lens on pages 31-32 of the XSi manual.
- The power switch on the top of the camera powers up the camera (as long as you have a charged battery installed). If it's the first time you're turning the camera on, then the camera will prompt you to enter the date and time. Pages 29-30 will walk you through setting the date, time, and language that you want to use in the camera's menus.
- Finally, the camera includes a shoulder strap. The best way to ensure that your camera doesn't get damaged is to attach the shoulder strap and use it! The camera will be more secure and easier to carry if you have the strap attached. Page 22 of the XSi manual shows how to attach the strap.



From left to right, the Rebel XSi's media slot, lens mount button and reference dot, and battery.

If you've shot only with a point-and-shoot camera, then you'll find much to like about working with an SLR. The bright, clear viewfinder, the ability to change lenses, and the advanced manual controls will give you far more creative power than you probably had on your point-and-shoot camera. If you're an old-school SLR film shooter, then the switch to digital will bring you huge improvements in workflow, image editing, and overall image quality.

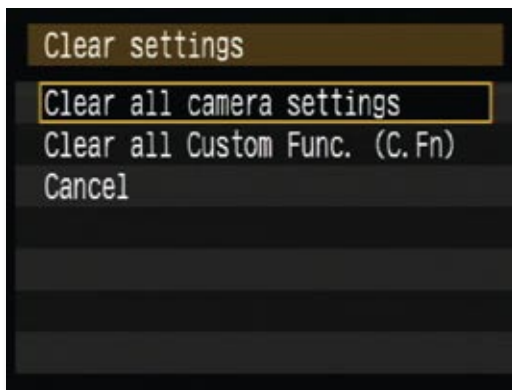
Obviously, with all the power packed into a camera like the Rebel XSi, you have a lot to learn. However, since the camera also has advanced auto functions, you can get started shooting with it right away and, to a degree, use it just like you used your point-and-shoot.

The best way to learn your camera is to use it, so before we look at the specific parts and components of your XSi, you should do a little snapshot shooting just to get your hands on the camera and get a feel for the general control layout.

Resetting the Camera's Defaults

If you've already been playing with your XSi, you might have made some changes to some of the internal settings. To ensure that your camera behaves the way that I'll describe in this book, reset to the camera's defaults:

1. Set the Mode dial to P, then press the Menu button.
2. Press the right arrow button on the back of the camera until the sixth menu is selected.
3. Press the down arrow to select Clear settings.



From the Clear settings menu, you can reset the camera to the factory defaults, which will make it easier to follow along with the instructions in this book.

4. Press the Set button to execute the Clear settings command; then select Clear all camera settings and press Set.
5. The camera will ask you to confirm the operation. Select OK and press Set.
6. Then choose Clear all Custom Func. and reset those as well.

Snapshot Shooting in Full Auto Mode

The Rebel XSi has full autofocus and autoexposure features that can make all of the photographic decisions that you need to make in most situations. When in Full Auto mode, all you have to do is frame the shot and press the shutter button, and the camera will automatically figure out just about every other relevant setting. However, you need to know a few things to get the most out of Full Auto mode.

On the top of the XSi, on the right side of the camera, is a Mode dial. The mode you choose determines which functions the camera will perform automatically and which will be left up to you. So, if you want more creative control, then you'll want to select a mode that offers less automation and leaves more power in your hands.

For snapshot shooting, Full Auto mode will be your best bet and will make your XSi function much like a simple point-and-shoot camera—but one that delivers the superior image quality of an SLR. To select Full Auto mode, set the Mode dial to the green box.



Set the camera's Mode dial to the green box to select Full Auto mode.

If you haven't done so already, take the lens cap off the camera. You don't have to worry about accidentally shooting with it on, because if the lens cap is on, you won't see anything in the viewfinder. Make sure the switch on the lens is set to Autofocus, not Manual.



The 18-55mm lens kit includes an autofocus switch, and most other lenses will have a similar switch. Make certain it's set to AF.

Framing Your Shot

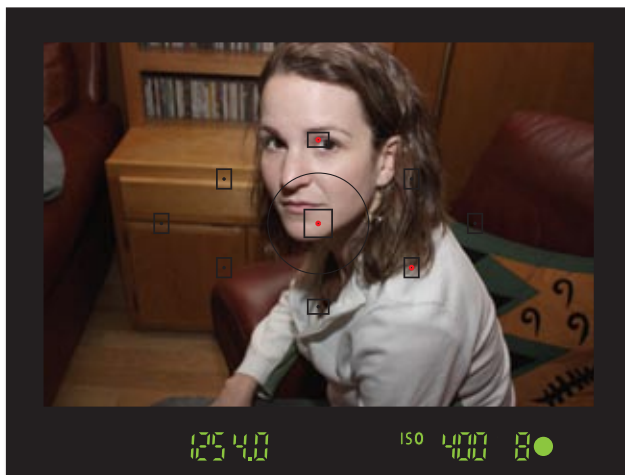
This next part you probably already know: Look through the viewfinder and frame your shot. If you have a zoom lens attached to your camera, you can zoom to frame tighter or wider. For now, we're not going to worry about composition, because we'll be discussing that in detail later.

Autofocus, or “How to Press the Shutter Button”

With your shot framed, you're ready to shoot. However, while pressing the shutter button may seem a simple thing, there are some important things to understand about it, because it's your key to the camera's autofocus feature.

Once you've framed the shot, press the shutter button *halfway*. When you do this, the camera will analyze your scene and try to determine what the subject is.

The camera can analyze nine focus points. Once the XSi has determined the subject (or what it thinks is the subject), it will light up the focus point that it thinks is correct. If more than one point sits on the plane of focus, it will light up them all.



When you half-press the shutter button to autofocus, the XSi will light up the focus spots that it thinks are correct for your subject.

Very often, several potential subjects sit on the same plane (that is, they're all the same distance from the camera). The XSi will show you all the focus points that it considers in focus. As long as one of them is on your subject, then it has focused correctly.

When the XSi has achieved focus, it will beep and show a green circle on the right side of the viewfinder status display. (You can see this in the previous figure.)

This half-press of the shutter is a *crucial* step when using the XSi (or any other autofocus camera). If you wait until the moment you want to take the shot and *then* press the shutter button all the way down, you'll miss the shot, because the camera will have to focus, meter, and calculate white balance before it can fire, and these things take time.

WARNING: Don't Zoom after Locking Focus

Once the camera has locked focus, don't adjust the zoom control. Focusing at a specific distance is a function of your current focal length. If you change focal length (that is, if you zoom in or out), you'll throw your image out of focus.

Take the Shot

Once the camera has told you that it's focused and ready to shoot, gently squeeze the shutter button. If you jab at the button, you might jar the camera, resulting in a potential loss of sharpness in your image.

RE M I N D E R: "My flash popped up!"

In Full Auto mode, the XSi will decide if it needs to use the flash or not. If it decides that it needs it, the flash will automatically pop up, and will be fired when you take the shot.

O O P S !

ARE YOU IN AUTOFOCUS?

If your camera doesn't beep or flash the confirmation light when you half-press the shutter, your lens might be set to manual focus mode. Somewhere on the body of the lens should be a switch for changing from auto to manual focus.



Your lens should have a way to change from auto to manual focus. If the lens provides stabilization, there will be a switch for turning stabilizing on and off.

Make certain it's set to AF or Auto.

- If your autofocus light blinks but doesn't lock focus, it's because the camera can't find a subject that has strong contrast. As we'll see, strong contrast is necessary for autofocus to work. You'll learn how to compensate for this problem later.
- If the focus beep repeats rapidly, then the camera has locked onto a moving subject and is tracking it. Shoot as normal.

After you shoot, the camera will display the image for two seconds, giving you a moment to review. When you're ready to shoot again, follow the same procedure. It's very important to remember to do a *half-press* of the shutter to give the camera time to autofocus.

TIP: Flash Shooting

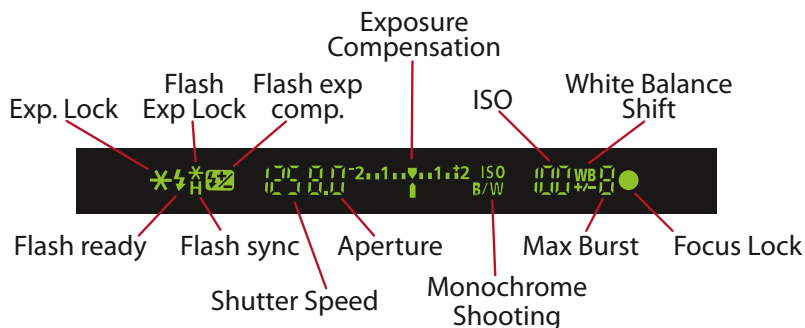
In a low-light situation, you may see some strange flashes coming from the flash when you press the shutter halfway. These flashes serve to help the camera's autofocus mechanism "see" when the light is low. Once focus is locked, the camera will beep, indicating that you can press the button the rest of the way, whenever you're ready, to take your shot.

Those are the basics of shooting. Compose your shot, press the shutter button halfway to focus, then squeeze the shutter button. This is the process that you'll use no matter what mode you're shooting in.

Spend some time shooting in Full Auto mode to get a feel for the shutter and basic camera controls.

The Viewfinder Status Display

When you press the shutter button halfway down, several things happen inside the XSi's viewfinder. As I already mentioned, the camera shows you which focus points it has selected for autofocus. It also uses the readout at the bottom of the viewfinder to tell you about its exposure choices and to give you some additional status information.



The Rebel XSi's viewfinder shows all the settings you need access to while shooting.

From left to right, the readout works as follows:

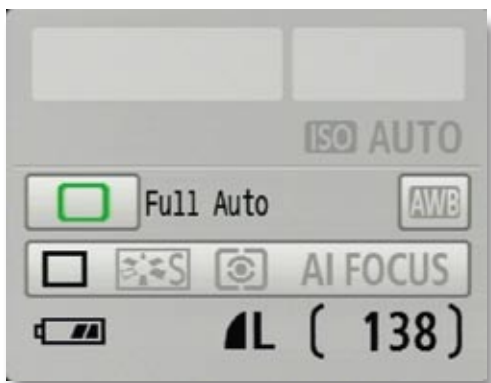
- If the camera has chosen to use the flash, then it will display the flash icon. The flash icon will blink on and off, and the word *busy* will be displayed, until the flash unit is charged and ready to go. If your battery has a good charge, this shouldn't take very long.
- Next, the camera displays its chosen shutter speed and aperture. You'll learn more about these in Chapter 5.
- The Exposure Compensation display is shown next. It has a range of -2 stops to +2 stops.
- Next comes ISO choice. For now, all you need to know is that the higher the number is, the grainier your images will be. Don't worry about this now, we'll discuss it in more detail in more detail later.
- Finally, you'll see a number showing how many shots you can shoot before you will have to wait for the camera's buffer to empty. The camera has enough onboard RAM to shoot 9 images when in Full Auto mode. While this may not sound like much, remember that as soon as you shoot, the camera immediately starts writing its buffer out to the storage card.

So, if you're not shooting too fast, you'll never come close to overrunning the buffer. If you're shooting bursts of images—at a sporting event, say—then you might fill up the buffer, and have to wait a moment before you can shoot again. You don't have to wait until all 9 images are available. As long as the number reads at least 1, you can still shoot.

- Finally, at the far right of the display is a green dot that appears whenever the camera has locked focus and is ready to shoot. When you press the shutter button halfway, you can press the rest of the way once this green dot appears.

The LCD Status Display

In addition to the in-viewfinder status display, the XSi also shows a lot of status information on the rear LCD. What's displayed on the screen varies depending on what mode you're in simply because in some modes you don't have as much manual control and so don't need as much status feedback. In Full Auto mode, your screen should look something like this:



In Full Auto mode, the LCD screen on the back of the XSi should look something like this.

As you can see, you can easily tell how many shots are remaining, how charged the battery is, and the image format that you're shooting in. The camera also shows what light-metering mode you're using, which, to be honest, is kind of strange, because you can't actually change this when shooting in Full Auto.

When you half-press the shutter button to tell the camera to focus and meter, it displays its chosen shutter speed and aperture at the top of the status display. We'll explore what these mean in later chapters.



After you half-press the shutter button, the status screen will show your shutter speed and aperture.

As you might have noticed, there's a sensor located just below the viewfinder. When you put your eye up to the viewfinder, the sensor detects your face and shuts off the LCD screen so that its light doesn't interfere with your vision. When you pull the camera away again, the display comes back on.

The XSi manual warns that if you're wearing sunglasses, this sensor can become confused and may not function properly. Personally, I've never had this problem, but it's something to look out for if you shoot in sunglasses.

Shoot some more in Full Auto mode and get comfortable with the camera's controls. While the camera has a lot of other buttons and dials, you don't really need to worry about them right now.

TIP: If the Viewfinder Is Not Sharp

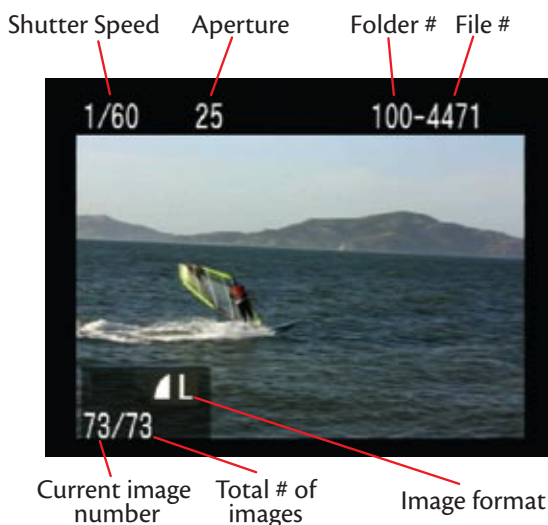
If you wear glasses and like to remove them when shooting, you can use the *diopter control*, the small knob next to the viewfinder, to compensate for some near- or farsightedness. Turn the knob until the 9 autofocus boxes inside the viewfinder are sharp. Note that the diopter may not be able to completely compensate for extremely bad vision. Also, you'll have to change it back if you put your glasses back on. If the viewfinder ever inexplicably goes out of focus, it might just be that you bumped the diopter knob. Turn it until focus is restored.

Viewing Your Images

As you've seen, the XSi displays your image for a brief time after you shoot. As you'll see later, you can extend this time by changing a menu setting. But when it comes time to review your images, you'll want to use the camera's playback mode.

To review your images, press the Play button on the back of the camera (obviously, the camera needs to be powered on for this to work).

The camera displays the last image that you shot, along with some status information.



When you play back an image on the XSi, the camera displays some important status information along with your image.

The left and right arrow keys on the back of the camera let you navigate forward and backward through your images. Playback mode has a number of other features that you'll learn about in Chapter 3.

At any time, you can press the Play button again or give a half-press to the shutter button to return to shooting mode. Note that the XSi can change between shooting and playback modes very quickly, much faster than most point-and-shoot cameras, meaning you don't have to worry about missing a shot because the camera is locked up in a playback mode.

Using Scene Modes

Now you've seen how the XSi's Full Auto mode works. Since Full Auto mode takes care of all the critical decisions regarding camera settings, it's an ideal mode for snapshot shooting and for getting used to the camera. Before you go off shooting, though, let's take a quick look at some other auto features that you might find useful while getting started.

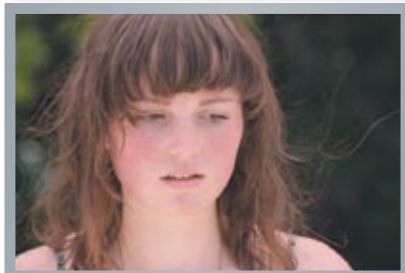
On the Mode dial, you'll see a bunch of little icons underneath the Full Auto option. These are the XSi's scene modes.



These options on the Mode dial are scene modes, which bias the camera's decisions under specific conditions so that it calculates more appropriate exposures.

Scene modes are also fully automatic, but each one biases some of its decisions in a certain way to make it more appropriate to particular types of shooting.

Portrait mode Portrait mode is ideal for shooting—you guessed it!—portraits. What makes a portrait different from any other type of shot? Typically, in a portrait you want the background blurred out to bring more attention to your subject. Portrait mode biases its exposure decisions to attempt to blur the background.



In the upper image, I shot with deeper depth of field to reveal details in the background. In the lower image, I shot with shallow depth of field to blur the background out and bring more focus to the subject.