

Best Dash Cams

You can spend a lot on one of these digital documenters of your driving, or nothing at all. But you mostly get what you pay for.

By David Abrams
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Photos: John Powers/Consumer Reports, Apeman

Headlights! Dash camera! Action! This new twist on the familiar Hollywood cue is an apt exclamation for the growing number of consumers driving with dash cameras affixed to their windshields. Dash cams can provide video documentation of, among other things, crashes and interactions with law enforcement, and a record of where (and at what speeds) young members of a household are driving.

These compact cameras are specifically designed for automotive use and create a video record of whatever goes on in front of the car, such as oncoming traffic and crossing pedestrians. Many can also record what's taking place inside the cabin. Some come with a rear-mounted unit that records activity behind the car and can double as a backup camera, which is handy if you don't already have one.

You probably won't get a discount on your auto insurance for using a dash cam, but the video it records can be used to dispute speeding tickets and as evidence or supporting documentation when filing insurance claims or in legal proceedings related to crashes and other incidents.

I wanted to review dash cams because I sit at the nexus of video and cars at CR. I shoot, edit, and produce videos at our Auto Test Center, where we test dozens of cars each year, and I get to drive those cars as part of our evaluation process. We all take one home each night to put them through the same daily duties you would and then we log our impressions.

I evaluated three dash cams and one dash cam app to find out which ones are genuinely useful and which are just a

disappointing gizmo that might end up unused in your glove compartment.

What surprised me most was the granular level of the data these provide: a lot more than just a time and date stamp or video of the view out the windshield. They record moment to moment how fast you're going, and GPS coordinates indicate precisely where you've been.

I was also surprised at what a challenge it was to find the sweet spot between price, features, and ease of use that lets you feel confident that you're getting the most for your money.

With dash cams, it turns out Mom was right: You get what you pay for.

Editor's Choice: Nextbase 622GW 4K Dash Cam

It's expensive and it delivers.



Photo: John Powers/Consumer Reports

Price paid: \$399.99

Resolution: 4K

Includes rear camera: No

Where to buy: Amazon, Best Buy, Crutchfield, Nextbase, Walmart

You want features?! I got your features right **HERE!** This model cost several times as much as the others and has a number of significant advantages over them. There's 4K resolution capable of capturing very crisp images (with an option to shoot in super-slow motion at a lower resolution 1080p to record

fraction-of-a-second details recording at regular speed could miss); a built-in polarizer to eliminate dashboard reflections in the windshield; image stabilization; enhanced night mode; the ability to upload video clips to the cloud; and an optional service to alert authorities if the device senses a crash has taken place.

I'll let the image from the Nextbase speak for itself:



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

The Nextbase produced the best image of any of the dash cams evaluated, by a long shot. Even when in motion, it captures fine details like license plates that other models could not, and highlights aren't as overexposed as with the other cameras, meaning you end up with a clearer picture overall. The Nextbase also gives you the option to burn both the speed and GPS coordinates into the video itself, adding another layer of information to document an incident on the road.

Nighttime performance is better than the other models we evaluated, clearly capturing license plate numbers with that higher 4K resolution. Just don't expect any "Predator"-style visibility: None of the cameras we tried had remarkable performance in the dark.



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

Most of the dash cams evaluated came with cautions about avoiding exposure to high temperatures, meaning they shouldn't be left in a vehicle, particularly in warmer months. The Nextbase has an easy-to-use magnet system for removing and attaching the camera when you're finished driving, and it was significantly easier to use than the other models we tried.

Even the currently available reduced price of \$349.99 price is steep, especially when you consider that it doesn't include the optional emergency service subscription or a rear camera (sold separately). Ouch.

This highlights the central dilemma we found with stand-alone dash cams: The systems that perform well enough to be very useful are expensive, and it's difficult to find places to save money if you want a quality product you can rely on.

However, there's one option I discovered that might work for many of you out there . . .

PLOT TWIST! You already own the device!

Free and Loaded with Features: Driver Dash Cam Smartphone App

It's far from perfect but might be all the dash cam you really need.



Photo: John Powers/Consumer Reports

Price: Free

Includes rear camera: No

Available for both Android and iPhone users, Driver costs nothing and provides similar functionality to the other devices in our evaluation. It also offers dual-camera recording and a detailed trip report. Dual-camera recording allows you to record both the action happening in front of your vehicle as well as inside (using the front-facing camera most modern smartphones have). This could be used to record interactions during a traffic stop and by parents or guardians to ensure a teenage driver is paying attention behind the wheel.

Another useful feature for a parent or guardian keeping tabs on a young driver: detailed trip reports. These provide numerous data points, including a detailed GPS map outlining where and when a car traveled, total miles driven, and hard-braking or accelerating events. It even shows in real time the speed (and speed limit) of the vehicle at each point in the video.

With my iPhone 11 Pro, the image quality is decent and similar to the Chortau (below), but it's not sharp enough and of a high enough resolution to capture fine detail at higher speeds. (Image quality will vary depending on the model of phone you use with this app.)

Obtaining the video files is also a chore. While they're accessible through the Driver app, they don't save to your phone's photo library and must be exported individually in a slow, cumbersome process.

Driver allows you to run your navigation and music apps through your phone while in use, but it requires you to keep the Driver app as the main app running on your screen, or else it will stop recording.

While the app and its functionality come at no charge, it's not



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

exactly free: Driver collects loads of your data, including video and audio recordings and location information, all of which it shares with third-party partners. Driver says it groups and anonymizes your driving data, but review its privacy policy to be sure you're comfortable with it before using the app. If you are, Driver is a way to gauge your own use of a dash cam and figure out if you really need to purchase a stand-alone unit.

Other Dash Cams Evaluated Apeman (aka HaHoco)

Not great, whatever name it goes by.



Photo: Apeman

- Price:** \$40
- Resolution:** 1080p
- Includes rear camera:** No
- Where to buy:** Amazon

I ordered this model because it looked like a good point of entry for the dash-cam-curious: It's inexpensive compared with the rest of the models I searched for, had a 4.1-star rating based on nearly 900 ratings on Amazon, and boasted similar technical stats and features to the pricer options (1080p resolution, a 170° angle of view, and what the company calls a "super night vision system.")

When I opened the package from Amazon, I was surprised to find that the HaHoco dash cam I had ordered was branded Apeman. I contacted the company, which confirmed that I'd received the correct model. So don't be surprised when you order the HaHoco and an Apeman shows up on your doorstep.

No matter what name it goes by, you're not likely to call it a great dash cam.

As you can see in the photo below, the Apeman produces sharp images, but the quality isn't great. It's either too bright and overexposed or too dark and lacking in detail, which means that you can't see things like license plate numbers on nearby cars—something you definitely want your dash cam to record.



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

And its "super night vision" feature wasn't super at all, again failing to record details like license plate numbers, which could be vital in case of an accident. A member of the company's customer service team promptly replied to our question regarding the Apeman's nighttime performance. After we provided video, the company informed us that its engineers had determined "this situation to be normal" and that they "will be working on a new firmware for this issue."



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

In fact, the only time this dash cam captured license plate numbers day or night was when my car was at a complete stop and the other vehicle was around 10 feet or less away. A dash cam that can't capture more distant detail, in even favorable lighting conditions while sitting motionless, isn't going to be very useful to anybody.

While this model didn't deliver, it did provide an important lesson: Always buy from a store with a generous return policy.

Chortau Front and Rear Dual Dash Cam

The rear cam is a nice touch but the images leave a lot to be desired.



Photo: John Powers/Consumer Reports

Price: \$69.95

Resolution: 1080p

Includes rear camera: Yes

Where to buy: Amazon

With over 24,000 ratings and the “Amazon’s Choice” designation, this device offers similar specs to the less expensive Apeman, but it includes a rear camera that records whatever is going on behind the car and also functions as a backup camera. But installing that rear camera requires running cables (provided) underneath the headliner of the car from the dash to the trunk. We didn’t want to do this to one of CR’s test cars, so I didn’t evaluate the backup camera performance.

Setting up the Chortau was simple and straightforward, and the product felt solid and better built than the Apeman. The images were sharper, but we were still only able to see license plate numbers that were recorded when we were stopped, making this no more useful than the cheaper Apeman model.

The camera also produced images with overexposed highlights and struggled to capture quality video when moving at any speed. When we reached out to the company, it told us that the camera should record license plates at distances between roughly 9 to 15 feet, and that its ability to clearly capture plate numbers could be diminished by lighting and environmental conditions and when vehicles are moving.



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

Performance at night was poor; anything illuminated by a headlight (such as a license plate) or street light was so

overexposed I couldn’t make out any details, meaning there’s little nighttime utility for this product.



Photo: David Abrams/Consumer Reports

The performance of the Chortau wasn’t the worst we saw, and we were happy to see the inclusion of a rear camera at this price, but the poor video resolution when moving at even slow speeds would severely limit the usefulness of this camera to document an incident on the road.

Dash Cam Shopping Tips

Using these guidelines based on our experience shopping for a dash cam will give you a head start and save you time and maybe even money.

- **Determine your needs:** In what situations do you think a dash cam would be useful? Will you need to use it at night? Will you want it to record inside the cabin?
- **Experiment with a free option before you invest:** Use a free smartphone app to see how you’d use a dash cam in your everyday driving. You may find that the app is enough.
- **Don’t skimp on image resolution:** If buying for insurance purposes, a camera with 4K resolution should be your baseline for image quality.
- **Choose a device with a rear camera:** What happens in front of your windshield is only half the story; make sure to choose a device that includes or is compatible with a rear camera.
- **It’s all in the details:** Choose a device that offers granular information, like speed and GPS coordinates, baked into the video files themselves. These are helpful for creating a fuller picture for authorities.

The Process: How I Evaluated These Dash Cams

To evaluate these dash cams, I established a 6-mile circuit through the town of West Hartford, Conn., that included highway driving as well as stop-and-go traffic through the downtown area. I then drove and recorded each circuit twice: once during afternoon rush hour and once at night. I evaluated image quality (including during challenging lighting conditions and at different speeds as well as when stopped), ease of setup and use, and the process of getting the video files from the camera to a laptop.