LEICA LANDMARK

The digital Leica M9 is the latest in a long line of miniature cameras stretching back almost a century. John Henshall FRPS puts it to the test

Above: The Leica M9 digital camera (middle) with 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH lens attached, together with two of its ancestors. On the left one of the first Leicas, a Leica 1 from 1929. On the right, the first Leica with interchangeable bayonet-fit lenses, a double-stroke wind Leica M3 from 1954, with 50mm f/3.5 Elmar lens. Together, they represent more than 80 years of cameras from this famous German name.

At the point, nearly a century ago, where Oskar Barnack designed the exposure testing device for 35mm movie cameras that was to become the forerunner of the first Leica, 35mm film was used exclusively for movie footage. Barnack loved outdoor photography but, suffering from asthma, struggled with the heavy camera equipment of the day. So he modified his invention, producing a small camera which he could carry easily when hiking. His camera produced images of 24x36mm dimension – twice the size of the standard movie frame – on standard perforated 35mm ciné film, and thus ushered in the era of 35mm film that was to dominate photography for the rest of the 20th century.

WW1 delayed the introduction of his camera as a commercial product until Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar, introduced the Leica (from LEItz CAmera) at the 1925 Leipzig trade fair, and the miniature camera was born.

To produce prints from such small negatives required enlargement, so the quality of Leica lenses needed to be exceptionally good. A microscope manufacturer with a reputation for high quality and precision, the Leitz company was perfectly placed for this.

Quiet in the studio

Many years ago, working as a director of photography of the moving image, I would be in the studio taking stills of my work using my Nikon F3. Suddenly, the floor manager would look at me and put his index finger to his lips. This was his way of communicating, 'We're going for a take – stop shooting now. That noisy shutter will be picked up by the microphones'. There was no other option but to put my camera down.

The photographer from the TV listings magazine also had to put his Nikon down, but he then picked up his Leica M4 and continued to shoot. The shutter on the Leica was so quiet that it couldn't be heard when shooting sync sound. He got the shots when the real performance was in progress. I missed them, so I bought a Leica, with lenses from 28-90mm.

The experience was immediate and profound. The Leica was a finely engineered example of the best German precision and craft, with exceptional lenses, and easy to use split-image rangefinder focusing. It was a joy to use. I was hooked. Within a year, I had a dozen or more Leicas, including two Leica 1s from the 1920s; and the earliest Leica with bayonet fitting lenses – the double-stroke wind M3 from 1954. I had also become a collector.

The collecting soon had to stop for financial reasons. Leica collectors abound, and prices can be very high. Perhaps more than any other cameras, secondhand Leicas hold their prices well. They are particularly prized in Japan – the leaders in camera design since WWII – where early Canon and Nikon rangefinders drew heavily on Leica design.

A Magnum legend

The Leica has long been the camera of choice for the style of observed photography for which legendary Magnum photographer Elliot Erwitt is famous. A few years ago, I shared a taxi with him to Marseille airport. he was, as usual, carrying his Leica M6. "Don't you shoot digital?", I asked cheekily. "No, I still use film – though sometimes now I forget to put the film in the camera", wryly quipped this master of observing and capturing life in his own iconic style.

While, the name Leica has stood for quality for over 80 years, Leica users have had a long wait for a digital body which does justice to their exceptional lenses.

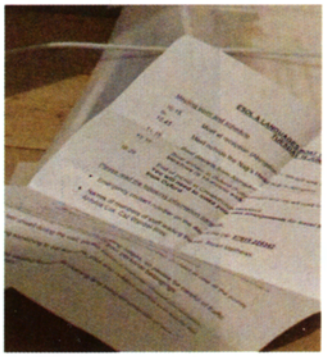
Released in 2006, the M8 was Leica's first digital rangefinder body to accept M series lenses, but its small sensor, combined with its requirement for front-of-lens infrared attenuation filters, didn't seem to suggest that Leica was at the leading edge of digital technology.

All that has changed with the advent of the M9. Unlike so many of today's jack-of-all-trades DSLRs, the M9 does not impose gimmick-laden digital imaging on the photographer. Rather, it gently adds the best of digital to an already superlative system.

The M9 will not appeal to those who have been used to selecting P, and letting the camera do the rest. It is for those who understand photography, and want control over how their camera helps them make photographs, not just take them.

It has no autofocus. Indeed, some would call its rangefinder focusing system manual, because it needs a finger to operate – turning the lens until two images coincide in the centre of the viewfinder. It is however simple and accurate, even in the lowest light, where DSLRs would be unable to operate, or perhaps need a focus assist light for their autofocus systems to work.

All the lenses for the M9 are prime, that is, of single focal length. The Leica M system does not compromise quality by using zooms. When a friend looked through the viewfinder of the M9, the first thing she asked was, "Where's the zoom?"



Top: Interior snap, shot at the M9's top ISO of 2500.
Above: Close up of the paper on the desk in the shot above, revealing the level of detail achieved even at this high ISO. When the camera arrived, I immediately wanted to try it at its extreme ISO of 2500. The shot was simply an interior snap, using the 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH lens, of my friend working at her computer. On review, I was shocked by the amount of noise I saw. On the computer later, I was amazed to find that most of the noise I'd seen was almost all gone, but equally amazed by the amount of detail I could see. I could read the text on a document on the desk, even though it was viewed at an oblique angle. There is no image softening to mask noise reduction.
Left: Elliott Erwitt with his Leica M6 camera in a taxi on the way to Marseille airport, 13 July 2006.

I had to tell her to use her legs – just as we had to until zooms began to rule in the 1980s.

Others have remarked on the 'retro' look of the leatherette body covering, and the weight of the camera. While it is not heavy, because of its die cast all-metal magnesium construction, the small body does have a high density.

Leica M series cameras have true live view - not the delayed so-called live view of today's do-everything DSLRs. The M9 shows you the subject before, after, and – crucially – at the precise moment of exposure, so you can be sure you captured that all too elusive decisive moment, or know for sure that the flash fired. There is no viewfinder blackout at the critical moment.

There is no video mode. The M9 is a camera for stills photography. No mirror clatter means no vibration as the wonderfully quiet shutter operates – so quiet that people may not even know that they've been photographed. While not quite as quiet as the earlier cloth shuttered Leicas, with its metal shutter, the M9 is

Above: HM The Queen and HRH Prince Philip at Windsor Castle on Garter Day 14 June 2010. 2480x1653 pixel crop (200mm equivalent) from the original 5212x3468 pixel image, yet the resolution holds up well. 90mm f/2.8 Tele-Elmarit 1/750sec at f/4 and ISO 800.

still whisper quiet when compared with most DSLRs.

Most of the noise when operating the M9 meanwhile comes from re-cocking the shutter after an exposure is made. For some reason, this is a slightly wavering whirring noise. If this might prove to be a distraction under certain shooting conditions, you can set the camera to its discreet mode, in which it only re-cocks the shutter when you remove your finger from the shutter release, giving you the opportunity to re-cock behind your back or under clothing to muffle the sound. But I am left wondering why Leica didn't retain the option of a manual winding lever to cock the shutter silently.

The shutter release has three subtle pressure points. The first activates metering and viewfinder display; the second locks the exposure in aperture priority mode; the third takes the picture.

There's also a soft shutter setting – and even soft and discreet – which takes the picture at the second pressure point. This makes it easier to hold the camera still when making longer handheld exposures. The ability to cradle the camera in the hands close to the body, together with the absence of mirror vibration, enables much longer handheld exposures without the need for complex image stabilisation in the lens or camera body.

While DSLR systems generally require you to buy expensive electronic cable releases, you probably already have the cable release for an M9 gathering dust in a drawer. If not, you can find one on eBay for under £1. The M9 shutter button has a standard mechanical cable release thread.

That's not to say that everything for the M9 is inexpensive. Far from it. The body costs £4950 in either black or steel grey. Expensive? No. A lot of money? Maybe, but this price is comparable to that for a Canon 1Ds MkIII or a Nikon D3X.

You'll also need a set of prime lenses. The 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH costs £2065; the 50mm f/1.4 Summilux-M ASPH £2500; and the 90mm f/2 Apo-Summicron-M ASPH, £2565 - a total of £12,080 for the kit. And even if you do have the ready cash, you can't just go out and buy the M9, because there's a waiting list.

Leica lens pedigree

The quality of Leica lenses is legendary. Almost without exception, they produce images of the highest quality, with no barrel distortion and no noticeable chromatic aberration.

One of the advantages of the camera being a rangefinder, and thus lacking a behind the lens mirror, is in lens design. Most DSLR lenses have to be retrofocus designs, to extend the distance between the rear element and the image plane to allow room for the flipping mirror. This makes them bigger and longer. The Leica doesn't need this, so its lenses have fewer elements and are much smaller and lighter, and therefore less obtrusive.

Our review M9 came with a 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH. Leica UK has a dearth of lenses available for reviewers: the 50mm f/1.4 Summilux-M ASPH is rarer than the proverbial hen's teeth.

The good news however is that all bayonet mount Leica lenses from the 1954 M3 5cm f/3.5 Elmar onward will fit and work on the latest Leica M9. To be able to use a 56-year-old lens on the latest digital camera is remarkable. I've also been using my old 90mm f/2.8 Tele-Elmarit. Incredibly, even pre-1954 Leica screw lenses from the 1930s onwards will fit this latest digital Leica by use of a screw to bayonet adapter.

When the camera arrived, I immediately wanted to try it at its extreme ISO of 2500. The shot was simply an interior snap, using the 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH lens, of my friend working at her computer.

On review, I was shocked by the amount of noise I saw, but on the computer later, I was equally amazed to find that most of the noise I'd seen was almost all gone, and by the extraordinary amount of detail that was now apparent. I could read the text on a document on the desk, even though it was viewed at an oblique angle. There is no image softening to mask noise reduction.

Of course, ISO 2500 may seem slow by the standards of today's five or six figure ISOs. Bear in mind though that DSLRs with small maximum aperture zooms let in much less light than wide aperture prime lenses. 1/125sec at ISO 800 with a f/1.4 lens is equivalent to 1/125sec at ISO 12800 with a f/5.6 lens.

The 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH is superb. It protrudes only 37mm from the body – 53mm including the expertly designed lens hood. Often overlooked, a good lens hood greatly improves image contrast and protects against flares. Ideally, a lens hood should eliminate all but the image-forming light. The rectangular lens hood for this lens does just that, and puts to shame the use of circular lens hoods on all but lenses which have rotating front elements.

This may seem a minor detail, but it serves to emphasise the attention to detail which Leicas enjoy. This is a product designed by people who understand all the finest details of photography.

I could not resist a shot of Bear House – my test shot throughout many years of testing digital cameras. In the early days, I would dream of finding a camera which could resolve the name on the cast iron nameplate. Today, even with the nameplate's contrast reduced by fading, the Leica M9 with 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH records the nameplate with crystal clarity.

With the rear element of non-retrofocus lenses much closer to the image plane, the problem of vignetting is increased. The emergent angle is much greater and the image forming light has further to travel to the corners of the sensor. This effect is more pronounced when using full-frame sensors.

Everyone, including Leica itself, said that a full-frame digital Leica M camera was an impossibility because of the short back focus of Leica M lenses. But then Kodak came to the rescue.

The M9 employs a full frame Kodak 18.5MP CCD sensor. Full frame sensors mean that lenses produce the same angles of view as they did in the days of film, with the same depth of field. To counteract the problem of vignetting, this sensor has offset micro-lenses over the pixels toward its outer edges. These act as condenser lenses to maximise the image-forming light at the outer extremities of the image.

DSLR manufacturers use an 'anti-alias' filter in front of the sensor. They wouldn't want you to refer to it as such, but really this is a sophisticated soft focus filter, designed to mask interpolation and moiré artefacts. Single chip cameras must all interpolate two of the three primary colours for each pixel, and this can lead to mistakes which show up as incorrect colour. There's also the problem of moiré patterning from such things as net curtains.

The best way to eliminate moiré is not by a filter but by unadulterated high resolution. At no time while using the M9 did I have any problem from colour

aliasing or moiré – though I did enjoy unadulterated high resolution. Admittedly, I did not photograph net curtains or anything similar!

Simply beautiful menus

Unlike DSLRs, the M9 does not require you to delve into menus within menus. There is just one main menu and it is easy to understand and set.

HDR devotees will love the auto bracketing setup – three, five or seven exposures in half to two EV increments and a choice of sequence (0/+/– or –/0/+).

The exposure controls are simple and direct. There are just two modes – manual and aperture priority. Aperture is set manually on the lens itself. You can count the clicks as you rotate the aperture ring, enabling you to set the f/stop quickly, even in the dark.

The shutter dial is another masterpiece of design. There is no mistaking the feel of the A setting, just a little further spaced from the B and 4000 settings. The manual shutter speeds, from 8sec-1/4000sec, have intermediate half-stop clicks. It's so tactile that, after a little practice, you can select speeds with your eyes closed.

The other exposure factor, ISO speed equivalence, has a dedicated button on the rear of the camera. Any ISO from ISO 160 to ISO 2500 can be set, plus a pull 80 setting, a full stop below the basic sensitivity.

The Info button brings up on the LCD what you need to know about battery life and remaining pictures. On playback, it provides a histogram, and tells you what focal length, ISO and shutter speed you used. It can't tell you what f/stop you used, though, because there is no lens iris coupling.

As you zoom in, the histogram zooms too, reflecting only the zoomed in section. This is excellent for checking highlights.

I had heard that the M9 was painfully slow to review a section of an image when zooming in. Sure enough, I found this to be true, but the first thing I always do when I receive a new camera is check that the firmware is up to date. It wasn't. After updating firmware, zooming in on a section of an image was virtually instantaneous. Formatting the camera's SD cards is also much quicker.

The facility to update firmware after you buy the camera is most important. Manufacturers can monitor feedback and improve many of facilities, without the need to return the camera to the service department. At times, the improvements can be little short of a redesign.

When you buy the latest camera, it is annoying to find that you can't open the Raw images in Photoshop. One way around this is to convert your camera-specific Raw files to .DNG. Many do this anyway, to ensure they will be able to open their Raw files in years to come. With the M9, you don't have to do the conversion, because the camera can save images in 14 bit .DNG format.

Above left: Bear House has been my test shot throughout many years of testing digital cameras. In the early days, I would dream of finding a camera which could resolve the name on the cast iron nameplate. Today, even though the inaccurate viewfinder gave me a much wider shot than expected, the Leica M9 with 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH records the nameplate with crystal clarity. Exposure 1/1000sec at f/5.6 and ISO 160, using 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH lens.
Above: Detail of Bear House sign from full frame image on the left. 1/1000sec at f/5.6 and ISO 160, using 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH lens.

Above: Front view of the Leica M9 digital camera, with 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH lens.
Above right: Rear view of the Leica M9 digital camera, showing the INFO display on the LCD screen.

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Perfect?

So, after all my unbridled enthusiasm for the M9, you may have jumped to the conclusion that it is perfect. It may be close, but perfect it is not. The brightline viewfinder may have been revolutionary in the 1950s, but now needs updating. The main problem is that you get much more in your picture than the viewfinder leads you to believe, and this means that you are constantly having to review, reframe and retake pictures.

As a former television cameraman, framing pictures accurately for the viewers' sets, I find this irritating. With this camera, the last thing I want to do is stop to review images all the time, preferring just to make pictures in the more connected way the camera allows.

No, I don't want to crop later – that wastes megapixels big time. At £275 per megapixel, I do not want to lose maybe £1000 worth every time I have to crop to get the picture I was led to believe I had framed in the first place. So much near genius has gone into the M9 that a viewfinder improvement must surely be within the realm of future possibility.

My other gripe is about batteries, but this applies not just to the M9 but to all cameras that use special batteries. All my mechanical Leicas still function sweetly, even my 80-year-old Leica 1s, but when I wanted to show a Canon ion electronic stills camera working at a lecture recently, none of its batteries would charge, and I couldn't find replacements anywhere. This rendered a less than 20-year-old camera about as much use as a car without petrol.

Other early digital cameras which use AA size batteries are still fine. Not only are such well-established batteries still available, but technology has advanced to produce much more powerful alternatives to the original low capacity NiCd cells. The ubiquitous AAs also have a much lower cost than special batteries. I have to ask whether the special battery used by the M9 (and previously by the M8 and M8.2) will still be available in 20 years, let alone be able to keep the camera functioning for 80 years, like its predecessor. Of course, with Leica's reputation, it may be.

Conclusion

The M9 is a worthy digital version of the world's finest rangefinder camera system. I have climbed the Great Wall of China - a similar height to Mount Snowdon - with a DSLR and 24-105mm zoom, together weighing 2.2kg, hanging around my neck. Would I do it again? Yes, though I would much prefer to do so with a Leica M9 and a couple of lenses.

The M9 body with battery and card weighs only 615g, and the 35mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH 260g, producing a combined weight of 875g - less than half that of the DSLR and lens.

DSLRs are so big and heavy that you can't wait to get the weight off your neck. So you miss shots – or grab them on that compromise compact camera you bought, while the size and weight of the M9 means you will carry it with you wherever you go. No more hiding your DSLR in the boot of the car because it's just too heavy to carry any longer. Even at the end of a long day, the M9 will not give you a pain in the neck.

The M9's image quality is on a par with the best from from the top Japanese DSLR manufacturers, but it weighs much less and is far less obtrusive. We really can't show such high image quality in print. I suggest you hire or borrow an M9 and make your own evaluation.

The Leica M9 can produce the highest quality images with exquisite simplicity of use, enabling you to concentrate on making pictures. Because it requires you to set focus and aperture manually, you are compelled to be closely involved in the photographic process. This is not a camera for action photography, but it is surely ideal for interiors and exteriors, especially travel and landscape.

Sadly, some will mistakenly see the M9 as a sop to those who cling to the past in the digital age. Seduced by the gimmick laden firmware features touted by most DSLRs, they will never know what they have missed.

John Henshall FRPS

Leica M9

- **Latest addition to Leica M Series**
- **World's first digital rangefinder camera with full frame (24x36mm) sensor**
- **World's smallest full frame system camera**
- **Body weight 615g, with battery and card**
- **Robust, one-piece, full metal housing**
- **Specially developed 18.5MP Kodak CCD**
- **2.5ins LCD**
- **Almost all Leica M lenses since 1954 can be fitted**
- **About £4950**

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