



M8: THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' MATE?

Paul Kay FRPS discusses how his purchase of a Leica M8 digital rangefinder reignited his interest in the M series in the digital era, and how its use has improved his photography

As a photographer specialising in underwater photography, I know all about camera weight! One of my Canon EOS 5D Mk II's and associated housings, complete with port, lens, flash,

and so on, weighs around 10kg, so carrying a spare body and above water use lenses has always been a problem, especially when travelling.

I first owned a Leica M rangefinder camera, an



the first) to enter the 'serious' digital camera market with a 'home-grown' offering, and its arrival was much anticipated by users of rangefinder Leicas.

On its launch, the M8 was not without some teething troubles, most notably in terms of its sensor's high sensitivity to infrared, the remedy for which has been to utilise IR filters in front of the lenses; a solution which is both costly and, in many users' opinion, far from ideal.

Despite its apparent problems, the M8 represented the first hybridisation of a traditional Leica M rangefinder with digital technology, and it has now carved out its own niche in Leica's history. With its 10MP Kodak sensor and M series lenses, it promised to produce images of sufficient quality to satisfy a wide range of demands. The lack of an anti-aliasing filter was intended to allow the lenses to reveal their true capabilities, but the 1.33x crop factor meant that Leica lenses, designed to cover the full 24x36mm frame, operated with a reduced field of view, and could not be fully exploited by the M8.

For anyone familiar with modern DSLRs, and indeed many compact digital cameras, the M8 may appear to be highly simplistic. In essence, it retains the operating characteristics of film M cameras and, despite being digital, could probably be operated by anyone familiar with an M camera from the 1950s, with minimal instruction.

Although marginally larger than a film M (except the M5) it handles and operates much the same. Inevitably, the back has switches, buttons and an LCD display, but these are relatively straightforward in operation. It also retains existent M series features, such as the removable baseplate, which is now used to cover both SD card slot and battery.

So much for the camera's physical characteristics. It was clear from the outset that the M8 was intended to carry forward Leica's highly traditional M concept into the digital age. But the digital age has substantially changed the entire ethos of photography and image taking tools. In film days, the camera lens was ultimately what defined the quality of the final image; now image quality is a result of the combination of lens and sensor.

To deal with the problems associated with image forming light striking the sensor at increasingly oblique angles away from the lens axis, the M8 makes use of offset micro lenses in front of the sensor. The optical design of M wideangle lenses meant that this was an issue that had to be resolved before the introduction of any M series digital Leica.

The sensor has inevitably been compared to those used in other cameras. It cannot be denied that lens design is now very advanced, and there are many extremely good lenses on the market. Hence, the M8 has had a lot to live up to, and equally has had to compete against very strong opposition. Or has it? In essence a small, compact, digital rangefinder camera, for those who are interested in using such a tool, there is little to compete with the M8, although it has had to

M4, nearly 30 years ago and, as a second system, the M has always had many attributes that I appreciate. Since that first M4, I've owned several other M cameras at various times, but the move to a digital workflow meant that these were no longer useful to me.

This changed with the introduction of Leica's first digital rangefinder, the M8, a couple of years ago, and I decided that it was time for a return to rangefinder photography. The M8 represents Leica's second attempt (the R series DMR digital back was

Above: This dolphin was 'bowriding' our yacht as, with engines cut, we glided to a halt (the dolphins are protected). Taken in January 2008 in Doubtful Sound, Fiordland, New Zealand, with a 90mm Elmarit at f/8, 1/500sec and ISO160.



deliver images of sufficient quality to satisfy such users.

Although now superseded by both the latest M offering from Leica, the full frame M9, and lagging behind current DSLRs in terms of technical specification, the M8 still can deliver extremely good images. At lower ISO settings, these are highly detailed and tonally excellent and, given the limitations imposed by its 10MP chip, perfectly good for many uses, including quite large prints, and publication even up to double page spread size. At higher ISOs though, noise quickly becomes an issue, and there are many who wouldn't use it beyond ISO 640, myself included.

The lack of an anti-aliasing filter, and subsequent moiré on fine patterns, has not proved to be a serious problem, and while moiré occurs, it is, in my experience, rare.

There is no doubting the quality of the lenses

Above: The view from just above Ogwen Cottage of the car park, National Park buildings and coffee kiosk - a scene well known to weary walkers and climbers on their way down from the mountains! Taken in last year's very cold December at dusk (5.30pm) with a 35mm f/1.4 Summilux Aspheric Lens at f/1.4, 1/30sec, and ISO320, handheld.

available for the M8, both past and present. In order to deal with optical technicalities, it is best to use 6-bit coded lenses on the M8. The camera is able to detect these, and adjusts and optimises the Raw image file (Adobe's DNG format) appropriately.

Many other, older, lenses can be used (even if they do not have, or cannot be fitted with, a 6-bit coding) with software such as Cornerfix, for corner colour drift.

The M8 can even, by using an L39 to M bayonet adapter, utilise lenses built back in the 1930s. Many older lenses are surprisingly effective on the M8, and I can testify that those from the 1960s are surprisingly good, although their wide open performance is often where they show their age. Modern Leica M lenses are, of course, extremely good, even at full aperture.

Although both body and lenses are solid and



much of the conventional wisdom of (film) photography, and applying it appropriately. The camera offers few shortcuts to picture taking, although aperture priority automation and, after firmware update, auto ISO, do feature.

After two years of using an M8, I now feel that I have returned to the roots of my photographic experience. Using it is akin to using my previous M cameras, albeit with the digital side tacked on. It is, however, an unforgiving camera. When I make mistakes, they are immediately very evident. It is not always the easiest camera to focus, requiring something distinct to work the coincident rangefinder with although, given appropriate subject matter, focus is both precise and highly accurate.

Framing is somewhat imprecise for much of the time, as no adjustment is available for shifts in field of view with varying distances. The centre weighted metering system lacks sophistication, and has all the benefits and drawbacks associated with this type of metering.

But, when I tell the camera correctly what I want it to do, it produces beautiful images, based almost entirely on my own input, which is, it has to be said, very satisfying photography.

Using the M8 is also a pleasantly tactile experience, and the rangefinder viewing provides a view very different from either that of the DSLR or the live view display offered by most modern digital compacts.

It has (re) taught me a lot too. I no longer use zoom lenses (not even on my Canon DSLRs). And, although I have four, I could now probably live with just one or two of my fixed focal length lenses, having realised that careful consideration of the subject is far more important than I had, slowly but surely, subconsciously drifted away from accepting.

Using the M8 has enlivened my interest in photography, in essence by forcing me to consider every detail involved in image creation at greater length.

Don't get me wrong. It's far from being the ultimate camera, but it does yield images that are different, if in nuance only, to those produced by DSLRs. It is ultimately a 'photographer's' digital camera, expensive, idiosyncratic, sometimes even awkward, but after two years, I realise that I am hooked on M rangefinders again. And, best of all, I think that owning and using the M8 is improving my photography.

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relatively heavy for their size, compared to the Canon DSLR system, a Leica M digital outfit is both small and light. It is inevitably limited in its use though, as minimum focus distance is 0.7m on many lenses, lens focal length is a maximum 90mm, and it lacks many of the features considered essential on today's DSLRs. But for many applications, these limitations are not significant in practice.

Although often considered the ultimate 'street' camera, for those who want to operate in the style of Cartier-Bresson, the Leica M has been used to produce images in numerous photographic genres, and in film form it was, and in digital form it remains, a very versatile tool.

The M8 is not, and makes no pretence at being, an automated, do-everything piece of kit. It requires substantial user input of the traditional photographic variety. To use it effectively means understanding

LEICA M8

- **Microprocessor-controlled metal blade focal plane shutter**
- **10.3MP 18x27mm CCD sensor, with a crop factor of 1.33x**
- **ISO 160-2500**
- **Large bright-line frame viewfinder with automatic parallax compensation. Magnification 0.68x**
- **Leica M bayonet mount, with additional optical sensing for all 6-bit coded lenses. All Leica M lenses of 21–90mm focal length produced since 1954 can be used, even if lacking 6-bit coding. Virtually all lenses can be retrofitted**
- **Aperture priority mode**
- **2.5ins rear colour monitor. 230,000 pixel LCD display**
- **SD memory card**

<http://uk.leica-camera.com>