

The Nikon F6 SLR is the zenith of Nikon's F-series 35mm film cameras. No film-loving professional photographer will be able to resist it.

BY ELLIS VENER

# The apex of F

AN END AND A BEGINNING: THE NIKON F6 SLR CAMERA

The Nikon F6 likely marks the end of the era for big, professional-grade 35mm SLR film cameras. For Nikon that history begins with the 1959 release of the Nikon F. Nikon historian Yokoyuki Tateno writes that the F possessed “unsurpassed quality, easy operation, copious functions, automatic features, compatibility with a variety of high-performance Nikkor lenses, excellent durability, advanced picture-taking capability, and a host of high-performance accessories.” Does the F6 live up to this standard?

Despite the complexities within, the F6 is quick and responsive and easy to use. Nikon has greatly enhanced the accuracy of its already famed 3D Color Matrix metering system so that it's near-impossible to stump it, even in hard-to-meter mixed-color and difficult back lighting.

Even if you're using non-CPU-equipped Nikkor lenses, you can take advantage of the Color Matrix metering (albeit without the subject's distance being part of the metering calculation). The F6's firmware includes virtually every non-CPU equipped



Nikon F6 SLR

Nikkor F-mount lens ever made, from 6- to 4000mm, over a range of maximum f-stops. From this you can create a custom list of up to 10 of your older lenses. For example, among my favorite lenses are a 105mm f/1.8 AI-S Nikkor, a 28mm f/3.5 PC Nikkor, and a 50mm f/1.8 AI-S Nikkor. To switch from one to another, I simply select the Non-CPU lens option in the screen menu and choose either L1, L2 or L3, switch to a CPU-equipped Nikkor lens and the camera automatically reverts to the correct CPU mode, and likewise when you switch back to a non-CPU lens last used.

The camera is surprisingly quiet—and not exactly silent—and the mechanical noise has less clatter than the F5. There are four major external differences between the F5 and the F6: the body size; the top deck; the controls on the back; and the viewfinder. The F6 body is substantially smaller than its predecessor, and just slightly larger—but heavier—than the F100. Add the MB-40 battery pack, and the new model is both taller and heavier than the F5.

Ambient backlighting combined with fill from a Nikon SB-800. Aperture priority mode Color Matrix metering and i-TTL fill flash set to -2. lens: 28-105mm f/3.5-4.5D AF Nikkor. AF set to Dynamic group mode.



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The control layout on the F6 top deck is simpler, and the buttons for multiple exposure and autofocus pattern control have been moved. Gone is the button lock on the off/on control ring that encircles the shutter release. Gone too are the interchangeable pentaprism options—no more Action, 6X High-Magnification, or Waist-Level Finders. According to Nikon, these were eliminated to better protect the camera from dust and moisture. (I suspect it was also a matter of manufacturing economics.)

The control buttons that remain are substantially larger, and staggered heights make it easier to distinguish one button from another by touch. A case in point is the AE/AF-L and AF buttons next to the main command wheel. A lock control button has been added just to the left of the eyepiece; push and turn the control wheel to lock all camera settings; push and turn again to unlock.

On the front of the camera, the changes are small. Now covers for the 10-pin data port and PC flash sync port are attached to the body. The mechanical mirror lock switch is gone, and mirror lock-up is now electronically controlled with the ring around the film rewind crank.

The biggest external differences are on the back of the camera. The LCD display is the dominant feature, along with the circular multi-selector button and AF Area mode selector. Depending on how you program it, the LCD displays the camera settings (ISO, flash sync mode and AF area selection, and AF sensor pattern), and provides the interface for navigation through the custom function menus.

The round, multi-selector button will be familiar to F5 and F100 users, but instead of four cardinal directions to navigate, there are now nine, one of them in the center.

Just under the multi-selector is a four-position switch for setting the AF-sensor pattern. Your pattern choices are:

## specs: Nikon F6 SLR

**FORMAT:** 35mm film (24x36mm)

**LENSES:** All Nikon F-mounts. Certain DX Nikkors will not cover the full 24x36mm frame at all focal lengths.

**VIEWFINDER:** Fixed eye-level pentaprism, built-in diopter, near 100 percent frame coverage

**METERING:** 3D Color Matrix metering, adjustable diameter center-weighted metering, 4mm diameter spot metering

**SHUTTER RANGE:** 1/8,000 to 30 seconds, 30 minutes (manual mode), bulb

**FRAME RATE:** CL: 2 fps (4 fps with MB-40 battery pack); Ch: 5.5 fps (8 fps with MB-40); Cs (silent-low-speed): 1 fps (up to 2 fps)

**ISO RANGE:** 6-6400

**AUTOFOCUS:** 11 focus areas; Single Area AF, Dynamic AF, Group Dynamic AF, Dynamic AF Mode with closest-subject priority

**AUTO-EXPOSURE BRACKETING:** 2-7 shots per bracketing sequence in 1/3-, 1/2-, or 1-stop increments

**FLASH:** TTL flash control by combined five-segment TTL multi-sensor, i-TTL Balanced fill-flash with Nikon SB-800 and SB-600 Speedlight, Standard TTL, Automatic Balanced fill-flash with TTL Multi-Sensor

**POWER SOURCES:** Two 3V lithium batteries, Multi Power Battery pack MB40, MS-40 battery holder (8 alkaline-magnesium, lithium or Ni-MH batteries) or EN-EL 4 rechargeable Li-ion battery

**WEIGHT:** 2.15 lbs., sans batteries

**MSRP:** \$2,810



The Pretzel King of Sarasota! Color Matrix metering and Aperture Priority control mode. The lens used was the 105mm f/1.8 AI-S Nikkor, film, Fuji Velvia 100F

- Single Area AF—you choose one of 11 sensors as the prime focus spot;
  - Dynamic AF mode—your choice of the primary sensor will automatically predict a moving subject's trajectory and delegate the tracking to the next sensor;
  - Group Dynamic AF mode—similar, but clusters neighboring sensors into groups at the top, bottom, center, left, or right of the frame, while automatically maintaining focus on the subject closest to one of the sensor positions within the specified group;
  - and Dynamic AF with Closest-Subject Priority. In this AF mode, the camera automatically selects the sensor area nearest to the closet subject. The F6 will automatically track a moving subject using data from the other focus areas.
- Sounds complicated, right? But it isn't. With only a little practice, the AF system is very intuitive. If you are confused at

first, the manual has charts for both single and continuous AF to help you select the correct AF-sensor pattern for the situation at hand. I mostly left the camera in Dynamic AF or Group Dynamic AF mode.

One more detail about the back of the camera—unlike previous models, it is permanently attached. Nikon apparently doesn't foresee anyone's opting to attach a 250-exposure back (last offered with the F4) or an NPC Polaroid back. Just about every databack function an obsessive note taker and sequential photography fan might desire is built-in.

With its large, bright viewfinder and improved ergonomics, the F6 is a joy to use. Where the F5 had five autofocus/spot-meter positions, the F6 has 11—a central square of nine cross pattern sensors, and two centerline outriders along the long side of the format. (I suspect the reason for the tight grouping of the central pattern is a “rule of thirds” for the Nikon D2X with 23.7x15.7mm CMOS chips. )

The displayed info is simpler than the F5's in several ways. A la the F100, the selected autofocus sensor location lights up in red, so it's readily apparent. The exposure, metering, and in-focus indicator are also easier to read, as they're clustered on a line at the bottom of the frame and backlit in bright green against the surrounding black.

As a film camera, the F6 design is akin to taking the shell of a WWII era propeller driven fighter and stuffing it with the controls and responsiveness of the most advanced jet fighter being built today.

If the F6 has a drawback, it's heft, especially with the addition of the battery pack for 8fps-bursts. Even so, the camera is well balanced and feels good in your hands. If you're shooting film, the Nikon F6 SLR is the camera for you. ■