

The digital M8 camera from German maker Leica delivers “the joy of photography.”

BY THOMAS WHITE

Fotovergnügen!

LEICA M8

It took 77 years and seven generations for Leica M-series cameras to evolve into the M7, the first model with automatic exposure, released in 2002. Leica has a tradition of unsurpassed craftsmanship and careful, thoughtful design developments—could Leica adapt the classic M-series for

new digital technology? Yes, with the introduction of the Leica M8 rangefinder.

Rangefinder cameras have several significant differences from—and in some circumstances, advantages over—SLRs. The rangefinder photographer composes through the viewfinder, where a set of bright lines defines



the frame, rather than through the lens. The viewfinder displays a much brighter image, providing more precise focusing than an SLR. Yet the design of the rangefinder limits the Leica M lenses to a range of 16mm to 135mm, and there's no way to preview depth of field in the viewfinder.

The compact design of Leica M lenses posed problems for digital adaptation. Especially with wide-angle Leica M lenses, light strikes the edges of the 24x36mm frame at a steep angle that's fine for film, but not for digital. In the Leica M8 digital rangefinder, the sensor has been reduced to 18x27mm, producing a conversion factor of 1.33X.

Leica worked with Kodak to design a CCD chip with offset microlenses at the edges of the sensor frame. The final step was to place a digital ID code onto each lens, which allows the M8 camera to make fine adjustments to raw files, tailoring each to the lens in use. The design allows the full clarity and sharpness of Leica's famous optics to reach the sensor chip. Because the M8 has no anti-aliasing filter, which would degrade image sharpness, there's a small risk of moiré in some images, but it can be removed in post-processing.

Banding appeared in some captures when there were bright light sources in the frame. Leica says they have made adjustments to the camera hardware and this is no longer a problem. If you have an earlier release M8 that exhibits banding, you can return it to Leica for repairs. The first camera that I received



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The compact size of the M8 lets you get in close where a larger SLR might get in the way. Exposure: 1/60 second, ISO 640, 28mm lens.

for this review showed banding in many images, but the camera from Leica's most recent production has been trouble free.

The second problem, evident in all M8 cameras, is a high sensitivity to infrared light. Some dark synthetic fabrics appear magenta in M8 raw files. Leica says the problem is due to the unusually thin IR filter in front of the sensor chip. Using a thin filter was necessary because of the tight clearance inside the M8 body, and to prevent loss of image sharpness at the camera sensor. Leica's fix for the problem is the incorporation of an IR filter at the front of the lens; two IR filters are provided free with every M8 camera. The filter can be removed to shoot images destined for conversion to black and white, where the IR sensitivity could be a benefit. The camera firmware update released in February should enable the camera to make

adjustments for images shot with the IR filters.

The external layout of the M8 is a classic Leica design: clean and simple. Leica has done a superb job of fitting a digital camera into the same size body as its M-series film cameras. The menus are concise and well organized with only the minimum of necessary options. The simple design of the M8 allows the photographer to concentrate on the photo subject instead of fiddling with a multitude of camera settings.

In the field, the Leica M8 demonstrates all the responsiveness of its predecessors. With a rangefinder's compact size and quiet shutter, photographers can move through crowds without drawing undue attention. The original Leica camera freed photographers from the burden of plate film; the M8 brings the convenience of digital to the M series. To shoot with the Leica M8 is to

experience the pure pleasure of making a picture. Fotovergnügen indeed! ■

Thomas White is a photographer based in Denver. He is currently working on a book about the National Western Stock Show & Rodeo. His Web site is: www.thomaswhitephoto.com.

specs: Leica M8

CAMERA TYPE: digital rangefinder

SENSOR: Kodak CCD, 18x27mm

RESOLUTION: 10.31 megapixels
(3,916x2,964 pixels)

LENS COVERSION FACTOR: 1.33X

FILE FORMAT: DNG, JPEG

ISO: 160 to 2500

MEDIA: SD cards up to 4GB

EXPOSURE MODES: Manual, Aperture Priority

FOCUS: Manual focus rangefinder system

SPEED: 2 fps

PRICE: \$4,800