

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS: LEICA'S M8 vs. DMR

Text and photos by David Young.



Those of you, who have read my earlier articles, know that [a] I'm a rabid convert to digital and [b] despite its foibles; I think the R8/DMR combination is the greatest photograph making machine ever produced. To be fair, I should point out that before my conversion to 'R' Leicas I'd owned both a CL and an M3.

So when I was offered the chance to spend a week with a pre-production M8, I jumped at the chance!

Having a firm grasp of the painfully obvious... there's neither a film wind nor rewind crank, which leaves the top looking peculiarly "empty". A nice, Leica script logo would help!

It's the same size and shape as a traditional "M" camera, although the body is 1mm deeper, to accommodate the 2.5" LCD

screen on the back. Dyed in the wool 'M' fans may notice the difference, but I found it compact, comfortable and easy to use.



The space for the rewind knob has been filled with an LCD counter and battery

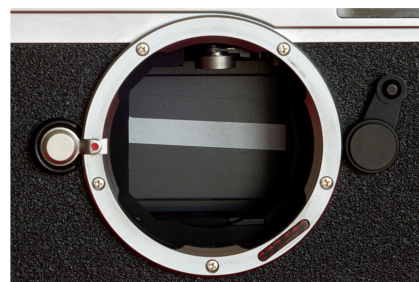
life indicator which is very easy to read. The top right is very clean, with an intuitive switch beneath the shutter release, for Off, Single or Continuous shooting and self-timer.



The camera bottom looks pretty much like any "M" series camera, except that when you pop the

bottom plate off, you find a slot for an SD memory card and the requisite Lithium-Ion rechargeable battery.

Pop the lens off and you'll find, both the vertical run, metal blade shutter adapted from the R8/9 cameras and the LED/sensor array (lower right) which detects the new 6-bit coded lenses. By the way, the M8 works perfectly well, with most existing M lenses, but the camera will not record the focal length or the max aperture.

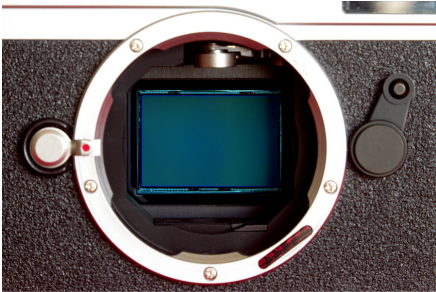


As you can see, one of the shutter slats is 18% gray to reflect light to the bottom mounted meter cell.

The meter is exceptionally accurate and the display is marvelous. In 'A'perture priority mode, the shutter speeds are shown in the bottom of the finder. Manual metering is identical to the M6-TTL, with two arrows and a dot. But, unlike the R8/9, where you seem to be looking at the display, the numbers and arrows seem to 'float' in mid-air. Large, easy to see (even with eyeglasses!) and not at all intrusive.

**The sensor** is from Kodak and from the same "family" as the

one in the DMR, but slightly larger, with a 1:3 crop factor rather than the DMR's 1:37. Thus, a 21 mm lens will have the field of view a 28mm lens on the M8 versus a field of view of a 30mm lens on the DMR. Not a huge difference.



More importantly, neither the M8 nor the DMR have anti-aliasing filters over their sensors. AA filters reduce the moiré patterns caused by regular geometric patterns interfering with the regular spacing of the pixels. But they also reduce the ability of the sensor to capture fine detail.

Because every other decent digital camera has an AA filter, both the M8 and DMR, at 10+ mega-pixels, will outperform cameras with many mega-pixels more. (*The DMR's picture quality has most often been compared to Canon's 16mp full-frame D1s MkII!*)

**Speed** is important in two ways... the speed with which the camera can be turned on and used, and the speed with which it can write your photos to the memory card.

Time to turn on is the big bugaboo with the DMR. Despite Leica's claims of 3 seconds, from the time you turn on the DMR, until it will take a shot is just over

7 seconds. This can be a Royal Pain, in many shooting situations! The M8's time from switch-on to shot is just under one second! No more than the time you need to wind the film and put a film 'M' to your eye!

As mentioned, the M8's sensor (3916x2634 pixels) is slightly larger than that of the DMR (3876x2584) yet the DNG (raw) files the M8 generates are just 10mb in size, vs. 19mb in the DMR. This use of "lossless compression" allows the M8 to write a file to your card in just over 2.5 seconds... just over half the time of the DMR.

The "engine" (*as they call a camera's computer, these days*) is either faster than that of the DMR, or its code has been highly optimized. If you are shooting RAW and "*chimp*" a shot... then spin the function wheel (borrowed from the DMR) to get maximum magnification – to, say, check focus; the DMR will take just over 6 seconds, before

the image de-pixelates and you can see what you've got. The M8 does this faster than I can accurately time it with a stop watch. Virtually instantaneous. Love it!

**Handling:** What can I say? It's and 'M' and it handles one... The finder is Leica's standard issue with all the clarity and accuracy you'd expect. The magnification factor was not marked on the camera and, being an "R" user, I'm not familiar enough to judge whether it's a .58, .72 etc. But I admit; the M8 is easier to focus with very wide angle lenses or in low light than is the R8+DMR!

The back-panel LCD screen is large, bright and amazingly clear. The menus are simple, well laid out and both quick and easy to navigate. The most used items are not found, however, in the menu!

ISO, white balance and file format (RAW, JPG fine, JPG basic, etc.) are accessed by simply pressing the SET button.





Navigate as normal and then lightly press the shutter button to set your choices and return to the picture taking mode. This is much more convenient than using the menu, but, of course, pre-production units do not come with instruction books... so you have to figure these things out for yourself! An ancient Japanese proverb says "*Simple when know how!*"

**Noise:** is one area where 'M' fans have been moaning about the prospects. After all, the nearly noiseless "tick" of the Leica shutter is legendary.

However, the need to make room for the shutter winder/motor and the electronics made the adoption of the R8/9's shutter mandatory. Besides, doing so brings flash sync (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> curtain) sync at 1/250<sup>th</sup> of a second!

On its own, the R9 shutter is actually quieter than the classic

'M' shutter. Of course, in an R9, it's masked by both mirror slap and the DMR's motor wind.

The M8 is not quite as quiet as a regular 'M', because a motor is needed to cock the shutter, if not advance the film. Still, the motor is very quiet, not at all obtrusive and delivers a good two frames per second!

**Convenience:** The M8, like all its predecessors, is a high quality, compact camera capable of delivering outstanding results. There are, as always, a few places where Leica could have done it better.

The battery chargers for both the M8 and DMR are very fine units, I'm sure, but they're needlessly large and consume huge amounts of gadget bag space. *With airline luggage handling the way it is, if you pack your charger in your checked luggage, you might as well not take your camera!*

The "leatherette" has a very tiny texturing, and thus the camera tends to be a wee bit slippery. And the camera needs a film wind lever, if only for a place to rest your thumb! I'd like to see a thumb rest, such as was added to the back of the R6, or moulded into the back of the DMR. It would improve the grip and make holding the camera both more secure and more comfortable.

**Conclusion:** If the DMR was Leica's first effort in digital, they got most of it right. There are a few wrinkles which I hope will be looked after by another upgrade.

The M8, on the other hand, is, electronically speaking, the DMR – *DONE RIGHT!* It combines the convenience of small size with picture quality second to none. Add the legendary qualities of Leica glass and you have a picture making machine par excellence.



Sadly, we were asked, by Leica, not to publish photos from our test M8, as the firmware (Version 0.28) is still a "*work in progress*".

Pity, because the photos I got were absolutely marvelous!