

The Poor Man's DM-R.

By David Young

A long glass user's perspective of the digital age.

In the first half of the 20th century Leica led the photographic world. Leica innovation was legendary. From the original introduction of the 35mm camera in 1923, to the revolutionary M3, E. Leitz and Co. had no equal.

After that, Leitz seem to lose their way. Later offerings, starting with the original Leicaflex, were always *"a day late and a dollar short"*. And, sadly, things are no better, in the digital age.

Though Leica has offered a number of re-branded point & push digitals from Fuji and Matsushita, their first true digital product is the DM-R digital back, for the Leica R8 & R9 cameras.

As this is written, the DM-R has just been released. By all accounts it is a magnificent piece of gear. However, not all of us can afford its staggering price.

The answer, for me and many others, lay in Japan. The Canon has several adapters available (*from Fotodiox, Novoflex and CameraQuest, amongst others*) allowing any EOS mount camera to use most Leitz/Leica glass in aperture priority mode. And thus, the LeiCanon is born!

For those of you, who have not tried the LeiCanon, believe me, it's no R8. The build quality is good (100,000 cycles), but certainly not to Leica standards. This is not a camera to will to your kids!

There is a certain joy in using a piece of mechanical apparatus that works incredibly smoothly, as you think it 'should'. The R8 & 9 are such cameras, as are the "M" series. Canon's 20D is well made, with good fit and finish. It's comfortable to hold and there is little to complain about, but it doesn't offer the pure "joy" as does a Leica.

With that out of the way, just how does it compare?

Well, the finder is a bit of disappointment... about as bright as that of the R3. There are better finders in the digital world, but sadly, those cameras can't be adapted to Leica glass. While I can see the viewfinder display clearly on my R8, I find the 20D's display so hard to read that I just ignore it. The screen is OK, but not great, for manual focusing. On the plus side, its smaller frame does make it easier for eyeglass wearers to see the whole field.

The Canon has a slight problem with overexposure



at small apertures with 3rd party lenses, but it's not significant in normal picture taking. If I hadn't tested for it, I'd have never have found it! But, it's there.

The body is a bit lighter (685gms vs. 790gms for the R9 and 890gms for the R8), making it a bit easier to hold and to carry on long hikes.

If you're a wide angle fan, and many of us are, most digital cameras will cause you some concern, and the 20D is no exception. Digital sensors are nearly all smaller than a frame of 35mm film and thus, for any given focal length, the field of view is narrower. This, they call the "crop factor". On the DM-R it's 1.3. The 20D's somewhat smaller sensor makes it 1.6. Thus, your 21mm Super Angulon will behave as if it's a 28mm (OK - 27.3 if you're picky!) on the DM-R and a 35mm (33.6) on the 20D.

It seems that, for wide angle, Canon's full frame D1s, or any Leica film camera is still the answer!

For long-glass users, the tables are turned. With the 20D, your 400mm behaves like a 640mm (or a mere 520mm on the DM-R). Not having to buy that longer lens can save you enough money to pay for the Canon body!

There is another benefit to this 'crop factor'. I use the 400mm f6.8 Telyt for wildlife photography. It's a great lens, but when used with the original Leicaflex 2x converter, there is substantial vignetting (See Vol. 37, #3, p.37) which is not the case with the new APO 2x converter. However, the crop factor of the 20D ensures that the sensor only sees the central portion of the lens's image. The older converter's vignetting is entirely outside the digital field of view. Thus, perfect coverage and another \$2000 saved!

Travelers can benefit from the LeiCanon, too. Canon makes a, not-too-bad, 17~85mm zoom (*quite sharp, but without the contrast we're used to and with a huge tendency to flare. Lens hood use is a must!*) But it, plus an 80~200/f4 Vario-Elmar and a Leica 2x converter, means you can cover everything

LEICA R DIGITAL ALTERNATIVES

from a 28mm through 640mm (equivalent fields of view) with just two lenses and the extender! Throw in a decent travel tripod or small, light, bean-bag for the long shots and you've got a very light, convenient and compact travel kit!

As well, the traveler's X-ray problem disappears and four 1 GB cards will hold the equivalent of 11 rolls of 36 exposure film in RAW mode or the equivalent of 24 rolls as high quality JPEGs... all in the space and weight of a single roll of film!

OK. We've covered everything but the actual photos. I have not made any technical tests... these are observations from using of both cameras.

For fine detail, and crisp pictures, Kodachrome still wins, hands down. There isn't a digital camera I've seen that can approach K-25. (*Of course, these days, film cameras can't either!*) At low ISO's (under 400) I'd give the edge to almost any film... though in many cases, not by a lot.

At higher ISOs (400 & above) there is no contest. The 20D (and a number of other dSLR's I've seen) run away with it. As ISO equivalent sensitivity increases, the pixels do not increase in size, as does

grain. As for digital "noise", there is less noise in a digital picture taken at ISO 1600 than there is grain in the equivalent photo shot on ISO 400 film.

Hand holding the 400 Telyt with 2x converter is normal practice for me. But, at f13.6, wide open, it's "a bright day only" combination. Even with ISO 400 film, I've lost many, otherwise good, shots to camera shake; because of the low shutter speeds.

With the LeiCanon, I just crank up the ISO to 1600 (it can be pushed to 3200) and fire away. Shutter speeds in the 1/1000th range are normal and my reject rate has dropped dramatically. Being able to switch to a Summicron and simply dial in an ISO of 100, rather than changing the roll, is a treat, too!

If I could afford a DM-R, I'd have one in a shot. Instead, I dream of the next generation... the R10d with a 12mp sensor, built into the same body as the R9... and all for under CAD\$5000. That, I'd buy... in a heartbeat!

In the meantime, the LeiCanon is a great way to experience the digital revolution, without having to sell the farm to do so.



American Bald Eagle (Juvenile) - 400/f6.8 Telyt and 2x converter on a LeiCanon.

Hand-held (shoulder stock - no monopod). Exposure: 1000th sec. at f8 (f16), ISO 1600.

No digital corrections of any kind have been made to this full frame shot. This is as it came from the camera.