

First Impressions with the Digital Modul-R.

Text and photos by David Young.



There is bit of wisdom, in the business world, which says you can tell what a manufacturer truly thinks of his own products, by looking at how he packs them.

My DM-R came packed in a large grey-paperboard box, which protected a beautiful, silvered, Leica box. This box is filled with custom molded, anti static, high density foam and everything was protected within an inch of its life.

There is even a fitted canvas carry bag, with custom molded high density foam for the back of the DMR and a separate zippered pouch for the "old" film back.

The first impression you get (or, at least, that I got) is how light it is. It seems to weigh almost nothing!

The second impression is how well it's made. After using Canon's 20D for the last 8 months and nearly 5000 photos, Leica's DM-R is a delight. The push buttons

have a nice, solid feel, though the rotary controls while certainly not "flimsy", do not feel quite as solid as those on the 20D. (*Indeed, there have been reports of the function wheel falling off a few units!*) But, overall, the DM-R is certainly up to top Leica standards.

The display on the back is the same (1.8") size as that of the 20D, but both brighter and clearer.

I have heard complaints that the DM-R's screen only magnifies the image in 4 steps, whilst the Canon has 10 steps. However, in actual use, the screen on the DM-R is more useful to determine focus or composition, as it is much clearer.

Installation was a snap and the controls are intuitive. Things are a little different than those of the Canon and I admit to a quick peek at the book to see how it's done, but without much reading it all became perfectly clear.

Of course, the R8's finder is designed for manual focus and is so much brighter than the 20D's finder that it's not even funny.

The specialized finder screen, which comes with the back, has marks showing the field of view for the DM-R's 1.37 crop factor. I found them very easy to get used to, and frankly, I like the idea of being able to see a little "outside the box". It is very similar to composing your shots with an M series camera.

A major concern of mine was the viewfinder... the back sticks out a fair bit and I feared that viewing might be compromised, especially for eyeglass wearers. Not so! The finder is fully visible, even to an eyeglass wearer, such as me.

Although the back looks like it might be awkward, it's not. You don't notice any of it. You just make photos.

Another nicety is the leather hand-strap that comes standard. I had a similar one on the motor winder for my old R3, and it was very handy. This one is even nicer.

The unit balances well in the hand – especially with a larger lens, like the 90 Summicron. With your hand through the strap, you can easily reach the shutter speed selector, but reaching the camera's shutter release is almost impossible.

Leica thoughtfully provided a new shutter release on the front, which falls perfectly under your finger and is smooth as silk. A second, lockable, shutter release is near the bottom - for verticals.

Although some people have complained about the size; it's no larger than, say, the top line Canon digital cameras, with which it competes, but it certainly is heavier! Still, I don't find it a burden and it balances the 400mm/f6.8 Telyt perfectly... something the 20D did not do well.

And speaking of photos... This is where the DM-R shines.

I had been quite pleased with my LeiCanon (see Viewfinder, Vol. 38, No. 3, p. 18). But I was looking for something more.

The DM-R delivers photographs with a level of fine detail I've not seen in my Canon shots. The additional 2 megapixels shouldn't make that much difference!

However, every dSLR in the world has an anti-aliasing filter, which does help to reduce Moiré patterns in some shots, but which also lowers resolution and thus, fine detail, in every shot. The DM-R has no such filter, correcting the problem, if necessary, in software. This is the same approach taken by every medium format digital back on the market and likely comes from the DM-R's *Imacon* heritage.

The result is photos which are sharper and with much finer detail than any "35mm" dSLR I've seen.

Leica have done an excellent job of setting the internal levels, such that shots from the DM-R appear closer to film than anything I've seen in digital.

Perhaps digital is not yet as good as film... but shots from the DM-R are so close, that in 12"x 18" prints, I cannot tell them from those made from film!

A few foibles: This is a first effort for Leica ... and it shows.

Although there has already been a firmware upgrade, to correct some automatic white balance problems, the DM-R still seems not to do as well as its Japanese brethren. Although perfect outdoors, when shooting indoors, by window light, with dark coloured walls in the background, the white balance is easily confused. Fortunately, the problem is readily cured during "development". Still, another firmware upgrade would be nice.

A more serious concern is the rather slow time to turn on... a full three seconds! This can be a real problem when you need to react quickly.

The write time to the SD cards is similarly, very slow... taking about 5 to 6 seconds, vs. about 1 second for the 20D. It is true, that the .dng files the Leica writes is nearly 3 times larger, but this is nearly twice as long, even so. I purchased the high speed (SanDisk Extreme III – 20mb/sec) cards, but the write time did not improve over the 9 mb/sec Extreme II card supplied with the

DMR. So, the problem is with the unit and not the cards.

This can become a problem when shooting a rapid series of photos. It's true, the buffer allows up to 10 frames, but when the buffer is full, I have had it take up to 3 full minutes to write to the SD card!

Noise levels, at ISO 400 and below, are excellent. However, noise at ISO 800 is not so good, and at the DM-R's "push" setting (= ISO 1600) it's downright poor.

For me, this is a concern, because I do a lot of wildlife work with the 400/6.8 Telyt and 2x converter... which is an f13.6 combination, wide open! High ISO settings are a great help, even on bright days, to maintain acceptable shutter speeds.

There is a simple work around, however. Set the camera at ISO 400 and, using the exposure compensation lever, deliberately underexpose 2 or 3 stops. This will yield an equivalent exposure to ISO 1600 (2 stops) or ISO 3200 (3 stops). When you correct the exposure during 'development', you will end up with well exposed



shots with more noise than normal with the camera's native ISO 400, but less than with the DM-R's ISO 800 setting.

The LCD screen is so good, that shots underexposed 2 stops will display a wee bit dark, but quite satisfactorily for checking focus or composition. Shots underexposed by 3 stops are quite dark, but will still 'develop' to a very high standard.

Some people may cry 'foul', but I have found that the system works, and very well, at that.

The supplied battery charger has an ingenious system to interchange the plugs for the UK, Europe or the US (all included). You still need one more adapter for Australia, but most places you travel, the unit will work, as it automatically switches between 100V and 240V, 50 or 60 cycles.

However it's huge! With its cord it's easily 4 times the size of the charger for the Canon, which is much more intelligently designed. Why make something so well equipped for travel (and most of us do travel with our cameras!) and then make it so unnecessarily large? It takes a huge amount of space in the gadget bag. *(I never put any camera gear in checked luggage, as it often doesn't make it there with you!)*

Battery life is also a concern. It takes 2 hours to recharge the battery for 3 hours (about 150 to 200 shots) operation. A second battery is a must, for any serious photo outing.

On the bright side, Leica also includes a 12Volt car charging cord. Very nice, though the manual makes no mention of it, and I've not yet been able to

determine if it has the same overcharge protection circuitry that's in the AC charger. And if not, how do you tell when the battery is charged, without overcharging? There is only one, red, power LED on it!

And why is it that gently squeezing the remote release (14.254 or 14.255) will not lock the meter reading in spot metering mode? It's not as if the circuitry is not in the DMR, for both release buttons do it! Yet this is true for the Winder R8/9 and Motor R8/9 as well! Both curious and annoying!

This last point is a nit-pick. When the LCD is being used to view previously taken shots, it does not turn off when the shutter button is tapped. You must turn it off, on the back, before you can take photos. This can slow you down and is also a great drain on the already limited batteries. Here, I much prefer Canon's programming.

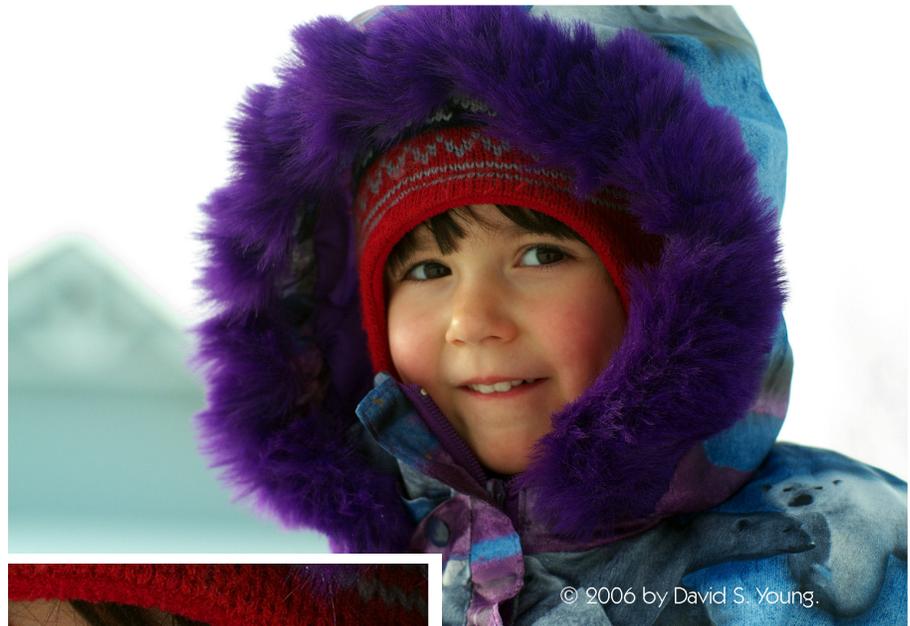
The Conclusion:

The DM-R is like "the little girl with the curl"... when it's good, it's very, very good.

The R8 with DM-R is a superb picture taking machine, which delivers results I cannot tell from film. To my eye, they match those from a good medium format camera.

But the combination is only suited to a methodical photographer, like myself. Those who need fast response and rapid fire performance (PJ's and sports types) will need to look elsewhere.

Still, the photographs it produces are so good, that I, and many like me, will put up with the minor inconveniences of the DM-R to achieve photographs that rival our best work with film.



Our granddaughter. R8/DM-R/90 Summicron, f4, 1/1000th ISO 400. The inset shows the detail in her eyelashes... and you can see me, in her pupil, kneeling in the snow, to get the shot!