

photoworld

25



2010/#1



Cover: by Paul Murphy

Cropped from just one half of an Alpha 700 12 megapixel frame, our cover is taken by one of the North East's best landscape photographers, Paul Murphy.

Paul is just one of many regular contributors of thoughts and images to the Forum on www.photoclubalpha.com which is now the heart of the club. His original version was one of the best liked shots of the recent cold snap (you can see the whole – unretouched – shot on our Gallery pages).

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Photoworld magazine is an independent quarterly from Icon Publications Ltd which provides free membership of the Photoworld Club UK/Photoclubalpha. The aim of the Club is to provide support, information, inspiration and activities for owners of Minolta, Konica Minolta, Seagull, Sony Alpha and other equipment compatible with the Minolta SR, MC, MD, VS, AF, AF-xi and AF-D mounts. Membership of the Club is not dependent on subscription and you may also sign up, receiving emailed information only but no magazine, through www.photostore-uk.com, www.minoltaclub.co.uk or www.photoclubalpha.com. Subscriptions cost £19.95 for four issues (UK/Europe), £23.95 (Rest of World), payable to Icon Publications Ltd, Maxwell Place, Maxwell Lane, Kelso, Scottish Borders TD5 7BB. This publication has no connection with Konica Minolta Holdings or Sony Corporation, or the brands mentioned. The logo typeface is 'Minolta Classic' designed by Justin Bailey.

HELPLINES AND INFORMATION

Authorised & warranty repairs, assistance and enquiries

OUR website www.photoclubalpha.com is now packed with detailed features on the Minolta and Sony Alpha systems, has a busy discussion **Forum** and you can search the site for help on topics. It has a full directory of useful links for downloading software or obtaining help. For personal advice from the Club, use e-mail only please, to david@photoclubalpha.com.

A **DEDICATED** helpline is available for Konica Minolta Dynax and Dimage digital system owners, and also for film camera owners. The helpline phone number is **0870 0104107**.

ALL REPAIRS for Konica, Minolta and Konica Minolta branded photographic products are handled by;

JP Service Solutions
Johnsons Photopia Ltd
Hempstalls Lane
Newcastle under Lyme
Staffordshire ST5 0SW
Tel: 01782 753366 – Fax: 01782 753340
Email: kmsupport@jpss.co.uk

SONY may announce further firmware upgrades or indeed products. Your first step should be to check Sony's website regularly:

www.sony.co.uk

Their general helpline, which will have information on any other numbers, addresses, departments or offices which Konica Minolta owners may need to reach in future, is: **08705 111 999**

For downloadable printable manuals, legacy firmware and software updates, visit:

<http://ca.konicaminolta.com/support/americas/>

For the Sony European user service – there is still no UK user club:

<http://www.sony.co.uk/nextlevel>

To order KM/Sony parts, accessories, and new Sony flash components etc, visit the Photostore, where Bernard Petticrew also hosts an advice forum:

<http://www.photostore-uk.com/>

MINOLTA REPAIRS

by specialist workshop in Milton Keynes

FOR MANY years **Camera Repair Workshop**, based in Milton Keynes close to the original Minolta UK service department, handled the repair of classic SRT, X, Vectis and later film cameras for Minolta UK.

They have obtained many of the spare parts and KM's stocks of older 'cannibalisation cameras' like 7000 and 8000i. Their proprietor is David Boyle, and his two technicians are Minolta trained. As an independent repairer they will specialise in film and digital, and hold parts going back to models like the XM. *The Dynax 9 is an exception, previously serviced by a special European centre, and must be sent to JP (see above).* No VAT is chargeable at present, and they offer Photoworld Club members a **10 per cent discount** on prices which they say are already better than former retail repair charges. This enables the Club to continue with its 10 per cent service and repair discount offer.

The **Photoworld Club Camera Check** scheme will be operated by Camera Repair Workshop, though in absence of Konica Minolta's former bulk shipping arrangements, the return carriage costs have increased and a charge of **£25 per camera/standard lens** combination is now required.

Your equipment is bench-tested for shutter speed, metering, focusing and aperture accuracy, externally cleaned and adjusted (this includes mirror box and film track, and all accessible parts or adjustments). If performance is below standard, a quotation will be issued for optional servicing. A certificate is completed showing the test results and functions checked, and returned with the camera. Camera Repair Workshop were actually responsible for most of the Club Camera Check work, and hold a stock of original 'Minolta Club' certificates along with all the necessary bench testing equipment.

They are based at:

Unit 9, Wharfside, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK2 2AZ.

Telephone 01908 378088, fax 08712 427677.

Email: cameraworkshop@tiscali.co.uk

Alpha hits Silver

The Alpha System celebrates its Silver Anniversary this month – though left uncelebrated by the inheritors of the Minolta AF legacy, Sony. They have no reason to draw attention to the age of the system, as in four years they have taken it the same sort of distance that Minolta took the world's first AF system in the late 1980s.

For Photoclubalpha and the historic Minolta Club of Great Britain, the anniversary does matter. A good many of you out there have been members since the launch of the system, often using the earlier SR and X manual focus systems before that. We still have a 1985 Minolta 7000AF and it's still working just as it did when new.

I don't mind showing my age to make a comparison. I was 11 in 1963 when I took my first pictures with an SLR camera. My father had bought himself a Pentax S3 – and the camera it replaced was 25 years old, a pre-war Zeiss Ikon Kolibri collapsable 16-on-127 model.

When the Kolibri was made, 127 was the 'vest pocket' format of choice. 35mm was on the rise, but 35mm SLRs had not yet arrived. They were as much a thing of the future as digital SLRs were when the Minolta 7000AF was launched.

But within that 25 years, there was hardly a single camera system made with interchangeable lenses that did not become obsolete. Only the 'frozen assets' of the cold war kept some systems, like the Exakta bayonet and the Praktina, alive. New brands were launched, from the British Wrayflex and Periflex to the Italian Rectaflex and many German oddities. It was not unusual for an entire system to be come and gone within a few years.

Even in the following quarter-century, the high years of the Japanese 35mm SLR, the succession of lens mount changes was bewildering. Independent lens makers like Tamron and Sigma were forced to make systems using interchangeable mounts not just because the public wanted it. A dozen or more mounts were made for every lens and in the 42mm screw thread fit alone there were endless variants – Praktica LLC (Pentacore Electric), Olympus FTL, Pentax ES and more.

Minolta's SR bayonet mount, introduced in 1958/9, actually remained basically unchanged all the way through to 2005 when the

Though the system has been known by many titles from Minolta AF to Maxxum and Dynax, underneath it has been Alpha from 1985



last manual focus model, the X-370S, was available. It survives even now as a mount popular in China where the Seagull range from Shanghai Optical includes Minolta fit models. That mount only ever had one major revision, to add a linkage for open aperture TTL metering. The introduction of programmed exposure and shutter priority was cleverly enabled by using the existing design of lens mechanism and improving its accuracy, while adding a simple reference lug to the f-stop setting ring.

Nikon's 1959 F-mount proved similarly easy to improve without any basic modification. Both these bayonet mounts celebrated half a century of production in 2009 – another landmark, which Nikon was able to celebrate but Minolta of course could not.

The AF mount

In January 1985, the Minolta 7000AF was launched on a completely unsuspecting photographic community. It had been one of the best-kept development secrets in Japan, something for which Minolta was never really forgiven. The 7000 Alpha as it was known in Japan hit the market running, earning the 1985 Technical Image Press Association (TIPA) Camera of the Year Award. It took the other camera makers two years to catch up and enter the autofocus era.

For the Minolta Club, 1981 to 1984 had already been an exceptional period with the X-700 and X-500 attracting more users than ever. The AF system only added to this growth and by 1988 we had the largest number of members ever with almost 13,000 Minolta users.

There was much discontent over the change in the mount, not because it was autofocus but because the body thickness (back focus) remained the same as the earlier system. This meant there could never be a lens adaptor for manual focus lenses, and at the same time they were unable to fit the AF body directly.

The AF mount was made wider in diameter, allowing larger rear elements and reducing a design constraint. This was one difference which Canon followed in their EOS autofocus system, making the throat as wide as possible. Nikon, deciding to keep faith with existing users, designed their AF mount to fit manual F-mount lenses. This limited the optical design pos-

sibilities for Nikon, and has continued to do so ever since. In the end, they benefited as the narrower exit pupils tended to be more 'telecentric' to use a digital age term. This allowed many of their film-era lenses to outperform those from their great rival Canon when digital SLRs became the norm.

Minolta had created some very small and light MD lenses in the early 1980s. Experienced users knew that these were not in the same league as the late MC and early MD models with much larger filter threads. A good example would be the 20mm f2.8 MD compared to the earlier 21mm f2.8 MC – the 21mm is one of the best superwides ever made, the 20mm with its 55mm filter thread has strong vignetting and fails to deliver architecturally straight lines.

For the AF system, the lens designers stepped back ten years and added the latest developments. The new 20mm f2.8 AF design resembled the old 21mm, not the tiny MD 20mm. In performance and drawing qualities it was midway between the two, but still much more akin to the classic design, sharing its 72mm filter thread. The new 24mm f2.8 AF was treated the same way.

Some MD lenses were 'ported' almost unchanged to the AF system – the best known of these is the 70-210mm f4, often called the 'Beercan'. The final MD version was already an advanced internal zooming, constant aperture design derived from work Minolta had done with Leitz over the years. There was no need to go back to the drawing board, or look to an earlier generation, for this.

Other AF system lenses were revolutionary – a new breed of high performance standard zooms which eventually displaced the ubiquitous 50mm f1.7 as the choice when buying a camera.

The 7000AF was launched with one, the 35-70mm f4. This tiny lens used the world's first commercially produced hybrid aspherical element, in which a layer of plastic is bonded to a glass lens to change its curvature. Though low in contrast and prone to flare when used against the light, the 35-70mm f4 was stunningly high in resolution. New films had appeared at the same time as the AF system, with Fuji's E6 slide films displacing older Kodak emulsions in popularity. The 35-70mm worked well with these bright, high contrast slide films.

All in all, the system was launched with 12 dedicated lenses including five entirely new designs

By 1988 – after only three years of real sales – the new 'Alpha' system included a professional



The development of the original AF lines first into the i series – champagne colour 8000i (labelled in Japan as 8700i) top – and then into the xi series saw the most elegant body styling ever applied to Minolta SLRs. Though the 9xi, bottom, looked far sleeker than the 7xi the body was more or less the same shape, it was the lack of a built-in flash which lowered its height.

body, the 9000AF also launched in 1985, as well as the original all-purpose 7000AF and dumbed down entry level 5000AF (1986).

It also offered one of the first digital imaging backs – more accurately a still video back, capturing VGA resolution colour frames with a 2X crop factor and recording them on 2" magnetic disks much like the Sony Mavica.

The first revision of the system came in 1988 with the Minolta 7000i, a far slicker and faster operating version of the 7000. It introduced Predictive Autofocus for the first time in any AF SLR, and the system of Creative Expansion Cards which were small ROM cards identical in form

factor to the Sony MemoryStick Pro Duo. These cards added functions to the camera, and from the start there was the suspicion that functions might be removed from cameras in order to sell them as later add-ons.

The i generation

Within a year, Minolta had upgraded the 5000 to the 5000i, adding the first on-camera flash; at the bottom end a 3000i was introduced. The first signs of a weakness of intent at professional level came with the absence of a 9000i. They may have thought the 9000 was good enough to require no replacement.

All the first wave of Alpha lenses

had been designed by the Sakai optical factory, which the club visited in 1986. Sixteen members signed up for a two-week trip including India, Thailand, Hong Kong and Japan. The highlight of this was a day spent with Minolta, including a reception at the Osaka headquarters tower and a tour of the lens making plant. Quality Circles of eight workers made every lens by hand from the components, and some lenses were very complex. The 28-135mm f4-4.5 was shown off with the most pride, alongside new G series superlenses.

By 1989, a new wave of cheaper mass produced lenses had arrived to replace the initial range. They were lighter, smaller, and often swapped a constant aperture for a variable one. The 70-210mm became an f3.5-4.5, and the 35-70mm did the same. More use was made in all lenses of the hybrid aspheric elements first seen in the original 35-70mm.

The 1988 revision to the i series established a kind of three-year cycle. In 1990, a 'bridge' camera called the Riva 105i appeared – 'the brick' with its built-in 35-105mm f4-6.7 Auto Power Zoom lens. The 8000i in the same year rounded off the range but was not a 9000 equivalent.

The Riva's function APZ linked the zoom setting to the focus distance so that if you framed a subject at 10 metres and followed it with continuous auto focus, the zoom would automatically keep the subject the same size even if the distance changed to 5 metres. It would also make an intelligent guess at initial framing; you lift the camera to the eye, the AF sensors detect the apparent area of focused subject, and zoom to fit as you touch the shutter button.

This camera was not an SLR, it had an optical finder, but it previewed the main innovations from the next generation of Alpha SLRs.

The xi cul-de-sac

In 1991, Minolta launched the 7xi. Retaining the card slot of the i generation, the xi specification expanded the number of electronic contacts in the lens mount from five to eight. The additional contacts transferred power to the lens, to allow motorized zooms, and provided more accurate feedback from the lens about focus distance and zoom setting.

With this information, the 7xi could use new xi Power Zoom lenses – a limited range, but surprisingly good optically. Like most innovations, they were almost certainly prototyped and launched from the Sakai optical works. The 28-105mm f3.5-4.5 xi, 28-80mm f4-5.65 xi, 35-80mm

f4.5-5.6, 35-200mm f4.5-5.6 xi, 100-300mm f4.5-5.6 xi and 80-200mm f4.5-5.6 xi offered a good choice of price and specifications. The best of the bunch, never made in any other form, was the 35-200mm in 1992.

This lens range introduced the first major incompatibility into the line-up. The new power zoom lenses required the eight-pin mount, and all cameras up to the 8000i only had five contacts. They could not power the zoom.

The new camera range designed to use these lenses – including the Auto Power Zoom function previewed in the Riva 105i – were the 3xi, 5xi, 7xi and 9xi. The 9 model did not arrive until 1992, and was not a true successor to the 9000. In most ways it was years ahead of its time, with a streamlined body design. From 1992 to the end of the film SLR system this remained my own choice; later models never offered anything to better it.

The primary camera of the xi system was the 7xi. For 1991, it was very advanced; the four-sensor multi-predictive AF could automatically detect subject motion and choose between continuous and single frame operation. The camera retained full predictive AF at 4fps motordrive speed.

The wireless flash system was introduced with the xi range in 1991. This was, again, a major innovation and another Minolta first. It is easy to forget now that in the 19 years of Minolta development of the Alpha system, the company consistently laid the groundwork for all other makers to follow. Wireless remote flash with multiple heads and TTL auto exposure was brand new in 1991 and rival makers took anything up to a decade to catch up.

The 9xi had no built-in flash, and for using remote heads, offered the option of a controller in place of using a flashgun on-camera as command unit. This seemed a professional solution in 1992, but in retrospect it probably lost Minolta many sales. The streamlined 5fps pro-specification camera with its superb viewfinder would have benefited from a built-in flash.

The SPxi was a super-compact model with spot metering as a special feature. Could any maker even think to sell a camera on this basis now?

Despite the features of the xi range, the cameras were generally considered to be not as elegant as the i series. The Creative Expansion Card concept and the APZ function with Eye-Start both got bad press, with old school product reviewers feeling that it was the photographer's job to do all this, and the camera should be so automated.



The 600si Classic has features which can be found later in the Dynax 7, 9 and 7D – the use of physical control knobs to adjust settings was its big selling point.



Possibly the ugliest Alpha ever made, the 800si had a big flash and needed plenty of battery power. Serious users consider one of the best cameras made, with extremely fast and accurate AF and many pro features like the sync socket.



The Alpha 9, Maxxum 9 or Dynax 9 depending on where you bought it – one of the best professional SLRs of the 1990s, still unmatched for build quality.

In fact, the Card system allowed things to be done which were – and still are – well beyond the abilities of any photographer. The Fantasy

Card, as an example, was able to shift the lens focus during an exposure such as 1/25th to create a glowing halo round the subject. The Multiple

Exposure card – as opposed to multi exposure on the camera – could do things like automatically grading the exposure for a series of overlaid images, leading to a subtle fade-in or out sequence on the single frame. The Data Memory card could record all the settings used for each, something we now accept with digital and would miss if returning to film.

Despite this, the xi system was felt to have gone a step too far and in 1993 the first of the si generation appeared.

The simple si?

The 700si won the European Camera of the Year Award for 1994-5. Teamed up with the new Program Flash 5400 (HS) which replaced the 5400xi wireless system flagship, the camera could synchronise flash up to 1/8,000th.

The xi power zoom and APZ disappeared, but the Creative Expansion Card slot remained. The 700si was the most advanced SLR of its time and class, but two later si models caught imagination better.

The 'Classic' 600si abandoned control via top plate LCDs and button presses, replacing these with physical dials and knobs. The idea was that this camera should look and feel more like a manual focus SLR, and overcome the complaints from those who disliked the electronic interface.

The 800si was an ugly brute, due to the inclusion of the highest powered built in flash ever fitted to an SLR. It was also very ruggedly built and had some professional level features. But once again, there was no immediate replacement for the pro 9 series in the 'hundred si' range.

The 505si and the improved 505si Super were the first ultra-compact SLRs benefiting from new construction methods associated with the opening of the Malaysian camera and optical assembly plant. The QTsi ('cutsie') was an even smaller precursor of the later minimal models.

The peak of perfection

That came in 1997 with the Dynax 9. It is hard to explain in 2010 just how exceptional this camera was. I took a Dynax 9 to test for a day's shoot in Barcelona along with the Canon EOS 1n and the Nikon F5.

In fact, the 9 did not offer anything more than the 9xi had five years earlier – the same 1/12,000th shutter and 1/300th flash sync for example. But it had the best viewfinder of all the big three pro cameras, and used along with the fairly new G series lenses such as the 17-35mm f3.5 it gave me results which were better.

The Dynax 9 (in Europe – Alpha

9 in Japan) came with an ambitious plan to support professionals with a five-year warranty across the entire EU regardless of where purchased, and a network of service centres with loan cameras.

As with so many of Minolta's attempts to capture the professional's interest it came to nothing. To make matters worse, a new semi-pro Dynax 7 appeared two years later which added functions the owners of 9s envied. The built-in data recording system had a computer which could also calculate depth of field and use near and far AF points to set the optimum focus. This was something the old Creative Expansion Card system offered, and which Canon had built into their system after a similar experiment (cameras with a barcode reader and expansion cards consisting of a printed barcode).

Worse still, with the Dynax 7 came a new use for the eight-pin lens mount. SuperSonicMotor focusing (SSM) did away with the use of the noisy if fast AF coupling between body and lens. It brought a few Minolta lenses into the same league as Canon's mid-1990s introduction of UltraSonicMotor (USM) lenses. The first SSM designs included the 300mm f2.8 APO G and a brand new 70-200mm f2.8 APO G zoom.

The Dynax 9 was unable to use SSM lenses without a service modification, and owners had to decide whether to part with their beloved camera even if they did not yet have an SSM lens. For the next few years – until the merger of Minolta with Konica in 2004 – those selling used Dynax 9 bodies needed to check whether they had done the upgrade, and get it (no longer free) before putting cameras on the market.

Every Minolta and Konica Minolta SLR body made after the Dynax 7 was compatible with SSM. The 7 also marked the transfer of camera manufacture to Malaysia, along with many lenses. The 9 remained hand-built in Japan, but the 7 was no longer a Japanese made body.

The Dynax 5, the smallest fully featured SLR even made by Minolta, took some of the AF improvements made in the 7 and continued a trend towards reducing size and weight above all else. The new all-plastic construction was not inspiring, and the later Dynax 60 (with a superior 9-point AF system as now found on the digital SLRs) was rarely seen as a 'better' camera than the 5 even though it was.

The 3, 4, 3L and 40 were all at entry level – similar or even more basic in their way than the earlier models such as the 3xi or the SPxi, a wonderful little camera from the xi



The last serious view of the last serious film camera made by Minolta – the 7. It is much smaller and neater than its digital successor which arrived only five years later. The days of opening the back to put film in were almost numbered...



With the 7D, Konica Minolta no doubt inherited an entirely Minolta design, but the lens shown fitted here was outsourced from Tamron, along with its 28-75mm companion. After the Konica merger, there were no more film bodies introduced.



The Minolta 70-200mm f2.8 SSM G APO tele zoom, along with a revised 300mm f2.8, introduced the use of in-lens focusing motors to the system. During the two years of Konica Minolta, it continued to be shipped with just the Minolta name on it.

period which featured spot metering as a special selling point. By the early 2000s it was beginning to look as if any kind of technical selling point was misplaced – though Minolta continued to include a spot metering mode in basic models right to the end, when other makers abandoned it.

Konica and digital

The 3L and 40 were the final fling for Minolta before the 2004 merger with Konica; there were never any Konica Minolta film SLRs, the remaining stocks continued to sell with the Minolta branding on bodies and lenses even when some of the packaging was relabelled. New Konica Minolta lens caps were put with Minolta brand glass. As far as anyone can tell, lens manufacturing in Japan ceased; the Malaysian factory kept going. Konica Minolta in 2004 introduced two new lenses which were actually made by Tamron – the 17-35mm f2.8-4 (D) and the 28-75mm f2.8 (D). Very few earlier Minolta designs had even been updated for the 8-pin specification (D), notably exceptions were the 24-105mm and the 100-300mm APO.

In November 2004, Konica Minolta introduced the Dynax 7D – the first digital SLR in the range. There is an unverifiable story that the camera appeared two years later than originally planned, and was to have used the Foveon X3 sensor which eventually surfaced in Sigma's SD-9. Minolta had used Sony digital sensors for some time, and may have been persuaded by Sony to abandon the idea of fitting their DSLR with a US-made imaging device – unproven and revolutionary – when a larger format 6 megapixel CCD was available from a Japanese supplier.

Whatever the case, the Alpha/Dynax/Maxxum 7D was two years late, too expensive, but also far ahead of its time. It was and now remains the best 6 megapixel DSLR

ever made, including even the Nikon D100. Sensor based AS (Anti-Shake) was a totally new idea in an SLR and gave the Alpha system its main enduring unique selling point.

In 2005, the 5D followed – it seemed over-simplified, but compared to later Sony offerings it is now seen to have retained important functions and performed well.

Then, in January 2006, Konica Minolta washed its hands entirely of photography. Pulling out of the photographic market for ever, it discontinued all the film cameras – which probably had not been manufactured for some time – and sold the Alpha system to Sony.

At this point, the Minolta Club probably lost more members than ever before; Sony was not loved as a brand, the end of film was now assured, and the two DSLRs were showing their age. Sony also had no interest in the Club despite showing some respect for the Minolta heritage.

The Alpha era

What followed was pretty remarkable. First of all, where Konica had not made proper use of the Minolta expertise it merged with, Sony immediately saw the value of the managers and workforce who had created classic cameras and some of the world's best lenses.

Within three months of the final takeover of the brand, they had the Alpha 100 ready for worldwide launch with a single brand name – the original Japanese choice – replacing the confusion of Alpha, Maxxum and Dynax. They gave it the first use of the highest resolution APS-C CCD yet made for consumer DSLRs, 10 megapixels, and kept all the features needed from the outgoing KM models.

The Alpha 100 remains an extremely good choice especially for landscape or macro work where its superior sharpness, depth of field preview, and 2 second mirror lock-up timer are desirable.

In September 2007, the Alpha 700 put 12.3 megapixels into a semi-pro body with glass prism, 5fps and every primary function a serious still photographer needed.

The launch of the Alpha 200, 300 and 350 six months later (actually rolled out between January and March) gave Sony a complete line-up from entry level to enthusiast/freelance grade.

The full-frame Alpha 900 came as a complete surprise in September 2008 – only two years after Sony's takeover really got under way – and the rollout of exceptional Zeiss lenses which had started with the 16-80mm



The launch line-up for Sony in June 2006 was based mainly on Minolta's lens catalogue.



The Alpha 700 – successor to the 7D, destined for two years in production.



The Alpha 900 full frame revived interest in classic Minolta glass like the 28mm f2.

for the A100 continued with premium grade (and price) full-frame options.

This speed and quality of development can only be compared to the first years of the Alpha system back in 1985 to 1988. Yet it was not going to let up; in 2009 Sony added the ultra-compact Alpha 230, 330 and 380 to replace the 200-350

series then launched a new breed of CMOS sensor in the Alpha 500 and 550. At the same time, the Alpha 850 was put in place as a reduced cost full frame 24 megapixel option.

Finally, in January 2010 the Alpha 450 arrived confirming that high performance CMOS and off-sensor live view would now be the norm.

Past and future

As I write this, the Alpha 700 has been discontinued and a replacement is keenly awaited. Sony has eight current DSLRs on sale in the Alpha range, with four immediate predecessors still working their way out of the retail system. Alpha offers three main body sizes, two sensor formats, new lenses using non-sonic in-lens motors (SAM), and four final image sizes from 10 megapixels to 24.

The 1992 wireless flash system which had lost some of its functions when digital cameras first used the unique Minolta hot shoe (the Dimage 5 of 2002) was eventually restored to full compatibility, though it was never possible to allow older flash units to mix with the (D) series and later Sony HVL models.

Best of all, so far, has been Sony's retention of the original 1985 M-AF lens mount which has kept the Alpha system backward compatible with millions of superb lenses made over a quarter of a century. Though the latest lenses (SSM and SAM drive) are not usable on old film cameras before the Dynax 7 or converted Dynax 9, current bodies work with all lenses.

Even the old cable-linked system for remote flash has been retained, and that makes the Alpha system reach back to 1981 in terms of compatible connectors.

All of Minolta's inventions – from TTL-off-the-film metering and flash control, Acute Matte focusing screens, honeycomb matrix metering, predictive AF, new hotshoe design... to wireless flash, sensor-based stabilisation and more – have been inherited and still bring their benefits to the Sony Alpha camera range.

– David Kilpatrick



α gallery



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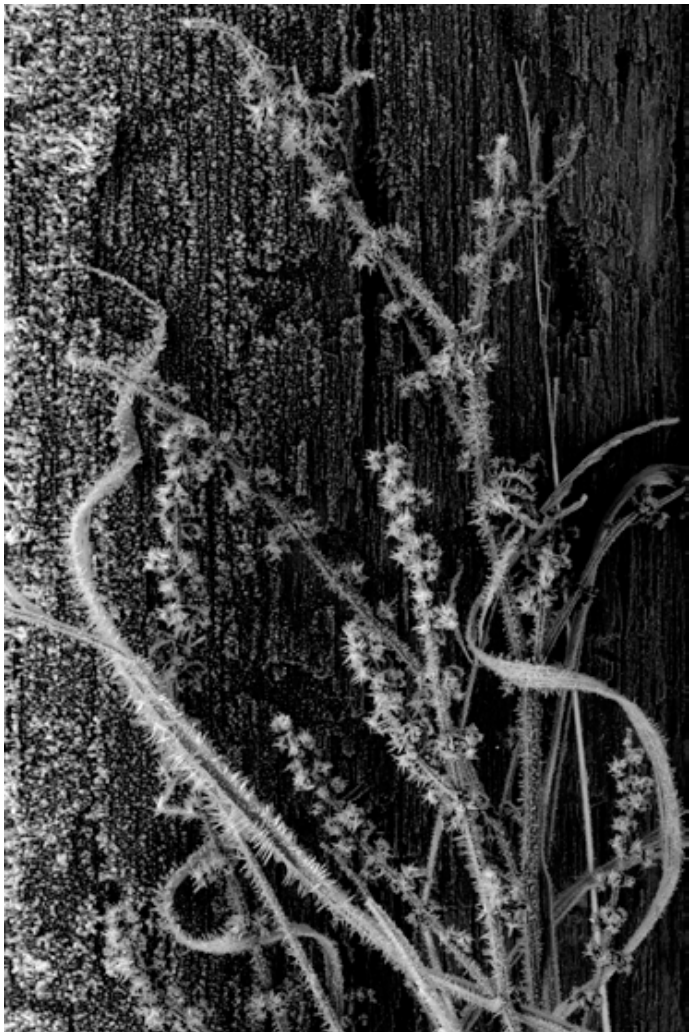
Winter options

Above: a pair of very different shots created from the same frosty situation by Allan McKeown of Girvan. The black and white shot was taken at Kilwinnet, a small nature reserve near Pinmore, off the Girvan to Newton Stewart road. "I had visited the location in summer when the vegetation was too dense, but the composition of the small jetty and the viaduct looked promising. I visited the location again the following January and February on a couple of occasions. This image and the colour version showing the viaduct were the most successful. Both were shot using the Tamron 17-50mm f2.8."

Top right: winter in the Yorkshire Dales — by Dr Francis Vallely of Pately Bridge, Harrogate. Konica Minolta Dimage A2 with lens at 28mm, ISO 64, 1/30th at f5.6.

Bottom right: two further examples contrasting the use of colour, with black and white, this time both winter studies of grass by Peter Karry. Left, grass in snow, "Taken in the local park, I waited till the early sunlight moved across the grasses. Dynax 5D, 24 - 105mm lens, 1/50th at f20 ISO 100. Right, frosted grass, Dynax 5D with Tamron 90mm f2.8 macro lens, 1 second at f22 ISO 100. "Taken in the local park, these grasses had a background of a log that had fallen."







Jamie O'Rourke was successful in the Sony competition which took photographers half way round the world to photograph the Twilight Football promotion. Jamie was flown to South Africa for the event, taking with him his Alpha 200 and 18-70mm lens which had helped him win the place. Above, "Behind the Wall. Table Mountain, South Africa" shot with the lens set to 60mm, 1/250th at f9, Below left – using ISO 400 and fitting his second kit lens, the Sony 75-300mm SAL, Jamie captured this football action at 1/400th wide open at f5.6, at 200mm. His portrait bottom right is captioned as a homeless woman in Cape Town. The lighting conditions were identical, with exactly the same exposure as the football shot, and the lens set to 160mm. Jamie took up photography three years ago and is a well-travelled shooter.





The North-East of England enjoys some of the most beautiful dawn and sunrise conditions – much as the opposite coast, the Solway Firth and Galloway, gets wonderful sunsets. Paul Murphy is a well-known Alpha user whose early-to-rise shots are wonderful, but he's not alone, and is joined by Reindert Nijland (fellow Tynesider) on this page. Above is a Boxing Day 2009 sunrise at St Mary's Lighthouse, a landmark at the north end of Whitley Bay, by Paul using his Alpha 700 – 1/80th at f8, ISO 200, 120mm. Below left is Reindert's Alpha 700 view at Tynemouth on January 8th this year (a very timely submission!), 1/320th at f13, ISO 200, 35mm on the CZ 16-80mm lens. Finally, we show the complete view from Paul of his cover shot this issue. The beach huts at Blyth could almost have been designed for photographers!



There are hundreds of great photographs posted in the discussions you will find on the Forum at www.photoclubalpha.com Visit the site, go to the Forum and create your own account to join in the photo challenges, showcase your best shots, and get help from members all round the world

Alpha Aqua Babies

Sony Alpha 350 underwater – by Ian Cartwright M-QEP FBIPP LMPA

Let me say from the start that I am not a bona fide underwater photographer. From time to time some of my work is taken with a camera which is under water. I'm not particularly at home in the water either – I could never be a scuba diver as I have a perforated eardrum, but I can be immersed and get by with a snorkel and goggles.

For the particular photographic requirements I am discussing here, I don't have to get my head wet. There are many cameras which could be used underwater, with expensive custom housings or with more universal glorified plastic bags, but not many can be viewed from above the water when the camera is just under the water surface.

To do this, the camera must have a swivel screen with a live view which stays bright even when the ambient light is relatively low. My subjects are mainly babies swimming, or at least immersed, in a shallow pool in front of a blue vinyl backdrop from Studio Décor, and lit with Broncolor studio flash from above the water.

I need spectacles to view a camera screen, and wearing them inside goggles is not really an option. Stick-on lenses, which go inside goggles, although feasible, are fiddly and can be dislodged. So, as my head is above the water, I wear reading spectacles as I would on dry land.

I used to use a Canon G6, which is a compact style non-SLR, and in many ways was the perfect camera for this particular application. Its downside was a slight shutter delay and fairly noisy images due to the small sensor.

A DSLR with its larger sensor was the obvious step up, but finding one which combined live view with high speed AF was not easy. Only the Sony Alpha system offered this, and at the time of purchase the choice was between the A300 and A350. For professional use, I preferred the 14.2 megapixel model as the ISO used would be below 400 with mains powered studio flash lighting.

The blue backdrop is ideal for single baby shots (above) but it's also good for montage – the shot below is made up from two. The baby swimming sessions are run by Aqua Babies (www.aquababies.co.uk – website photos by Ian's Caramel Photography studio). Right: the Alpha 350 and flashgun inside a Ewa-Marine flexible housing.



Technical challenge

I had been triggering the flash with a low cost radio device bought on e-Bay from a guy in Canada, shipping from Hong Kong, which was able to send its signal from a non-submerged position in the hot-shoe of the camera. I don't know whether it would still work deep under the surface as I haven't needed to be particularly deep.

Because of the need to be able to increase the image quality, to allow for bigger prints, I researched available options. As I am not shooting under water more than three times a year, I could not justify housings costing thousands of pounds or underwater lights.

Underwater lighting tends to be crude and too close to the camera for my liking anyway. The pool I work in allows for safely placing lights just where I want them allowing me to have a large soft "sky" with bounced heads aimed at the white ceiling, and a more directional "hazy sun" using a head with a soft box diffuser, place above and behind the camera.

Initial test runs revealed that a live view with the Alpha 350 on Manual for exposure, which is necessary for studio flash, gave me a screen too dark to view as the available light is not bright enough for an aperture of around $f8$. It only switches to Auto Gain when the pop-up flash, or a camera top flash, is used.

I was able to buy an old (1993) Minolta 5400xi flash which, on a minimum manual power suitable for slave synchronisation of the studio flash, selects $1/60^{\text{th}}$ second in Aperture Priority mode with Auto Gain for the Quick Focus Live View. There is no problem with shutter lag or image lag as there was with some alternative systems' live view and focus methods.

I would like to be able to use a radio trigger directly inside the Ewa-Marine housing, and its manual power settings. The Sony HVL-F42AM flash might fit, but I need the highest output at minimum power to ensure slave sync works every time. The HVL-F58AM is too big.

Wireless flash triggering with a fixed shutter speed and auto brightness on the Quick Focus Live View screen is not possible with the new Alpha 500 and 550 either, although Sony is aware of this issue and reported to be working on it. At the moment if you use Manual exposure, the screen reflects the actual brightness the manual settings will produce; if you use a radio trigger in the hot shoe on Aperture priority, the screen is perfect but the camera tries to make a time exposure as it can't tell flash is being used.



Ian likes the effect of surface reflections (above) but it is possible to avoid them (below).

Water babies

With this set-up, pointing the flash gun upwards or to the side, I am able to trigger the flash using the cells on the heads or packs. I can give instructions to the swimming instructor so that babies needn't spend any longer under the water than necessary. We are talking about two seconds at maximum.

The baby sessions can last for over seven hours with up to 80 babies in total, so having my head out of the water helps me cope!

From a technical viewpoint, critical factors include the clarity of the

water, the focal length of the camera lens and the amount of light available.

The water washes off skin particles as well as oils and make-up. The more people have been in the water the cloudier it becomes, so it is crucial to have enough time ahead of the shoot when the pool's filters are working. Water has a magnifying effect, so wider lenses become effectively longer.

It's not a good idea to have too much water between the camera and your subject because of the particles and a blue colour shift, but also you wouldn't generally want to have too much perspective distortion or run

out of background, so I choose a medium wide focal length equivalent to around 28 mm on 35 mm cameras.

I have retired my first lens, a 17-50mm Tamron $f2.8$ XR DiII zoom, in favour of a fixed focal length 20mm $f2.8$ Sony SAL lens, which is shorter and fits the Ewa-Marine housing better. At $f8$, the depth of field is fairly large so focusing is not super critical. Sometimes, with babies, the flash duration is too long at about $1/250^{\text{th}}$ second, as they can flip around rapidly. I could speed up the flash duration but would have to sacrifice power, so I put up with the odd blurred arm.





Adults as well as babies make great underwater subjects, especially women with floating drapes or dresses. Some of Ian's shots are creative experiments (above, inverted for effect) and some are unexpected requests – such as the underwater bridal shot for a wedding album, right.

I rely a lot on the skill of the swimming instructor in positioning a baby. They often have their own idiosyncratic behaviour such as soaring head first, bobbing bottom up, or twisting and rolling. After the first attempt, with an adjustment, the instructor can often counteract this movement for the photograph. I have to be on the ball to fill the frame as much as possible, ideally have the instructor out of the shot, and the baby in a good position.

I often have to retouch out the instructor or extend a background on over half of the images. Thankfully, the vinyl background is relatively easy to extend. I get better sales which are done online via everybodysmile.com, when I take the trouble to do most of the retouching before uploading the images.

There is a tendency for images underwater to be blue and, curiously many babies' hair,

especially after "correcting" the blue, can appear strongly ginger. This doesn't seem to happen with adult's hair. Nobody has offered a convincing explanation for this so far!

I feel sorry for those genuine redheads out there! Although I make it absolutely clear that I will take the artificial redness out of the non-redhead's hair, many parents are so worried that their child should have any red hue in their follicles that they just have to email me to point out that their child has 'strawberry blond hair, not ginger'.

I also encounter the odd aesthetic disagreement when it comes to surface reflections, which I love, and asymmetry, which I also favour. Sometimes I can't help responding, that the only people without reflections are vampires. Is the customer always right when they insist on total symmetry? Sometimes I argue, sometimes I just crop as they request!

The clients are given the option of paying extra for an enhanced session which allows for at least six immersions over half an hour, shared between six babies and /or families, compared with up to four immersions over 15 minutes. This option is only available to more experienced 'swimmers' when there is less of a risk of causing babies distress. Should that happen, the session is ended, as the baby's welfare is paramount.

The booking fee pays for the session and prints are extra. I offer unframed prints, two types of frame and canvases. I also offer montages of images creating sequences or the illusion of more than one person in the water.

Models and brides

I have always valued personal work and I like to do underwater shoots with one or more adult swimmers. Flowing fabric and graceful body shapes can create beautiful, unpredictable images. Although the pool I have been using is quite shallow and this is a bit limiting, I still have ideas to try whenever I can find volunteer models who can look 'normal' underwater. I am offering brides an underwater option after the wedding, wearing their wedding dress.

My method has evolved for my particular subject, and, no doubt will continue to evolve. I am able to offer 45" prints from the Sony Alpha 350, which is plenty big enough for the moment!

See: www.caramelphoto.com



Alpha 450

Selling for about £50 less than the Alpha 500, the 450 will reach shops in March 2010 and offers 14.2 megapixel CMOS with MFC Live View

The A450 is an A200 update with an A550 14 megapixel CMOS sensor (the A500 being effectively an A300 update to 12 megapixel CMOS). There may be some surprises present when examined, but the listed specification indicates this camera is exactly what it appears to be.

Here are the recent and current camera 'sets' – in every line the first has a fixed rear screen and no quick live view, the second has a quick live view and an articulated screen, the third has a higher pixel count sensor:

A200	A300	A350
A230	A330	A380
A450	A500	A550

The 450 breaks the pattern by using the 550 sensor not the 500 sensor, leaving possible room for a 12 megapixel A400. It also adds Manual Focus Check Live View, which of course is missing in all the CCD based cameras.

It's unlikely we shall see a 14 megapixel A280, but that's what the model number would be if it was made. In line with speculation, logical models A600, A650, A750 are possible introductions but the Ax30 and Ax80 designations could apply.

It is not an A230-330 style body, but an A5xx-style body, and uses the larger battery – hence the excellent shot count per charge. At the time of posting this information, no further images were available from Sony's UK press media library.

The logic of this camera may be questioned, but a lot will depend on the viewfinder eyepoint. By choosing a relatively small and safe viewfinder magnification, and removing the articulated screen which forces your eye away from the eyepiece, Sony may come closer to the comfort factor of the Nikon D5000 which despite having an articulated screen allows a closer eyepoint and better visibility of the finder. Until buyers pick up this camera and try it, we can't be sure. It may just hit the mark perfectly.

The viewfinder eyepiece is not the same as any previous Alpha model – the eye start sensors are above the ocular.

From the press release:

The DSLR-A450 is a perfect all-rounder. Inside the 450 is a high-resolution 14.2 (approx.) effective megapixel Exmor™ CMOS sensor. It's teamed with the powerful BIONZ processor to deliver highly detailed, ultra-low noise images. Sensitivity extends right



The Alpha 450 weighs 520g and the body size appears much the same as the 500/550, including extra height for the flash to avoid red eye and lens hood shadows. The viewfinder (below) places the eyepiece much lower down, with sensors above. This may suit some users well. The rear screen allows true live view off the sensor for 7X or 14X critical focusing and 100% accurate composition.



up to ISO 12800, allowing you to capture beautifully natural handheld images in low light without flash.

With a generous 95% field of view, the bright optical viewfinder makes framing and composition a pleasure. As an extra refinement, Manual Focus Check Live View previews clear, bright full-resolution images on the 6.7cm (2.7") Clear Photo LCD screen. With selectable 7x/14x on-screen image enlargement it's ideal for confirming pin-sharp focus with portraits, still life, macro and architectural scenes.

The powerful BIONZ image processor enables high-speed continuous shooting at up to 5 fps (maximum – approx. figure). In Speed Priority mode (with AF and AE set at start of burst) this increases to an amazing 7 fps (maximum – actual speed depends on shooting conditions and media card).

Creative options are enhanced with Auto HDR mode that accommodates bright highlights and dark shadow details in a single frame. Two successive frames shot handheld at different exposure values are merged automatically by the camera. The result is a detail-packed High Dynamic Range image – with no need for a PC image editor and specialist skills. In addition to fully automatic operation, the exposure difference between frames can be manually set up to 3EV, in 0.5EV increments.

SteadyShot INSIDE™ offers up to 4 steps of anti-shake correction with the full range of 30 lenses and two teleconverters, as well as compatible A-mount optics by Konica-Minolta.

The 450 also offers the most impressive shooting stamina of any DSLR camera by Sony to date. The high-capacity battery allows up to 1,050 shots between charges.

Connect the 450 to any HD Ready TV for a breathtaking big-screen view of your photos. PhotoTV HD optimises still image reproduction on compatible BRAVIA™ models, while BRAVIA™ Sync allows control of slideshow and other camera playback functions using your TV remote.

The DSLR-A450 digital SLR camera by Sony is available from the beginning of February 2010.



Editor's note: despite Sony stating this availability, all the advertisements we have seen state mid-March 2010 for deliveries. Jacobs have the body only priced at £449.50.

Summer snows

For most of us, visiting the Arctic is something that can only easily be undertaken during the Summer months when sea ice has melted and broken up sufficiently to allow access by ship.

Not only is it light for 24 hours a day but in June and July, the sun gets nowhere near the horizon. Even in Summer it was easy to feel the harshness of the Arctic wilderness and appreciate the achievements of the great pioneers of Arctic exploration such as Amundsen, Nansen and Rae. Today's tourists regard reaching 80° North, 650 miles from the North Pole, as a real landmark deserving a champagne celebration on deck, albeit at 8.30am in freezing conditions. The trip was on the Russian ship, *Akademik Ioffe*. Although crewed by Russians, all the leaders were Canadian, Australian or Norwegian.

Svalbard is an archipelago of islands lying midway between Norway and the North Pole. Spitsbergen is the largest of the islands with the small town of Longyearbyen being the departure point for most cruises. An expedition trip like this is not all about photography as the Arctic experience and sense of adventure are just

As if we don't get enough of it at home... Duncan McEwan headed for Arctic Svalbard in midsummer for an unseasonal extra dose of the white stuff.

Two of the lenses in Duncan's travel kit for this expedition were the classic Minolta 100mm f2.8 AF macro and the new Sony 70-400mm f4-5.6 G SSM tele zoom. The macro was used at f16 for the Svalbard poppy – the national flower of Spitsbergen. The full reach of the zoom at 400mm was needed for the polar bear on the shore at Mushamna, working from a zodiac launch. 1/800th at f6.3, ISO 400. All images on Alpha 900.



as important. A cruising ship does limit photography, but it also gives time to take in the atmosphere. More intensive photography was undertaken during shore landings or zodiac excursions, normally two per day.

Equipment consisted of two Sony Alpha 900 bodies, and three lenses – a Sony 24-70mm CZ f2.8 SSM to cover landscape situations, a Sony 70-400mm SSM G lens for wildlife and a Minolta 100mm f2.8 macro lens to photograph the Arctic flora. A Gitzo Basalt tripod was also taken, mainly with macro photography in mind, but it also proved surprisingly useful on deck when using longer focal lengths – the ship, having been designed for sonar research, was remarkably vibration free. The deep lens hood supplied with the 70-400mm lens was a great asset, helping to keep rain or sea spray off the lens which was further protected with an ultraviolet filter





Above: Colourful ice sculptures at Tusenoyane, taken from a zodiac in fairly choppy seas. Alpha 900 with Sony 70-400mm SSM G lens at 135mm. 1/2500 at f5.6, hand-held. ISO 200.

Below: Walrus taken in heavy rain and strong winds at Dolerittneset, on Edgeoya. Alpha 900 with Sony 70-400mm SSM G lens at 230mm. 1/125 at f9, tripod. ISO 200.







Top left: Beluga whale bones at Bourbanbanma are a reminder of the mass slaughter of whales that took place in Svalbard over the centuries. 70-400mm at 250mm. 1/10 at f20, tripod. ISO 200. Bottom left: This Arctic fox had its den below this house in Ny Alesund. 70-400mm 00mm. 1/400 at f5.6, tripod. ISO 200. Above: Old coal wagon relics from a failed coal mining venture at Calypsobyen. 24-70mm f2.8 CZ SSM lens at 28mm. 1/20 at f18, handheld. ISO 200.

— a cheaper alternative to Sony's high quality protection filters.

Landscape photographers who are used to using a tripod nearly all the time probably under-value the importance of image stabilisation achieved through Sony's *SteadyShot Inside* feature. On this trip, it assumed top priority as most photographic opportunities involved hand-holding the camera. Particularly when shooting from the unstable platform of a bobbing zodiac, *SteadyShot* was invaluable.

The tripod was carried on most shore excursions, but opportunities

to use it were limited due to having to stay within, and keep up with, the group. Groups were created according to fitness or 'ambition' and since usually opting to join a group going further/higher, it did limit tripod use compared to being in a more leisurely group. When using the tripod on deck, SS was switched on, rightly or wrongly, to counter any sea movements or vibration.

Long reach pays

One of the first things to realise about a trip to Svalbard is how

restrictive it is compared to the freedoms one may be accustomed to. Shooting from a cruising ship imposes considerable restrictions, with any foregrounds being limited to parts of the ship itself.

Medium telephoto focal lengths were found to be most useful for photographing the coastal land during cruising. Restrictions on land were dictated by the dangers from polar bears, and guides would recce an area before any landing was made. Even so, on two occasions, shore excursions were prematurely terminated due to an advancing polar

bear — safety was paramount. Each group had a guide who carried a high powered rifle — just in case!

Bears have a habit of lying sleeping in hollows or behind rocks so there was always the risk of a surprise encounter which could be potentially dangerous. The 'keep together' policy was rigorously enforced, for the best of reasons, and it was necessary to curb any desire for individual exploration.

To avoid disturbing walrus colonies, a 30 metre exclusion zone is imposed, but with a telephoto zoom this presented no difficulty in getting good close-up images. Also restricting was a 5 metre exclusion around historic sites (e.g. abandoned hunting huts, rusting machinery, whale and walrus graveyards) which limited some otherwise excellent wide angle and detail opportunities.

The closest approach to a glacier front was 300 metres due to the dangers from 'calving' which can displace waves capable of swamping a small boat like a zodiac or kayak. Working within all these restrictions should be regarded as a challenge, even if it is frustrating. Unique photographic opportunities abound — wonderful light, dramatic glaciers, majestic snow-covered mountains, Arctic tundra, diverse flora and fauna.

Grey skies with mist and low cloud are common in western Svalbard, obscuring the upper half of the impressive jagged, mountainous landscape. Fortunately there was still sufficient interest in the terrain below this level and with a good number of blue sky days, an excellent mix of conditions produced varied images.

Graduated ND filters were regularly used to counteract weak skies but adjusting these, while hand holding the camera, took a bit of getting used to. A polariser was seldom used. On most dull days, it was possible, using wide apertures, to shoot quite comfortably on ISO 200, with ISO 400 used when out in the zodiac on choppy waters.

In 1820, Arctic explorer William Scoresby wrote of Svalbard:

"... although it is shone upon by a four months' sun every year, its snowy covering is never wholly dissolved nor are its icy monuments of the dominion of frost ever removed."

Long may that be true, because Svalbard is a special place.

The trip was organised by Peregrine Adventures:

www.peregrineadventures.com



For details of Duncan McEwan's 2010 series of photo workshops and holidays, visit: www.dmcewanphotography.co.uk

Expedition to Peru

After many years thinking about it, I decided to organize a photographic safari to Peru (the southern sierras – Cuzco and Puno) for Easter 2009. A group of friends confirmed their interest on it, and a good friend of mine who has her own tour company took care of all the logistics.

First stop was Lima and that, for me, was a totally different angle on my country. Even if I was born in Lima, I never liked the city and only visit it because some of my family still live there. Now Lima is a hot (and spicy) gastronomic destination and deserves a couple of days exploring *cevicherias* – hidden-away restaurants where creole food is king – or fancy restaurants with their menus offering the new Peruvian cuisine. And better not to forget a visit to one of the numerous *Pisco* bars (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pisco>).

I picked Easter time for our trip to Cuzco because I wanted to do more than just visit the ancient cities of the Inca. On Easter Monday, the procession of the Lord of the Earthquakes is a sign of the syncretism between the ancient beliefs and the ones the conquerors brought to the Andean world. After visiting a couple of churches, the procession gets back to the Cathedral where thousands of people fill the Plaza de Armas and the streets nearby in order to receive the benediction. This was the third time I have been in Cuzco during the procession – and the third time I have been amazed by people's devotion.

After visiting the principal landmarks in the city of Cuzco, we headed to the Sacred Valley of the Incas and we stayed a couple of nights while visiting the Inca sites of Moray (circular terraced crop sites) and the salt pools system of Maras, the fortress of Sacsayhuaman and its cyclopean stones, the art and craft market of PISAQ and the living Inca town of Oyantaytambo, from where we took the train to Macchu Picchu.

Easter marks the end of the rainy season (October to April – from All Saints to Easter) which brings green mountains and flowers everywhere, and still lots of chance of rain. This year we had to endure a full day, from the two days I planned, under heavy rain. Photo-wise it wasn't that bad, as the quality of the light was ideal for naturally saturated colors and clear shadows, but it didn't help when we tried to do panoramic

Club member Pako Dominguez took a gamble and organised a group trip to Peru, signing up fellow enthusiasts to capture Easter celebrations, historic sites and the colourful Peruvian culture.



views of the ruins – miserable photographers and wet lenses!

The day after, we took the bus to the ruins early in the morning and, since it was still foggy, we decided to walk back the Inca trail to about two kilometers away from Macchu

Picchu, as the clouds lifted and the sun came through. I spent most of the time taking photographs of flowers, mostly orchids under the misty light. When we got back to Macchu Picchu, the sky cleared and we could complete the session with the

panoramas we missed the day before.

After Cuzco, we went to Puno in the high plateau (3,800 meters high/ 13,000 feet) and the Titicaca lake, from where we took a boat to visit the floating islands of the Uros, and the Taquile island where we stayed over-



night. Taquile is a Quechua enclave within the Aymara nation. We stayed at one of the chief of the community's houses and enjoyed our last evening in the Andes watching the sunset over the highest navigable lake in Earth.

Equipment: I took the Alpha 700 and decided at the last minute to take the vertical grip with it because I decided to take with me the Tamron 70-200 f2.8. I brought the KM 17-35mm f2.8-4 and the KM 28-75mm f2.8, one 8GB and two 4GB cards and a 40GB FlashTrax for daily backups. I didn't use the 70-200 f2.8 enough in order to make the effort of bringing a big and heavy lens worthwhile – my

35-200mm xi would have been fine. The 28-75 f2.8 emerged as a good close focus lens (flowers) and a wonderful performer for everything else. I'll take the 100mm f2.8 Macro the next time. The 17-35 f2.8-4 is, for me, indispensable on APS-C size cameras – and probably on FF too.

Originally we planned to do a trip in 2010 and open it up to more enthusiasts – like Photoclubalpha members. The economic conditions have put that plan off, but there are more years ahead. Visit the Forum at photoclubalpha.com, any future trips will certainly be mentioned there.



See more with CMOS

I moved from a position of uncertainty about the merits of the new Sony CMOS sensors with ultra high ISO capability to one of appreciation as the weather and light got progressively worse this winter.

While I think that the colour quality and fine detail recorded by the 14 megapixel CCD models (Alpha 350 and 380) at ISO 100 is not matched by the new sensor, the benefits from ISO 400 to 1600 are impossible to play down. At the minimum setting of ISO 200 it is better than the CCD at 200, just not quite as good as 100.

The colour is never the same – but the A350/380 share a unique colour rendering which is also very different from the 100, 700, 900 and any other Sony body. It's closer to the original Dynax 7D and 5D.

I can live with a more 'ordinary' looking colour palette if my pictures at ISO 800 are as usable as ISO 200 results from other cameras – and this is exactly what the Alpha 550 delivers.

In the last issue I was able to use examples from early buyers of the camera. I have now been able to test it for three months.

I will not show here more than one result of the built-in High Dynamic Range function which makes two exposures at a speed of 7fps, bracketed, and auto-stitches these in camera to create a JPEG with both highlight and shadow detail retained in full. It's worth an article in its own right, with better examples.

Nor can I yet show what 7fps really does. I've had a brief crack at my usual test subject – the local National Hunt races – with some success. What matters more is that at 5fps, the Alpha 550 can really manage to autofocus and auto expose, or so it is claimed.

Where the A550 has benefited me has been in everyday shots where the light would have defeated even the Alpha 700. When set to ISO Auto, it ranges from 200 to 1600 and you can't put a cap on that. It was happy to select 1600 for close-ups where I would have gone for 400 in preference.

But – the 1600 results were excellent. In well lit (though not bright) conditions 1600 looks like 400 on other cameras.

Also, the Alpha 550 delivers extremely accurate exposure and rarely overexposes a shot. Some claim that the raw files are darker than they need to be, and maybe this is true. Any raw processor which handles

David Kilpatrick found the high ISO quality of the Alpha 550 14 megapixel sensor valuable as the days got shorter and darker



High Dynamic Range versus DRO+

The top picture is a normal shot – Standard JPEG. The second picture shows the effect of using the maximum HDR function (3EV difference between the two shots taken almost simultaneously). Look hard and you will see the double imaged moving car, but also note how accurate the colour of the red van remains. The bottom picture using maximum DRO+ (Level 5) and a single exposure. Note how the colours are affected, especially the colour and brightness of the red van. HDR wins if you can use it.

the files, like Adobe Camera Raw or Sony's own Image Data Converter, produces normal brightness results. The JPEGs from the camera are also of the correct brightness.

Perhaps the exceptional 920,000 dot rear screen of the Alpha 550 is confusing users. It's MUCH brighter and more accurate tonally than the Alpha 700 or 900 screen. This is what happens with new generations of cheaper cameras, they can overtake more expensive earlier models in some respects.

This screen is one such improvement. It's far better in sunlight conditions and also gives a more accurate idea of colour balance.

The Alpha 550 also has an improved viewfinder screen. The focus markings are no longer permanent, they are created by an LCD overlay and only appear when needed. This means that your Quick Focus Live View, using the CCD camera located in the prism housing, no longer shows all the screen markings all the time.

There are some very faint hairlines visible from the wiring to activate the LCD overlay, but these are so fine they do not appear on the Quick Focus Live View.

The Manual Focus Check LV is even better – except that for some reason Sony has decided you want a big text panel permanently overlaid, telling you that MF Check LV is being used. It's a pity, because without this panel the HDTV video feed from the camera would be good enough to record movies!

The ISO benefit

The right-hand picture was taken at ISO 800, as a raw file processed using Adobe Camera Raw 5.6.

This picture shows no more noise or grain than a typical ISO 200 shot with the Alpha 350. It had no problem passing Alamy's quality control, which will reject noisy images, along with other shots ranging up to ISO 1600. While I would trust 1600 on the Alpha 900, it would be out of the question on the A350 or A380, equally so on the A100, 200 or similar models and even on the A700.

The A550 – and now the new 450 – look like being the first APS-C models where using ISO 1600 will produce a picture you can't always tell from one at low ISO. In low light, or with dark subjects, the result will

A combination of very low noise ISO 800 from the raw file, 16mm (equivalent to 24mm) angle of view, foreground illumination from the built-in flash and careful processing using Adobe Camera Raw 5.6 with graded sky exposure and local corrections produced this result from the Sony Alpha 550. Photograph by David Kilpatrick.





be worse than in good light. And of course a lower ISO will be better still.

At first, I used Auto ISO on the 550 and was surprised that a whole set of 16-80mm CZ close-ups of fairy cap toadstools had been bumped up to 1600 when I expected the camera to stay at 200 to 400 with the sun out.

But I was underestimating the filtering effect of trees on sunshine. The exposure was perfect with settings of 1/100th at f11, ISO 1600. Even with SteadyShot it would not have been a good idea to use a shutter speed longer than 1/100th at 80mm for a close-up shot.

I returned with a tripod the next morning when the light was similar, and over the course of two weeks documented the growth and decay of a couple of troops of the toadstools.

Here in encountered a problem with the Alpha 550. It has no mirror lockup or pre-lift self timer. Although the shutter-mirror action is quieter and sweeter than the Alpha 100, the sort of exposure times needed at ISO 200 for this subject nearly always showed vibration blur even when the tripod was used. Speeds from 1/8th to 1/30th were particularly prone to mirror shock. Hand-held pictures with SS were generally better than tripod shots without, perhaps because the hands damp the vibration and SS can deal with what remains. The



problem goes away with speeds of 1/4 second or longer on the tripod, as the vibration dies away. This omission from Alpha entry-level cameras later than the 100 is much missed.

You might expect that MF Check Live View macro focusing would allow an exposure with the mirror still lifted up, but it doesn't. The shutter closes, mirror comes down, mirror lifts, shutter opens... it's actually worse for vibration than any other shooting mode. I gather nothing can be done to change this as the mirror-shutter cycle is mechanically linked, with no provision for separate control of each function.

I have acquired some very substantial old macro bellows (a rather nice Pentax 42mm screw Auto set) and will be trying some MF Check LV focused macro work as warmer weather brings more subjects. My existing skinny little BPM bellows just couldn't handle the vibration.

The new Alpha 450 also offers MF Check LV, not doubt with exactly the same mirror action. It's a pity, because with mirror lock the high ISO quality could have aided astrophotography and photomicrography. We can hope to see this 14 megapixel sensor – or an even better one – in a future Alpha 700 replacement. With mirror lock-up!



THE 'INNER LANDSCAPE'

with David Ward

2 days, at Seaford, East Sussex

Wednesday/Thursday 7/8 April
or Saturday/Sunday
10/11 April 2010

We are delighted to have the services of David Ward, who will be leading his first workshop in Sussex. David is one of the country's leading landscape photographers, whose eye for shape and form is without equal. His distinctive style and philosophy have earned him a reputation for his superb and very personal images. Examples of these may be found on his web site www.intothelight.com. David describes himself as a 'tshirt winning' professional landscape photographer working on large format. His teaching emphasis is on the photographer's vision, rather than what format or camera is being used, and that he tries to pass on his knowledge in an 'accessible and humorous manner'. The workshop is, therefore, suitable for anyone, beginners included, no matter what equipment you use.

Quotes about David from well known photographers include Joe Cornish 'David Ward's camera looks deep into the landscape, revealing texture, detail, rhythm and subtleties that most of us miss' and from Keith Wilson, editor of Outdoor Photography 'In the world of landscape photography there are many practitioners but precious few masters. David Ward's compositions are artful and compelling'. David regularly leads workshops for 'Light and Land', and is the author of two books 'Landscape Within' and 'Landscape Beyond'. (both highly recommended!) The workshop will include field trips, discussion, and picture review and is a rare opportunity to see and learn from this master photographer. *Price £255 (deposit £75). 10 places.*

IMPROVING YOUR LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

with Colin Westgate
and Hugh Milsom

2 days, at Mersea Island, Essex

Thursday/Friday 15/16 April 2010

This workshop is being held in Essex for the first time, so if you were unable to attend in Sussex last year, then here is your chance. Landscape photography is often thought to be straightforward and indeed, it is not difficult to obtain reasonable pictures. Frequently, however, landscape photographs are disappointing, perhaps because of unfavourable light, poor composition or lack of interpretation and shortcomings in printing. With the right approach,

such problems can be overcome and this comprehensive workshop will cover methods of improving your landscape pictures from the moment of taking prior to the production of the final print. The content will be a mixture of discussion, picture appraisal, and a field trip into the local area around Mersea Island.

The In-depth discussion will cover the principles of landscape photography, both technical and aesthetic. Topics such as the characteristics of different lenses and filters, choice of subject matter, viewpoints, composition, exposure, use of light and more will be included.

Vision and Interpretation are vital elements in succeeding with landscape photography. This includes 'pre visualisation' at the moment the picture is taken and post production prior to making the print. Both will be covered, the latter using Photoshop procedures, which will be demonstrated using digital projection. A selection of images taken digitally on the workshop will be used, but if you are a film worker, you are invited to bring negatives or transparencies with you. Both Colin Westgate and Hugh Milsom have many years of experience photographing in the landscape and both will demonstrate and discuss their individual approaches to the subject. *Price £125 (deposit £40). 8 places*

PICTURE FORUM (Essex)

One day, at Mersea Island, Essex

Saturday 17 April 2010

This event has established itself as a 'must' in the Quest programme, and this will be the first time it has been held in Essex, in order to make it more accessible for the growing number of photographers in that area. Picture Forum is a unique event and the formula of mini presentations by participants, a competition and a talk by a leading photographer has proved very successful. It is the opportunity for everyone to show their work, and we invite short presentations of up to 15 minutes (about 25 pictures). These can be with prints, slides, or digital files. It is not, however, obligatory to give a presentation, and you are welcome to attend Forum just to enjoy the work of others, if that is what you would like.

The presentations occupy most of

the day, and are a vital and enjoyable aspect of the programme. It is your chance to show your photography, so please bring a selection of your pictures. For practical reasons, the competition is open for prints only – not more than one per person. A brief critique and appraisal on all entries will be made and prizes awarded for the best work, one to be chosen by the judge (t.b.a.) and another by audience vote, plus runners up. Forum is always an interesting and exciting day of sharing pictures and experiences, where everyone can join in. Not to be missed! *Price £25 includes buffet lunch & refreshments (but not bar drinks!). Payable in full on booking not eligible for 'early booking' discount arrangements.*

SPRING IMPRESSIONS

with Colin Westgate

1 day, at Leonardslea, near Horsham

Tuesday 27 April 2010

A perennially popular workshop, where special techniques are used to make beautiful pictures of the vibrant spring flowers in this spectacular garden location. The impressionistic effects that can be obtained will often greatly enhance the literal reality of the subject and make pictures you will want to hang on your wall! An opportunity to try something really different and exciting, with lovely images virtually guaranteed! *Price £55 (deposit £20). Includes entrance fee to gardens.*

Park entrance fees and refreshments on arrival included in price.

THAMES BARGE RACE

from Maldon, Essex

Friday 4 June (evening)
to Sunday 6 June 2010

Now a regular event in the Quest programme, this is a wonderful opportunity to sail in a genuine Thames barge! Seeing these beautiful vessels at close quarters, under full sail, is a never to be forgotten sight. Quest has chartered 'Reminder', built in 1929, for our exclusive use. She will be taking part in the Barge Race from Maldon and will sail early Saturday, returning on Sunday afternoon. There could be as many as fifteen barges in the race and we will be sailing and racing with them for the whole of Saturday On Sunday, the barge

will cruise in the sea around the Blackwater estuary. The barge offers a very special viewpoint with the possibility of some stunning photography of these magnificent barges in full sail as well as activities on deck, the barge skippers and crew, and local boats at anchor and under sail.

We will embark on Friday evening, when we will enjoy a superb seafood platter and wine, courtesy of Quest (an alternative will be provided for anyone not able to eat seafood). We will sleep on the barge Friday and Saturday nights and return late afternoon on Sunday. All meals are catered on board, so you will not have to do anything on the barge except relax, enjoy the experience of a lifetime and take photographs although you will be welcome to help with crewing if you so desire. A wonderful way to get away from it all! All meals included. *Price £345 (deposit £100).*

10 places (strict limit)

Price is based on double or sharing a twin or triple berth. No singles are available due to the nature of the accommodation. In the event of severe weather conditions it may be necessary to change or curtail the planned itinerary. This will be the decision of the skipper. In the extremely unlikely event that it is unsafe to sail, no refund can, regretfully, be given, but the barge, her crew and all food will remain at the disposal of the group.

BEGINNERS DAY for Digital Photographers

with Colin Westgate

1 day, at West Mersea, Essex

Saturday 19 June 2010

A day designed for newcomers to photography or for those wanting to improve their skills. It will cover the use and understanding your camera, aesthetics, such as composition and light, and the basics of improving and printing the picture. The workshop will be a combination of discussion, field trip and use of the computer and printer. Participants do not have to have sophisticated or expensive cameras, as even the simplest ones are capable of good quality results if used correctly. Everyone will take away a finished, mounted, print of one of his or her photographs. *Price £65 (deposit £20). 4 places maximum.*

Quest Workshops 2010

Colin Westgate's QUEST workshops, sponsored by Photoworld, are based in Essex. Telephone 01206 384315 or email questphoto@btinternet.com. Download a PDF programme for the full year from www.questphoto.co.uk

Club Diary

PHOToclub EDINBURGH OPEN DAY February 14th

Our annual meeting open to all photographers

A REGIONAL indoor meeting has been arranged for **Sunday 14th February 2010** in the premises of the Edinburgh Photographic Society at 68 Great King Street, Edinburgh. Doors will be open at 10.00am with the programme starting at 10.30am and finishing around 4.30pm. The cost is £4.00, inclusive of refreshments. No prior booking is required.

John Watterson (London) – a lifelong Minolta/Sony user and very versatile photographer. John will talk about pictures he has enjoyed taking over the years and the stories behind them.

Jim Henderson (Aberdeen) - Jim is an expert on The Northern Lights which are due to reappear in strength in 2010, and will present an amazing collection of images as well as describing the techniques involved in photographing them.

Duncan McEwan – Landscape and nature images that capture

the essence of the Arctic, taken on a 2 week trip to Svalbard in June 2009. A portfolio and short article also appears in the issue of Photoworld out later this month.

David Kilpatrick – studio still life photography with live view manual focus check; Alpha 550 and Sony digital projector, adapted tilt lens, Lensbaby 3G, LED lighting.

Critique Session – for digital images only. Members can submit 3 images which must be sent in advance, either on CD to Duncan McEwan, or emailed to mcewan@dunarden.fsnet.co.uk to arrive no later than 12th February. Images must be in jpeg format, 1024x768px at 72dpi.

Although not part of the critique session, exhibition display boards will be available for anyone wishing to display prints.

For more information email: mcewan@dunarden.fsnet.co.uk

Cash for Minolta cameras, lenses and accessories

AF (Dynax, Maxxum, Alpha) system – subject to demand, we will pay a fair price for most AF system outfits, lenses and accessories. The price will be based on recent eBay final prices, or the price offered by a dealer selling on commission. Some items have very little value today, including earlier film bodies with kit lenses such as the 35-80mm f4-5.6, and early flashguns which are not compatible with today's cameras.

SR/MC/MD/X manual focus system – very few bodies, lenses or accessories now have any ready market or resale value. Some do. We will advise if we can not consider buying. Where outfits are involved, one small accessory or one lens may be the only item of interest today.

Minolta CLE, rangefinder, 110, 16mm, Disc, Vectis, compact, early digital, rollfilm or other historic cameras will also be considered.

Please email david@maxwellplace.demon.co.uk or call 01573 226032 to discuss. Items must be sent for checking before a price can be given. You may be given the option of having the items placed on eBay and we will send you 75% of the final net sale price (we will take photographs, place the items on eBay, pay the commission and Paypal charges, post and packing, and account for VAT, and handle all aspects of the sale). We will consider non-Minolta/Sony equipment for eBay sale or auction as well.

David Kilpatrick, Icon Publications Ltd, Maxwell Place, Maxwell Lane, Kelso, Scottish Borders TD5 7BB

PHOTOSHOP ELEMENTS TALKS BY CLIFF CARTER

ALPHA photographer Cliff Carter has been featured in this magazine and he's now giving talks including Digital Demonstrations using *Adobe Photoshop Elements* – with examples of panoramic printing, basic and advanced techniques, and AV presentations on various subjects.

Bookings now being taken for the new camera club season. Please telephone:- 01903 812579 or email Cliff at: cliff.ccd@mac.com, or refer to the Southern Photographic Federation Handbook 2009/10

Wednesday 3rd February
Sony Alpha Club at Weybridge
Elements & Panoramas

Thursday 4th February
Sony Alpha Club at Basingstoke
Image Assessment

Wednesday 21st April
Cbeam C.C
Subject TBA

Wednesday 28th April
Horsham Photographic
Society Digital Panoramas

Monday 13th September
Bexleyheath Photographic Society
Pixels & Art?

Wednesday 15th September
Horndean Camera Club
PixElation – techniques & demonstrations using Elements

Friday 1st October
Seaford Photographic Society
An Elements Workshop

Wednesday 13th October
Littlehampton C.C.
Aviation and Infra Red Workshop?

2010 LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY COURSES and HOLIDAYS with Duncan McEwan

Isle of Eigg (10-15 May)
Eigg is one of the gems of the Inner Hebrides and offers fantastic photographic opportunities in a small area. Minibus transport provided. The coastline north of Laig Bay is probably the finest in Scotland with magnificent views across to Rum. Based in the Glebe Barn (no single accommodation). A half day excursion to the Isle of Muck is also planned. Cost: £695. *Light and Land: 01432-839111* contactus@lightandland.co.uk www.lightandland.co.uk

Other locations are being planned: see www.dmcewanphotography.co.uk for details.

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY SONY ALPHA EVENTS

EDINBURGH University Photosoc, in co-operation with sponsors Sony, has created a series of meetings all led by an expert Alpha system user.

January and February events with Dave Lawrence and Celia Henderson, on Safari and Close-Up photography, are either now past or were fully booked as we went to press. So was a later full day landscape workshop with Alonzo Diaz.

Duncan McEwan presents 'The Scottish Highlands' on **Tuesday, 16th February 2010, 19:00-22:00hrs**. Duncan will be talking on aspects of the art and craft that he uses to create his work. Having photographed the Scottish landscape for over 40 years now, Duncan will talk about both his own influences and his hope to influence others for conservation of our environment.

Professional fashion and beauty photographer Michael Wayne Plant gives a workshop and portfolio review session on **Tuesday, 23rd February 2010 from 19:00-22:00hrs**. Michael will conduct a live photoshoot, demonstrating to attendees different lighting styles and techniques of working with models. After the shoot, Michael will cast his experienced eye over the work of the attendees. Work to be considered for critique should be consistent with the theme of the workshop and must be pre-submitted in both electronic and physical form. Details will be available shortly.

Paul Genge, of Sony Alpha UK, may also be attending. There will also be showcases of the Alpha range on display at the majority of these dates.

Please email photosoc.ed@googlegmail.com with your name and e-mail if you wish to attend. Organiser: Adam Bramley.

Isle of Arran (20-24 October)
Arran lies in the Firth of Clyde and is often referred to as "Scotland in Miniature" on account of its varied terrain – an excellent mix of mountains, glens, moorland, rivers, waterfalls, woodland and magnificent coastline. Travel by minibus. Based in the Kinloch Hotel at Blackwaterfoot on the West side of Arran. Cost: £890. *Light and Land: 01432-839111* contactus@lightandland.co.uk www.lightandland.co.uk

Call the Photostore

Adrian Paul at the Photostore can obtain almost any accessory you need for your Alpha system camera.

Lost a flash shoe cover? Or just want to get one for your new camera which came without?

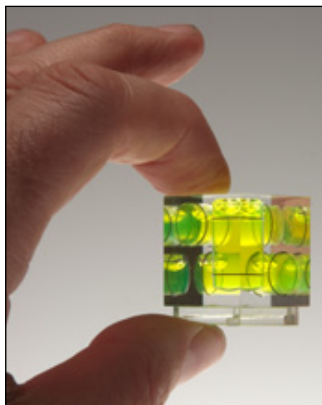
Call Adrian – the same goes for lens caps, body caps, flash 'feet', AC adaptors, battery packs, lens hoods, cases, straps, LCD protectors, eyepiece magnifiers, LCD hoods, hand grips...

If it's a Sony accessory Adrian can obtain it for you. He also has stocks of Minolta and Konica Minolta items.

Photostore has its own web forum with former Minolta expert Bernard Petticrew as resident guru.

One of the latest items is an electronic spirit level – an alternative to the clear acrylic block with three-way levelling. On the right, we show the new level made to fit the Alpha accessory shoe. LEDs are visible above your eye and help you get the horizon dead straight, but it is easier to use on a tripod or with Live View than looking through the finder. Unlike some 3rd party accessories, it does not stay locked in the shoe for ever!

Go to www.photostore-uk.com or visit Adrian's 'Minolta Mania' eBay shop (trader name minolta-mania) – or call Adrian on 01132 448 664 with credit card ready.



01132 448664

www.photostore-uk.com



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Shot by Nick Simpson
Equipment supplied by Zena, OMD & Kinetic

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