



Photograph by David Kilpatrick, Alpha 900, 17-35mm KM (D) lens at 17mm.

Our cover photo was taken using the Alpha 900 and 17-35mm Konica Minolta (D) lens stopped right down to f25. The lighthouse is actually sited to the left of this view, and a second shot has been montaged in at horizon level to bring it into line with the rocks of Berwick's Spittal Beach.

You can download a full size file for this picture by visiting:

<http://www.pbase.com/davidkilpatrick/image/104521336>

It can be printed up to A2+ size. Many other samples can also be seen and downloaded from these pages, all free of charge. Permission is given for printing as test files for personal use.

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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 services, 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 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. Letters can not be answered by post.

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 Photoshore, 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.

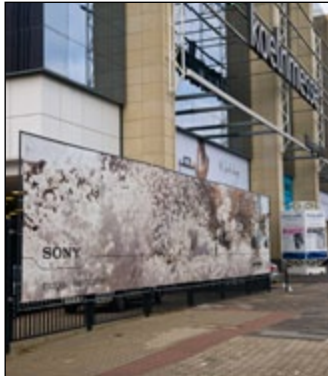
They are based at:

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

Telephone 01908 378088, fax 08712 427677.

Email: cameraworkshop@tiscali.co.uk

Sony shows Alpha at photokina 2008



PHOTOKINA at the end of September in Cologne saw the launch of several new camera systems, including the Micro Four Thirds (by Panasonic) and the Leica S2. For Sony, the show was a chance to get publicity posters and graphics on to huge billboards and the city's S-Bahn local train system. The stand itself was understated and very sober in black and cinnabar – the colours of Alpha. And sure enough, the Alpha system dominated the stand too.



In our photographs, Sony staff discuss the Alpha 900 with a visitor from the Hasselblad stand (top right) and show off an 85mm f1.4 Carl Zeiss ZA Alpha-system lens fitted to a high end Sony HDTV video camera (middle right). Any Alpha mount lens can be fitted to the video system now using a special converter. The 85mm becomes a very powerful ultra fast telephoto for this medium.

The stand (middle left) used less graphic display than the posters outside the halls (top left) and the applied window and coachwork graphics on the trains (above, and seen from the inside

of a carriage at the right). This campaign was for the Alpha 700, using the 'foam city' theme.

Our Alpha 900 – purchased, not a loan review camera – arrived on Saturday September 20th and got some heavy use immediately, before going to Cologne on the Monday. These pictures were all taken on the 900, without flash.

Sony launched the A900 on September 9th. You can read and see full transcripts from the launch at: <http://www.photoclubalpha.com/2008/09/10/alpha-900-launch-press-conference-part-1/>



Duncan's 10-days wonder

I have been using Minolta cameras and lenses since 1970 with great satisfaction and success. The acquisition of a KM Dynax 7D marked my entry point to digital imaging, replacing this with a Sony A100 about 18 months ago. I still love film and have been reluctant to let go of it completely – I guess I shoot about 50/50 film and digital, appreciating the relative merits of each medium.

In early September I had the privilege and pleasure of using the Sony A900 for ten days with the Carl Zeiss 24-70mm f2.8 SSM – a real cracker of a lens. The only other lens used was my own Minolta 70-200mm f2.8 SSM which has a direct Sony equivalent. The photographs were presented at the Alpha 900 launch.

Why me? I cannot claim to represent top end professionals, but I do think I am representative of a significant sector of the market that the A900 will appeal to.

So how does the A900 offer what I need from a camera? I want a camera to capture faithful colour, light quality and crisp detail/definition leaving me to concentrate on compositional aspects.

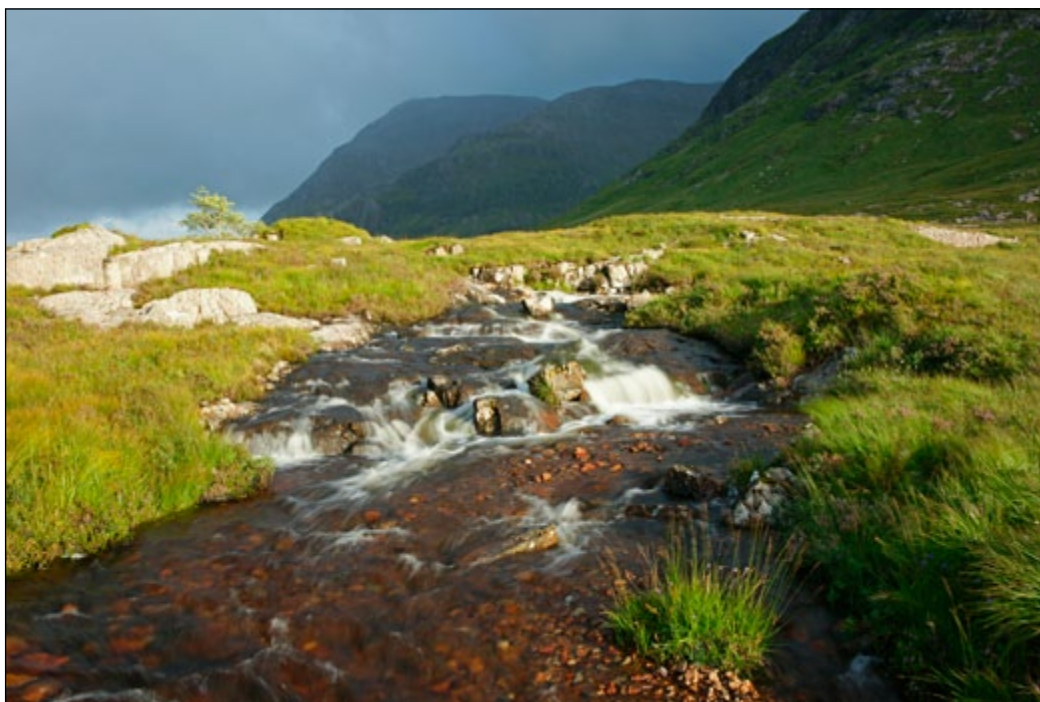
COLOUR – the rendition of colour impressed me greatly. The range of colours encountered in the Scottish landscape were handled in a most pleasing manner. Blue flowers have always been notoriously difficult to record accurately on film and I was amazed at the accuracy of the colour produced.

The Creative Style Menu provides the opportunity for in-camera processing of colour to suit specific situations and subjects. Although many will prefer to apply these at the RAW conversion stage the excellent in-camera processing will be welcomed by many users.

Very overcast conditions gave lovely accurate muted colours, portraying scenes accurately.

CAPTURING THE LIGHT – The quality of images made in less than ideal lighting conditions was most impressive as was the performance in more dramatic lighting situations where the contrast range is often much greater. I was left in no doubt that here was a camera that could deliver all I required for my own photography.

EXPOSURE ACCURACY was very good with only minimal adjustments at times – much less than I have been accustomed to with the Alpha 100. A third of a stop either was about all



that was needed to produce perfect histograms, even with night time exposures of 15 to 20 seconds. The exception was for light toned subjects such as mist but was no more than expected for this type of subject.

AUTOFOCUS was easily the best I have used. It was fast and positive. The continuous AF was up to the task of following moving subjects and coupled with a drive speed of 5 frames per second, the Alpha 900 is well equipped to serve the needs of sport/action photographers. Focus hunting seemed to be rarely encountered and only in situations that were

entirely predictable, such as mist.

The ISO RANGE: although the range is from 100 to 6400, 100/200 ISO were mostly used for landscapes but mid-range values of 400/800 were excellent for sporting subjects. The higher ISO settings were not extensively explored, although on floodlit buildings at ISO 3200, the performance was outstanding in terms of sharpness with low noise levels and less saturated colours. ISO 200 ISO is reputedly the optimal setting for the camera.

FINE DETAIL – it is amazing what fine detail can be

recorded by a 24.6mp sensor especially when using quality optics such as the 24-70 CZ lens.

D-RANGE OPTIMISER was found to have value in contrasty situations and has a choice of settings from standard to various advanced settings. The standard setting produced subtle changes and could safely be left switched on.

I feared at the outset that it would take me time to get to grips with the camera, but I need not have worried. The A900 is easy to use, and a delight to use. It felt really good to hold from the moment I first picked it up and it



no heavier or bulkier than you would expect for a professional camera. Processing and transferring so much information requires a lot of battery power and I quickly found that CF cards bought for the 7D were no longer adequate for a full size sensor.

The brightness of the viewfinder is exceptional – subjects looking almost as bright through the viewfinder as in reality, a fact made obvious when shooting in dull light or when taking night time shots. Indeed, dull weather photography became quite inviting. It also makes one appreciate detail at the taking stage, which should be very useful in macro work, and also when manual focusing is being used.

The Alpha 900 has a fantastic range of functions and with the CZ lens and the 24.6mp sensor, delivers amazing quality. All the features I would expect in a professional camera are there – a mix of innovation and tried and tested ones. The key functions are button operated by very well positioned buttons and the multiselector has a real positive feel. One button is left for the user to assign a specific function which is very useful. The **Custom** button has a dual function depending on whether you are in shooting or viewing mode – in the latter it brings up the histogram display. A lot of flexibility has been built into the custom functions, accessed through user friendly scroll-down menus.

The high resolution 7.5cm LCD screen gives the best display that I have used.

In such a high tech piece of equipment, it was refreshing to find that simple 'traditional' features such as a true mirror lock-up and a built-in eyeshield had been included. The mirror lock-up is in addition to a 2 second mirror lock-up delay and is a feature that will be particularly useful in macro photography. The eyeshield makes life easier than using clip-on protectors and its use contributes to much more accurate exposures when bright light is striking the rear of the camera.

At the end of the trial period I was left with the feeling that my attachment to film was considerably weakened due to the superb quality of the images captured. The Alpha 900 certainly fulfilled my photographic requirements and expectations – big time!

Be prepared to be impressed!
– Duncan McEwan



*Duncan McEwan is Scottish Region
Organiser for the Photoworld Club
(photoclubalpha). See: [http://
www.duncanmcewan.co.uk](http://www.duncanmcewan.co.uk)*



Smooth operator

Mark Cargill found the Alpha 900 great for his distinctive long-exposure dawn and dusk images

30 seconds at f16, CZ 24-70mm at 24mm, ISO 100.

Sony were grinning from ear to ear with the launch of their new flagship camera two weeks before the *photokina* trade show – and the grins have just kept on coming.

The Alpha 900 is a 24.6MP full frame DSLR that in many ways competes directly with Canon's flagship the 1Ds MkIII and not so much in my opinion with the Nikon full frame FX sensor equipped models D3 and D700 – but more on that later.

Picking up the A900 for the first time and you soon realise that this is a really well-made piece of equipment. Sony have also included some decent weather sealing and although many are polarised on its looks (it kind of has that Marmite effect), I personally like the styling which certainly has character.

Part of the unique design comes from the pentaprism housing, which is larger than most due to its oversized design. It is important not to underplay Sony's achievement here as when you take a look through the viewfinder, you are immediately struck just how bright and clear things are. In fact it is brighter than the D3 and the 1Ds MkIII, so kudos to Sony.

The mirror slap reminds me very much of my Rollei 6008 in terms of noise, so not one for shooting quietly at the back of the church then! However, it does have a reassuring quality sound

10 seconds at f20, CZ 24-70mm at 50mm, ISO 100.



that hints at the precision engineering and you certainly feel that you are working with a piece of quality equipment when shooting with this camera.

In terms of handling? Put it this way, my personal work involves shooting with the aforementioned D3/D700 combo and I have always considered Nikon cameras of late to have some of the most intuitive handling characteristics of anything currently available. Without looking anywhere near a manual (does that make me a blokes' bloke?) I found myself very quickly getting to terms with all the major functions with no head scratching whatsoever. Anyone already shooting with the Alpha stable will feel very much at home with how this camera operates.

Many have been looking at and asking for comparisons with Nikon's D700, mainly because of the price parity of the two models. In many ways I feel that they will appeal to completely different types of photographer. There is no question that the D700 has superior high ISO capabilities (although the A900 is closer than you might think) and with the accessory grip can deliver more frames per second than a Specsaver factory at full tilt.

But that is not what the A900 is about. If Sony had doubled the launch price to say £4k, most would then compare it to the 1Ds MkIII as after all the specifications clearly have more in common with each other.

It is only to Sony's credit and our gain that you can buy this camera for sub £2k and that is actually quite something. For that you get a camera that no doubt is giving Canon some sleepless nights, as shooting RAW and processing in something like *Lightroom 2*, the A900 will easily give the full frame Canon a serious run for its money. In fact, keeping with the Canon comparisons, in terms of image noise, the Sony shows

it a clean pair of heels when the ISO levels reach 1600 and above. So brandy and cigars all round then? Well not exactly, the in camera JPEGs are certainly not the best and Sony need to do some work here. Equally the omission of live view was not the most inspirational of decisions, considering that it is now standard issue for this type of camera and I for one use live view for manual focusing regularly in the studio and

on location. Some are bemoaning the unique Intelligent Preview function (a pseudo live view in some respects), but I actually quite like it. Finding the perfect exposure in order to maximise tonal and dynamic range is much quicker using this feature, however this also shows that the metering can at times be erratic. Maybe a little more work on firmware revision is needed.



Images - the Fife coast, and Edinburgh, all with the Carl Zeiss 24-70mm f2.8 lens and Lee neutral density/grad filters. Above, 20 seconds at f22, ISO 100, 35mm focal length. All photographs © Mark Cargill.

Opening your eyes with OU

Brian Young took Course T189 – 'Digital Photography: Creating and Sharing Better Images'.

I had studied computing and social sciences with the Open University throughout the nineties and into the twenty-first century, so I was intrigued to discover a new course in 2007 which coincided with my new obsession – digital photography.

The OU website whetted my appetite as it seemed to offer something for everyone, from novice to proficient, and I enrolled on the first course due to start in the May for the sum of £175. It is a ten week course, staged twice a year from May and October, and caters for several hundred each run. Access to a computer and the internet is essential since you only meet your fellow undergrads on line, through the OU's own intranet in forums set up specifically for the course.

There is a particular excitement when any OU course package crammed full of books and DVDs arrives, but I really wanted to get started with this one since it was all about having fun for a change, and less of an academic commitment.

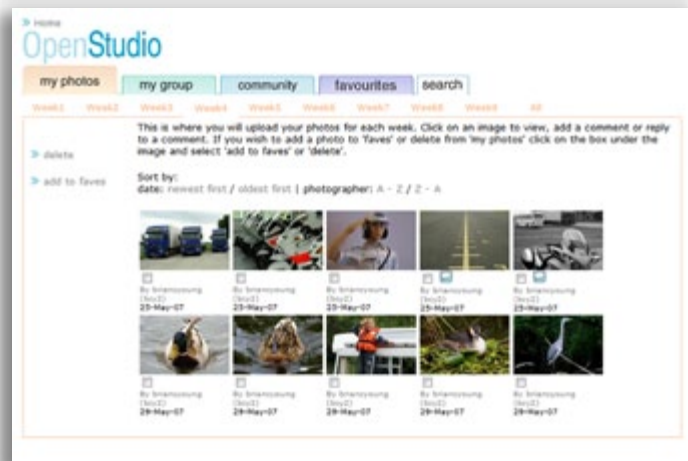
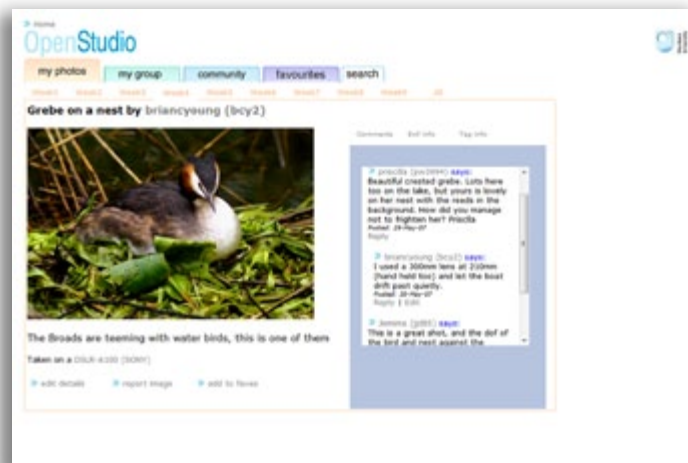
The material supplied several weeks before the start date enabled me to prepare for the coming quest by registering with the OU's online system and exploring the various forums dedicated to course T189.

There is a 'café' for general chit chat, and bespoke forums aimed at providing interaction between students and moderators on the different aspects of the course, such as the software for digital processing and the techniques of photography. *Photoshop Elements* is supplied with video tutorials on DVD and online, and the main hub of the course is the T189 dedicated website.

On-line features

The **website** can only be accessed by course members and apart from containing a wealth of information to do with the course it is also the spring-board for everything to come. The calendar promises each week's topic and each topic has an online tutorial with explanations, interactive demonstrations and exercises to complete.

But the jewel in the crown of this course is the encouragement to take photographs, within the themes of the weekly topic, and to display them on the course's own online gallery programme called Open Studio.



Top: my Week 4 photo posted, with comments, in Open Studio. Above: my complete Week 4 set of 10 images posted. Below: the course programme for T189 2008 as shown on the OU website.

A screenshot of the T189 Digital photography website. It features a navigation bar with tabs for 'Home', 'Index', 'Calendar', 'Assessment', 'Forums', 'Resources', 'Glossary', and 'Open'. Below this, there's a section titled 'Study calendar' with a sub-header 'The calendar below suggests a study pattern that should enable you to work through the course at a steady pace and complete the computer-marked assignment and the end-of-course assessment by the cut-off dates. If a link is not connecting, that part of the course is temporarily unavailable.' The main area is a table with 10 rows, each representing a study week. The table has columns for 'Study week', 'Start date', 'Course material and assessment', 'Cut-off dates', and 'Study'.

Study week	Start date	Course material and assessment	Cut-off dates	Study
0	Before the course starts	Getting started		Study: 0
1	1 May	1 Interesting images		Study: 1
2	8 May	2 Light becomes data		Study: 2
3	15 May	3 Exposure		Study: 3
4	22 May	4 Focus and depth of field		Study: 4
5	29 May	5 Understanding and using colour		Study: 5
6	5 June	6 Printing and projecting your photos		Study: 6
7	12 June	Computer-marked assignment (CMA 41)	18 June 2007	
8	19 June	7 Innovation in photographic imaging		Study: 7
9	26 June	8 Critiquing and creativity		Study: 8
10	3 July	9 Sharing a panel of ten images and preparing for the ECA		Study: 9
		Guide to submitting your end-of-course assessment		Study: 10
		What next?		
		End-of-course assessment	16 July 2007	

There we are allocated ten spaces each week with at least five meeting the specific theme of the week and the rest for any photographs we might want to post, the only proviso being that they were taken by us.

The **Studio** enabled me to view my own photos by week, view those of others from my group and also the whole course (if you had the time and inclination). Everyone is encouraged to comment on any photos they felt were worthy, positive or constructively critical, and all comments could be read by all group members.

The **Forums**, which quite honestly could be avoided without any effect on how we progressed on the course, were bulging with the usual 'experts' and 'completely bewildered' that one comes to expect in any online forum these days. I did dip in and out, but there would need to be many more hours in the day if every thread were to be followed.

However I did enjoy reading some of the more bizarre comments such as one course member who had just gone and purchased their first ever camera and was asking for advice on how to switch it on! But there were also a considerable number of professional photographers in the mix who were more than helpful with their expertise.

The curriculum

This article would not be complete without a canter through the course programme and the accompanying photographs represent some of my humble efforts as I gathered pace and ability.

The first week was very much an introduction and exploration into photography entitled "Interesting images" which included video tutorials, a journey through the history of photography looking at the fundamentals of composition, and a mission to photograph letters in everyday scenes.

The second week "Light becomes data" looked at how a digital camera works in principal with various associated activities for us to explore our own camera's features.

Week three, "Exposure" did what it said on the tin utilising online graphics to help with the understanding of varying the amount of light hitting the sensor.

This was logically followed with a week devoted to “Focus and depth of field” and by the start of the fifth week I had pretty much got my head around the basic principles.

“Understanding and using colour” and “Printing and projecting your photos” filled the next fortnight and at the end of week six there was a computer marked assignment to complete on the work covered up to then. This consisted of a multi-choice answer paper completed and submitted on line and although it only counted for 10% of the total marks towards the course result it did give a sense of focus on what we had covered (pun intended).

Week seven, “Innovation in photographic imaging” immersed us in reportage, juxtapositioning and mis-en-scene and a dictionary was added to my photographic kit as it really was a trip into the unknown and helped me consider my images more laterally. Mr Warhol gets a look in here and we had much fun in the self abuse and multi-colouring of our old passport photos for some of our weekly Open Studio posts.

Slide show finale

Week eight concentrated on the emotive “Critiquing and creativity” and certainly prepared me for running my own work up the flagpole for the penultimate week which was to “Share a panel of ten images and prepare for the ECA” (the End of Course Assignment).

And the final week, the ECA, required us to build a slideshow from a selection of ten photographs, write three short essays about our course work, to illustrate our understanding of the course content, and submit it online in a zip file.

In summary, I learnt a lot, although I should stress that I was very much a novice to start with. I really enjoyed the journey with a different weekly assignment to complete so my camera was never far away, and the opportunity to share discussion with likeminded folk, albeit electronically, was good, just as belonging to the Photoclubalpha forum has become.

I passed my course with flying colours, indeed I now know how those colours are represented digitally...

— Brian Young



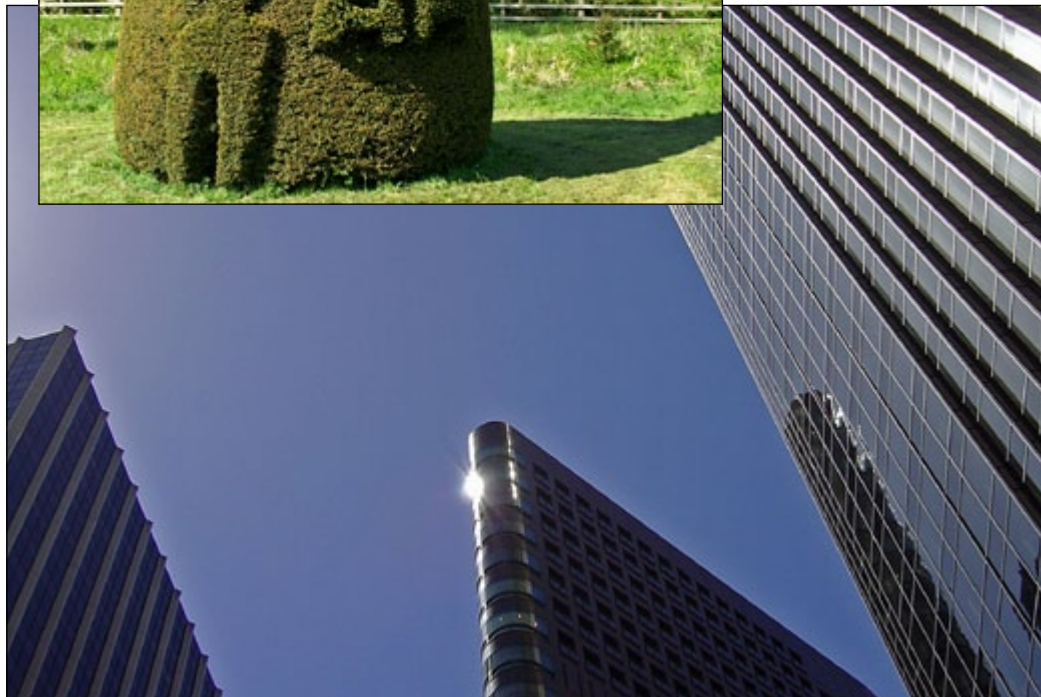
See:

www.brianyoungphotography.co.uk
and for information on
the 2009 courses
[www3.open.ac.uk/courses/
bin/p12d11?C01T189](http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12d11?C01T189)



Left: OUweek1 – looking for letters in everyday scenes.

Below: OUweek2 – discovering how light becomes data.



Above: OUweek3 – the art of cropping from a very long shot.

Left: OUweek4 – Focus and Depth of Field.





Above left: OUweek5 – understanding and using colour. Above right: OUweek7 – digital manipulation, turning my new Bonneville into an old one with PS Elements.
Below: OUweek6 – this photo of Rutland Water attracted feedback. One comment was that it was like an Old Master; but I'm not too sure how the windsurfer fits in with that!



Below left: OUweek8 – an attempt at creativity after considerable free form straightening as it had been shot at an acute angle originally. Below right: OUweek9 – one of the ten photographs from my final panel for the ECA.



Alpha 900 – the big picture

WHEN the unstoppable changeover to digital SLRs began for Minolta system owners in 2004, the Club was already losing members because even a 50/50 coverage of digital equipment and technique was enough to put off many dedicated film users.

Now that Sony has launched a full frame DSLR costing over £1,600 I am wary of alienating everyone who has invested in digital models from the Konica Minolta Dynax 7D to the Sony Alpha 350. We have seen in a period of under three and half years the launch of seven models using the DT (APS-C, just under 16 x 24mm) format with progressive increases of resolution.

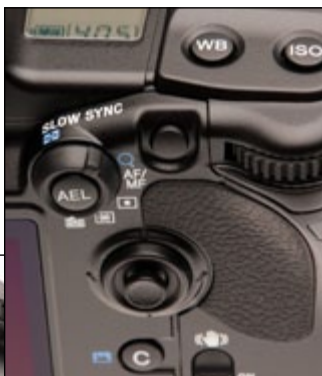
For many photographers, and I include myself and Shirley in this, upgrading relatively expensive SLR bodies half a dozen times in three years is an entirely new thing. From 1994 onwards, our film SLRs were the Dynax 9xi and 7xi and even the arrival of the Dynax 9 and 7 did not change that. It did not matter very much that we were slightly out of touch with the latest features and functions of the new cameras, as our real 'upgrades' came when film makers introduced new and better emulsions.

This roller-coaster ride from 6 megapixels to 14.2 also involved many changes of lenses. From the first D7D with 17-35mm and 28-75mm lenses actually designed for full frame, we progressed until the camera cupboard included seven lenses designed only for the DT image size. The only justification for this expense could be found by looking back at the sort of bills we once paid for slide film, colour negative film, black and white film, processing and darkroom materials.

The full-frame Alpha 900 takes the expense into a different class. It can not fully use the excellent DT-format lenses we rely on, like the Carl Zeiss 16-80mm, Sony 11-18mm and Sony 18-250mm – you can fit them to the camera, it will automatically crop the frame to an 11 megapixel file, but you have paid for 24.6 megapixels and a full 24 x 36mm frame. If you add the costs of new full frame lenses to the body, you will be lucky to have much change from £5,000/\$10,000.

At the same time, the 1.5X factor DT format continues to develop. Sony have released new firmware for the Alpha 700 which improves its

David Kilpatrick takes you through reasons for and against moving up to full format digital with the 24.6 megapixel Alpha 900



The Alpha 900 is quite at home with older Minolta AF lenses. Details show the deep finger recess, traditional mode dial,

results at higher ISO settings; new dedicated lenses for the format are on the horizon, including Tamron's 10-24mm f3.5-4.5 ultra wide fast zoom shown at *photokina* 2008.

There are many benefits to shooting DT, and one is more depth of field. At the same angle of view, a DT format lens can be used 1.5 f-stops wider open for the same depth of sharply rendered subject. This is very important for bounce flash photography where you are often obliged to use settings like f5.6 to f8 and have groups of people with their faces in front of and behind the point of focus. It also benefits long lens and low light wide aperture photography.

DT format users have become accustomed to the extra 1.5X telephoto reach and the availability of superzooms. The 18-250mm Sony lens is equivalent to a 27-375mm on full frame and no such thing exists! The standard kit tele zoom, 75-300mm, is equal to a 105-450mm on full frame. It is simple enough fact that the 1.5X factor allows a 33% reduction in focal length for the same 'reach'; a 33% reduction in focal length means just under half the apparent lens size, and a cut of 58% in weight. If a 105-450mm lens was made, it would weigh 2.35X as much.

We have become used to these advantages. Once, 200mm or 210mm was often the longest focal length you had for your SLR – and you could consider yourself lucky next to the user of a Leica rangefinder, where 135mm was the longest without special added equipment. Now you go on holiday or target your garden birds with a virtual 450mm you would never have dreamed of!

Taking the step to the Alpha 900 means leaving these effortless benefits behind.

So why, after getting my Alpha 900, have I hardly touched the APS-C/DT format bodies?

Quantum leap

One answer is that the Alpha 900 is built like a true successor to the Dynax 7D and film Dynax 9. It is a superbly solid though not large or heavy camera. It has the best viewfinder in its class – at 100% per cent uncropped view, and a 0.73X apparent scale with 50mm lens, it is a fraction 'smaller' than Canon's £5,000 1Ds MkIII (100% and 0.74X) but some 20% brighter due



wide-angle for Nikon, fitting it on the Kodak to enjoy a true wide view, and finding all the shots came out purple at one end and green at the other!

I shoot pictures for Alamy, and many fellow Alamy shooters use full-frame Canon. The question of exactly which lenses can be used without risking rejection because of unsharpness is a regular one, and generally the answer comes out that at the wide-angle end only the latest and most expensive designs are up to the job.

The Alpha 900 is higher in resolution than any Canon, so I was almost sure my collection of older Minolta and Konica Minolta glass

would be of little use. I went to the September press launch in Edinburgh equipped with my 17-35mm KM (D), 28-75mm KM (D), and 24-105mm Minolta (D) because I knew my ability to afford an Alpha 900 would depend on whether these were any good on full frame. I simply can't run to a new Zeiss 24-70mm and then the essential (January 2009) Zeiss 16-35mm f2.8 which I was able to test in prototype form only.

I left the conference and called David Jenner at London Camera Exchange to order my Alpha 900!

Left: the original 50mm f1.4 Minolta AF lens focuses accurately and gives sharp images corner to corner on the Alpha 900. Dutch Dolphin class submarine moored at Leith; ISO 100, 1/160th at f10.

to the improved mirror, condensor, screen, prism and eyepiece design.

Just looking through this hyper-sharp viewfinder changes your ability to compose images down to the last detail. Visibility into the extreme corners of the frame is the best of any viewfinder ever made, free from eyepiece coma aberrations or curved distortion. This single experience – using the A900 viewfinder – is mentioned by nearly every new owner as the reason they will migrate entirely to full frame.

Added to this, the 24.6 megapixel image is fully twice the size and 42% higher in linear resolution than the Alpha 700's 12.3 megapixels. It is double the linear resolution and four times the overall image detail compared to the Dynax 7D/5D. The practical effect is that an A4 print from the 900 is as sharp as a postcard size print from the 7D.

Of course, such large images are not needed all the time. With every DSLR, it has been possible to select smaller JPEG sizes. Originally this meant web and computer screen small images. The 'small' image

size on the Alpha 900 is actually slightly larger than the Dynax 7D's 6 megapixels and the 'medium' size at 13 megapixels lies between the Alpha 700 and 350. With these smaller JPEGs comes an improvement in high ISO noise and detail sharpness, making it possible to shoot at ISO 6400 and produce perfect prints.

In the past, you have been used to the small improvements made with new films, or the increments from 6 to 10, then 10 to 12 or 12 to 14 megapixels. Those who have wisely held back and waited have perhaps jumped from 6 to 12 megapixels and seen a great improvement. The move to full frame and 24.6 megapixels is even more impressive because of the way the Alpha 900 works with full frame lenses.

Max compatibility

My experiences with full frame cameras from the Kodak DCS Pro 14n onwards have always been limited by the poor compatibility of so many existing lenses. I remember grabbing my lovely 17mm f3.5 Tokina manual

Main image: ISO 6400

In reasonable light indoors (window light) the Alpha 900's maximum ISO setting of 6400 gives perfect sharpness and colour rendering without excessive noise. Exposure 1/800th at f6.3 with the 50mm f1.4 lens. Model: Jasper, Maine Coon.

When it came, I discovered that almost all my vintage glass worked well with the 900. The most unexpectedly good results were from the 1985 70-210mm *f*4 and 50mm *f*1.4, the 50mm *f*2.8 and 100mm *f*2.8 macros of a similar date. The early wider angle zooms were not good, with both the 35-105mm *f*3.5-4.5 and 35-70mm *f*4 combining sharp central imaging with smeary blurred edges. The 35-200mm *f*4.5-5.6 AF-Xi motorised zoom was well up to the task, proving sharper than any other wide to tele zoom at full aperture.

The later generation represented by Minolta's 24-105mm *f*3.5-4.5 (D) demonstrated just how good

the Carl Zeiss 16-85mm for the DT format is. I have used the 24-105mm and liked it on the A100 and A700. On the 900, the full frame reveals distortion, vignetting, chromatic fringes and loss of sharpness in the corners. Sony makes a new version of this lens and I would treat it with caution as an Alpha 900 possibility.

The similar era Minolta 100-300mm *f*4.5-5.6 Apo (D) gave much better results than expected, with just a hint of wide open softness and predictable levels of distortion and vignetting at the long end – already known from film use. Even so it would be perfectly usable.

Moving on to Konica Minolta's 17-35mm and 28-75mm Tamron-based designs, both proved excellent needing only to be stopped down to tidy up soft extreme corners. While they may not match Carl Zeiss alternatives, they weigh and cost half as much or less. Sony does not make any versions of these, but Tamron still makes them in Alpha (D) mount – they can provide an inexpensive basic kit for the new full frame.

The 70-200mm Minolta G SSM gave, as expected, superb results at normal working distances. Fitted with the 2X Apo (D) converter, some colour fringes appear but can

be corrected. Used for minimum focus distance close ups at 1.2m and 200mm focal length, the 70-200mm has a strongly curved field resulting in a sharp centre but blurred edges; it must be stopped right down. The 200mm *f*4 Minolta Apo Macro G, as expected, gave exemplary results corner to corner wide open at any distance.

My 100mm *f*2.8 Soft Focus and 28mm *f*2 RS lenses, both of which are stars on the DT format, proved to have more softening to the outer field than expected. They are still good, but not as good as the macros and standard 50mm *f*1.4.

Finally, my only new full frame lens is the Sony 70-300mm *f*4.5-5.6 SAL SSM G. This is a wonderful lens on the Alpha 700. I found that on full frame, visible distortion and vignetting spoils the record of near-perfect sharpness and absence of colour fringes. It's not so very different in these respects from the older Apo (D) 100-300mm despite being a huge lens by comparison. I thought the extra size and front element diameter would mean minimal distortion and vignetting; that's not the case.

Various independent lenses, when tested, worked as well as expected. Not one lens I've tried

so far has shown heavy shading to the corners, or colour shifts, or extreme purple fringe effects.

The Alpha 900 uses a weak anti-aliasing filter positioned with a bigger gap than normal between filter glass and sensor surface. This seems to preserve a very sharp image and give better edge and corner detail with wide angle lenses. Overall, the 900 proves tolerant towards older lenses and if you have 'good' glass from 20 years ago you may be pleasantly surprised.

Focus accuracy

Helping all these lenses along is improved autofocus accuracy. No special claims have been made, but front and back focusing errors which afflicted many of these lenses on the earlier Alpha bodies disappear on the 900.

Sony has built in micro AF adjustment, allowing plus or minus 20 steps of correction to be entered for up to 30 different lenses. I was looking forward to using this function, but could not find a single lens which needed it!

The AF module of the 900 is crammed into the DT 1.5X crop zone. As a result, wide area AF is not all that wide. Maybe it is this tightness of the AF cluster of nine main focus point (11 sensors, plus 10 'focus assist' metering cells) which improves accuracy.

Focus is certainly as fast as the Alpha 700 if not faster. I should remember, though, that the Alpha 900 central sensor is able to use

The distortion shown by the SAL 70-300mm SSM G at 200mm in this shot came as a surprise. It's perfectly sharp and free from chromatic aberration, but does distort visibly on full frame.





Action with the 70-200mm f2.8 Apo G SSM lens, above – the big viewfinder and 5fps are matched by accurate follow focusing on 'C'. Photographed at Kelso Races. Left, the 100-300mm Apo (D) zoom wide open at 230mm, ISO 200 – SteadyShot has given a sharp result from 1/25th. Edinburgh Zoo.



f2.8 aperture lenses fully. With the Alpha 700, my wide angle has been an f4.5-5.6 11-18mm, my standard zoom an f3.5-4.5 16-80mm. These are replaced by an f2.8-4 and a fixed f2.8 so I'm benefiting from the high accuracy f2.8 central horizontal sensor.

The flash dilemma

The Alpha 900 has no built-in flash and therefore can not control remote wireless flash, or even provide you with a convenient aid in low light.

The only flash worth considering for this camera is the Sony HVL-F58AM, though you can use earlier models from the Minolta 5600 HS(D)

onwards for on-camera direct and bounce work as normal. The Sony 58 permits wireless control, and can make just the same use of your 5600, 3600, 56, 36 and 42 model flashes as any of the digital SLRs.

Consider older flash units as a stopgap only. The natural companion for the 900 is the 58 and its cost (over £300) needs to be included in any purchase planning.

High ISO & high res

Much misleading test information has been published about the performance of the Alpha 900. Reviewers are not used to checking 24.6 megapixel

images and do not always understand how these relate to final print sizes.

The Alpha 900 is capable, at ISO 100-800, of exceeding the quality you would expect to see in a 20 x 16 print from rollfilm. It was very difficult to select an image to reproduce as a fold-out here – we have some stunning work from others which would make a great poster, but without the kind of critical detail to show just what 24.6 megapixels can mean. My image used was purpose-taken for the job.

Before writing this article, I spent one full month using the Alpha 900 in all kinds of conditions for all kinds of subject. Many shots were set up to

answer questions about quality on the Photoclubalpha forum, and can be viewed or downloaded from www.pbbase.com/davidkilpatrick.

We also use Nikon D3 and many other cameras, so I am far from blind to the benefits of more limited resolution and superb ultra-high ISO settings. I found that I could process the Alpha 900 raw files to get clean ISO 6400 at 12 megapixel size. I know that I can not add detail to a 12 megapixel shot to make it equal a 24.6 megapixel one.

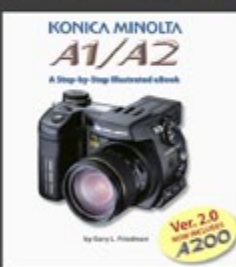
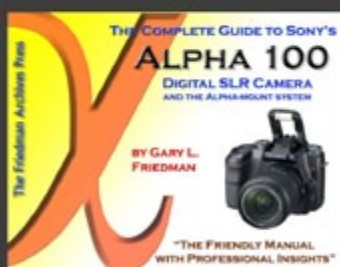
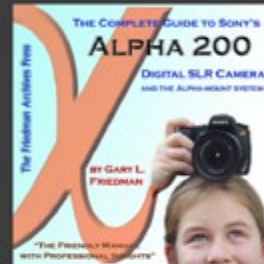
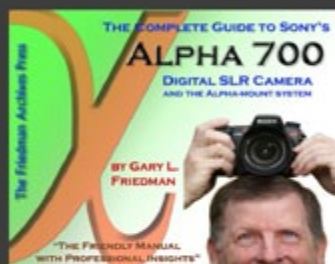
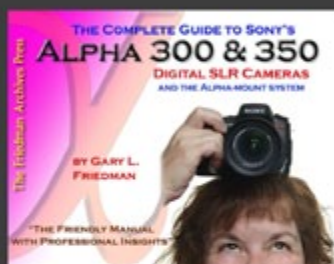
The Alpha 900 eats card space, monopolises computer power, demands big hard discs for archiving, and if you shoot raw it goes through batteries fast. At the end of the first month, I had to shoot some pictures at the photo industry's annual awards, and chose the Alpha 700 with the HVL-F58AM and 18-250mm SAL lens. The 900 would have been the wrong tool for the task.

In daily use, the Alpha 900 takes over. The difference it makes to landscapes, close-ups and general views is worth the small burdens it imposes! I would also use it for action work because the full frame and superb finder allow cropping when framing is less than perfect, and the 5fps is a true five.

You can read much more analysis of the Alpha 900 at www.photoclubalpha.com – and see many more pictures.



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HVL-F58AM flash: changes

Although the Minolta wireless flash system remained backwards-compatible for over a decade, digital bodies came along and prevented true TTL off-the-film exposure control. The 5600 and 3600 HS (D) flashguns were the first to offer nearly all the features found on the earlier film-based system, but one important function was lost. This was Ratio.

Ratio control simply means the ability to set one flashgun to a lower power than another when two or more are used with wired or wireless connection. From the wired 4000AF/2800AF system for the first AF models onwards, ratio control was possible and the wireless system continued this in its simple 2:1 form.

Even simple 2: ratio was lost with the digital system. You could still obtain this, in practical setups, by positioning one flashgun further away than another or mixing 5600 and 3600 flash units which have different powers. Other makers, in the meantime, developed new wireless systems (admittedly many years after Minolta pioneered the technology) and offered a wider range of ratio settings.

To catch up with this, Sony designed an entirely new protocol called Control Plus (CTRL+) which is fully operative only with two DSLR bodies – Alpha 700 and 900 – and one flashgun, the HVL-F58AM. If you have multiple HVL-F58AM flashguns – hereafter called the 58 – you can use one as an on-camera controller and set this and two other groups of flashguns to a wide range of powers in a three-head setup. The ratio is shown on the controlling flashgun as X:X:X and can range from 1X to 16X power in relative terms, in doubling steps. The controller gun can also be set to Zero power.

This system is expensive. At street



The unique design of the HVL-F58AM allows optimum bounce or direct illumination with the camera held vertically as well as horizontally. Almost any angle of bounce is possible.



Below: a parade of Sony and Minolta flash units. All can be used in a mixed wireless setup, including simple two-group ratio control using the 58 and 700/900. From the left: 58, 42, 5600 and 3600.



prices, each 58 is around £300 and to do this you need at least three guns. There is a cheaper flashgun, the HVL-F42AM (referred to as 42), which can be used in three-head ratio setups but only as the lowest power head, and only with a 58 as the second off-camera flash. The Sony HVL-F56AM and HVL-F36AM (56 and 36, direct equivalents of

the earlier Minolta 5600 and 3600) can not be used in three-head X:X:X ratio setups but they are usable in a simplified remote mode.

Use with older models

If you own the Minolta 5600, 3600, Sony 56 or 36 the 58 will control these just the same way a pop-up flash can, but unlike the pop-up flash it can provide variable power from the camera position. The 58 defaults to CTRL+, which is compatible only with the newer 58 and 42, so when you first use your new 58 you must alter its setting.

You do this by pressing the Function button and keeping it held in until C01 (Custom Setting 1) appears. You then press the right arrow key to select C03, and the up/down arrow to select CTRL2. You can ignore C02, the channel setting, unless you always use your wireless flash on a different channel from Channel 1.

If you leave the flash, or fire a test picture, the display will revert and show CTRL as the mode, CH1 as the channel. Your 58 is now able to fire remote 5600, 3600, 56, 36 and also the newer model 42 and 58 guns. All will be treated as a single group, as if they were one flash.

To vary the power between the 58 on the camera, whether bounced or direct, and all the remotes, press the Function button when in Wireless mode; press the right or left arrow key until CTRL blinks; press the Function button again, and RATIO will be displayed with OFF by default. Use the left/right arrow keys to turn Ratio to ON, and a display with 1:1 will appear. You can now vary the on-camera (first figure) and remote group (second figure) power.

In this mode, any combination of off-camera Minolta or





Compact case (58 and 42, above) and new folding stand/tripod adaptor.



Konica Minolta HS (D) and Sony HVL guns can be controlled.

You can also fire the same combination using the built-in flash of the KM D7D, D5D, Sony Alpha 100, 200, 300, 350 and 700. The 58 must be set to RMT mode. The 58 can not be used as a controller on any models except the 700 and 900.

Use with new models

Full ratio control with three power groups is only possible using HVL-F58AM guns. If your on-camera flash is a 58 and you have two or more remote 58s, set function C03 to CTRL (not CTRL2). This is shown as the CTRL+ mode. Turn on RATIO, and you will find you have three groups 1:1:1 – CTRL (the flash on your camera), RMT and RMT2. You use the controls on each of the remote 58s to set the gun to RMT or RMT2 (its Group).

Now, from the flash on the camera, you can freely vary the power from 1 to 16 (five full f-stop steps)



The 58's EX cable and battery pack fittings are identical to the 5600 (below).



The HVL-F58AM shown mounted on the Alpha 900 with Wireless mode selected on the camera's rear menus, and the soft illumination active on the flash.

The control design of the flash is intended to match the controls of the cameras, using the same size buttons, switches and controller pad. Below: the 58 controls compared to the 5600/56 design.



or turn a group off entirely. This setting is useful for the on-camera flash, cutting its power down to a control signal level which will have no visible effect on the exposure.

If you use the HVL-F42AM, you can not set a ratio between two of these guns. They are always in the group RMT, and can not be in RMT2. So using two off-camera 42s is much the same as using any two older guns. If you own a 42, it is already lower in power than the 58. In combination with one or more 58s, which can be in RMT or RMT2 groups, the 42 always appears in the middle setting of the ratio display.

Other functions

The HVL-F58AM has all the familiar functions developed by Minolta over the years including stroboscopic frequency flashing during a long exposure, variable manual power control, motordrive compatibility up to 5fps (and more), provision for using the Off-Camera cable system and the Battery Pack. The connections are identical to older Minolta models and you can use the same cables and battery (see left).

The 58 does have a thermal cutout system, and will warn when overheated by too much motordrive



Pull-out mini bounce card and wide angle diffuser in use.



use. It recycles faster than any previous model (no doubt to cope with action sequences) and has better battery economy, still using the same familiar 4XAA. There is a rear LCD panel illumination button which has a pleasantly soft level of light, matching the amber colour of the 900's top LCD illumination.

Of course, the main point about the 58 is the bounce design which allows the head to be positioned for direct flash with vertical shots so that shadows are cast diagonally and not directly to one side. The zoom function is intelligent and recognises the change from vertical to horizontal, increasing coverage as needed.

In place of a flip-out wide angle diffuser alone, the 58 has both a diffuser (covering down to 16mm lenses on full frame) and a white mini bounce card.

The tripod/table stand is also modified to offer better support though the thread is still just plastic. The 58 comes with an excellent design of case, and actually takes up hardly any more space than a 42 in your bag. The release button moves to the right hand side and this appears to make flash removal from the hot shoe require less concentration.

Finally, the 58 communicates better white balance and exposure information to the newer DSLRs. Overall it's a much improved main flash offering for the system and only the price compares badly with competitors.

– David Kilpatrick



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Left: a really strong and simple study mainly in red and black from Paul Murphy of Cramlington, Northumberland – ‘Last Minute Advice’, captured with his Alpha 100 and 200mm f2.8 Minolta Apo G lens, 1/25th at f9, ISO 100. Above, a strikingly characteristic Sri Lanka beach shot by Markus Spring of Bad Reichenhall, Germany. He used an A700 with Sigma 17-70 mm lens at 70mm, exposure 1/8,000th at f8, ISO 100, developed from raw with LightZone running on a Linux system. Below left, a surprising moment caught by Australian action maestro Chris Horne using the Alpha 700 with 70-200mm SSM lens at 135mm, aperture f4, 1/2,000th at ISO 400. Below right, by Glenn Turner of Camberley, Surrey – Streptocarpus, Alpha 100, 100mm f2.8 Minolta AF Macro at f22, HVL-F56AM and HVL-F36AM flash beads, ISO 200.



Using DRO+ on the A700

Those of you who own any of Sony's DSLRs might be familiar with its "Dynamic Range Optimization" feature, where the camera's computer will lighten the darker pixels of the .jpg images under certain circumstances. And while it can do impressive things when it kicks in, the feature doesn't always kick in (what's more, I can never predict when it will do so).

Enter the Sony Alpha 700, which gives you the ability to force up to five levels of DRO onto the image, whether the camera thinks its necessary or not. Even better, it allows something called "DRO Bracketing", where you take one picture and the camera processes and stores three different images to the memory card, each with a different level of DRO. Using DRO Bracketing AND shooting RAW+JPG is a very good way to "cover your bases" – shoot quickly in very difficult light when there's not enough time to evaluate the exposure or try different settings manually.

Over the past 11 months I've been experimenting with DRO levels in harsh lighting situations (where the brightness range of the scene exceeds the light range that the sensor is able to capture) and I have several examples of where it works well and where it makes things worse. The first thing I've learned is that, while the DRO-processed images can look great on the camera's LCD screen, once you get back to your computer DRO levels 4 and 5 are almost always too much – there's a certain artificial look to them that even an untrained eye can sense. I end up using DRO Level 3 almost exclusively when I turn the feature on.

Another thing that is quite valuable – Sunset pictures turn out amazing when I combine DRO Level 3 with the A700's Sunset mode. Try it!

Where does DRO make things worse? Check out the pictures inside a cathedral, where the lighting was extremely challenging to begin with. In situations like this it is better to turn off DRO, spot meter for the ceiling, and put the camera on a tripod – it's going to be a long exposure.



Above: one of my favorite shots from the Photo Expedition to Latvia – church near sunset. I combined Sunset Mode (which adds reds and yellows to the image) with DRO Level 3 so the subjects wouldn't look so silhouetted. This is how the image looked out of the camera, with no additional post-processing.



Left: a before and after example using DRO without Sunset, then with Sunset. Below: candlelit Restaurant: This is an area where DRO really excels. The two pictures shown are with DRO set to "+" (where the camera decides when it should kick in – clearly it decided not to), and the camera set to DRO Level 3.



Gary Friedman looks at Dynamic Range Optimisation and how it can transform shots in difficult lighting



DRO and Metering

Room with bed: this is a classic case where the scene looks perfectly good to the eye, but the camera can not record the entire range of light – the brightness of the window, the details in the shadows – and so the automatic exposure assumes the windows are the main focus of the picture and exposes for that, leaving the rest of the room looking dark (Example 3).

Normally the solution to that is to take a spot meter and meter for a neutral area of the image, such as the carpet in the lower-right-hand corner, or the wallpaper in the upper-left (which is what you see in Example 2). That's fine, but then the windows wash out. Remember, in wide dynamic range images such as these, you can either capture the highlights or the shadows, but not both.

Using DRO Level 3 balances things out very nicely – the camera still exposes for the bright windows, but it lightens the shadows pleasantly so that it looks closer to the way you remember seeing it.



DRO and colour saturation

Moon reflection on the water – If the shadow area of your image contains a colour, that colour is enhanced using DRO. Here, the bluish-cast of a snow-capped mountain scene is enhanced via DRO Bracketing (Level 1, 3, and 5). While it's true that Level 5 does look kind of unreal, I actually like it best.





Which manual DRO setting?

Standard DRO has very little effect on images beyond a slight brightening of the mid tones. You can get a similar result using the Brightness setting (available on the Alpha 700 and 900 in some Creative Styles) or the Lo80 or -1 Zone settings.

DRO Advanced (100, 200, 300, 350) tends to be conservative as the earlier examples show. Manual DRO+ available on the 700 and 900 is the most effective setting. In natural light, you can safely use the entire range of settings from 1 to 5. The examples above and right show Level 1, 3 and 5. Skin tones are acceptable even at Level 5 in this lighting. When using flash, the flat light on faces may produce unnatural looking skin tones at anything over DRO+3.

Better than HDR?

DRO+ can be more effective than taking two or three shots and combining them using High Dynamic Range. Below, a situation where the straight non-DRO image (left) is transformed by setting DRO+3.





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SIGMA



O U R W O R L D

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Shooting data: SIGMA 12-24mm F4.5-5.6 EX DG Aspherical HSM. 1/160 second exposure at f/11.

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