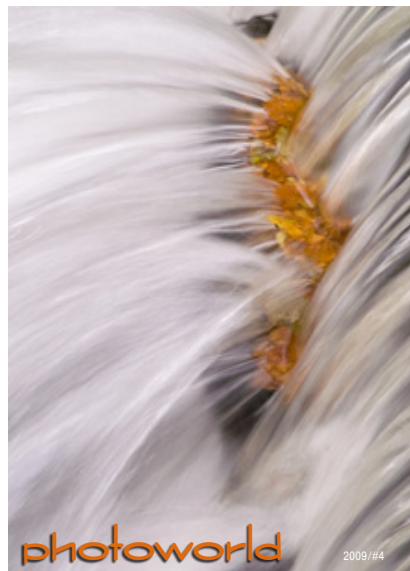




photoworld

2009/#4



Cover: by Duncan McEwan
Caught in the Fall

A slow shutter speed portrays movement in the water while the trapped beech leaves are relatively static.

KM Dynax 7D + Minolta 70-200mm f2.8 SSM lens. 1/10 @ f13 (+0.3 compensation). Lee polariser. ISO 400.

CONTENTS

- 2 **Contents and Information.**
See also – <http://www.photoclubalpha.com>
- 3 **The Alpha 500, 550 and 850 new models – news and key facts about the October introductions.**
- 7 **Poor Light Starts Play! Sony's Twilight Football.**
- 8 **Gallery – the pick of your pix**
- 12 **London on Parade**
Peter Karry primes you to plan for the New Year's Day carnival in the capital.
- 16 **Autumn Techniques – Duncan McEwan**
With the world turned from green to brown, catch the golden sun before Winter arrives.
- 20 **Samyang 85mm f1.4 Aspherical IF lens**
A budget all-manual portrait optic revealed.
- 22 **The HVL-F20AM – an infrared conversion**
Gary Friedman customises the new mini flashgun.
- 25 **Call The Photostore – accessory hotline.**
- 26 **UK title for club director**
Alpha cameras help win a national award.

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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 500, 550, 850

When I reviewed the Alpha 380 in the last issue, I had no idea I would have out the camera and lens up for sale and be waiting for a new model to write about just three months later.

During its brief use, I found that the 380 with its SAM 18-55mm lens was actually much better than expected. The lens was notably sharp around 40-55mm and the camera focused it with far greater accuracy than we are used to. But with the new Alpha 500 and 550 on the way, it had to go!

As I write, the availability of the Alpha 550 for review has been hampered by late delivery in the UK compared to other parts of the world. Cameras have been in use for weeks, not days, when still not available to look at or buy here.

New CMOS

The Alpha 500/550 are models which use entirely new sensor technology and processing, in bodies which resemble the A300/350 in overall size and shape but with styling features from the A330/380. Fortunately, that extends only to the materials and controls, not to the shape of the right hand grip. The 500/550 have a decent sized grip.

The sensors are a 12.4 megapixel and 14.2 megapixel CMOS with greatly improved high ISO noise levels, capable of sensitivity up to ISO 12,800 and not to be confused in any way with the CCD technology of the 300/350 or 330/380 with their 10.2 and 14.2 megapixel sensors.

It also seems that the 12.4 megapixels of the Alpha 500 is not related to the EXMOR of the Alpha 700 even though it is an EXMOR development. There is not likely to be a firmware fix which makes the A700 capable of the same low noise high ISO. But there is very likely to be a 7-series model in future using either or both these new CMOS sensors, and probably adding a video function.

That is indeed missing from the new models, despite current trends. They have Live View, and this is much improved. While the A500 has a system much like the A300-380 series, the A550 has a 920,000 pixel CCD and that must demand a better in-prism LV module, which appears to be fitted to both although the 500 has a lower resolution rear screen.

This sensor has a fine enough res-

In the second round of launches for 2009, three more Sony Alpha models bring the current range of DSLRs up to a surprising choice of eight



New 30mm f2.8 macro and 50mm f1.8 SAM lenses arrive this month

The Alpha 500 is only £50 cheaper than the 550 but considerably lower in specification. It's definitely worth looking at the 550 instead!



The Alpha 500/550 models have a new interface design for the rear screen, above. The shutter speed and aperture are confusingly unmatched. The 5 series body is bigger than the A23-380 models, below.



olution to allow both Face Detection and Smile Detection to be incorporated in Live View mode, with appropriate display of the zones for 'found' faces and triggering of the shutter automatically when a big enough grin is identified by the software.

Fast firing

Although the Alpha 500 body comes in at around £530 and the 550 for a surprisingly low premium at under £600, both offer true 5 frames per second shooting.

The 550 extends this 7 frames per second in a special mode which freezes focus and exposure (no attempt at AF tracking when shooting at this speed). However, I have tested most other sub-£2,000 cameras which do similarly high speeds and all of them either disable continuous AF or have a disclaimer that full speed will not be attained.

The 8 frames per second mode of the Canon 7D, for example, is best achieved using Live View with no mirror action. The Alpha 550 can manage 7 fps *with* mirror operation in optical viewfinder mode.

That is exceptional at this price, beating anything which Canon or Nikon have offered to date.

Viewfinder options

The 5-series models are a step between the 3-series and the 700 as you would expect. The body build quality is more like the 3-series, and the viewfinder is a mirror prism with a relatively small scale factor.

The AF display is improved, along the same lines as the A330 and 380, and many changes are made to the display of shooting settings and data.

With the rear screen, the changes are even more radical – QuickNav is gone, so is the graphic display of the 230/330/380, to be replaced by yet another variant of the GUI with diagrams to show shutter speed and aperture changes.

Though Sony claim this display clarifies how shutter and aperture interact, it does not show the relationship as an EV shutter used to do (so that when 1/60th was next to f8, 1/30th was next to f11). Instead, the scales run together with the widest aperture next to the slowest shutter speed, the smallest aperture next to the fastest speed. This is rather like a representation of a program shutter/aperture exposure mode.

Extra functions

The Alpha 550 adds a new HDR (High Dynamic Range) option to the DRO (Dynamic Range Expansion) of the earlier models. This is best used on a tripod with a static subject like landscape, as two frames are taken at widely bracketed settings. The action is fast enough for hand-held work in an emergency, and the software in the camera actually corrects any shift in the camera position by aligning

the details of the two images. It then merges them to produce a finished JPEG which covers at least two stops more highlight to shadow detail than a regular shot. This can look fairly flat – unlike HDR processes done on your computer which often look hyper-real and over emphasised in contrast. Changing the tone curve of the JPEG using an editing program will restore a natural bright look to the image without losing the highlight and shadow detail.

You can adjust the strength (bracketing) in HDR, and when using regular DRO+ the new models have the same manually set +1 to +5 range as the Alpha 700 and 900. That is a welcome feature, as these manual settings always seem to be more effective than Auto DRO.

To use HDR when shooting people, Live View is recommended. No reason is given why.

Continuous shooting

Because the Live View mode operates with the mirror active, the shooting speed is cut from 5fps maximum to 4fps. To achieve maximum continuous shooting speed, you need to use manual focus and exposure and a fast shutter speed.

The Alpha 550 has a much larger buffer than the A500. Despite the larger image size, it can shoot 14 raw files or 7 raw+JPEG compared to just 7 raw or 3 raw+JPEG before slowing down. Neither camera offers unlimited JPEG shooting – perhaps because the JPEG engine is refined compared to earlier models. The A550 will shoot 32 Fine, the A500 only 12 in sequence.

This means the Fine JPEG from these cameras is similar to the Extra Fine quality in previous Sony models.

With the Alpha 550 only, a special 'S' high speed mode can be set. This locks the exposure and focus with the first frame – no focus priority is possible, and no subject tracking. The camera will then shoot at 7 frames per second.

Image sizes

It's unusual to get any two sensors from the same maker which precisely match in pixel output dimensions. The Alpha 550 is an exact, perfect match for the 350/380 with a file size of 3056 x 4592 pixels. That is despite it being a CMOS sensor not CCD, an entirely new design according to released information.

The A500 is 4272 x 2848 – exactly the same as the A700. This is not so surprising as the CMOS sensor could be based on the A700. But it's unusual even so.



The Alpha 550 seen from the top is not identical to any previous model. The body is two-tone, like the Alpha 380, with a silver-grey for the top plate. The rear screen is now a full 3 inches, larger than the articulated screens of earlier models, and is a 920,000 dot full VGA resolution. On the top plate there is a new MF Check LV button for off-sensor Live View (with no autofocus function of any kind), D-Range button which also accesses HDR shooting, Drive button and ISO button. The Smart Tele Converter button is moved away to make room for better positions for the Exposure Compensation and AEL. According to Matt Crisler, who took this shot for us, the direct AF point selection is not as positive as with the 700/900.

Manual Focus Check

Both the Alpha 500 and 550 offer a second kind of Live View, working directly from the imaging sensor. However, it can not operate as a viewfinder. It is limited to 15 seconds of display during which time you can enlarge the detail to 7X or 14X to check focusing.

This mode uses auto gain, so no matter what exposure compensation you have set, the view will be normalised. You can not judge the picture brightness. To prevent this, hold in the AE Lock button before pressing the Manual Focus Check button, and the actual exposure will be previewed.

You can use manual focusing to change the focus while the live image is displayed. If you press the AF button, the mirror will flip down again and AF will be performed before returning to the Focus Check view.

This mode can be used whether or not the camera is switched to OVF or Live View. If used in OVF mode (normal prism viewfinder) Sony recommend fitting the eyepiece cap. It's probably much quicker just to switch to LV mode before using Manual Focus Check.

When you fire the shutter, the mirror is already up in this mode. But it won't work as mirror lock-up, lacking from the system in cameras

below the Alpha 700. After the live view focusing, the mirror drops down then flaps up again for the exposure. This is a wasted opportunity to restore a useful function.

Manual Focus Check could also be called Composition Check – it shows 100% of the view. Compare that to only 95% through the viewfinder and a mere 90% using the Quick Live View system.

As you will realise, this added mode is not as robust or versatile as full time off-sensor live view. But it will provide a preview of colour, exposure (with AE lock), focus sharpness across the image, and 100% of the shot.

Dual media slot

The 500 and 550 use a similar card system to the 230-380 series, with both SDHC and Memory Stick Pro Duo HG slots.

Switching between the two storage cards does not involve using menus, you just slide a small switch under the card door. It is not possible to do backup recording, automatic overflow, split raw+JPEG, or copy from card to card.

The card drive and DC input are on the right hand side, other interfaces are on the left side.

Restored AE Lock

One feature omitted from the 230-380 series is retained on the 500 series, the AE Lock button, with its function also adjustable through the menu setup. As with the 200-350 series, it doubles when held in as an EV lock to allow Manual exposure to be adjusted in a single step. Just hold the AE Lock in, turn the front control wheel, and the settings will change together.

Direct selection of AF points is similar to the 200-350 design (no worries about the menu diving process of the 230-380 range appearing here). The multi-way controller is used for this, and other functions for DRO, Drive and ISO are accessed through separate buttons on the camera top.

Availability

Once again, the unavailability of a review camera for this magazine or our website has caused problems. The 500 and 550 were due to reach stores on October 29th. We were due to publish before then. Sony UK was not able to help as all review samples were already allocated to magazines more relevant to their marketing. This is something we just have to live with as an enthusiast title.



Dual card slots are for SD and MS Pro Duo, with a hard switch to select.

The high ISO in-camera JPEG quality of the Alpha 550 is a big step forward. Matt Crisler used ISO 1600 and his 300mm f2.8 SSM lens at f6.3 – ensuring a 1/4,000th shutter speed to freeze any movement. Cypress Gardens, South Carolina. See: <http://www.crislerimages.com>



The Sony Alpha 850

To add a price-tier to the Alpha range (and a price tear to the eye of anyone who did not buy an Alpha 900 when they were heavily discounted) we now have the Sony Alpha 850.

This is a camera I don't need to test because it is essentially an Alpha 900 with some minor cosmetic changes to the skin over its magnesium body, and a minimal reduction in specifications.

In place of the precision-adjusted 100% viewfinder mask – which involves four setscrews and requires an operator to calibrate the camera before it leaves the factory – there is a 98% fixed mask. The prism remains exactly the same size and brightness, it's just been given a tiny margin of safety for the frame holding the focus screen.

Where the Alpha 900 can motor along at 5 frames per second, the Alpha 850 has been given a slightly more relaxed shutter-mirror mechanism and less powerful processor/buffer, limiting it to 3 frames per second.

That is more than enough for anyone using 24 megapixels for its main strengths of detail rendering at low ISO settings.

You do not get the Remote Control RMT-DSLR1 with the A850, or with any of the new lower priced models including the A230, A330, A380, A500 and A550. All will work with the infra-red wireless remote. It can be ordered from the Photostore. An alternative is the Jianisi Remote Control for Sony Alpha, made in China, which I was able to find for £4.50 plus postage from Hong Kong, well under £10 for a simple and very slim device which only does the instant or 2-second release but appears to be a little more powerful than the Sony (better triggering range).

There was a DxO statement that in some European markets the Alpha 850 would be packaged with *DxO Optics Elite* raw processing software; so far this has not been spotted!

The Alpha 850 has been selling for anything between £200 and £400 less than the Alpha 900, though in a few cases special deals have continued to make the 900 a better buy. At WarehouseExpress the A850 body was £1,699 when the A900 body with vertical grip and two batteries included was only £1,899. For that difference (an effective saving of £150) the A900 has been an easy choice. It was even easier when the A850 was £1,999!

But such deals are disappearing now and the Alpha 900 is firming up around £2,000 for the body only while the 850 is below £1,700.



The Alpha 850 is totally at home with the new 70-400mm G SSM lens, which is EISA European Zoom Lens of the Year. This lens offers very high MTF figures maintained well at the longer end.

Other launches

With Pentax's K-7 (similar sensor to the Alpha 550 but with HD video and true live view), Nikon's D300S (similar sensor to the A500 but with faster shooting, HD video, true live view, professional grade body), the full-frame D3S with similar video update... and then Canon's EOS 7D (18 megapixels and HD video in an APS-C body) and 1D MkIV (16.9 megapixels, HD video, in a superfast 1.3X factor body) – well, the heat is definitely on Sony to bring in DSLR video soon or be considered a has-been.

Similarly, semi-professional or professional APS-C as well as full frame now needs rejuvenating with the Alpha 700 hitting its second birthday.



Below: 3-shot HDR image processed in Photomatrix (B&W conversion in Photoshop Elements): Alpha 850 lens, Minolta 20mm f2.8 at f13 ISO 200; shutter speeds 1/1000sec (-2 EV), 1/250sec (0 EV), 1/60sec (+2 EV). Photo by Brian Harper.



Third party remote control: the Jianisi slim, simple remote replacement makes an ideal partner for any of the new Alpha models which do not come with a remote. If you have a recent Bravia TV, the playback functions of the original Sony remote are not all that important. Your TV band controller will do all that.

A similar unit is also made by JLL. You can find these most easily from eBay sellers like 'John Camera Store' in Hong Kong; they are all very reliable.

Poor light starts play!

Sony's original 'Twilight Football' promotional stunt in September was designed to get media coverage round the world, and certainly managed.

What it did not do was prove that Sony Alpha cameras, or even the EXMOR-R equipped pocket digital cameras, could produce great action pictures in fading light. If anything, the ordinary and often blurred images released after the event proved you can't create great pictures to order.

They also proved that superb locations for photography don't make superb settings for football, and vice-versa. The floating pitch moored off the Punta della Dogana in Venice was so functional the classic scene beyond looks like a backdrop. There are squares in Venice where kids *do* play football, with great architecture around them. But no visible canal!

Tintagel, so-called King Arthur's castle for the British event, rewarded the teams with cloudy skies and early darkness.

Antequera Bull Ring in Andalucia was one of the better choices with its glowing colours, but most of the shots were spoiled by glass barriers marking the pitch, and photographers wandering into other people's shots.

The spectacular Iguazu Falls in Argentina created a mudbath in bad light and worse weather, while the Australian Pinnacle Desert appeared to be devoid of dramatic pinnacles (do a Google search to see what it really looks like). No doubt there were restraints on where the pitch could be placed. The light in Australia looks lovely (admittedly, *before* sunset) but that glass pitch enclosure was never going to allow wonderful pictures.

One boob Sony made was to state that the twilight is 'longest' at the equinox. Of course, it is not – it is longest at midsummer the further away from the equator you get, and longest at midwinter near the equator. It's just most *evenly balanced* worldwide at the equinox. If you want a really long twilight try John o'Groats on June 21st, not Tintagel on September 21st!

These are the best shots we could spot in the released set. The Antequera shot seems to catch what they intended, but it would have been possible with any camera, it's a slow shutter speed impression not high ISO low-light frozen action. With no EXIF data to check.



Sony staged the strangest worldwide promotion by arranging 'Twilight Football' five-a-sides on the September equinox, and getting invited amateur photographers and press to try the new Alpha 550.



Antequera is not a prime tourist destination, being inland from the Costa del Sol, so it's interesting that Sony should have tracked down this historic town and its large, well preserved bull ring for a location. For the match final on September 23rd, teams were flown to South Africa. The Iguazu Falls in Argentina soaked the pitch created some glorious mud. Below, the Pinnacle Desert in Australia looked to be one of the better locations. Photographs on the Alpha 550.



α gallery

Sometimes we receive a set of pictures which just does not deserve to be broken up for a single image selection. A small essay or a group of pictures given the same treatment can often be more effective than a single shot. It's something worth considering if you are framing prints for your wall.

These three shots were taken by Peter Hollbaum-Hansen. He says: "During the family's summer holiday we stayed close to a industrial area south of Copenhagen, Denmark. At first these chemical tanks were not very interesting... on the contrary! But with some dramatic skies and some postprocessing, mainly in Photoshop Lightroom 2, they came out with some dramatic beauty. You can almost see The Joker on top of these tanks in Gotham City!"

If you want to achieve styled and toned results like this, try OnOne Software's PhotoTools 2 which contains raw processing presets simulating lith print and other 'looks'.



Industrial Beauty

Peter Hollbaum-Hansen used a Sony Alpha 700 fitted with the 70-300mm SSM G lens and set to ISO 200. His raw workflow included deep adjustments to the individual colour channels, as well as shadow tint, saturation, vibrance and contrast curves.



To very different approaches to autumn leaf colours and shapes are shown on this page. Above, Peter Karry used soft focus, high colour saturation and low contrast to create a distinctive effect. He used a 90mm macro at f16 and ISO 100 on his Konica Minolta Dynax 5D. The contrast is lowered by the effects of diffraction.

Tony Jones shot the single oak leaf, right, using a Sony Alpha 700 fitted with a Tamron 55-200mm zoom at 120mm and f6.3, 1/640th at ISO 400.

To enter your own pictures for future *Gallery* pages, just send digital files. Images should be no larger than 2000 x 3000 pixels or the equivalent data size for panoramas (6 megapixels). They should be saved as AdobeRGB or sRGB JPEG files, with embedded ICC profile and intact EXIF data, to level 8 quality (High) or better. Your details, caption, copyright information, website URL, email address etc should be written into the file EXIF or IPTC fields - use 'File Information' in *Photoshop File Menu* to view and edit these text fields.

You may also put caption, website, etc information in a separate text document attachment or in the body of your email.

The pictures must have been taken on Minolta, Konica Minolta, Sony or Sony Alpha equipment. Scans from slides, negatives or prints are accepted and full details must be provided of equipment used. EXIF data will be used to confirm the origin of digital entries.

Send by email to: **gallery@photoclubalpha.com**

You may also send by post on CD, CDs or DVDs must be universal (Mac or PC) and always 'finished' never left open for another writing session. Please do not send memory cards. TIFFs may be used on CDs only, not by email— no layers, no 16-bit please. Send to :

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You may enter as many images as you like at any time, including your name and address and all relevant caption details. *Gallery* entries will be considered for cover or portfolio use and web editions. Each contributor chosen receives a year's subscription/renewal, or a prize of similar value which may be a photographic book or other item.





"Hurricane Bill stopped by last month to deliver some very nice waves here on Florida's East Coast", said Ed Dvorak of this shot. "This is just one of my many good images, that morning. Hope you like it. Shot on Saturday August 22nd 2009 with my Alpha 700 and a Tokina 300mm f2.8 lens and a Kenko 2X extender. Florida's best surf break, Sebastian Inlet State Park."

Philip Sharp visited the Scilly Isles – a destination we rarely see photographed – and submitted the pictures which appear at the bottom of this page and the next, very different angles of view to suit very different subjects. The gulls were taken with the Alpha 900 and 70-400mm G SSM lens at 400mm – ISO 320, f13, 1/500th of a second.





John Gilkerson keeps the –brightly coloured – flag flying for film photography with his Dynax 800si. Above, Elgol photographed in October 2008 on one of Duncan McEwan's Scottish photography workshops. 24-105mm lens at 28mm, 1/6th at f22 with a tripod, Fuji Velvia 50 film. John is also working with a Sony Alpha 200 but his scans from Velvia have real impact.

Below, the second Scilly Isles image from Philip Sharp completes a spread devoted entirely to the moods of the sea and the sea shore. Philip used his Sony Carl Zeiss 24-70mm f2.8 T ZA lens at 24mm, and f22, with a 20-second exposure on a tripod.*



London on parade

When that time of year comes round again – when you promise to make those important New Year Resolutions and never do – here is an idea for you to make one that you'll keep and enjoy.

Don't let your camera hibernate through the colder, darker, days of Winter, even after the festive season when you have just been indulging yourself too much and feeling lethargic. Whatever the reason, the New Year is a time you can blow away those cobwebs. It is also a time to use your camera and enjoy the festive environment, but you may need to make plans right now to be in the right place.

Transport and accommodation both get booked up early for New Year events, whether it's Edinburgh Hogmanay or a Mediterranean cruise.

There is no better time or place to try out some creative ideas than going to one of the many New Year festivals like The London Parade.

The Lord Mayor of London's New Year's Day Parade is one of the premiere events in the world today. This is one where unless you live in London, you may want to book a hotel for New Year's Eve and be ready in the morning for the photography. Not too early, as you will see; you are allowed to sleep off the night before...

In past years, I had used film in my cameras to take photos of this parade – but now, with the advent of digital photography, not having to worry about whether you will exhaust those films, the event has become so much more attractive, as you can relax more. With the possibility of the weather being anything from sunshine to rain to snow showers (and that can happen all during this one day), the ability to change ISO ratings means that you can be very flexible in adapting to the conditions.

What and where

The London Parade starts at Westminster as Big Ben strikes 12 noon on 1st January and the route it takes is as follows: Parliament Square, Whitehall, Trafalgar Square, Pall Mall, Regent Street, Piccadilly Circus and Piccadilly, up to the junction with Berkeley Street.

I recommend getting to your chosen spot an hour beforehand to secure your viewing space on the

Peter Karry photographs the Lord Mayor of London's New Year's Day Parade every January 1st – and invites you to share his know-how for capturing the festival.



Parade route, but I also recommend allowing yourself about an hour before that to spend time walking around the outskirts of Parliament Square where the groups of performers will be gathering. At this time it is so much easier to obtain both posed and candid shots of them with their accoutrements – from sousaphones in the marching bands to vintage vehicles.

The people taking part in the parade are usually full of the New Year joy – especially the youngsters from the USA who have travelled specially to participate – and will not mind if you ask them to pose for you. You could also find some interesting reflections in the brass or silver instruments.

As this time of year tends to be cold, standing around can make you feel colder, so dress sensibly – many layers, gloves (I use fingerless ones), and a hat – and you may want to bring a flask of a hot drink. Take a camera bag or rucksack large enough to be able to include the clothes alongside your kit, once it has got warm enough not to wear them. Be aware of the risks of theft. Also take spare batteries in case the camera's runs down in the cold.

Choosing your position along the route is worth planning in advance, as, even on January 1st, the sun can be very bright and standing on a western side can mean shooting straight into the sun. As the hours go by, the low sun in the sky will move around and facing east can become a problem. Using light shining through flags or transparent materials can provide some saturated colours, but take care that flare does not creep into the shot unless you are doing so on purpose.

All the world

Massive crowds, estimated at more than 550,000, packed the 2.2 mile route in 2009 along London's most famous streets to see the fantastic spectacular as it wove its way along this route, making this the largest in its 23 year history. Yet many of you probably do not realise that this photographic opportunity has been happening, just waiting to be explored.

In its 23 year history the New Year's Day Parade has had just about everything: a marching elephant, a world-record attempt, a three-headed man and a fire-breathing dragon. It has also helped raise two thirds of a million pounds for charity, and has welcomed among its participants visitors from as far afield as the United States, Japan, Hawaii, China, South Africa and the



Left, facing page: reflections at Westminster before the parade sets off, a good time to catch rehearsals. Above: Pearly King buttonboled. Below: frantic action and bright colours make great subject matter.



Caribbean, alongside the UK groups.

Participants totalling a staggering 10,000 performers from some 20 nations filled the streets with a kaleidoscope of colour and culture. At the start of this year 23 London boroughs and 23 American marching bands were included in the line up of one hundred performing groups. The New Year's Day Parade Festival offers an amazing array to see many music ensembles – marching bands, concert bands, jazz bands, orchestras and choirs – that participate in it each year.

There are few musical venues in the world that can provide the exhilarating performance experiences, the actual 'walking back in time' offerings of English history and the absolute absorption into a culture as that made possible with this festival. You should expect that the parade will take between two and three hours to pass by, if you want to see it all.

Diversity rules

There is always some action happening as the parade moves along the route, and because the parade has to halt fairly frequently as bands or cheerleaders stop to perform for the spectators, this action is often right in front of your viewing spot – but be considerate of the others close-by with the same thoughts as you.

The action can be anything from the frantic movements of groups of synchronised dancers to pop music, or the slower waving from Beauty Queens or Morris Club owners sitting in their cars. The impact available for your shots is increased by the bright colours of the huge variety of costumes, so you can decide whether to focus on one main colour or go mad with a rainbow of colours. Where else will you be able to photograph such a diverse set of people – from the colour of Notting Hill carnival costumes, the culture of Pearly Kings & Queens, the rock'n'roll dancing of Cheerleaders, to clowns clowning about?

In order to take the photos I used a Konica Minolta Dynax 5D, mostly with the 24-105mm (effectively about 36-160mm) and a flashgun, set to create RAW files. You may want to include a longer telephoto zoom such as a 75-200mm if you are trying to home in on some of the performers. Of course you don't have to take a DSLR as some of today's advanced digital compacts will provide many of the functions necessary to achieve decent shots.

One creative tool you can try is slow speed sync when you use the flash to add a small amount of

fill-in flash which provides some detail alongside the blur caused by a slow shutter speed. To do this effectively, I use the flashgun off camera (on a hand bracket) which is when a DSLR comes into its own. Occasionally I also added some more movement by simultaneously using the zoom range during exposure. Set the ISO to 100 if you want a lot of blur, or 200 or even 400 if trying for sharper results. If you are using flash, try to avoid including any road signs in the background as their highly reflective surfaces show up brightly – even if they seem far away.

One item you can definitely leave behind is a tripod. Now that memory card prices have fallen, you can load up with an 8GB or 16GB to avoid changing that in the middle of shooting.

My post-production work was done in the manufacturer's software (*Dimage Master*), tweaking the tone exposure compensation and/or the White Balance to make the results more to my liking. Just a couple of photos were enhanced in *Photoshop*, mostly to crop an image.

How 2009 went

Bob Bone, Executive Director of the Parade said of the 2009 event: "We had wonderful crowds on the streets – and a terrific reaction from our global TV audience. The feedback has been fantastic – giving London the perfect platform to show what it has to offer."

The Borough of Merton carried off top prize in The Let's Help London Challenge – earning their mayoral charity £7,500 and a share of the street collection. Their entry entitled "Winter Wonderland" celebrated the borough's parks and open spaces – with a dramatic moving tableau – featuring elves, fairies and a snow queen.

The celebrants, led off by the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Greater London, the Lord Mayor of Westminster, and London's Town Crier, are as diverse and colourful as London Boroughs – from Redbridge, Hounslow, to Croydon, Havering - where entries can be of any type – a float, band, dance group or costumes that reflect the spirit and history of their community:

American Marching Bands – from places as diverse as Wauwatosa, Atlanta and Lakeville, Minnesota; often award-winning performers.

Falun Gong (Chinese traditions and culture)

Red Hat Society

London Fire Brigade

Universal Cheerleaders

Association (UCA) & Universal Dance



Above: not all pipers are Scots! A member of the Shree Muktajeevan Pipe Band, playing in the well-established tradition of Pakistan where most of the world's Highland bagpipes are now manufactured. By combining a slow shutter speed with flash and zooming while tracking the movement, a dynamic effect is created.



Charing Cross stations are all on or very near the Parade route.

Embankment, St James's Park and Green Park are all a short distance away.

Please note: London Transport will be operating a reduced service on New Year's Day, so allow some extra time for your journey.

By bus: A number of buses serve the Strand/Piccadilly areas. These include numbers 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 22, 23, 38, 91, 77a and 176

Buses 3, 12, 24, 53, 88, 109 and 211 serve Whitehall. However please check with London Transport Travel Information (020 7222 1234) as to which buses will be diverted because of the parade.

By rail: Charing Cross British Rail station is about 5 minutes walk away from Trafalgar Square, which is at the middle of the parade route.

Where can you park (although driving is best avoided)?

NCP and Masterpark car parks will be open – for a list of their properties in the area visit www.ncp.co.uk and www.masterpark.org.uk.

But many roads in the vicinity of the parade will be closed for hours before and after the Parade, so you should check beforehand.

Of course, if you can find a taxi, they'll know which roads are closed and where to take you!



A member of the Universal Cheerleaders Association caught with a great smile – flash again helps freeze the action, while sunshine adds a touch of backlight.

Below: a map of the route.

Association (UDA), again from USA
Little Big Truck company
London Pearly Kings
and Queens Society
Donkey Breed Society
Clowns International
UK Muscle Bike Club
Goldwing Owners Club

having fun and supporting a good cause – and this can include you with your digital or film camera – go on, make this your New Year's resolution! It's been mine for many years!

Planning it

How do you get there? To plan your journey door to door visit the Transport For London Website or alternatively call Journey Plan for the same service: (+0044) (0)20 7222 1234.

By tube (London Underground): Westminster, Piccadilly Circus,



Winter wonderland

So now you may want to visit a London that on 1st January used to be nothing but closed shops, restaurants, dark theatres, but now is transformed to a vibrant place filled with people

Autumn techniques

After the green, some might say monotonous, colours of Summer, most photographers look forward to the season of real colour - Autumn. As with Winter, it is never easy to tell in advance just how "good" it will turn out from a photographic point of view because it varies so much from year to year, but it is always an exciting prospect.

In my opinion, Autumn and Spring are the most dynamic seasons – seasons of change and this is what makes them so refreshing. This is not to understate the merits of Winter, which may have repeated peaks and troughs but without the same feeling of progression created through different species of plants changing colour at different times and at different rates.

Although mid-October through to the first week in November may deliver the peak of autumnal colour and mood, the season starts much earlier than that. Early September signals the start of the changes, particularly in upland, moorland or mountainous areas, with the following 9-10 weeks providing wonderful variety. Deciduous trees are the obvious attraction but senescence is evident in grasses, shrubs, parks, hedgerows, harvest fields and perhaps even your own garden. Larch trees can give wonderful rich golden colours which are accentuated when they are mixed with dark evergreen conifers. Fruits such as rosehips and rowans can add further colour, while on the ground, fungi are abundant. Evidence of Autumn is everywhere, even in cities.

Particularly appealing early on, is the mix of subtle colours with greens, yellows and browns harmonising in a pleasing manner and conveying a real sense that change is under way. Later on, frost or snow may combine with autumn colours to create images showing two seasons in one – a true bridging of the seasons. Even in the mountainous regions of Britain, this combination can never be guaranteed, but it is always on my wish list. If it does happen, the likelihood is that the snow will not persist for more than a day or two. An ND grad filter may prove useful in such situations to balance the exposure difference between snow and exposed land.

The coating of wax on leaf surfaces can be rather reflective, giving the leaves a shiny appearance. A polarising filter will cut through this sheen and reveal the true underlying colours, often even

Duncan McEwan runs through the basics for getting brighter Autumn colours and exploiting those fallen leaves into the shorter days of Winter.



Rannoch Birches: Good colour contrast with the clouds being so important in completing the composition. Alpha 100 + Sony DT 16-80mm ZA lens. 1/10 @ f13 (+1.3 compensation). Lee polariser. ISO 200.

Rowan Tree: A demonstration of how damp, overcast conditions can produce excellent colour. Alpha 100 + Minolta 70-210mm f2.8 SSM lens. 1/40 @ f10 (-0.3 compensation). Lee polariser. ISO 200.



on dull days. Sometimes it is not always easy to anticipate its effect on vegetation, so it is worth rotating it in the hand to see if it is having any effect before fitting it to the lens.

Another filter that finds favour with some photographers is an "enhancing" filter which intensifies red/orange/brown colours. Its effect can be very dramatic but often overpowering. As a similar, but much more controllable, result can be achieved in *Photoshop* or *Lightroom*, its merits do not justify the high cost of this filter. With image processing software, it is easy to adjust colours and saturation to give dramatic results but it is all too easy to 'go over the top' by boosting colours to the extent that they look unnatural - a measure of restraint may be necessary if your aim is to faithfully represent the scene as it appeared to the eye. Some Alpha models have an 'Autumn' setting in the Creative Style menu which enhances reds and yellows which are so widespread in the autumn palette of colours. Some may choose to use this as an easy way of achieving punchy Velvia-like colours at the time of taking.

Composition is a key consideration in all types of photography but where wonderful colours prevail, it is all too easy to give inadequate attention to the composition. In the picture of the fishing boat, the hillside was fairly flatly lit and as a result not portrayed as well as it would have been with more directional side-lighting. To strengthen the image, I decided on a symmetrical composition with the triangular corners reminding me of the mounts that used to be used to fix small prints into an album. The result is a strong, original composition which, although it may break conventional rules, compensates for the limited quality of the lighting. The inclusion of any pale sky would have been a serious distraction and excluding it has allowed the colours to assume their full impact.

Achieving colour contrast is often easy at this time of year and setting golden foliage against a blue sky can provide the most obvious opportunity. While a polariser will

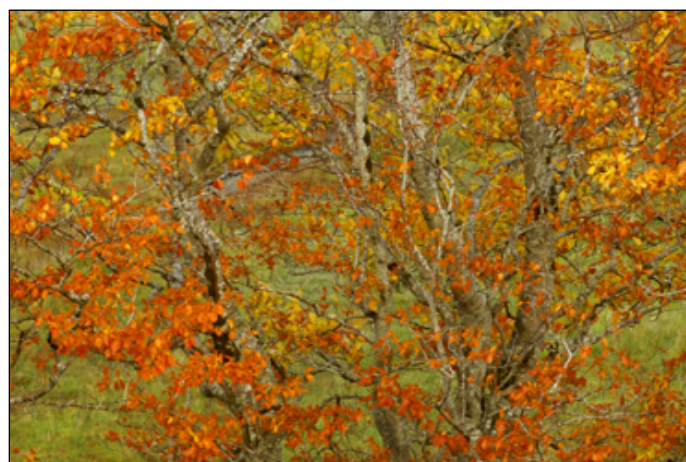
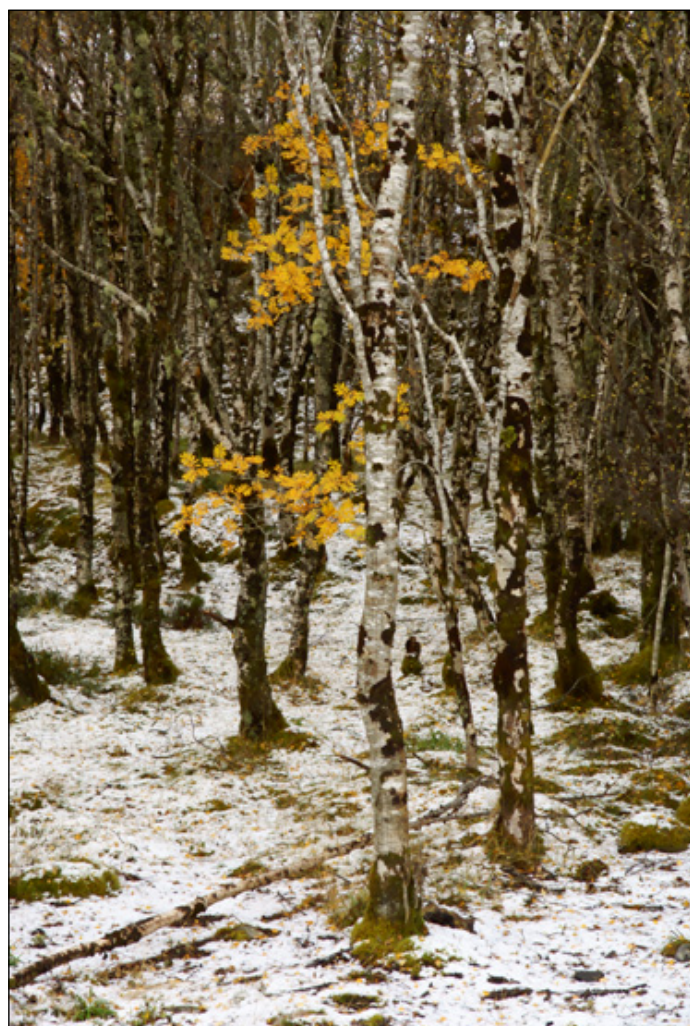


First Snow: Two seasons in one, by Loch Maree in Torridon.

Alpha 100 + Sony DT 16-80mm ZA lens. 1/320 @ f8 (+0.3 compensation). Lee 0.6 ND grad. ISO 200.

Swirling Leaves: The movement of leaves in the water is emphasised by using a slow shutter speed. A polariser reduced highlight reflections on the rock and the fallen leaves. Alpha 100 + Minolta 70-210mm f2.8 SSM lens. 1/20 @ f13 (+0.3 compensation). Lee polariser. ISO 100.





Top: Loch Lomond. Purists might prefer the boat on the left but other compositional considerations took priority. Alpha 100 + Sony DT 16-80mm ZA lens. 1/60 @ f7.1. ISO 200. Left: Two Seasons: A touch of colour in an otherwise monochromatic scene. Taken in rather dismal conditions. Alpha 100 + Sony DT 16-80mm ZA lens. 1/80 @ f8 (+0.7 compensation). ISO 200. Above: Autumn Tapestry. A typical palette of autumnal colours, helped by the green field showing through the gaps. Alpha 100 + Minolta 70-210mm f2.8 SSM lens. 1/40 @ f10. ISO 400.

enhance the effect, avoid using one if looking directly overhead as the sky will go unnaturally dark blue.

While all kinds of light can be put to good use in Autumn, strong sunlight shining through colourful foliage can often give the most spectacular results, maximising colour and giving a glowing quality to leaves. It works well at different scales – single leaves, part of a branch, a single

tree or a wide expanse of woodland.

Autumn is also a season in which to be creative. Effective techniques are the use of selective focus at a wide aperture, or using slow shutter speeds, which pick up movement in vegetation while rocks or tree trunks remain sharp. In both cases, some wonderful mixing of colour can occur.





*Beech Woodland : Dramatic colours created by strong sunlight shining through the leaves.
Alpha 100 + Sony DT 16-80mm ZA lens. 1/20 @ f9. ISO 200.*

*Glen Torridon: A combination of colour and mood, typical of the West Highlands in Autumn.
KM Dynax 7D + Minolta 28-70mm f2.8 G lens. 1/80 @ f9 (-0.3 compensation). ISO 200.*

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



Samyang manual 85mm

Perhaps because of the diameter of its rear group the Samyang 85mm $f1.4$ Aspherical IF lens is not made in Pentax 42mm screw fit. Instead, the Korean lens-maker which also manufactures this design for Vivitar offers Canon, Nikon and Alpha mount versions. The most functional of these is the Nikon version which has an AI-Nikkor style aperture function. On the Alpha variant, the aperture is purely manual. There is no coupling to auto stop-down, let alone couple the metering.

With a typical price from European suppliers (the main agent is in Poland) of around £200 plus postage, the Samyang is certainly cheaper than any alternative 85mm $f1.4$ including secondhand Minolta classics which can fetch four times that at the drop of an eBay bid.

Is it as good? This is a difficult one. It's quite exceptional fully open and at $f2.8$, reaching peak performance at $f4$ and if anything softening a bit when stopped down. With most Sony or Minolta AF SLR bodies, the metering is very accurate at $f4$ and the screen is equally bright at all apertures between $f4$ and $f1.4$.

The minimum focus of exactly 1m is not stunning for close-ups, but it is not really meant for that. The seven-blade diaphragm has a curved design creating something close to nine-blade circular effect at wider settings, and losing some accuracy of shape on the way down to $f22$.

The manual focus action is ultra-smooth, perhaps because the entire mount is made of plastic. The glass unit may be top quality, but the barrel is budget priced. The aperture ring in half stops is rather vague and light in action.

My Samyang is not in a very good state because after ordering an 85mm chip and contact set from James Lao, it was necessary to hack into the bayonet mount to make space for the chip. The mount metal is extremely soft alloy, and the grinding wheel used to attack it went through it like butter, taking out far more than intended. In the process of tidying this up I found that wire cutters were easily able to trim the mount alloy, no need even for a file. I could have neatly cut the recess for the chip that way.

Moreover, the chip ordered (intended for M42 mount adaptors) was not necessary and a smaller one made for Sigma conversions would have been fine and needed

From Korea come Samyang lenses, oddly ambitious designs in a purely manual form. With a 14mm $f2.8$ due for launch early in 2010, we look at the 85mm $f1.4$ which is already gaining a reputation.



Above: the Samyang 85mm $f1.4$ on the Alpha 900, without the hood. The front element is well recessed. Below: with the hood fitted. It's fairly effective.



I damaged the very soft metal of the mount when cutting into it to fit the chip shown here. A perfectly clean job should be easy enough.

no surgery to the mount. There was space to fit it as part of the black rear element surround is actually part of the mount ring.

This light alloy mount is secured by three screws lightly tapped into the plastic of the lens barrel rear face. It hangs on by almost nothing. Still, with the messed up bayonet flange and the very flimsy mount, it fits the cameras perfectly smoothly and securely.

The chip – not fitted by Samyang, an oversight they should correct – enables manual focus confirmation on Alpha bodies. Without the chip, you must rely entirely on visual focusing. That would work fine with the new Alpha 500 and 550 in Manual Focus Check mode.

The focus light in my Alpha 900 was very sensitive to the Samyang at any aperture from $f1.4$ to $f6.3$. It was possible to pinpoint focus quickly and accurately. I got the impression that it might even be more accurate than AF.

This is a neat small lens (72mm thread) and comes with a deep lens shade that threatens to wear out its own bayonet in minutes not months, plus a soft pouch which will not fit the lens and hood together – pop lens in pouch, push hood over the end and it's snug.

I have yet to find a job for the Samyang – maybe extension tubes will help me use that near-zero depth of field!

– DK





Above: hen at f4.5, and 300dpi section; below, bride and wedding photo shoot at f5.6, with 150dpi enlarged section equal to 40" print.



The HVL-F20AM

Let's be clear. This flash should not be viewed as an "accessory flash" in the conventional sense. It is not much better than your camera's existing pop-up flash – in fact, if your camera does have a built-in pop-up flash, you can safely skip this article. You will most likely not benefit by owning this flash.

So why am I writing about this little flash so enthusiastically, and why does it warrant the space of a full magazine article? Simple: This little flash addresses my biggest gripe about the A900, which is the lack of a pop-up flash.

Why did Sony make that design decision? Well, way back in 1998, Minolta introduced its 2nd Pro autofocus film camera, the Dynax 9. An outstanding camera in all respects (just ask anyone who's used one); however when it was introduced the camera was widely criticized by the mainstream press because it violated the "simple common knowledge" that professional-calibre cameras don't have pop-up flashes. What these media idiots didn't realize was that the pop-up flash was there to trigger wireless flashes cheaply and easily (a foreign concept for all other brands at the time). The lesson: it's more important to cater to the needs of the visionless yet ignorant media instead of your customers.

Fast forward to 2008, with the introduction of the Alpha 900. Yes, the pentaprism was large to begin with

It's a tiny flashgun but its functions – as a wireless trigger – can be boosted with a modification. Gary Friedman performs infra-red surgery.

(to help facilitate the large viewfinder image), and there wasn't much room up top for a built-in flash, so there was some technical justification for not putting a flash up there. But the real truth is that Sony paid more attention to market research (and to what Canon was doing) than to its users when it decided to omit a pop-up flash. A900 users who wanted a fill-flash would just have to buy a separate accessory flash. And users like me who loved to use wireless flash, well, they had to buy the biggest, heaviest and most expensive flash in Sony's lineup: the HVL-F58AM flash just to control the other wireless flashes. This is progress? This is the kind of ridiculousness that Canon shooters have had to put up with until just recently.

Sony didn't apologize for this glaring feature omission. Nor did they say, "Hang on... a new, tiny accessory flash which will address all of your concerns is on the drawing board". I was expecting Sony to introduce an Infrared wireless flash controller, like its competitors, which would be very tiny and would only do wireless, not fill flash. But in May 2009 Sony quietly announced the HVL-F20AM flash (which I will hereby refer to as the "20"), and oh, by the way, when it's attached to an A900 it can trigger wireless flashes, too. The best of both worlds!

Wait, it gets better. The larger distance between the lens and the flash means that there's a reduced chance that the front of your lens will cast a shadow on your subject when shooting in macro mode. It also means less red-eye than what most pop-up flashes will produce. This is also the first pop-up flash (well, that's essentially what this is) that you can bounce off the ceiling. And unlike the A700's pop-up flash, the 20 flash can fire wireless flash signals at 5 frames per second. Oh, and for less than the price of a roll of film and developing



Top: the HVL-F20AM, a miniature £120 flashgun for the Alpha 850 and 900 with other uses, seen next to a cigarette packet. Non politically correct, but makes the point.

Above left two shots: wide direct and bounce settings. Above right two shots: the Tele/Wide switch on the side of the rotating head, and the Direct/Bounce switch on the flash body.



From the left: the HVL-F20AM mounted on the Alpha 900, flipped up for use. The gun in folded down position which also switches it off. Right, the two AAA cells shown here are Energiser Lithium - light weight and much more power.



you can modify it to be instantly transformed into an INFRARED wireless flash controller at the turn of a knob. But more on all of that later.

What it does

So let's start with the basics, and let's compare this flash's performance with that of the A700's pop-up flash (and in doing so, every other Sony DSLR's pop-up flash as well.). The first thing you should know that the A700's pop-up flash, in the best case, will only allow a shot every 0.7 seconds. Even if you're using it as a wireless flash controller (which outputs relatively little light), the fastest shooting speed you can achieve is 0.7s. Contrast this with the 20 flash atop the A900, where you can shoot at a full 5 fps, regardless of whether the flash is fully recharged or not!

In my very informal tests, for a subject 5 feet away and lens set to 50 mm at ISO 200, the 20 flash was able to illuminate the subject properly at 5 frames per second for the first five frames. After that, the pictures started getting darker. I don't know if this was intentional or not, but I applaud this behaviour nevertheless – when shooting people using a fill flash (where the built-in flash is only there to lighten the shadows; not to provide all the illumination), sometimes it's more important to get the right expression than for the fill light to be perfect. I'd rather the camera shoot when I press the button, even if the fill flash isn't ready. Never before have I used a modern automatic camera that allowed me this option.

Interestingly, this very same behavior was observed when shooting at 5 fps in wireless controller mode – the 20 seemed to send out control signals on every single frame for upwards of 30 frames (I stopped testing after that). But interestingly, even when the off-camera flash was set to manual output mode at 1/32nd power (so it could keep up with the 5 fps control signals), the flash only the first five or six shots – and it ignored subsequent signals until I stopped shooting for a second. My conclusion? When the 20 is not fully recharged even the minimal-energy control signals aren't properly formed, resulting in mis-firings. Now we all know that nobody would use the flash this way in the real world, but as an engineer I like to know the limits of my equipment.

This begs the question, "So can I put the 20 flash on to another Sony DSLR and get faster shot-to-shot times?" When used as a fill flash, yes; however you can't use the 20 as a wireless controller on any camera



A wide-angle shot – not enough coverage

other than the A900 (and the A850).

As far as raw power goes, the differences are negligible – the 20 has a guide number of 20, where the A700's flash's guide number is 12. (In the world of guide numbers, the larger the number, the more powerful the flash. As a reference point, the high-end HVL-F58AM has a guide number of – you guessed it – 58.)

Wireless Flash Protocol

It's not very widely known that when the A900 and the large 58 flash were introduced, Sony introduced a brand new wireless flash protocol which offered ratio control and different timings to help address the problem of lazy-eye. The new flash protocol is incompatible with the old flashes, though. So when I got my 20 flash I was concerned that I would not be able to trigger my legacy 56 and 36 flashes.

It turns out that Sony was concerned about this issue too, and made the decision to have the 20 use the OLD wireless flash protocol. This is good news, because it means it can trigger a wider variety of accessory flashes:

- HVL-F58AM
- HVL-F42AM
- HVL-F56AM
- HVL-F36AM
- Minolta 5600HS(D)
- Minolta 3600HS(D)

Older wireless flashes (specifically the xi-series flashes) won't work with this or any DSLR.

Controls

Mechanically, the flash is about as simple as you can get. In keeping with the pop-up flash analogy, you pull it up to turn it on, and push it down to turn it off. (The flash will also automatically turn off and on along with your camera body – a nice feature!) The flash has two small LED's on the back: "On" and "Chg" (charge); there are no other displays or buttons. You can't put the flash into manual output mode (not even on top of an A700 set to manual output).

the frame, and the pre-flash sensor (peering at the focusing screen) can sometimes miss the small object reflecting the weak pre-flash. This can result in a greater number of overexposure errors when shooting flash with wide lenses.

Worse, when shooting a group of people with a wide-angle lens, the distance between the flash and the subject in the far corner is greater than the distance between the flash and the person who's front-and-center, meaning the people in the corner will receive less illumination. The wider the lens, the greater the effect (see photo, top). And so, since I generally avoid shooting wide angle and flash, wide diffusers are a feature I rarely use.

However, there is a feature I wish the flash had instead of the wide diffuser: Instead of moving a diffusion panel in front of the flash tube, I wish I could instead turn the knob and have an Infrared filter appear there.

Why an IR filter?

While it's true that the "Morse-code-like" wireless flash commands which emanate from the 20 are of relatively low intensity and will rarely show up in your shot, there are some shooting conditions (for example when shooting a close subject at a large f/stop like f2.8) where the signals will indeed affect the exposure. (see below, a shot that was designed specifically so that the wireless command flashes would show up in the exposure).



Without IR filter



With IR filter

Since nearly all DSLRs are designed to block infrared light, and since all flashes are designed to receive it, putting an infrared filter in front of the flash will have the flash transmit control signals that are invisible to the camera, yet just as effective at controlling the off-camera flashes.

In my books, I had always advocated taping a strip of exposed and developed color negative film (yes, FILM! Remember that?) and placing it over the pop-up flash, making for an instant and cheap infrared filter for the pop-up, ensuring that the control signals will NEVER show up! Furthermore, putting an IR filter in front of the flash does not seem to affect the distance at which a wireless flash can be triggered.

But in the past, affixing and removing a piece of film on the flash was always kind of a pain. Wouldn't it be great to modify the 20 to be able to just dial-in an infrared filter on demand??

On-Demand IR Filter

I have, in fact, performed such a modification on my 20 flash: I've taken it apart and taped a strip of exposed and developed color negative film on top of the movable wide-angle diffuser. So now invoking the diffuser invokes an IR filter as well. It's a straightforward modification which you can do yourself. And the hardest part is just opening up the case (and voiding the warranty in the process). I never minded voiding the warranty as long as I could get my equipment to do what I wanted.

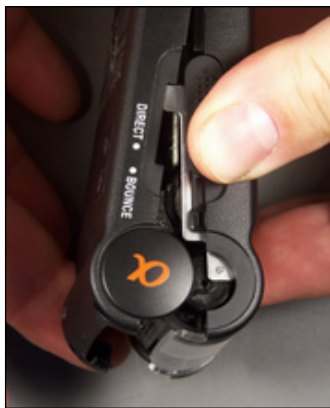
Before I go into how to take the unit apart I should throw in the standard disclaimers: taking a flash apart, even to improve its function, will void the warranty. And although the wires going from the capacitor to the flash tube are pretty well insulated, the possibility of electric shock is always there if you're not careful. If you're not comfortable taking things apart, you might want to enlist the help of a teenager who's into this stuff. But really, in the case of this flash it's pretty straightforward.

So here's how to do it yourself, step-by-step:

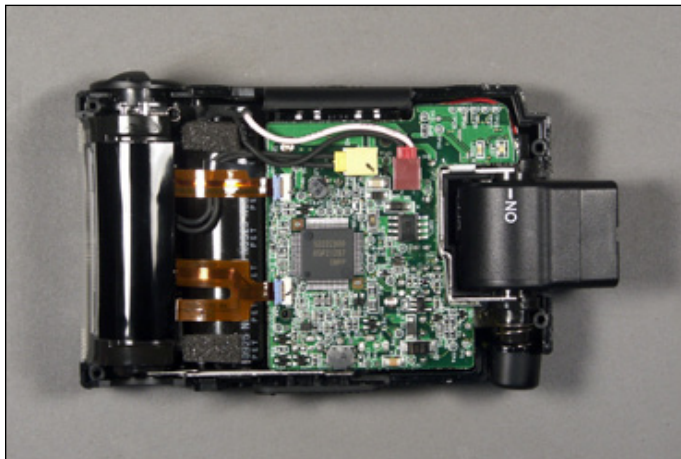
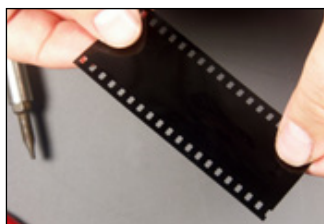
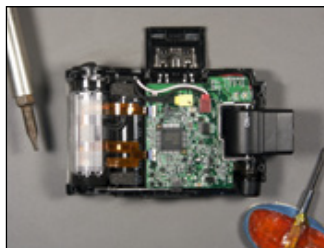
Before you begin, make sure the wide-angle flash diffuser is NOT in front of the flash tube (turn the knob to the "Tele" position).

There are four holes on the back of the flash, each of which is filled in with a small solid rubber tube. You can pull these out rather easily by sticking it with a pin and pulling upward (top photo).

Under the rubber tubes are four Philips-head screws. Using a



Gary Friedman's infrared modification is carried out at your own risk and is not endorsed by the publisher!



small jewelers screwdriver, remove these screws and put them aside.

The two halves of the case are still being held together by internal latches, and to get them apart they must be pried open using a large flat-blade screwdriver. Start from the bottom of the case where the flash hotshoe is; pry the case apart, working your way toward the end which holds the flash (next two pictures).

Be careful not to disturb the physical switch which controls the bounce head. Also try to keep the pieces holding the flash tube in place from coming apart. You can put it back together easily enough, but it's better not to disturb it to begin with.

Now you have the case open as shown in the picture centre left. Our goal is to tape an infrared filter to the wide-angle flash diffuser, visible on the left. Take a piece of fully exposed and developed color negative film and cut it into a strip approximately 3.8cm wide by 1.2cm high.

Affix the piece of film to the wide angle flash diffuser by using a strip of double-stick tape of equal size. You can see the finished modification in the final photo.

Don't try to turn the wheel to turn the flash diffuser while the flash is open; there's something about the design of it that makes this difficult while the case is apart. Once the case is put back together it should turn again quite easily. Put the case back together again and put the 4 screws back in (the pressure of the screws are important!).

Test the new modification.

You should be able to turn the wide-angle diffuser panel knob and have the new IR filter rotate to the front of the flash tube.

Now try it on your A900 or A850! With the IR filter in front of the tube, set your camera to MENU>Camera Menu 2>Flash Mode>Wireless.

Take an off-camera flash, attach it to the camera's hot shoe, turn on the flash, and press the camera's shutter release button halfway. This puts the flash into wireless mode. Remove the flash and place it somewhere off-camera, pointing toward your subject. Put the 20 onto your camera, turn it on, and fire a test shot. Your wireless flash should go off and there won't be any control signals in your shot, even if the subject is close and you're shooting wide open!

Now you can be proudly include yourself in the new "DIY" generation of people who improve their products without waiting for manufacturers to do it for them!



Alpha e-Books by Gary Friedman:
www.friedmanarchives.com

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?

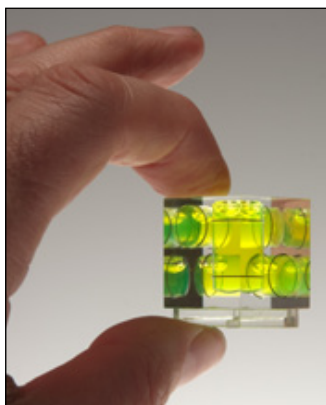
Call Adrian – the same goes for lens caps, body caps, flash 'feet', AC adaptors, battery packs, lens hoods, cases, straps, LCD protectors, eyepiece magnifiers, LCD hoods, hand grips...

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 accessories sourced is an electronic spirit level – the clear acrylic block level we showed in the last issue has been a big seller. On the right, we show a Seculine Cross spirit level from Intro2020 (£59.99). Adrian has found one made to fit the Alpha accessory shoe, it's not identical but you will get the idea – LEDs are visible above your eye and help you get the horizon dead straight.

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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UK title for club director

It did not seem right to get local publicity for my first national awards win. But I'm happy to show it here as an Alpha success. Such a grand title seems like false pretences; there are countless better 'Press, PR and Stock' photographers out there in Britain. I know it and they know it!

That is not how awards work – either for the British Institute of Professional Photography, which I've been a member of for 30 years, or the Master Photographers Association which I joined in 1981. They are judged on the basis of a single picture rising to the top through a process of anonymous viewing and computerised marking with a team of five judges.

Until 2009, all awards for both bodies (which ran joint awards for five years from 2004) had to be submitted at great expense as finished 20 x 16" exhibition prints. Costing from £12+VAT each (special basic deal from Loxley Colour or Colorworld Imaging, two national labs which also arranged delivery of entries directly by van) each well-presented print might run to £40 or more with a top grade mount material and laminated finish or overlays.

That was beyond my budget as an editorial photographer – never having

David Kilpatrick became UK Master Press PR & Stock Photographer of the Year earlier this month at the 2009 Master Photography Awards. Here's the story behind the winning image below – and five Awards of Merit.

any need for mounted exhibition prints, and no in-house mounting. Thirty years ago as a partner in a commercial and advertising studio I had the facilities, but we were too busy to think of awards.

Soon after that I became editor of the house magazine for one or the other of the two pro bodies, having already been editor for the then-HIP back in 1975-6. I felt it better not to enter awards as an 'insider', no matter how rigorously and anonymously they were judged.

Then, in 2008, the BIPP's magazine editor Steve Hynes broke this informal rule and entered, winning a nomination. In 2009 MPA changed the entry rules to 10 x 8"

unmounted prints, to reduce the huge workload of sorting and handling over 3,000 20 x 16s. I decided to pay the £8+VAT per image entry fee, and chose 12 published, assignment and stock images from the last 12 months.

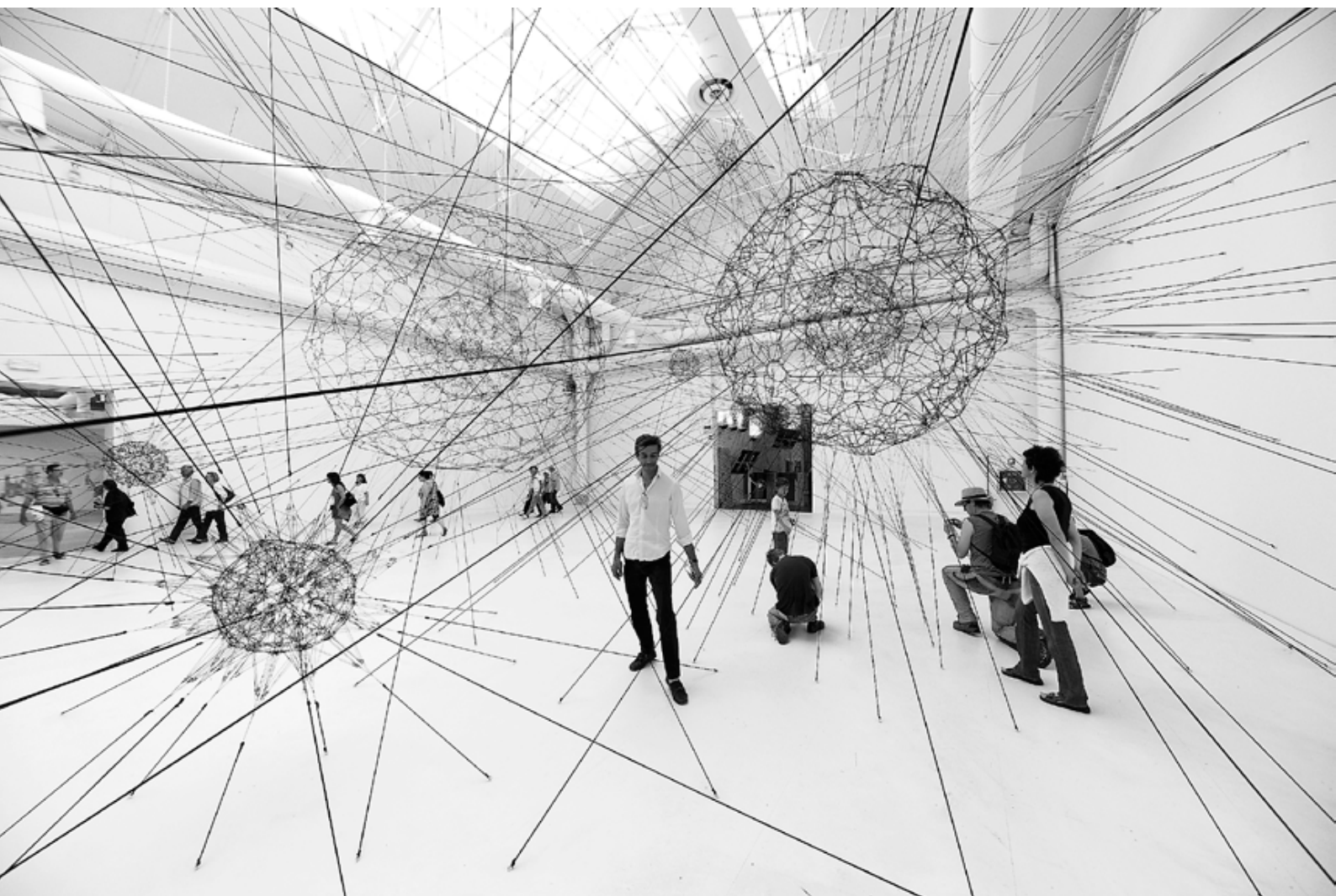
I was surprised to learn that five had earned Certificates of Merit (above 80 points) and one an Award of Excellence (above 90 points) which also put it in the running for the category, one of the Bronze awards. The picture – below – went through to win. It shows an art installation at the Venice Biennale, by Frankfurt artist Tomas Saraceno. It is an elastic rope construction called 'Galaxies Forming Along Filaments, like Droplets Forming on



Receiving the award from MPA President Desi Fontaine and awards guest speaker, comedian Mike Osman.

the Strands of a Spider's Web 2009'. It was taken using the Alpha 900 with Sigma 12-24mm zoom at 12mm.

The merit successes, right, were: Manchester Airport walkway (Alpha 900, Sigma 12-24mm); Spittal Beach and Lighthouse (A900, 17-35mm); Viola (A900, 28-105mm Minolta); Red Hot Chilli Pipers shot at the Alpha 900 launch using the Alpha 700 with 16-80mm CZ; and Corsac Fox at the Galloway Wildlife Park, Alpha 700, Tamron 70-300mm at 150mm and f4.5. – DK







OUR WORLD

Liz O. Baylen: Born in 1979, she graduated from Ohio University's School of Visual Communications in 2001 and began working for The Washington Times. She has covered assignments around the world and was selected as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize while with The Washington Times. Most recently, her images have appeared in several major newspapers.

Photo data: SIGMA 24-70mm F2.8 IF EX DG HSM. 1/800 second exposure at F5.0

LIZ O. BAYLEN SHOOTS THE WORLD WITH A SIGMA LENS.

An unusual scene captured by a Sigma lens - croquet in New York's Central Park!

This photograph was captured by a Sigma lens, a large aperture standard zoom lens optimised for full-frame digital SLR cameras. Benefiting from the latest optical design, a compact body length of only 94.7mm is achieved. Extra Low Dispersion (ELD), Special Low Dispersion (SLD) glass elements and an aspherical lens compensate for colour aberrations and ensure high image quality. The Super Multi-Layer Coating reduces flare and ghosting, and the Hyper Sonic Motor (HSM) ensures quiet, high-speed autofocus while allowing full-time manual focus override.

Compact, large aperture standard zoom lens featuring an HSM system and optimised for full-frame digital SLR cameras.



● Available for Sigma, Canon, Nikon, Sony, and Pentax cameras

Matched lens hood and fitted padded case included.

SIGMA 24-70^{mm} F2.8 IF EX DG HSM

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