



# ONE CAREFUL OWNER:

LEICA M9

The M9 is undeniably one of the world's most desirable bits of photographic kit, but how does it shape up in real life?

WORDS & PICTURES STEVE GOSLING



I HAVE TO ADMIT UP FRONT THAT I love Leica cameras and I've been a Leica M user for many years. There are occasions when my Canon and Hasselblad outfits are just too big and bulky and my old Leica M6TTL meets my need for a high quality camera that's small, light and reliable. But this camera isn't digital, and in recent times I've grown to enjoy the flexibility, quality and convenience of digital photography.

While searching for a digital alternative to the M6TTL I tried the Leica M8, but was put off by the 1.33x crop factor and the need to use filters to counteract the camera's increased IR sensitivity. Then along came the M9. With its ability to use all of my →







Leica lenses at their full-frame focal lengths and offering a way of working that is both familiar as well as enjoyable, this camera was a dream come true. Admittedly an expensive dream – at a shade under £5000, it certainly wasn't cheap. But I decided to bite the bullet back in May 2010 and so far I've been very happy with my purchase.

For a start it feels just like my M6TTL. It's almost identical in size and weight and is just as simple to use due to the traditional minimalist and uncluttered design. The optical viewfinder is so bright and clear it makes you wonder how you could ever be satisfied with a DSLR.

The base-plate is removed to change SD cards and the battery, so the experience is identical to loading film in the M6TTL. I use Sandisk Extreme III 4GB cards and have had no practical problems with compatibility or write speeds. The M9 has a reputation for being a voracious consumer of battery power but this hasn't been my experience – one battery easily lasts me for a whole day's dawn to dusk photography.

Like my M6, the M9 is a quiet and very unobtrusive camera to use. The camera offers a number of shutter release and



cocking options to minimise both vibration and sound and these work very well. My personal choice is the soft and discreet mode that facilitates slow speed handheld photography and only re-cocks the shutter upon letting go of the release button, thus minimising noise at the time of shooting.

But it's the image quality that is really →

“ THE M9'S OPTICAL VIEWFINDER IS SO BRIGHT AND CLEAR IT MAKES YOU WONDER HOW YOU COULD EVER BE SATISFIED WITH A DSLR ”

**PREVIOUS PAGE AND BELOW:** These shots of Venice are reflections in windows that try to capture the edgier side of the city and I've cross-processed them to reflect their slightly surreal nature.

**OPPOSITE** I was working in Italy earlier in the year on three subjects – bicycles, graffiti and old Fiat 500s. The M9 and the small Leica lenses are ideal for overseas photography when travelling light.

## INSIGHT: Usual camera settings

**EXPOSURE MODE:** Aperture-priority **LIGHT MEASURING MODE:** Centre-weighted (the only option) **FOCUS MODE:** Manual (the only option) **ISO:** 160 **WHITE-BALANCE:** Auto  
**CUSTOM FUNCTIONS:** Shutter release – Soft & Discreet mode



## Photo Kit Leica M9 User Test

outstanding. To the naked eye the 18-megapixel images appear to be on a par with the photographs from my 16-megapixel Phase One digital back. Of course this is due in no small part to the legendary optical abilities of those prime Leica lenses, with sharpness across the frame and excellent performance even wide open.

The camera offers two exposure modes, manual and aperture-priority. Both modes are based on a centre-weighted metering pattern and it's the latter that I use most frequently. Generally the camera gets it right but like any other centre-weighted system it's not foolproof. In particularly difficult lighting situations I analyse the histogram display to judge the amount of any exposure compensation required.

I'm very happy with the camera's colour reproduction – shades & tones are accurate and the AWB makes a good job of getting colour balance right. As I shoot Raw, any fine-tuning is easily made at the processing stage. The M9 can record Raw files (in DNG format) as uncompressed (at 14-bit) or compressed (at 8-bit) files. As I'm always in pursuit of the best file quality possible I've only ever shot uncompressed DNG images, although I know some Leica M9 users who maintain that there is little difference between the two options.

As a committed mono photographer the M9's black & white conversions are particularly exciting – giving the most filmic results I've ever seen from a digital file. Even photographs taken at relatively high ISOs convert well to mono, with any noise looking like film grain. Lovely!

My normal ISO setting is the camera's base of ISO 160 and I adjust upwards when required to enable safe handholding of the camera, something that is much easier with a rangefinder than an SLR as there's no mirror induced vibration. I've used ISO 2500 and the results are more than suitable for publication and at ISO 1250 I'd happily produce large prints.

So is it the perfect camera? Almost. It's certainly very good for what I use it for – travel and some landscape work. This is a camera best suited to wide-angle or standard lens photography. The maximum focal length available is 135mm so its capabilities are limited but no one system is ever likely to meet all requirements.

For a camera costing £5000 I'm surprised that there is no sensor cleaning system built in (most current entry level DSLRs have this facility) but it's not a must have for me so I'll learn to live without it.

My one serious gripe with the M9 is the LCD monitor on the rear. I'm not the first reviewer to criticise its lack of size or resolution – much smaller on both counts than my Canon EOS 5D MkII. But the major issue for me is that the screen is made of plastic. After a few weeks of use my screen was covered in very fine scratches,



**“AS A MONO PHOTOGRAPHER THE M9'S BLACK & WHITE CONVERSIONS ARE EXCITING – GIVING THE MOST FILMIC RESULTS I'VE EVER SEEN FROM A DIGITAL FILE”**

**ABOVE:** I'm an avid people watcher and this project consists of my observations on relationships reflected in body language. Leica Ms are great for this type of work as they're quiet and discreet.

caused by nothing more abrasive than a plastic shirt button. At this price level Leica should have fitted the M9 with the tougher sapphire crystal screen that was used on the M8.2. It would have added to the cost but a plastic screen on a camera that is otherwise built to such high standards is just not acceptable.

The bottom line is, do I regret my purchase? No, I don't; it's a great tool to take photographs with. I can continue using my lovely Leica lenses and the image quality is to die for – to the point where I can almost forgive Leica for that screen – almost! O

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**Usual type of photography:**

Fine art, landscape and travel

**Would you buy this camera again:**

Yes, without a doubt

**What do you like most?** Image quality

**What do you like least?** The plastic LCD

**What feature/s would you like to see?**

A sapphire crystal LCD monitor

**What software do you use for Raw processing:** Capture One Pro