

DIGITAL RANGEFINDER RRP: \$9599

Leica M9-P

The Leica M9-P represents a legacy of fine design that stumbles awkwardly into the digital world, writes **Ewen Bell**

FOR TWO WEEKS I TRADED IN MY modern DSLR camera system to make a Leica M9-P my travel companion. I discovered a whole new respect for those professionals who have dedicated themselves to the brand, and discovered just how easily we take autofocus for granted.

High in the rice terraces of Guangxi province, a small guesthouse still displays a large poster of Chairman Mao in their lounge room. The familiar face of last century now looks out across a DVD player and satellite TV. Times have changed since Mao ruled the Middle Kingdom, and times have also changed since Leica was the most seductive choice for photographers.

I'd returned to China to travel some familiar territory and road test the Leica M9-P, the modestly badged version of Leica's traditional rangefinder

technology wrapped around a full-frame digital sensor. For years I've been excited about the idea of travelling with the generous Leica sensor packed into a tiny and elegant camera body.

Leica fans rarely miss an opportunity to highlight the dynamic range performance of the M9-P, the ultra-portable design and superb quality lenses. Indeed the lenses are made on a scale that ensures character and quality, but it was the body itself that most interested me. I wanted to know if I could trade-in my heavy DSLR equipment for something less intrusive and easier to travel with.

The body is built to last in ways the average user can't detect from feel alone, engineered for reliability and durability. Innovation and technology has largely been restricted to the dynamic range of the sensor. Rich in pixels and CCD performance, this compact format delivers specifications more familiar to studio work than street-wise travel. The downside of that is some inconsistent results at high ISO and heavy battery consumption.

“You don't look through the lens; these are not SLR cameras”

LENS ENVY

Two things I love with my lenses are wide angles and shallow focus, and the Leica 28mm f/2 gives me most of what I want from both. A modest sized lens that won't draw attention in a crowd, the 28mm has a nice guide-pin that makes it comfortable and quick to pull focus manually. The bokeh is nice when shooting wide open, but vignetting impacts the final image more than you expect for a lens worth half as much as the camera. For a little more dosh you can shop for a Leica 24mm f/1.4.

WE TESTED:

- » Leica 28mm f/2 Summicron-M ASPH RRP: \$5799
- » Leica 24mm f/1.4 Summilux-M ASPH RRP: \$9799

Buying advice
Shooting with the M9-P feels more like the old film days. So if that's what you love, great! But be careful what you wish for.

FAIR COMPARISON

Up against a modern DSLR, the Leica M9-P looks totally out of place, and to be fair we've resisted over-emphasising that direct comparison. This is a camera for a very specific audience; it's not for everyone. Wildlife photographers need not apply.

There was one obvious aspect of travelling with the M Series that I hadn't fully thought through: the absence of autofocus.

Focus pocus

Earlier this year a Leica fan had walked me through the rangefinder concept and demonstrated how it worked. As far as manual focus is concerned the system is impressive by virtue of its simplicity. Two images are presented in the viewfinder of a Leica M series, a dominant image viewed immediately through the glass and a second image bounced off mirrors from the other side of the body. You don't look through the lens; these are not SLR cameras.



■ Tested: The Leica 28mm f/2 Summicron

BUCKETS OF STYLE

But could it be too much a case of style over substance? Fans will say no. But at almost \$10k, it lacks some of the ready advantages of even the most basic DSLR.

SUBTLE BRANDING

There's no mistaking the distinctive look of any Leica – but this small piece of branding is one of the only distinguishing features that marks this model as being an M9-P. Hence its “essence of discretion” marketing story.



CHOICE OF COLOURS?

Not especially. The world's smallest full-frame digital camera comes in either black or silver chrome. Its rough, vulcanite leatherette finishing also makes it safe and steady in-hand.

FOCUSING CHALLENGES

Shallow focus looks fabulous in your final images, but demands a huge amount of focusing accuracy when shooting. Even the tiniest of errors in distance and you'll be producing images that are virtually unusable.



WHAT WE THOUGHT

Love it:

- ✓ Small, quiet and subtle, this camera looks harmless when shooting in urban situations.
- ✓ The images are lovely within the functional ISO range and reflect the quality of your lens.

Like it:

- ✓ Selectable ISO limit and shutter speed when shooting in auto ISO mode.
- ✓ Great range of lenses to suit wide-angle work and shallow focus, but at a price.

Loathe it:

- ✗ Poor exposure metering means you miss too many shots.
- ✗ Composition through the viewfinder relies too much on your imagination.
- ✗ Rear screen is slow, small and low res, and so undermines the advantages of shooting digital.

» DETAILS

Manufacturer: Leica

RRP: \$9599

Lens mount: Leica M Bayonet with 6-bit lens encoding

Lens system: Leica M-Lenses from 16mm to 135mm

Sensor: CCD 18MP

Sensor size: Equivalent to full 35mm film format

Processor: Dual processors

Weight: 600g

Media: SD cards up to 2GB/SDHC cards up to 32GB

Website: leica.com

» VERDICT

Features: The attraction of the Leica M9-P is simple – divine optics and imaging packed into a beautiful design.

Quality: The compact form is achieved by skipping autofocus support. If you have the skill to drive the M9-P then your images will be unique.

Value: If you're addicted to autofocus on a DSLR system, then this won't be the Leica that makes you swap brands.

» RATING

7/10



IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

The radically shorter lenses of the Leica M series cameras are possible thanks to the lack of a rear mirror – vastly reducing the space between the back of the lens and the sensor.

“For the last decade I’d been leaning on modern autofocus. Now I found myself working hard just to take a simple shot”

A newfound respect

At this point my dependence on autofocus was becoming rather obvious, and I know all those dedicated Leica fans are having a good chuckle at my expense. Rightly so. I thought about all those gorgeous black and white images you see in the Leica magazines and suddenly understood just how hard those photographers have to work. Part of me was humbled by their commitment and effort.

There’s also a part of me that wonders how much better these Leica photographers might be if they had a solid autofocus in their hands. How many shots do they miss through the constraint of working in manual focus?

Photography doesn’t always work like that, however, because style and technique matter more than the equipment. That very constraint to establish focus and operate in a methodical manner is part of the Leica style. Working with a little patience and avoiding the desire to rush from shot to shot is something professionals strive for.

In my case I had a good sense of what shots I was missing by travelling over familiar territory with an unfamiliar camera. Apparently my style isn’t as slow and patient as I once imagined. I take my time to absorb the character of a scene before

REAR SCREEN BLUES

“I didn’t enjoy the partially obstructed view of the rangefinder, the painfully slow rendering of images on screen and the nearly useless pixel density that made it impossible to verify whether my focus selection was on the mark.”

Rangefinder technology is simple to implement, easy to keep straight and provides good feedback when trying to pull focus in a wide range of light conditions. The first cameras I owned were fully manual SLRs shooting film, but that was a lifetime ago. For the last decade I’d been leaning on modern autofocus technology to get the shot right, and now I found myself having to work hard just to take a simple shot.

If you’re migrating from an older Leica to the M9-P digital, this won’t be an issue. If you’re used to shooting in the studio with a medium format system, then you probably do everything with manual focus anyway. If you’re a lazy travel photographer like me who takes full advantage of technology at every turn, then the Leica M9-P requires a whole new skill-set, and perhaps a change of attitude as well.

Committing to a focal length

There are ways to shoot manual and still be ready for the moment, such as locking in f/11 and using the focus guides on the lens to target a rough range of subjects. Everything from 2m to 10m can be easily accommodated at f/11 on a 28mm lens, or 0.7m to 3m if that works better for your scene. Provided you have enough light, the wide depth of field approach will get the job done with minimal fuss.

The trouble is that once you commit to f/11 or higher you’re potentially hitting the ISO limits of the sensor. Worse than that, you’re not taking

BAGGING THE BADGE

What’s the difference between a Leica M9 and an M9-P? There’s a tougher material on the rear screen and a modest absence of Leica’s red dot logo on the front. A small etching of Leica’s brand name adjacent to the shutter is the only evidence of the true nature contained within.

advantage of the biggest asset of shooting with a Leica: extremely shallow depth of field from f/2 lens or lower combined with a large sensor. Small sensors like the APS format or compact cameras dilute the shallow focus effect, so the lovely big chip inside the M9-P is able to take advantage of f/2 or lower in ways that only a full-frame DSLR or medium format camera can.

It could be argued that if you’re going to shoot with a Leica M9-P at f/11 to compensate for the lack of autofocus then you may as well go and buy a Nikon 1 or Sony NEX, because you’re missing out on the best feature of the camera system.

Shallow focus looks fabulous in the final images, but demands a lot of accuracy when you’re shooting. A small error in distance and you’re image is unusable. Trying to grab my frames at f/2 and lock in focus through the rangefinder was much harder than I had anticipated. When you get your bearings on the subject, you quickly know whether you have focus or not – but the process is far from instantaneous. I missed a lot of great opportunities while fumbling around with the rangefinder.



SIZE MATTERS

The absence of a rear mirror as found in SLR cameras has profound implications for the design of Leica M lenses. The distance between the rear of the lens and the sensor is very small, which makes it possible to build very small lenses compared to DSLR cameras. Vignetting is typically harder to overcome on wide-angle lenses however, so the Leica M9-P uses modified microlenses on the sensor to improve light detection towards the edge.

The sum total of these limitations makes the experience of shooting with the M9-P feel more like film than digital. At every turn you’re imagination has to step in where the technology falls short. That’s what we had to do in the days of Kodachrome: render the scene in your mind before you hit the shutter and wait patiently for a chance to see what the results were.

Perhaps the film feel of the M9-P is exactly what Leica fans love most. I still know a few guys who insist on shooting film when they wander the wilds of India and Nepal, and I suspect the M9-P will suit them nicely. For my wandering in China I was disappointed that the rangefinder and rear screen didn’t deliver a better shooting experience, because I really want to own a camera that approaches the quality of a Hasselblad – but is smaller than a DSLR.

The Leica M9-P is a good bit of engineering, but not as good I’d hoped for.

SUMMARY

A legacy of fine craftsmanship now struggles to find a place in the digital world. Leica make lovely gear and the M9-P takes lovely photos, but the fact is that I take better photos with a more modern camera system that offers fast autofocus, affordable lenses and quality review of images on the rear screen. But the people who buy a Leica already know what they want from a camera, and they don’t need me to tell them what’s good or bad about the M series. It takes immense skill to shoot manual focus these days, and the Leica M9-P will reward that skill very nicely.

seeking to shoot photos, but I still rely on the autofocus to enable quick reactions to unpredictable moments. After two weeks with the Leica M9-P, I did get better at grabbing scenes, but my desire to persevere began to wane. I missed my DSLR gear.

Travelling light

I definitely enjoyed travelling with a tiny little satchel bag and hiding the Leica M9-P inside. I also enjoyed the modest nature of the camera when walking the streets with it in hand. This low-profile system avoids all that unwanted attention that comes with lugging a big fat lens around with you.

I didn’t enjoy the partially obstructed view of the rangefinder, the painfully slow rendering of images on screen and the nearly useless pixel density that made it impossible to verify whether my focus selection was on the mark. The battery was too small for my liking as well, and needed topping up each night even under moderate use.

The main drama when shooting street scenes was poor performance when metering light. Modest hot spots all too easily throw off the accuracy of light metering, requiring you to work fully manual to ensure accuracy in complex light. That’s precisely when I most want my camera to step up and carry some of the workload for me. Metering light proved the most frustrating aspect of the Leica M9-P, even more than the rear screen and the underpowered battery.



LEICA IN DISGUISE

How to “spot” a Leica M9-P? There’s no round, red Leica logo just here where this screw sits – but there is a small etching of the brand name on the top next to the shutter release.