



Thinking About a Mirrorless Camera?

Photographers today have a bigger and better selection of cameras to choose from than ever before. Whether you pick a smart phone, a 100mp \$50,000-dollar medium format camera, or anything in between, you have the potential to create a contest winning image.

As always, what kind of pictures you make and what you do with them should influence your choice of equipment. If posting pictures of your vacation, family or last night's fancy dinner on social media is your goal, any modern digital camera will do the job. However, if your work requires a variety of different lenses your choice is not quite as wide. If you shoot fast action sports, wildlife or magazine glamour shots, your choice of equipment is even narrower.

Over the past few decades the choice for the majority of serious photographers has been the 35mm Single Lens Reflex (SLR), initially with film but now digital (DSLR). No doubt, the development and refinement of digital sensors has revolutionized photography. We now are in the midst of a second, less dramatic revolution—mirrorless cameras. The first mirrorless interchangeable lens camera (MILC) from a well-known camera maker was the Leica M8 introduced in 2006. Fuji®, Olympus®, Panasonic® and Sony® soon joined in with m4/3 or APS-C sensors (both smaller than the traditional 35mm format). Sony

raised the stakes in 2013 by introducing a pair of “full frame” 35mm format MILCs. Canon® and Nikon dabbled with mirrorless offers but didn't seriously join the mirrorless market until September 2018. A number of the so called ‘*blogosphere*’ experts predict that mirrorless cameras will eventually replace SLRs completely. I would agree. Over the last five years DSLR sales have shown a steady decline from about 14 million units to about 7 million. Mirrorless interchangeable lens cameras (MILC) sales have held steady at approximately 4 million units. It's only a matter of time until the lines on the graph intersect.

Let me share my own experience with the DSLR vs. MILC. I renewed my interest in nature photography when the first Canon Rebel digital cameras became popular. When someone asked what kind of pictures I took my response was always “birds, bugs and blooms (wildflowers).” Now I include landscapes. My confidence in Canon gear was solid until the Nikon D800 came out in 2012 with a 36mp sensor produced by Sony. The big deal with the Sony sensor was dynamic range. (Simply put, dynamic range is the range of light to dark tones that a sensor can accurately capture.) Landscape photographers who were previously shooting +2.0-2 exposure brackets for HDR now claimed that they could make one shot exposed for the sky and then bring up the shadows and



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blacks in their post processing with no artifacts. The Canon sensors at the time could not do this. However, the Sony dynamic range advantage over Canon decreased dramatically as ISO increased. In some cases, the Canon actually had better dynamic range at higher ISOs. Because wildlife photography often requires higher ISOs I resisted the jump to Nikon®.

A year and a half after the Nikon D800 introduction, Sony introduced the mirrorless full frame A7 and A7r cameras. The A7r had essentially the same sensor as Nikon's D800. A major selling point of the A7s was twofold: significantly lighter weight and the ability to use, with adapters, almost any lens from any manufacturer. Positive reviews flooded the photo forums from photographers using their adapted Leica®, Zeiss®, Olympus®, Minolta® etc. lenses with success on the A7's. My reaction to this was to take advantage of a Sony demo at my local Bedford's Camera in Little Rock, Arkansas. With an SD card in hand, I intentionally under-exposed a shot of the model by 2 stops. Back home on my computer I happily confirmed that I could pull up the exposure without penalty.

The dynamic range and detail from the 36mp sensor were impressive. Because the electronic viewfinder and back LCD showed information directly from the sensor it was nice to see a histogram before pressing the shutter. (The same as a DSLR in live view.) However, in the end it was the smaller size and light weight of the Sony compared to the Canon 5dIII that I was lugging around for landscapes that convinced me that an A7r was in my future. That, and the 35 and 55mm Sony/Zeiss lenses, a 21mm Zeiss Loxia and a 15mm Voightlander, all compact and relatively light lenses, rounded out my new landscape kit.

All was not honey and clover, however. Despite using the best available adapter with my Canon

long wildlife lenses, it was clear that the Sony mirrorless did not have the focusing ability needed to track birds and animals. Also, tracking a bird with an electronic viewfinder was not as easy as with an optical viewfinder. Additionally, the Sony battery was good for only a fraction of the shots compared to the Canon. Fortunately, at this point running Canon for wildlife and Sony for landscapes and incidentals has worked well for me.

Most of the people I talk to who are exploring mirrorless cameras are attracted by the lighter weight. Indeed, you can build a relatively light system. Although Sony has several very light lenses, e.g. 28, 35 and 55, their recent emphasis has been on the development of pro level fast zooms that are neither small nor light. If you are a photographer who depends on 24-70 and 70-200 2.8s, the weight savings between the Sony system and your Canon/Nikon system may be disappointing.

If light weight is your goal and you need an interchangeable lens system there are other mirrorless cameras to explore. Fuji (aps-c sized sensor) and the Olympus and Panasonic (m4/3) are all capable systems.

I agree that mirrorless cameras will gradually replace SLR's. From a manufacturer's perspective fewer moving parts make mirrorless cameras significantly less expensive to produce. Sigma, Panasonic and Leica have joined forces to produce a new MILC. Sony clearly is competing directly with Nikon and Canon. Their top of the line mirrorless A9 model reportedly has made significant progress in focus tracking, battery life and friendlier electronic viewing. Canon and Nikon are behind in mirrorless development but significant advances are expected. Don't be surprised to see a contingent of Sony, Nikon and Canon professionals shooting mirrorless at the 2020 Olympics. The bottom line is, match the current offering of fantastic cameras to your personal needs and shoot away. ■

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