

Magnificent 7

Jon Tarrant reviews the most involving medium format camera on the market today

The original Mamiya 7 was reviewed by this writer early last year (*BJP* 11 February 1998) based on a considerable period of use previously – followed by even more use since. In view of this, the writer may be regarded here as either favourably biased towards Mamiya's rangefinder system, or well briefed to tackle the new model. Most likely, the truth is a bit of both.

It is worth recapping the original Mamiya 7 briefly, for much of the first model is reiterated in the Mk-II. Even before the 7 there were Mamiya medium format rangefinders, most recently the Mamiya 6/6MF and prior to that the Press/Universal. In contrast with the latter (which has an 'upright' design), the 6/6MF was clearly a precursor of the current camera. That said, the 6/6MF recorded square images and had a retractable lens mount that made the camera more compact for storage and transportation: the 7/7-II has a fully rigid body and uses Mamiya's preferred 6x7cm format.

Some have described the Mamiya 7 as an over-grown Leica rangefinder, and to a degree this is a fair comment. But if size matters – and in terms of film area it most definitely does – then the 'over-grown' reference must not be dismissed lightly. The fact is that the Mamiya 7 is capable of producing absolutely stunning image quality.

There are a number of reasons why this is so, not least of which is the very considerable extent to which the camera involves its user in the picture-taking process. Having a direct view of the subject, without the interruption of a brief black-out (and the accompanying clatter) caused by a flip-up mirror, gives the impression of images being captured by the eye, rather than by the box that is in front of it. Other reasons to like the Mamiya 7 include its lightness, quietness and superb lenses.

NEW MODEL

Mamiya's new model has all the charms of the original, and adds a few new twists of its own – though a couple of weaknesses do still remain.



Top: Mamiya 7-II differs from the original Mamiya 7 in a number of cosmetic and feature ways. The new model is available in both 'champagne' and black liveries. Picture courtesy of Johnson Photopia. Right: The new 50mm f/4.5 lens has a considerable rear protrusion that contains elements which would be prohibited in a reflex camera. Picture taken using an Epson PhotoPC-750Z digital camera. Photograph © Jon Tarrant.



Cosmetically, the 7-II body differs slightly from the original when seen from the front in respect of a new Mamiya-embossed rubber grip to the right, together with a bluer rangefinder window and a small chrome stud (which is pressed to release the exposure compensation dial) at the top. There is also a new cable release socket on the bottom right corner. At the back there is a multiple exposure slider lock.

Other additions are a third lug that allows the carrying strap to be attached for either horizontal or ver-

tical transportation, and a re-designed crank that draws the camera's internal blind to protect the film when changing lenses.

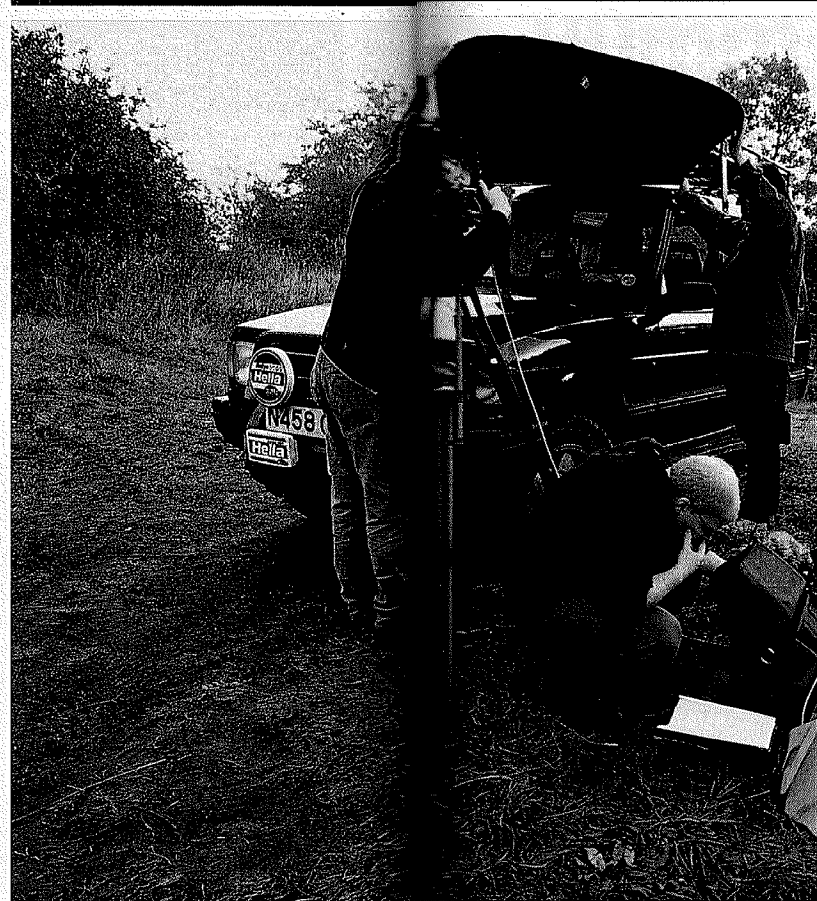
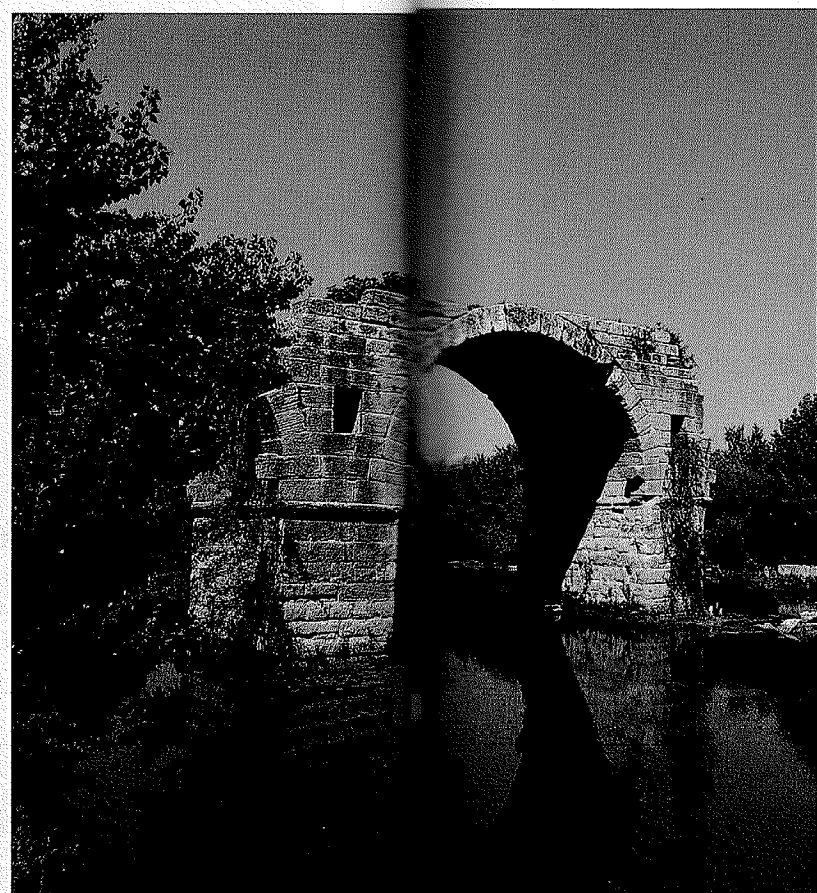
Features that stay the same are the 10s self-timer, double-image focusing rangefinder, fully manual and aperture priority exposure modes, exposure lock, exposure compensation ($\pm 2\text{EV}$) and shutter speeds from 4s to 1/500s with flash synchronisation at all settings.

Still missing is a battery check function. The easiest way to emulate this is using the self-timer button, which lights a red LED when activated and can then be cancelled.

An enduring possible pitfall is the semi-polarised viewfinder image, which can make scenes look better than they appear on film – but this is a product of the rangefinder system and seems inevitable if a bright image is to be enjoyed.

FIVE LENSES

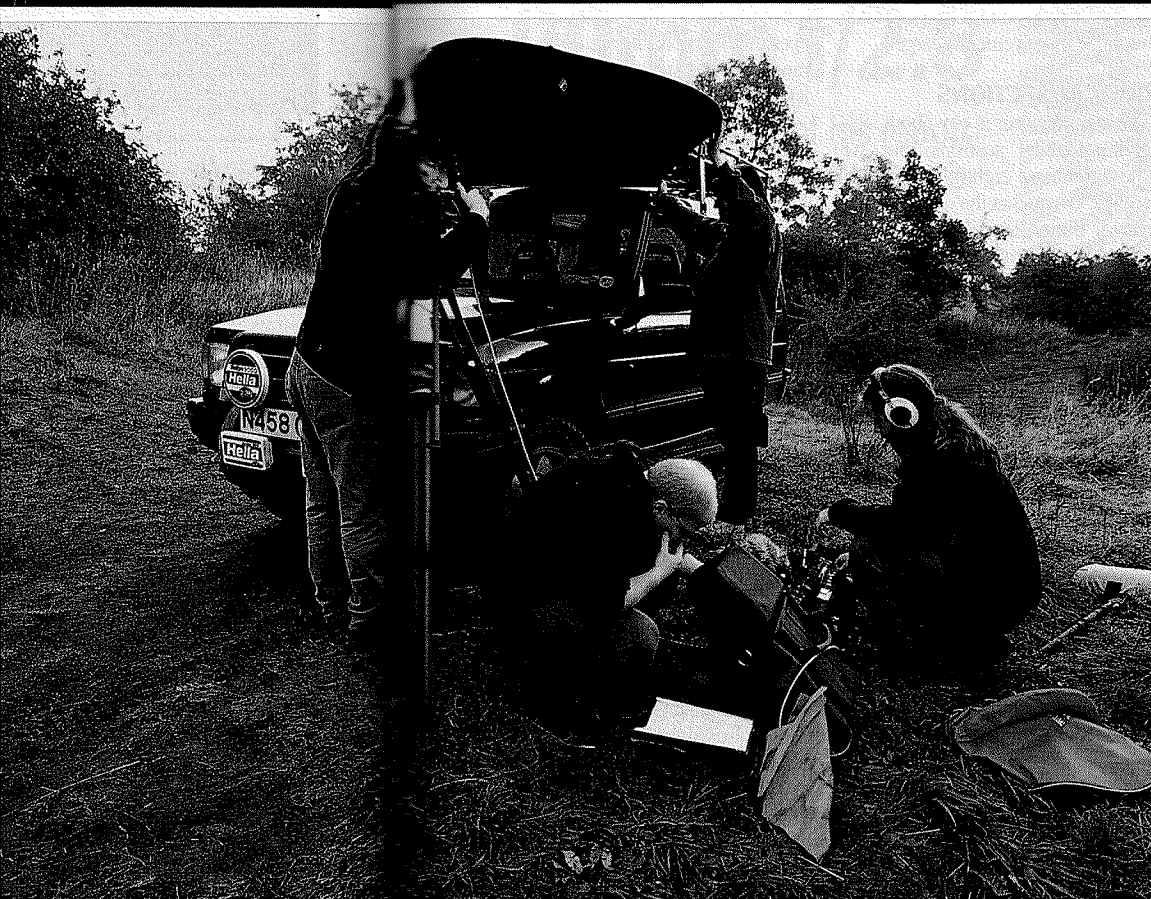
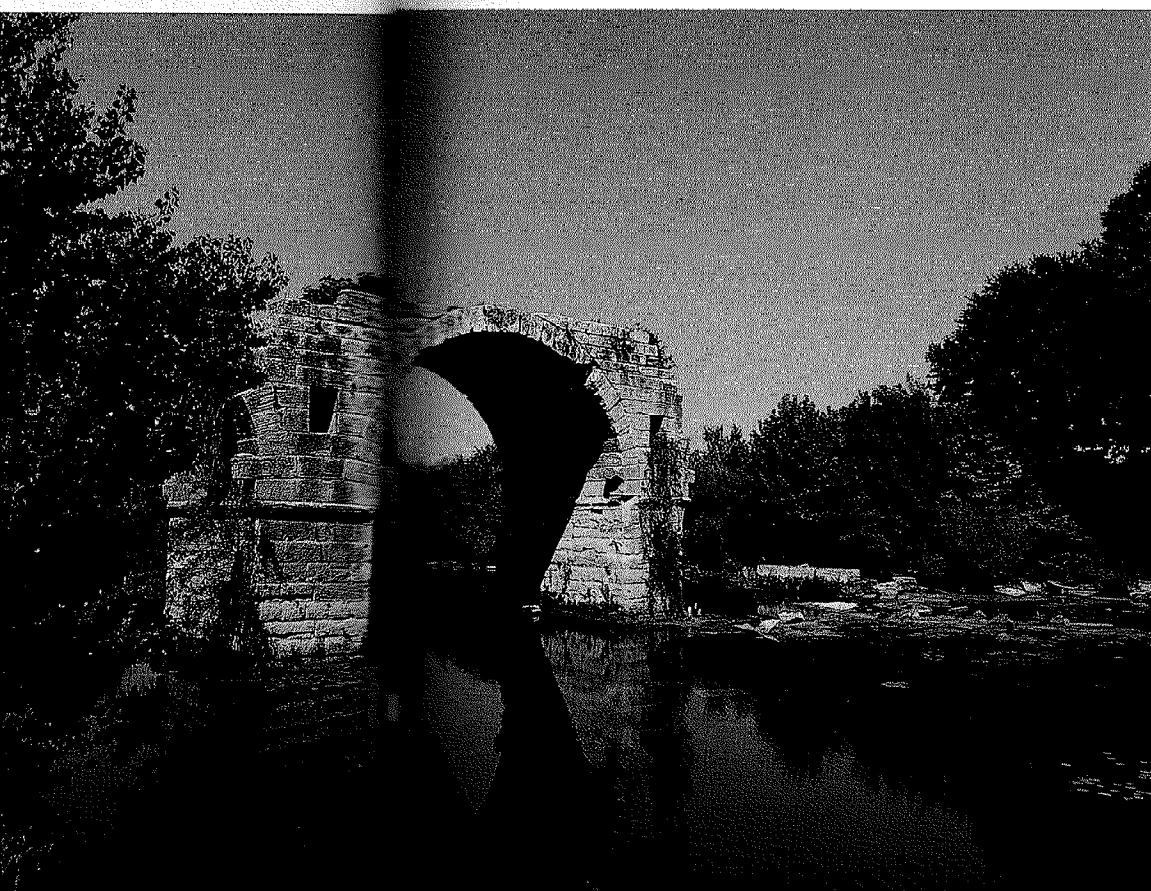
The original Mamiya 7 was offered with a choice of four lenses: the new model brings with it a fifth. To the previous 43mm f/4.5, 65mm f/4, 80mm f/4 and 150mm f/4.5 is now added a 50mm f/4.5. Following-on



from what has already been stated, these are all top quality designs that are not constrained by the necessity to use retrofocus methods in the shorter focal length types. The permitted rear extensions can be clearly seen when examining the lenses (see picture).

Although the new lens is indeed very fine, the author's preference after experience with all five focal lengths, is still for the standard 80mm – which is in fact slightly wider on the Mamiya 7's 56.9mm image format.

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requires its own accessory viewfinder because the camera itself only covers angles of view for the 150mm, 80mm and 65mm lenses. However, if framing is not critical it is possible to use the camera's own viewfinder with the 50mm lens provided that the scene is composed to



■ Above: Colour transparency film (in this case Agfa RSX-II 100) reveals good exposure accuracy and excellent lens performance from the 80mm f/4. Photograph © Jon Tarrant.

Left: Pont Romain, near Lansargue, France. Picture taken using the 80mm lens. Photograph © Paul Stewart. Below left: Filming for Yorkshire Television's *We Can Work It Out* programme: presenter Jane Harvey is in the vehicle doing a piece to camera. Picture taken using the 50mm lens. Photograph © Paul Stewart.

the very edges. Composition cannot be assured, but there are times when the convenience of a single framing and focusing window does make this tactic worthwhile.

On the downside, this tactic loses the 50mm viewfinder's spirit level, which is otherwise very useful for ensuring true horizontal alignment. An even bigger problem is the fact that the camera's viewfinder is partly obstructed by the lens – a particularly acute problem when attempting to use every last bit of the window. In short, therefore, there is a real dilemma as to whether it is acceptable to work with the camera's viewfinder and a slightly obstructed view, or whether a clear view is essential in which case the accessory viewfinder must be fitted.

Note, however, that because the external viewfinder mounts in the hotshoe, this particular location is ruled out for a flashgun under those conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

As far as the new body itself is concerned, it has to be said that the additions do not really constitute great improvements. This is not to decry the 7-II so much as to acknowledge that the Mamiya 7 was already a near perfect camera in its own right – though obviously a rangefinder with just five lenses will not suit all photographers.

Nevertheless, the significance of the revamped model is its expression of Mamiya's commitment to the medium format rangefinder system.

For the user, the fact that the camera's results are as remarkable as the camera itself is a joy to use makes the Mamiya 7-II a system totally without equal. **BJP**

For further details about the Mamiya 7-II system, call Johnsons Photopia on 01782 753300.

SECOND OPINION

Mamiya 7 novice Paul Stewart offers his thoughts on the new Mk-II camera

This camera has all the advantages of a 35mm rangefinder system with the obvious plus of larger 6x7cm images. The feel of the camera is very much that of an over-sized Leica fitted with an L-grip. Image quality shows that the optics are of a very high order and of course the fact that it is a coupled rangefinder, rather than an SLR, means that it is not necessary to compromise the optical design to take account of a moving mirror.

In use, the compact nature of the system was evidenced by the fact that I could get three lenses and a body, together with the auxiliary finder for the 50mm lens, a small flashgun and a Sekonic L-408 meter in the same Domke satchel that is usually used for an M6 system with similar components.

Leaf shutters in the lenses give flash synchronisation at all speeds, so fill-in is very easy even without the super-computer flash that replaces skill and knowledge in many of today's 35mm systems.

Many readers will remember the aggravation of the old Mamiya Press (one of the Mamiya 7's direct ancestors), which, while a brilliant camera, had one of the most awkward dark-slide arrangements in creation. The Mamiya 7 replaces this arrangement with a quick-release roller blind that is built into the camera. Only when this blind is closed, using a fold-down knob on the baseplate, can lenses be changed. To prevent accidental non-exposures when the blind is closed, the shutter release is prevented from operating until the blind is opened again using the spring-loaded catch. Perversely, it is possible to open this blind with the lens removed, so care should be taken accordingly.

In use, I had no problem with the metering, and found the aperture priority mode and the exposure lock very useful. Apart from its obvious strengths (light yet robust construction and excellent optical quality), the camera's main appeal lies in its ergonomics. The Mamiya 7 Mk-II is quite possibly the easiest medium format system to use, and is great on location or for reportage.