

# Friday Film: Mamiya 7 Review by Garry Taylor



## Mamiya 7 by Garry Taylor

When I bought my first camera, just a year ago, I could never have guessed that buying a simple digital camera would lead me to where I am now. My Sigma DP-1 is a great camera, which I still use, but after my first trip away with it, I decided I wanted more. Much research and discussion later, I ended up with a beautiful Zeiss Ikon 35mm film camera. This camera has served me very well, and I of course continue to use it. However, in recent months I have thought more and more about making large prints, larger than 35mm film will comfortably enlarge to. Consequently, now I was considering medium format film. Steve's excellent write up of the Fujifilm GF670 made me set on getting such a camera, or a similar one at least. Yet more research and consideration was had before settling on the Mamiya 7 range finder camera. In principle, the Mamiya 7 is similar to both the Zeiss Ikon and **GF670**. All three are range finders, all film, all have manual controls, but with a pleasant amount of automation (Aperture Priority, built-in meter). The GF670 is every bit as aesthetically pleasing as the Ikon, but it was that, perversely, eventually made me decide against it. It's chrome body and leather bellows look about as good as an inanimate object can, but I wanted to blend into the crowd. The GF670 is about as anonymous as walking around sans clothes on my lower half. Since buying, I've seen a

Bessa III (same as GF670) “in the flesh”, and all in black, it is far less eye catching (in a good way), but still every bit as desirable.

To cut a long and potentially dull story short, I now own a Mamiya 7 and a 65mm lens. On a 6×7 negative, 65mm is more like 32mm on 35mm film, so the 65mm is a wide-normal lens. The 80mm lens on the GF670 (or on Mamiya 7, if you so choose) is more like a 39mm lens on 35mm, just a little long for me as an every day lens.

On holding the Mamiya 7 for the first time, I consider it to be a reasonable size for what it is. I’d seen them in shop windows before, so was ready for it to be a considerable size. It’s big, but if you’re used to full frame DSLRs, it will seem reasonable. This size of course is a trade off for image quality, a 6×7 negative has about 4.3 times the film area of 35mm film, which should make for startlingly more resolution and detail.



## Getting started

First – load a film! This was easy, as thankfully, it is almost precisely the same as loading the **GF670**, and I had watched the video by Steve on this very topic. I had my first roll loaded in no time, and was ready to shoot.

It is often said that the Mamiya 7 takes amazing photos, but the build quality of the camera is only so-so. My first impression of the camera leads me to believe this is true. The knobs and dials do not feel as good as the Ikon, and the viewfinder is certainly not as crisp and clear. The focus patch however is very clear, maybe more so than the Ikon.

On attempting to set the shutter speed dial to "A", I found it would not move. A little experimentation later, I find you have to push down a little button before the dial will move. This places the Mamiya 7 behind the Ikon in usability in my eyes. AEL mode is on this shutter speed dial too, so it's not a quick button press like on the Ikon, or most other cameras. I can see using this camera will be slower than using my Ikon. This is not a deal breaker for me, with just 10 shots to a roll, it's probably a good idea to slow down anyway.

Operation is otherwise as you expect, on half pushing the shutter release, we can see exposure details at the bottom of the finder, again, this is not as clear as on the Ikon, and the text is very small. It's all perfectly adequate, but users of other range finders may be disappointed.



## Out and about

My first few rolls of film will all be spent around Central and East London, again, with only 10 shots to a roll of film, I find myself using a far more critical eye and far more reluctant to shoot than when using 35mm film. On one hand, perhaps this will lead to better photos, on the other maybe I'll miss out on serendipitous mistakes, and be less likely to bracket for difficult exposure.

As hoped, the camera did not attract too much attention, and with its large, chunky handgrip, the Mamiya is easy to walk around with. It's not a pleasing marriage of leather and chrome like the Ikon, but the 7 has its own charms and quirks. The lens is smooth to operate, similar in feel to a Voigtlander lens, I can only compare it to the one Leica lens I own, but the Mamiya lens is every bit as pleasant to use.

Like many medium format lenses, this one is not fast, at just f/4 wide open. The camera itself tops out at 1/500 second shutter speed, so the Mamiya 7 does not excel for low light shooting, nor for blazing sunshine, but for everything else, these specifications will be just fine. For low light, perhaps a faster film will be enough, or a tripod. For midday sun, there is slow film, or a neutral density filter (ND).



## Results

For my first outings with the camera, I shot 2 rolls of Portra 160VC, and 2 rolls of Ilford XP2 Super. I followed oft-cited advice to rate the Portra at ISO 100, to over expose by half a stop, and the XP2, I rated the the XP2 at 320, to over expose by around two thirds of a stop. I think the Portra's colours come out muted and more pleasing when over exposed, particularly skin tones. I think XP2 needs the over exposure less, and would happily shoot it at it's box speed of ISO 400. None of the shots are intended to win awards, and are just to get a feel for camera and the type of results I can expect.

I have found the results to be significantly sharper, with more pleasing tones than 35mm. The way in which focus changes to and from sharpness is subtly but noticeably different to 35mm.

The Mamiya's meter is somewhat unpredictable, as it is somewhere between a spot meter and a centre weighted one, but it's not through the lens, so it's field of view does not change when your lens does. I would definitely have preferred a TTL meter, or like the GF670, a more "ambient" meter which surveys the whole scene, rather than just a spot. I only got a couple of exposures out of 4 rolls which were badly off though. Note that all pictures are directly as they came back from the lab, no post processing of any kind.



## Conclusion

Using the Mamiya 7 is probably a good deal less pleasant than a Zeiss Ikon or Leica M. It is large and a little awkward to use, if you shoot a lot, you're forever changing film. However the results possible with such a camera by far make up for the inconvenience. Resolution with the right film is higher than even a top end DSLR, with the potential to enlarge to poster size prints. Whether you like the tones and nuances of film vs. digital is a personal choice, but if you like 35mm, you'll love medium format. The ongoing cost of medium format is quite significantly more than 35mm, and certainly a lot more than digital. The only saving grace is that a medium format film camera is cheaper than a full frame DSLR, and a fraction of the price of a medium format digital solution. Also, many medium format digital solutions max out at low ISO ratings, cannot do exposures beyond 30 seconds, and other limitations not present in film cameras.

The 6×7 format is quite square, and maybe takes a bit of getting used to. Unlike the GF670, there is no option to shoot 6×6, but there is the option to shoot 35mm panoramas with a moderately priced kit.

With consideration, the Mamiya 7 is probably one of the best camera buys out there, it makes outstanding images, and is very portable. For me, it's closest competitor is the GF670. At the same price, I'd have gone for the GF670, but it's anyone's guess whether that would have been a mistake or not.



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