

AMATEUR Photographer

BRONICA RF645 AP TEST

Price £1,500 kit Type 645 rangefinder

BREAKTHROUGH BRONICA

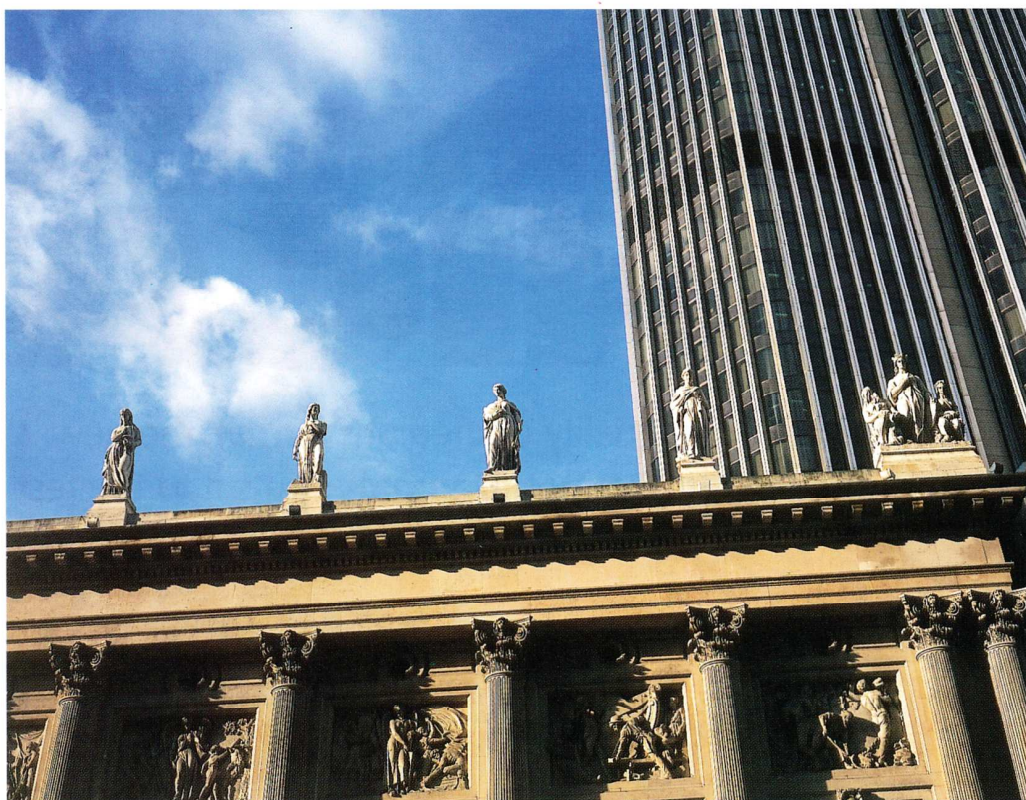
If you are a rangefinder fan and fancy the quality of medium format, the new Bronica RF645 might grab your attention. **Damien Demolder** puts it to the test

BELOW Compact and simple to use, the new Bronica RF645 might just be the camera you have been waiting for. It delivers medium format quality in a 35mm style package



Review Date : 25 November 2000

IAP TEST BRONICA RF645



BRONICA HAS HAD a firm foothold in the 645 market since the introduction of the ETR in September 1976. At the time this camera was the only system 645 SLR camera in the world. The system proved itself popular and an updated version of this original body is still very much in production in the shape of the ETRSi.

This new Bronica 645 is another world first – it is the only 645 rangefinder with interchangeable lenses. There are, of course, other 645 rangefinder-type cameras, most notably from Fuji in the shape of the compact-style GA range. But these don't have those all-important interchangeable lenses. The GA645Zi does have a zoom but as this is fixed, the focal length potential is not quite the same.

The Bronica RF645 was launched at the Photokina show in Germany a few short weeks ago (see AP 7 October). Now we can see how good it really is.

SPECIFICATION

The Bronica RF645 is a manual focus coupled rangefinder camera that uses an in-the-lens leaf shutter system. Accepting both 120 and 220 rollfilm the camera produces either 16 or 32 56x41.5mm (or 6x4.5cm) images per roll. At present the system has three lenses taking the Bronica RF mount: a

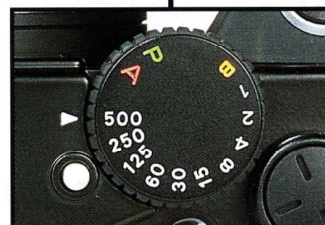
45mm f/4, a 65mm f/4 and a 135mm f/4.5. The equivalent focal length lenses for a 35mm camera are 28mm, 40mm and 80mm. All three Bronica lenses use the helical focusing system.

The camera makes a strange sound immediately after the shutter has been fired: a kind of straining whine. This might make you think the camera is winding on the film – but it isn't. This noise is actually caused by the lens shutter re-cocking. Film wind-on in the RF645 is via a single stroke of a manual thumb crank handle, similar to that which you might expect to find on a 35mm SLR. Loading and winding to the first frame is also manual.

While the emphasis of this model is firmly on manual operation, there are a few automatic functions to make life that little bit easier. In addition to manual exposure the camera offers aperture priority plus a fully automatic program mode. In either of the auto modes, users will have access to shutter speeds of 1-1/750sec. In medium format cameras generally, this top speed is quite unusual – and it is almost unheard of in a leaf shutter lens. However, this top speed needs to be qualified. The 1/750sec speed is available only when an aperture of f/22 is selected. From this we might assume the shutter speed is probably not quite 1/750sec, but with a much smaller ►

CONTROL DIAL

This top-mounted control dial deals with your exposure modes and the shutter speeds in manual exposure mode. It locks in the auto modes, but moves freely for manual selection

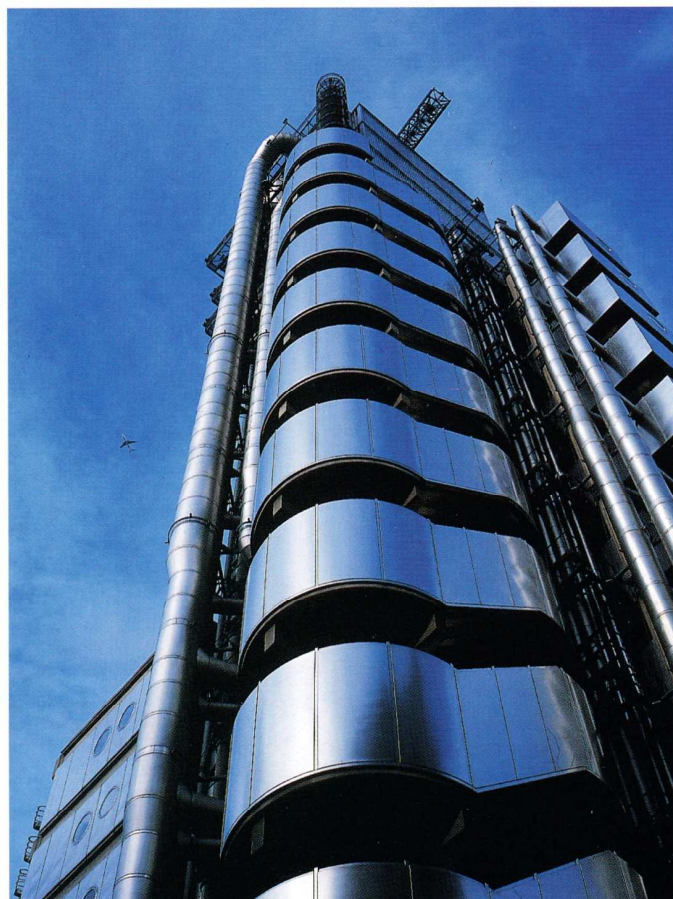


SHUTTER RELEASE

The shutter release is very well placed and falls beneath the shutter finger naturally. This button also houses the traditional cable release socket



ABOVE I bracketed a stop either way for this shot, expecting the centre-weighted meter to struggle, but it did very well in the first frame



ABOVE Big, ugly silver buildings against a bright blue sky usually get metering systems in a muddle, but the RF645 seems to have no problem with them

'A single turn of the crank handle will get the film in position for the next shot'

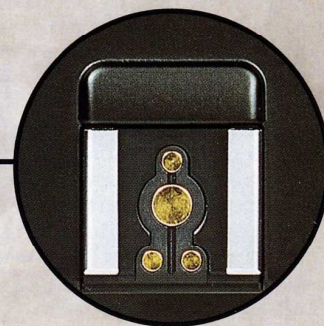
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WIND-ON

Film advance is completely manual on this camera, but thankfully Bronica has set up the gearing to shift the film in just a single turn of the crank

HOTSHOE

The camera has a hotshoe that will accept normal flash guns set up for automatic non-TTL operation. In addition Bronica has released an excellent and compact unit that is TTL-dedicated to this camera

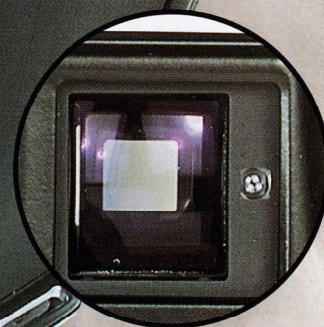


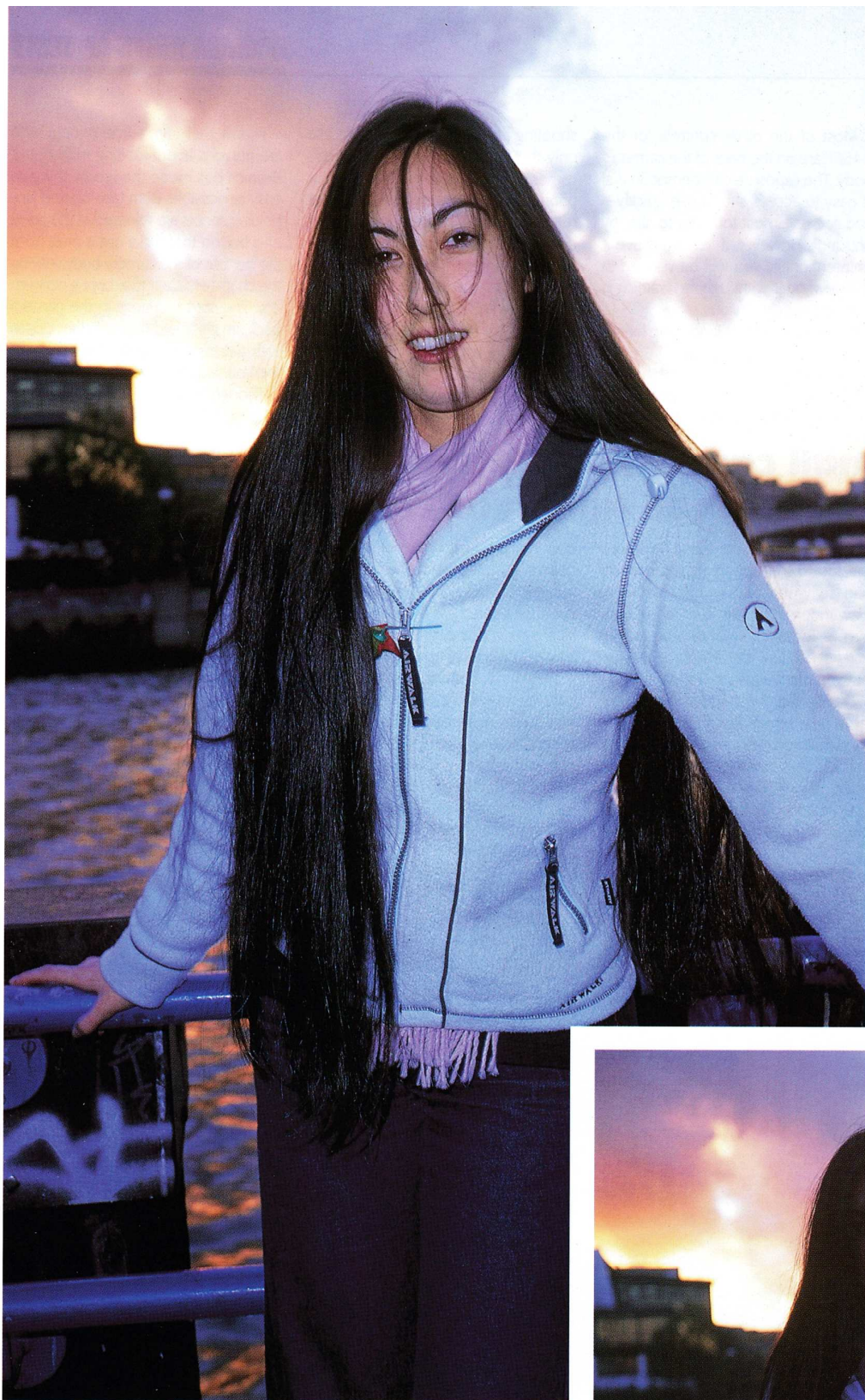
PC SOCKET

Users are not confined to the hotshoe when flash is required. The camera houses an external flash socket (or PC socket) so that any unit with a connector cable may be used. This is useful when more powerful guns are needed or when you want to use the flash off-camera

VIEWFINDER

The viewfinder allows framed viewing when the camera is fitted with either the 65mm or 135mm lenses. When the 45mm lens is used, you will need an accessory wideangle viewfinder that fits in the camera's hotshoe





◀ hole to pass over, the speed is, in effect, the same as a 1/750sec shutter would have. As it is a leaf shutter you are playing with, you will be able to synchronise your flash at any of the shutter speeds available. This is handy for adding a touch of fill-in flash to your subject on a bright day when you find you want a shutter speed faster than the usual 1/125sec.

To deal with lighting situations that may fool the meter, you have exposure compensation of ± 2 stops in half stop increments and AE lock for when you

ABOVE The RF20 flash unit produces an excellent balance between daylight and flash exposure. The unit has pumped out just the right amount

need to recompose. The metering system is centreweighted and is judged through a window next to the viewfinder. The system does take account of the lens you have fitted, but of course it is still the same system. This means different lenses deliver different-sized areas of centreweighting. Thus, in theory, switching between lenses gives

different characteristics in the metering. This is potentially confusing and will need a little getting used to before you can accurately deploy the exposure compensation feature. For this test we were not able to determine how great this difference will be as we had only the 65mm f/4 lens to put on the body.

Film speeds are set manually but omit a speed you may have liked to see: ISO 3200. This is not too much of a drama, as the exposure compensation dial can deliver the same result, but it means a reduced amount of compensation is available when you are faced with a bright subject against a dark background in either of the auto modes.

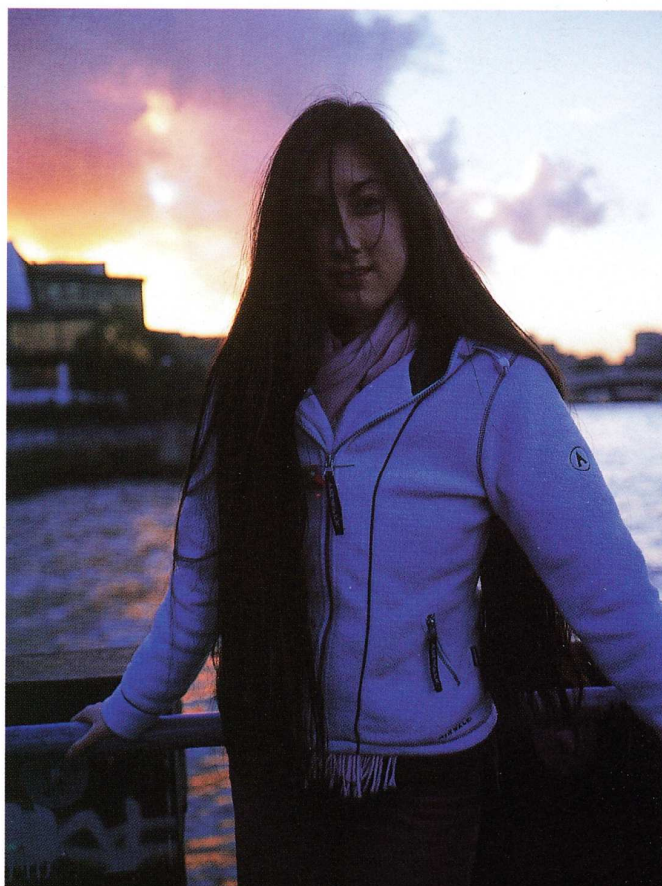
That is pretty much it. As I said, a fairly simple camera but with just enough features to help you along a little.

HANDLING

This is not a small camera and it's not particularly light... but that said, it is both small and light for a 645 format camera. Compared with the three 645 format AF SLR models we tested a couple of months ago (23 September), the Bronica is tiny. Still, if you are used to using a 35mm SLR and are expecting to use this model in the same way, you are in for a sore wrist.

On some occasions extra weight is excusable – and when it means excellent build quality and a really solid

BELOW Without the flash the RF645 underexposed a little in strongly backlit situations and when the background is far brighter than the subject



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camera it is a bonus. In the case of the Bronica RF645, the weight has gone in to aspects of the camera that will make it last for a very long time.

The mainly square and flat body has a large hand grip on the right-hand side that lets you get a secure hold on the camera. The shutter release is built into the top of this grip and falls directly under the shutter finger with no need for searching. In fact, the positioning of the shutter release and the film advance crank make the experience of shooting with the Bronica very much

Most of the other controls for the 645RF are on the back of the camera's body. The exposure compensation dial is easy to access and to use quickly – and seems almost too easy to alter by accident. However, if you do move it unintentionally you will be warned in the viewfinder... though the warning is not desperately obvious.

If you are used to a landscape format viewfinder, looking through the Bronica viewfinder will come as something of a surprise. Being a 645 camera with an upright film position, the longest

shooting medium format I would use only the manual mode, but with this camera it is so easy to put it in aperture priority that I found myself using that most of the time. The lenses have a traditional wide aperture ring and just the right amount of focusing tension to make them a pleasure to use.

The viewfinder uses a bright double image square in the centre of the frame for focusing. In most cases this appeared bright and easy to see against any shade of background. The lens barrel creeps into view in the

I know there are some people who are nervous about loading rollfilm, but Bronica has made the whole thing as easy as possible. Both take-up and film holding spools are released at the press of a button that flicks out a plug from the bottom of the camera body, leaving the chambers clear to accept a new visitor. The start markings in the camera back are clear and the rear door closes with a reassuring clunk, reminiscent of the Volkswagen adverts.

Though I only had the one lens (65mm f/4) to test with this camera, I

'This is not a small camera and it's not particularly light... but it is both small and light for a 645 camera'

like using an old 35mm manual SLR. I was pleasantly surprised to find that a single turn of the crank handle will get the film in position for the next shot.

The main control dial on the top-plate deals with shutter speeds and rotates freely between each of the timed settings. It is impossible to accidentally switch the auto or program setting on or off because the wheel locks in these positions. Also, the wheel does not rotate through 360° so changing from B to P requires a full rotation in the opposite direction.

dimension of the film frame runs from the top to the bottom of the camera and so when you look through the viewfinder, you will see an upright frame. To shoot in landscape format you have to turn the camera on its side, but you quickly get used to this.

Down the left-hand side of the viewfinder screen Bronica has supplied us with an excellent information panel. This displays shutter speeds and apertures as well as the number of stops over or underexposed your picture will be in manual mode. Usually when

bottom right-hand corner of the finder, obscuring that part of the image you will get on the film. I must say that, because I handheld the camera most of the time, this didn't bother me too much, as it is easy to move the view to inspect what is going to appear. However, had I used a tripod more often and been engaged in shooting carefully constructed landscapes or detailed subjects, this might have got on my nerves a bit. I like to know exactly what is going to be in and out of the frame and this obstruction did not help.

thought I would check what it was like changing the lens anyway. There is not a lot to compare this camera with, but some of you may be familiar with Mamiya's 7 series of 6x7cm rangefinders. Before changing the lenses on those, you have to pull a blind across the film to prevent light leaking in to fog your film. Once you are used to it, this is not too much of a problem – but every time you forget you fog a couple of frames. This also makes changing lenses a slightly longwinded affair.

Bronica has come up with a very ►



There are situations when manual focus can help a candid more than AF. Most AF systems would have struggled with the glass here, while MF made it easy

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◀ neat way of getting around this problem. As you go to unscrew the lens from its bayonet mount, a sprung lever is released within the lens mount and this automatically pulls a blind over the film. Very clever, very quick and you don't even have to think about what is happening. I tried to catch it out by taking the lens off very slowly in direct sunshine but I'm pleased to report that I still didn't get a fogged frame.

Another nice feature of this camera is its multiple exposure (ME) system. The way it works on this model, there is no limit to the number of exposures you can make on a single frame. However, the negative side of the system is that there is no lock on the ME button. This means that for every exposure you wish to overlay onto another you have to press the button again. This is no great hardship but it does mean you have to touch the camera on its tripod

PERFORMANCE

In line with the simple theme, the Bronica RF645 uses a centreweighted metering system consisting of five area zones. For the most part I found this system worked very well throughout the test. Under a variety of conditions, the meter recommended the correct exposure for the subject, whether there was a large area of sky in the frame or not. Even when shooting in a covered shopping arcade with an open daylight section in the distance, a reasonable exposure was achieved. The shutter movement is also light enough to allow handholding the camera at speeds slightly longer than you might normally risk, which is especially useful in low-light situations.

One area where I found the meter does have trouble is when there is a strong backlight. I tried some portraits at sunset with the sun falling from

BRONICA RF645	
Format	6x4.5cm frames on 120 or 220 rollfilm (16 or 32 frames)
Image size	56mm x 41.5mm
Price	Body with 65mm f/4 lens: £1,500. 45mm lens plus viewfinder: £700. 135mm f/4.5 lens: £650. RF20 flash unit: £300
Country of origin	Japan
Shutter type	No.00 type lens shutter
Shutter speeds	8-1/750sec plus B. 1-1/500sec in manual
Film advance	Manual
Flash sync speed	At all speeds
Exposure modes	Program with shift, aperture priority, manual, full auto
Metering pattern	Centreweighted
Sensitivity	EV3-18
Exposure comp	±2 stops in 1/2 stop steps
Bracketing	No
AE lock	Yes
Film speed range	ISO 25-1600; all manual selection
Focusing modes	Manual
Multiple exposure	Yes
Cable release	Yes – standard screw-in type
Power	2x CR2 lithium 6V cells
Dimensions	145.6x107.3x64mm
Weight	810g

'Overall, this is a very nice camera to use. The Bronica RF645 feels like quality and is dead simple to operate'

each time, thus risking slight movements which can lead to misalignment of objects that are common to more than one frame.

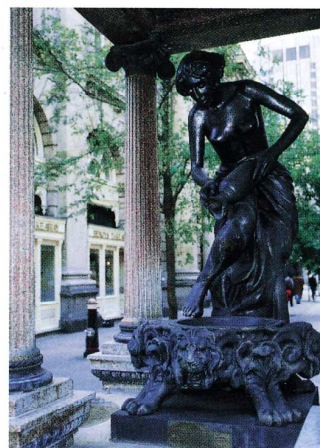
Overall then, this is a very nice camera to use. You will find the Bronica RF645 feels like quality and is dead simple to operate.

behind my subject and reflecting off some water. In most of these shots the camera missed the mark by about a stop... but then, you would expect this from any camera. At the same time I tried some fill-in flash shots using Bronica's dedicated accessory flash and the camera set to aperture

priority. I found the RF645 filled in the subject perfectly while still allowing the background to register nicely.

The flash also worked perfectly indoors as well, when the film was relying entirely on the flash for any light on the subject. I was initially a little concerned that the close proximity of the low-profile flash unit to the camera lens might bring on a touch of redeye, but no such vampire effect was visible in any of the pictures I took with flash.

I was very impressed with the 65mm lens we had to test with the camera. The trannies I got back were all very sharp and there are no signs of distortion or vignetting even in seemingly extreme conditions. It will be interesting to see how the other two optics compare – and how all three perform on the optical bench of Dr Bell.



ABOVE Even with a jet-black subject, the camera and flash combination still got the exposure right



ABOVE You might not associate manual focus with grab shots but the focusing of the RF645 is so easy and comfortable it can be used very quickly

AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHER VERDICT

I was very impressed with this camera. I enjoyed using it greatly and I'm very pleased with the results it gave me. This camera is an excellent tool and there is no other 645 rangefinder camera with interchangeable lenses. Landscapers will appreciate the film size and lightweight body (though, being a rangefinder, it can't show the effects of filters in its viewfinder). Fashion or portrait photographers, meanwhile, will appreciate the upright viewfinder. They will probably want a longer focal length lens made available – but it is a brand-new camera system and it is surely likely that more lenses will arrive. Until more lenses do appear, the system is a little limited to the focal ranges of a standard kit zoom lens. Great camera, though.

Damien Demolder

Specification	15/20
Handling	27/30
Performance	27/30
Value for money	16/20



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