

CAMERA TEST



Happy medium



An autofocus medium format camera with a digital back – surely the best of both worlds? **Andy Latham** puts the Mamiya 645AFD II to the test. Will it live up to its promise?

The courier had left a note apologising for having missed me and directed me to investigate my grey wheelie bin at the side of the house. There lay a box containing a couple of thousand pounds worth of wideangle lenses to use with the new Mamiya 645AFD II that *OP* had sent me a couple of days before. I certainly hoped that it wasn't some kind of judgement from a photo-enthusiast delivery driver!

The new 645 AFDII is an update on the earlier model offering a new autofocus system, the introduction of 36 custom functions and various other tweaks. It is, of course, a 6x4.5 medium format SLR camera with the D element signifying the added facility of being able to attach a digital back (either Mamiya's new ZD back or one from a third-party manufacturer).

Now, before reviewing a camera I always feel that it is important to know where the reviewer is coming from. How we use and assess a camera depends very much upon our own practices and experience. For the last four years I have almost exclusively used a Mamiya 7II medium format rangefinder, landscapes are my sole subject and I have not used a medium format SLR before.

Upon opening the box my first impressions were of an elegant beast – much heavier and bulkier than my



MAMIYA 645AFD II

rangefinder but with a few nice curves to please the eye. The aluminium alloy body is clearly built to last and the complete system with a rollfilm holder and 80mm standard lens weighs in at a hefty 1.7kg. It is not a camera for prolonged handheld use, though the grip is well designed for the camera to sit comfortably in the hands.

Anyone used to using a decent 35mm SLR will have no difficulties understanding the controls. A large dial on the top plate selects the usual exposure modes: program, aperture priority, shutter priority, manual and the custom function mode, with thumb wheels on the top and rear to change aperture or shutter speed. I liked the fact that aperture and shutter speed could be set in 1/3-stop increments for much more precise control over exposure. I also liked the shutter speed setting going up to 30 seconds, which saves a lot of elephant counting.



LEFT

Roddlesworth Woods.
Exposure compensation is essential in misty conditions where the meter may be deceived
Mamiya 645AFD II with 55mm lens, Velvia 50, 10 seconds at f/22, 81B filter, tripod

OPPOSITE

Ice & stream.
The camera's meter coped well with this tricky situation
Mamiya 645AFD II with 80mm lens, 2 seconds at f/22, Velvia 50, tripod

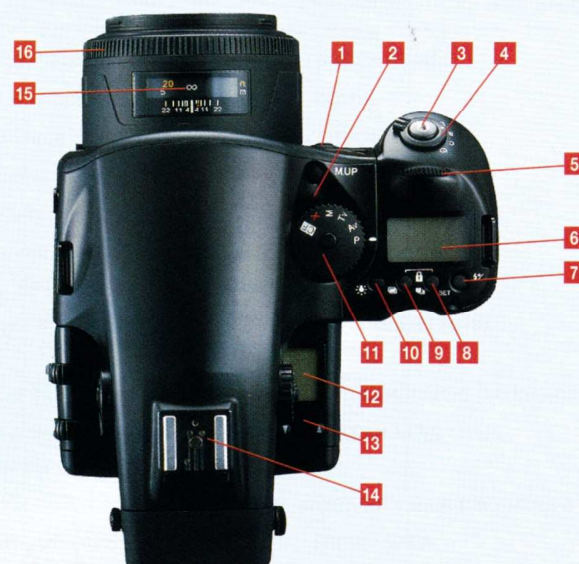
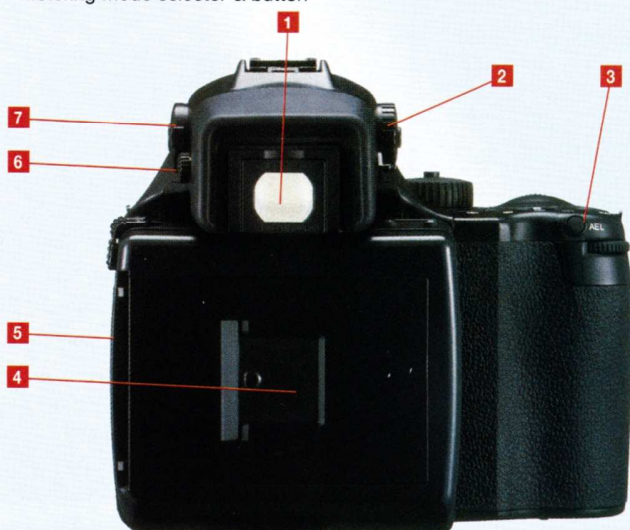
Metering options are controlled by another dial offering centre weighted, spot or a combination of the two, and an exposure compensation dial allows settings in one third increments up to $\pm 1/3$

stops. This locks handily on zero for quick re-setting. An auto-exposure lock button is well placed for easy thumb access and a useful feature, when pressed, is that after re-composing the viewfinder

Features at a glance

BACK PLATE VIEW

- 1 Viewfinder
- 2 Exposure compensation dial & button
- 3 AE lock button
- 4 Memo pocket
- 5 Dark slide storage slot
- 6 Dioptre adjustment
- 7 Metering mode selector & button



TOP PLATE VIEW

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 AF assist beam/self-timer | 9 Multi-exposure button |
| 2 Mirror lock-up | 10 LCD backlight |
| 3 Shutter release | 11 Exposure mode & custom function dial |
| 4 Shutter mode selector | 12 Film back LCD panel |
| 5 Front dial | 13 Film speed setting - up & down buttons |
| 6 External LCD panel | 14 Hotshoe |
| 7 Set button | 15 Distance scale window |
| 8 Auto-bracket button | 16 Focus ring |

CAMERA TEST

RIGHT

Twisted Oaks.
The 35mm lens (equivalent to 22mm in 35mm format), really allowed me to get close to this tree yet show it in the wider context of the woodland
Mamiya 645AFD II with 35mm lens, Velvia 50, 8 seconds at f/22, 81B filter, tripod

◀ displays the difference between the locked value and the new exposure reading – handy for quickly assessing the range. All relevant information is displayed on the top LCD panel and in the viewfinder which is large and bright. I also found the large, soft rubber surround spectacle friendly.

Other familiar features are options for continuous shooting mode, auto-bracketing, multiple exposures and the length of the self-timer can be easily set. There are 36 custom functions available though I couldn't see myself using any other than the ability to superimpose data on the edge of the film. I frequently forget to make a note of technical data such as shutter speed, or any exposure compensation used, and this would definitely help. Most useful of all is a dedicated mirror lock-up button, situated next to the exposure mode dial, which saves fiddling in menus or creating custom settings. Mirror lock-up is advisable



6x4.5cm equivalent of 35mm focal lengths

35mm = 22mm	55mm = 34mm
45mm = 29mm	80mm = 50mm

in order to prevent vibrations when using slow shutter speeds.

Film is held in a detachable magazine which can be replaced with a digital back. Loading film is a little tricky at first if you are only used to 35mm or a rangefinder as the rollfilm holder needs to be taken out, spools swapped, and film wound round. Once re-inserted in the magazine the film winds automatically to the start, but film speed has to be set manually on the magazine LCD screen. The whole process soon becomes second nature.

On the road

In use, the weight of the camera became less of an issue than I expected. Once in the backpack the extra weight is not noticeable, and when taking landscapes the camera is tripod-mounted anyway. I quickly got to grips with the main controls and liked the accessibility of buttons such as AF lock, AE lock and depth-of-field preview while looking through the viewfinder. One problem though, with the AE lock, is the ease with which it can be accidentally pressed while making slight alterations to the camera position on the tripod. Always check that informative viewfinder display.

The autofocus, while not as sophisticated as top-end 35mm SLRs, was quick and accurate

Data File Mamiya 645AFD II

£2,199.00 inc VAT (BODY ONLY)

CAMERA TYPE	Interchangeable lens 6x4.5cm SLR
PRICE	£2,999.00 (including 80mm f2.8 lens and 120/220 RFH)
LENS MOUNT	Mamiya 645 AF mount (compatible with M645 mount)
FOCUSING MODES	Single shot, continuous, manual
EXPOSURE MODES	Manual, aperture priority, shutter priority, program, flash,
METERING MODE	5-segment evaluative centre-weighted average (AV), spot (S), variable ratio auto shift (A-S)
SHUTTER SPEEDS	AE: 30 to 1/4000 sec. (1/8 step), manual: 30 to 1/4000 sec. (1/2 step), and bulb mode
EXPOSURE COMPENSATION	+/-3Ev in 1/3 stop increments
AUTO BRACKETING	Enabled with auto-bracketing button (2 or 3 frames auto-bracketing), 0.3, 0.5, 0.7, 1EV step units selectable
DEPTH-OF-FIELD PREVIEW	Yes
VIEWFINDER	Fixed prism viewfinder magnification x0.71, built in diopter adjustment – 2.5 to +0.5, built-in eye piece shutter, 94% coverage
FILM SPEEDS	ISO 25 to 6400
POWER	6 AA batteries (alkaline-magnesium or lithium)
DIMENSIONS	6" (W) x 5" (H) x 7" (D) (153 X 128 X 184mm) body only
WEIGHT	1730g (with AF 80mm f/2.8 lens and 120/220 roll film back, without batteries)

CONTACT tel 01782 753300 or visit www.mamiya.co.uk

MAMIYA 645AFD II

enough, especially for landscape uses. Similarly, the exposure meter did its job very effectively without being an all-singing-all-dancing matrix system and, frankly, if you are serious enough to buy this camera you will be using your own judgement and several spot-meter readings to evaluate the scene.

I was fortunate enough to try out all the wideangle prime lenses (35mm, 45mm, 55mm) in addition to the standard 80mm supplied with the camera (see table on page 87 for equivalent focal lengths for 35mm). All performed well, had smooth focusing rings and an essential depth-of-field scale. The 35mm lens

has a separate ring to switch between manual and autofocus and has to be set to AF for autofocus to work, regardless of the setting on the body.

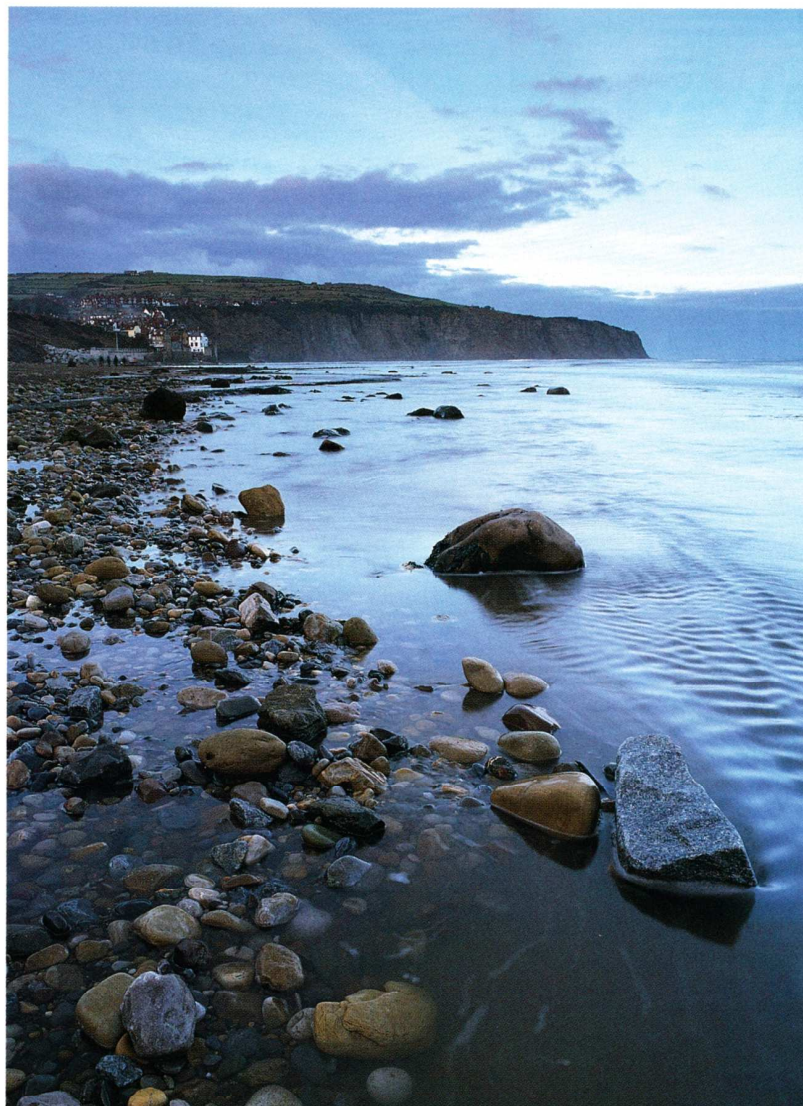
I enjoyed using a medium format SLR for the first time, combining the sophistication and automation of a top-end 35mm SLR with the image quality of a 6x4.5cm slide. Initially, the novelty of automation made me a little lazy, letting the camera do the work, but eventually I found myself taking more and more manual control. After all, in landscape photography, you don't really need much in the way of automation. It was a joy, however,

to be able to see the effects of filters, particularly ND grads, through the viewfinder – no more educated guesswork with the rangefinder.

As with any camera, the ultimate test of its worth are the end results and I was pleased with what I obtained. Images were sharp, showed good contrast and were what I was expecting. I certainly have no intention of returning any part of the camera to the bin. For my own limited landscape uses, however, I am happy to stick to my Mamiya 7II, preferring its portability, simplicity and larger image size, but I am sure that the 645AFD II will appeal to many. ■

LEFT

Robin Hood's Bay. The 45mm lens was my personal favourite and is probably the most versatile of the lenses for landscape work. *Mamiya 645AFD II with 45mm lens, Velvia 50, 1 second at f/22, 0.3 ND grad and 81B filters, tripod*



The Verdict

The Mamiya 645AFD II is an impressive piece of kit offering all the features and capabilities that you would expect from an autofocus medium format camera, while not as sophisticated as a top-end 35mm SLR – it's not meant to be, and does what it is asked to very well. Given the steady demise of 35mm film cameras, this could just be the camera to entice you to upgrade to the joys of

'This could just be the camera to entice you to medium format'

medium format transparencies. Of course, if your pockets are deep enough, you may also be tempted by its potential as a dual format camera – stick on a digital back and prepare to be astonished.

LIKES Format, build quality, large viewfinder, handling, lenses, digital capabilities

DISLIKES Weight, accidental setting of AE lock

