



Film Camera Japanese

Mamiya Medium Format

The Mamiya Press



I like things to be small, light, and simple, and these preferences apply equally to nearly any product. My favorite car since the close of the Second World War is the original Golf GTI, and the simple Honda Cub will forever be near the top of my list of favorite bikes. I've written here about my love for the diminutive Canonet

[<https://www.casualphotophile.com/2018/03/19/canon-canonet-35mm-film-rangefinder-review/>] . Even among my interchangeable

lens cameras I'm always trying to reduce and simplify my kit

[<https://www.casualphotophile.com/2018/02/23/canon-fd-24-35mm-f-3-5l-earning-the-red-ring/>] .

I know what I like, and this has informed my buying habits. But recently I found myself thinking big. I wanted a medium format camera.

I own a lot of old Canons and Pentaxes because I like them and I feel comfortable with them. I've bought plenty of Volkswagens and Saabs for the same reasons. It's all too easy to fall into a trap created by force of habit. Sticking to my favored brands should've had me buying a Pentax 67 [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus], but long hours spent trawling eBay brought something unexpected; a Mamiya.

Mamiya's final medium format rangefinders, the 6 [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus] and the 7 [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus], have long been favorites among hip photo geeks. Their compact dimensions, excellent lenses, and modern meters make them extremely desirable pieces of equipment. But what I ended up with was not a 6 or 7, it was a Press.

The Press shares very few of the 6 and 7's virtues just mentioned, but it offers an extraordinary amount of configurability that can be matched by very few cameras.

When it first arrived at, I was immediately struck by its formidable stature. Even disassembled in the box. This is a camera the size of a paint can. The grip looks like the flight stick from an F-86 Sabre. The body cavity will nearly fit a whole Minolta 7sII [<https://www.casualphotophile.com/2017/05/24/minolta-hi-matic-7sii-35mm-film-rangefinder-camera-review/>]. It outweighs my cat.

It was clear from the start that this camera would place me firmly outside my comfort zone.



I wasn't even entirely sure how I'd handle testing the Mamiya Super 23 [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus]. I don't shoot a lot of landscapes. I like walking and shooting, yet this camera was clearly going to be happiest atop a tripod. After avoiding the camera for a few weeks, intermittently playing with it and trying to master its operation, it dawned on me.

I am nominally a member of the press, and I would be going to the New York International Auto Show to cover a Porsche launch for another site [<http://flatsixes.com/cars/911-gt2gt3gt3-rs/gt3-rs-with->

[weissach-package/](#)]. Where better to test a Press camera than at a press event?

What is a Mamiya Press?

The Mamiya Press family is a series of multi-format, interchangeable lens rangefinders introduced in 1960. The original Mamiya Press and its derivatives are among the last cameras of their type, as 35mm SLRs were quickly taking over the professional and photo journalist market following the introduction of the exceptional Nikon F.

All members of the Mamiya Press system share a few commonalities. All are rangefinders, all have interchangeable backs and lenses, and all boast a large removable plastic grip. The many models differ in the details. The original Press along with [the Super 23](#) [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus] feature a movable bellows back which the S and 23 Standard both lack. The Press G is compatible with Graflex G Mount backs. A Polaroid-branded variant was marketed as the 600SE, and used Polaroid packfilm.

Apart from the Polaroid variant, which got three unique lenses, all of the Press variants can use the same selection of glass. These range from a 50mm f/6.3 to a 250mm f/5.0. For the purposes of this review I used two lenses; the 65mm f/6.3 and 100mm f/3.5.

All of the lenses in the system have leaf shutters, and the release and cocking mechanisms for the lenses are positioned on the lens itself rather than on the body of the camera. Because of this arrangement there are no interlocks. Advancing the film and cocking the shutter are handled separately for each shot.



Despite the name, I get the impression that the Mamiya Press was not intended for working press photographers. The camera's immense size and the rear bellows mounted to most models gives me the impression that the Press was intended more for studio work than for work in the field. Undeterred, I pressed on with my press badge and press camera.

Surprisingly Deft Handling

I've never considered "getting there" to be part of a camera review, but with the Mamiya this factor is worth considering. Before you can use the Mamiya it has to get wherever you're going, and for me this meant getting the camera in one of my bags. This meant at least partial disassembly every single time I wanted to stow the camera in my [Abonnyc \[https://amzn.to/2HoldIe\]](https://amzn.to/2HoldIe) bag.

For best fit, the film holder and lens needed to be removed and packed separately from the body. In a pinch the body could be stuffed in the bag with the film holder attached, but this pressed the camera into the bag, and its rectangular bulk could be felt against my back.

This of course meant reassembling the camera every time I wanted to use it. After a while I became well-drilled in the process, though it was a multi-step affair. With practice I could affix the lens, attach the release cable, attach the film back, remove the darkslide, cock the shutter and be ready to shoot in about fifty seconds.

Because the film backs are interchangeable you can actually switch films mid-roll, much like a Hasselblad. I carried two backs with me, one loaded with [black-and-white film](https://www.casualphotophile.com/?s=black+and+white+film) [https://www.casualphotophile.com/?s=black+and+white+film] and one loaded with [Kodak Portra](https://www.casualphotophile.com/2015/06/12/film-profile-kodak-portra-400/) [https://www.casualphotophile.com/2015/06/12/film-profile-kodak-portra-400/]. Switching was as simple as slipping in the darkslide, unscrewing two thumb-screws, affixing the alternate back and pulling the darkslide.

All this noted, in terms of startup time the Mamiya is substandard.

In use the Mamiya seems to defy physics. The large plastic grip is surprisingly effective at mitigating the camera's awkward shape. While the layout of the grip does mean cantilevering a lot of weight off to one side, it helps the camera feel a lot smaller than it actually is. Several times I found myself walking around New York shooting [the Mamiya](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus) [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus] like I would any other rangefinder. It wasn't the Press' ideal use case, but it could hang in a pinch.

The Business End

To be blunt, Mamiya made no attempt to make its Press cameras handsome. The company's development money seemed to go into smoothing out as much of the shooting process as possible while maintaining an extremely modular camera design, and in practice they mostly succeeded. While the interchangeable backs make advancing the film and cocking the shutter a two-step affair, the camera streamlines the rest of the shooting process.

Focusing is easy, and the viewfinder is very large and bright – unsurprising considering the amount of real estate it takes up on the front fascia of the body. The framelines are selectable for 100mm,

200mm and 250mm lenses. I found the 65mm lens [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus] had a close enough field of view to the full finder (including the area beyond the 100mm framelines) that I was able to omit the awkward spring-base removable finder from my bag.

The 65mm lens in particular is extremely sharp, which helps to make up for its slow f/6.3 maximum aperture. The lens' short focus throw and deep depth of field made it easy to walk and shoot with, particularly if conditions were bright. Most of the outdoor shots in this review were taken with this lens, as the lighting conditions indoors at NYIAS made the slow 65mm lens a challenge to use.





The 100mm lens [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus] is a more multi-faceted creature. Of the ten or so lenses in the system, this one is best optimized for use with the bellows back. The 100mm can collapse about 2.5cm into the body to allow focusing when the bellows are extended or tilted, though when collapsed focus can only be achieved using a removable ground-glass holder.

On the floor at NYIAS I primarily used the 100mm lens, and found that it offered a very smooth gradient from the areas of critical focus to the out-of-focus areas. The jump from in-focus to out-of-focus was never jarring, even when shot wide open. The long focus throw of this lens and the large rangefinder patch made it easy to shoot with, even outdoors in the middle of the night.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the two lenses was the lack of vignetting. The Mamiya Press [http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus] is a multi-format system, and I was shooting exclusively in 6 x 9, the largest available format. I actually expected some visible vignetting at the edges and was pleasantly surprised to find that the images are bright corner to corner. An impressive feat for such a large negative.





Takeaways

The Mamiya Press Super 23 [[http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus)

[icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus) is one of the most complicated film cameras I've ever used, and I am far from mastering it. My experiments with the rear bellows have mostly resulted in failure, and all too often I found myself making multiple-exposures that I didn't intend to make. This is not a camera someone can pick up and use instantly, and without a rigid adherence to process it is easy for even an experienced shooter to make mistakes.

Where the Press shines is its versatility. The lens selection is larger than the wonderful Mamiya 6 and 7 of the 1980s and 1990s, and the multi-format back system is head and shoulders better than the back-masking system employed by the Mamiya 7. With time and patience, there is very little the Press cannot do. Whether you want to shoot 6 x 9 format with an ultra-wide or 6 x 4.5 with a telephoto, the Press can hang. If you are willing to carry multiple backs and darkslides you can even change from format to format between shots.

While I found shooting the Press [[http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus)

[icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus](http://rover.ebay.com/rover/1/711-53200-19255-0/1?icep_ff3=9&pub=5575092698&toolid=10001&campid=5337536412&cus) to be a struggle at NYIAS, I didn't really mind. Despite the name this is not a press camera in 2018. But it is a terrific tool for any number of other jobs, ranging from portraiture to macro to landscapes. The Press will flatter any work that allows the photographer to slow way down and fine-tune the image. The enormous negatives, solid image quality and versatility all make for an extremely enjoyable camera to use, just don't try to keep up in the world of New Media.

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