Sony Alpha 900: First Test

The new Sony A900 24.6MP DSLR is the first full format high resolution model in Sony's Alpha line-up, featuring the industry's first ever 24.6 effective megapixel full-frame CMOS sensor. David Kilpatrick had the opportunity to handle one briefly at the press launch in Edinburgh last month. Here are his first impressions

The much anticipated 24.6MP full frame DSLR from Sony was unveiled to the European press in Edinburgh at the beginning of September. It turned out to have a £2000 body only street price, with a surprising 5fps shooting rate for 100 Jpegs or 11 Raw files.

No one really expected such a high pixel density to match Nikon D3/D700 high ISO performance, and it is equivalent to around a 10-11MP density on an APS-C sized sensor, so the speed range of 100-6400 (auto from 200 to 800) is fully in line with the pixel size.

Unique points about the Alpha 900 include its prism viewfinder, which is the second largest on the market after the Canon 1Ds MkIII, and the brightest on the market by a clear margin of 20% over all comers. It's 40% brighter than the Sony Alpha 700 and the majority of other APS-C or full frame models.

It also has a 100% view, fine tuned to match the sensor assembly positioning. All makers have experienced problems with getting the screen view to match sensor view precisely, because unlike a film gate, the sensor is a free-mounted assembly with adjustments. Up to now, makers have struggled to get the sensor adjusted to match the viewfinder.

With four adjustment controls on the viewfinder screen mask, Sony just lines the camera up on a test bench which records the position of a target as seen by the sensor and adjusts the horizontal, vertical and rotational tuning of the focusing screen to match. The result is a claimed dead accurate 100% view, despite having a floating sensor with in-body stabilisation.

Sony has also used a glass condenser lens and designed a new eyepiece using ED glass, which permits over 30° of eye position movement. On first picking up the Alpha 900, the clarity of the finder (which has no eyepiece-induced distortion or aberration) hits you, along with its amplified brightness. It seems Sony has made a viewfinder which, in 2008, is as impressive as the Olympus OM-1 finder was way back in 1974 – a new viewing experience.

It really does make you see the world differently, especially through fast lenses. Attention to the finest detail can be given because you can see clearly, not at a reduced scale.

The camera has no live view, but instead uses a mode called Intelligent Preview. You assign the custom or the depth of field button to this as required, and when pressed, the lens is stopped down and a very rapid small preview file is displayed on the rear screen. This is not a Raw capture and cannot be saved to card.

You can then adjust many parameters, from exposure settings to override, white balance, contrast, and creative style (a wide range, in both sRGB and aRGB). Once the preview looks right and the RGBL histograms confirm your visual adjustment, the settings you make are automatically saved for subsequent shots. Pressing the shutter release to refocus and compose returns you to shooting mode with your 'virtual Polaroid' adjustments all made.

There is a true mirror lock up (not a timer setting), and to go with this, an eyepiece blind for the viewfinder. The mirror itself is the largest of any DSLR, and uses a twin hinge action to rise in the limited space between the lens and sensor.

This space is limited because the sensor has the AA/IR filter positioned further away from the sensitive silicon. The big gap reduces the apparent sharpness of dust (there is an anti-dust coating and sensor shake function as well). Though Sony does not say so, optical theory suggests that a big-

ger gap also means using a weaker AA filter, which is turn means that wide angle lenses will not be disproportionately softened by the AA (as they are when a stronger lo-pass filter is placed closer to the sensor surface).

The shutter mechanism is oversize, to allow for the movement of the sensor correcting shake, and the newly released lenses – a 70-400mm f/4-5.6 Sony G and 16-35mm f/2.8 Carl Zeiss ZA – appear to have larger than normal image circles for the same reason. Flash synch has been successfully held at 1/200 (stabilisation enabled) to 1/250 (stabilisation off) and a new adaptor is available to connect studio triggers like Pocket Wizard and Elinchrom Skyport to the Alpha 900 dedicated hot shoe.

The very detailed 3ins 920,000 pixel VGA rear CCD (similar to the Alpha 700, Nikon D300, D3 and D700) uses Quick Navi, the rapid control system first seen in the Alpha 700. The review image can be magnified up to 20x, and is reasonably fast to see, thanks to the use of two separate Bionz image processors. The camera chooses from these sequentially according to workload, and they take it in turns to handle processes. Even when shooting continuous 5fps sequences, once the 11-frame Raw buffer is full, it flushes so fast that the camera continues until the CF or MS Duo Pro HG card is full, at around 3fps.

Auto bracketing is extended to five steps of 0.7 EV, or for HDR sets, three steps of 2EV (this is also updated on the Alpha 700 by installing the new firmware download Version 04 from Sony's website).

The Alpha 900, priced almost identically to the Nikon D700, is similarly built with a magnesium alloy shell front, back and top in three main parts, clad in a hard synthetic skin. It has comprehensive sealing, with gaskets at every point for 'splash-proof' status. This leaves the lenses as a potentially weak point, since they are not splash-proof – but revisions of the range, including upgrades to supersonic focusing motors, are planned.

There is a dual card slot system, and the card door uses a 'labyrinth' moulding, which traps dust and water, preventing it from reaching the slots. There is no provision for dual card recording, either split Jpeg and Raw or duplicated files, and no provision for auto switching cards when media is full. Given that a 4GB card was full after just 91 Raw+ Jpeg captures, this is an omission which will rule out the camera for many wedding, portrait, fashion and general people shooters.

As for results, Duncan McEwan showed a superb sequence of landscapes and equestrian action shots taken over a 10-day period in Scotland. These impressed journalists at the launch conference, but were only seen on a projection screen.

I had a limited chance to use the camera later in the day, by aiming it from a conference room window with a variety of new and old lenses. This proved that, while the new 16-35mm f/2.8 CZ might be highly desirable, my little-used Konica Minolta 17-35mm f/2.8-4 (D) turned in a fine central performance, with softness and vignetting only in the extreme corners at 17mm. My similar 28-75mm f/2.8 (D) seemed to be a touch less sharp than the new 24-70mm Zeiss. My 24-105mm (D) was bendy and had some generous edge colour fringes, but was stunningly sharp and handled very well on the body.

There was no obvious full-frame incompatibility problem with these relatively recent zooms originally designed for film use; no colour vignetting, just predictable illumination fall off, and certainly no problem dealing with 5.9µm pixels – bigger, in fact, than a 12MP APS-C sensor would have. While the little Sony Alpha 350 packing 14.2MP into a 1.5x factor crop has shown up the weaknesses of many lenses, the generous full-frame 24.6MP of the 900 is not as demanding.

As for metering and focusing, the AF is crammed into the 1.5x APS-C zone, because the 900 will auto crop when you fit a DT type lens (just as the Nikon full frame models crop when you fit a DX lens). This makes the entire nine zone, 'assisted' array, with its centre double cross and f/2.8 spot, a very local distribution of AF points.

The 40-zone matrix meter, in contrast, goes beyond the 1.5x crop, and this means that metering with DT lenses is unreliable. You are recommended to use manual exposure when shooting with the crop factor, and any lens which does not cover the entire finder field.

An impressive vertical grip is available, with top rate ergonomics. There is no built-in flash, but when a HVL-F58AM rotating bounce flash is fitted, it becomes a multi-channel, multi-group, ratio capable wireless remote flash controller. To disappoint predictions, the Alpha 900 does not have built-in WiFi, even though Sony says that by 2010 90% of its products will be wireless networkable. It also does not have built-in or attachable GPS tagging.

With Zeiss lenses to back it up, a system could easily cost you £5000 before you buy the powerful Mac or PC needed to manipulate 70MB Jpegs and their even more workflow-intensive 12-bit Raw companions. Add the Sony Bravia 4000 series giant HDTV Sony would like to you own – the camera has the most advanced HDTV display functions when connected to a Bravia with Photo-TV features – and you'd be doubling that figure.

The Alpha 900 is a technicians' camera, aimed squarely at the market once held by the Contax RTS system or the Leica R8 in the era of film, continuing an old Minolta tradition of appealing to landscape, still life, technical, portrait and beauty, and similar interests above the usual news, sport and action favoured by other makes.

Sony Alpha 900

- **Sony Alpha mount, compatible with Minolta A-type bayonet**
- **CMOS full frame 35.9x24mm sensor**
- **Charge protection coating on low-pass filter**
- **Image sensor shift mechanism**
- **Jpeg, Raw (ARW2.1) Raw+Jpeg**
- **ISO100-6400**
- **External Wireless control flash system with pre-flash TTL metering**
- **Electronically-controlled, vertical-traverse, focal-plane type shutter**
- **1/8000-30secs + bulb**
- **Continuous-advance rate Hi: Approx 5fps Lo: 3 fps**
- **3ins 921,600 dot LCD**
- **Litium NP-FM500H 7.2V battery**
- **Battery life approx 880 shots**
- **156x117x82mm**
- **850g**
- **Around £2000 body only**

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