

## **CAMERA REVIEW:**

### **ALPA 12**

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It's not vogue to call cutting-edge digital and film cameras "point-and-shoot" but they are designed and used largely in that way. Nearly all 35mm digital, film and contemporary medium-format cameras homogenize fundamentals of technique with autoexposure and autofocus by microcomputer. Automated color correction in digital photography is another such advance. The objective is laudable: help photographers expand their creative potential by automatically resolving challenges that can detract from composition, or make the moment impossible to capture because manual control would be too slow. For some photography, certainly, electronic assists are not just helpful but are considered essential.



**Alpa 12 SWA Featuring 25mm Lens Rise**

### **The Alpa Approach**

The Alpa 12, designed and produced in Switzerland, also aims to liberate creativity through advanced engineering, but from an altogether different perspective. The Alpa

is a precision medium-format viewfinder camera designed for ultimate quality in moderate to extreme-wide imagery, such as landscape, architectural and other painterly photography. Specifically, the Alpa expands creative potential by enabling ultra-fine image quality and the perspective control of a view camera, with basic, intuitive operation, portability and adaptability. The Alpa is equally conducive to film and digital photography with a switch of the camera back; it is also competent in macro-photography, and capable of aerial and small-distance photogrammetric applications.

Alpa performance centers on four design qualities. First, simplicity of control. Second, accommodation of advanced optics for film and digital wide-angle photography. Third, thoughtful accessories that enable serious hand-held perspective control, and push the limits of medium-format in low-light and tripod-less situations. Fourth, extremely fine engineering tolerances.

*[Click here to view architectural photography taken by the author with the Alpa 12 SWA.](#)*

### Alpa Specifications

The Alpa creates negatives or transparencies in a variety of medium formats from square to panoramic, up to 56x84mm (three to five times the area of 35mm film); or with digital backs from 16 to 39MP.

The Alpa utilizes an ultra-bright viewfinder and velvety smooth shutter release (and operates without mirror vibration, since the camera is not an SLR). Alpa models share view camera traits such as ground-glass and Polaroid backs for precise composition and focusing, while utilizing quality wide-angle lenses not conducive to SLR digital or film cameras.

Reversible camera backs on the Alpa provide for quick transition between vertical and horizontal orientation in static photography, as well as secure tripod mounting in the vertical position. In addition, a number of variants of the Alpa have been developed to meet individual preferences, which are available by special order. The system is fully modular, with easily fitting body, lens, film or digital back, and a medley of accessories. Batteries are not used in film photography with the Alpa, although a light meter is required for most intents and purposes.

### Versatility in Perspective Control

In correcting for slanting lines when aiming the lens up to capture height, the Alpa 12 SWA version is able to manage extreme perspectives—hand-held! This feature is the sum of a series of enhancements ranging from its substantial and unsurpassed lens shift capability for portable medium format, with rack-and-pinion controls, to viewfinder visibility of its universal spirit level (a basic need rarely met in photography). Viewfinder masks feature rectilinear etchings (i.e., both vertical and horizontal center lines) and are

available with simulated shift patterns as well. A few other cameras are physically capable of such handheld performance, such as Cambo, Horseman and Linhof, but are less practical in real-world situations requiring precision, especially under time pressure, because the cameras lack enabling assists or are comparatively cumbersome.

### Digital Design Features

Another unique benefit of the Alpa is its engineering to extremely high tolerances to expressly accommodate the new, first-generation wide-angle lenses expressly designed to facilitate perspective control in digital photography, which are not yet available for Canon, Nikon or Hasselblad cameras.

To accommodate digital backs to ultimate fit, Alpa is the only camera to my knowledge that provides for minute focal length adjustment at the point of attachment of the digital back.

### Weight and Bulk

The principal Alpa models will seem large and heavy to photographers who do not use medium- or large-format cameras. A body, lens, viewfinder and back can weigh 4-5 lbs. The proportions are in the range of contemporary advanced 35mm and digital as well as medium-format cameras.

Many users become accustomed to handling larger cameras in a surprisingly short time. The Alpa seemed moderately heavy the first two or three times I tested it, after which it felt normal. The generous weight nevertheless contributes to the Alpa's exceptional resolution in hand-held photography (e.g., as measured against a Hasselblad with similar lens), other factors being the seamless Alpa shutter release and quality film backs. In my experience, the Linhof backs adapted by Alpa are superb.

### An Alpa Bonus: Custom Lenses

Schneider Optics, a leading producer of large-format lenses, has developed unique optics exclusively for Alpa. First, the 48mm Apo-Helvetar shares some performance traits of the legendary Zeiss Biogon built into the legendary albeit recently discontinued Hasselblad 905SWC camera. (The Biogon lens was available for the Alpa in two limited editions prior to the advent of the Apo-Helvetar). The Apo-Helvetar, hand-held in overcast light, produces exceptional image quality for an expansive wide-angle lens as measured for resolution, tonal range and absence of distortion. Further, the Apo-Helvetar offers significant lens rise and shift for architectural or landscape photography, and can be used in a variety of formats up to 6x9—features the Biogon lacks. Yet the Apo-Helvetar, like the Biogon, does not require a center filter (although it may be desired for effect), further enabling hand-held photography in less than ideal lighting.

Introduced in 2006 was another custom Schneider lens for Alpa, the extreme-wide 36mm Apo-Switar, with qualities matching or exceeding the Biogon in most respects, with image circle suited for both 6x6 and 6x7 formats.

### Macro Photography

Alpa provides photographers two avenues to extreme close-up photography. First, the large-format Schneider 120mm Makro-Symmar lens has been adapted to Alpa specifications in a helical mount. Alternatively, three macro adapters of 16mm, 34mm and 52mm length are available to effectively convert regular lenses to close-up lenses on the Alpa.

### A Model Camera—Literally!

Rarely do modern, functional cameras appear as fashion statements in vogue magazines such as Gentlemen Quarterly—it's another aspect to the Alpa. Of course, no photographer of my acquaintance would admit to allowing good looks to enter into a camera decision! That being said, the mainline Alpa 12 WA and SWA cameras do project stature of solid functionality crowned with large, facile handgrips available in natural rosewood, rosewood black or natural pear wood. Synthetic alloys, preferred for grips by some photographers, are also available. A more compact version of the Alpa, the 12 TC model, has a slimmer profile.

Despite its substantial development, the Alpa is nevertheless rare in the USA. Until recently, it was distributed by two dealers within the country; presently it is available from at least three, or by direct order from Switzerland. The Alpa, produced by a trio of dynamic entrepreneurs who are continually refining and updating their product, has withstood the five-year new product test of time and is thriving in the global economy.

### A Premium Price

The cost of an Alpa, at \$10,000-14,000 as of this writing for the body, a customized lens, viewfinder, filmback and other basic accessories, would seem luxurious to many photographers. (The recent decline of the US dollar hasn't helped!) A digital back raises the cost substantially. Yet my friends Ursula Capaul, Thomas Weber and Andre Oldani, who produce the Alpa in Zurich, seriously disagree with any "luxury" description. (There I go, name dropping again! Disclosure: I met Ursula, Thomas and Andre only recently, at PhotoPlus Expo 2007, but we have carried on an intermittent email correspondence. They have patiently answered my repeated, often tedious questions about their camera.)

Actually the majority of photographers commenting on the Alpa on Internet forums regard it as a luxury camera, or at least out of their price range, notwithstanding its virtues. The median price is more than what most self-described, serious photographers would consider spending for a camera.

In my view, the issue pends on the definition of “serious” photographer (if you’ll excuse the phraseology coined by an ex-US President). A photographer earning their livelihood from photography would not hesitate to invest in quality equipment designed and built to last for decades, and which will not be obsolete in 2 or 5 or 10 years. Such individuals are the majority of Alpa users, many of whom also utilize view cameras and consider the Alpa an economic alternative with regard to work process, film and digital applications.

There is also a class of photographic enthusiasts who acquire cameras as collectibles, to be admired for their own sake (for which the Leica M series is well known), and which may ultimately appreciate or at least maintain their value. The Alpa appears to fit this description.

### Summing Up the Alpa

In review, a number of characteristics make the Alpa desirable to serious photographers and aficionados of the craft:

- ❑ an eminence and fineness of thoughtful design, fit and finish in medium format;
- ❑ basic, intuitive operation;
- ❑ advanced wide-angle optics for high resolution and dynamic range with minimal distortion;
- ❑ versatile digital capability;
- ❑ unprecedented portability for wide-angle perspective control in medium format;
- ❑ the custom-designed Apo-Helvetar and Apo-Switar lenses; and,
- ❑ probable preservation of value, if not appreciation.

This, then, is the Alpa 12: elegant in function and form, a modern classic expanding creative opportunity. Reference has been made to the likelihood of high resale value, yet I believe that most Alpa owners will actively use as well as admire and preserve their cameras as lifetime gifts to themselves.