

AN UNCONVENTIONAL RECOMMENDATION
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THE 37TH FRAME: ISSUE #8 SEPTEMBER 2005

As counterintuitive as it may seem, there are times when taking an advanced digital camera, using it in manual mode, and mating it to a decidedly low tech lens may be just what is needed to obtain optimal image quality. Ironically, the Canon 1Ds, arguably the most technologically advanced 35mm camera available, may well be the one that most benefits from such an unconventional union. The 1Ds's full frame, high resolution sensor provides exceptional image detail, but is unforgiving in its ability to reveal the optical flaws of any lens. Therefore, in order to see what this camera is truly capable of, it must be used in conjunction with top quality optics. One can readily find suitable telephoto and normal focal length lenses to deliver the necessary quality, but obtaining optimal wide angle performance is more problematic given the inherent difficulty with edge sharpness and distortion at shorter focal lengths.

Rather than debate whether a given Canon wide angle lens is superior to any other, I would, instead, like to offer an intriguing alternative. My suggestion is to consider using Contax Zeiss manual wide angle lenses with Canon EOS cameras. There are two Contax Zeiss lenses that stand out as superlative performers and which can be easily adapted to the Canon EOS system. These are the 21mm and the 28mm f2.8 Distagon *T's. For those concerned with numbers, photodo.com rates the 28mm lens quite highly with a score of 4.3, while the 21mm is unrated. More specific optical data for both the 28mm and 21mm lenses are also available at this link.

Though the quality of these lenses will be evident in film-based photography, their benefits will be far less tangible when they are used with digital cameras that have smaller than full frame sensors. For example, the Canon 10D's sensor, with its 1.6 magnification factor, will produce a crop from the central, sharpest area of the lens. The edges of the frame, where the greatest challenge to image quality lies and where the ability of the Contax Zeiss lenses shine, are thereby completely eliminated from the field of view.



Hell's Hollow Falls, McConnell's Mill State Park, Lawrence County, PA. Taken with a Canon 1Ds and 28mm Contax Zeiss lens.

Moving beyond the numbers, let's focus on the 'photographic experience' one has when using these lenses. My personal experience involves the 28mm Zeiss, a used sample of which can be routinely purchased in excellent condition for under \$250. The lens is made of metal and has a decidedly solid look and feel to it. The focusing ring action is smooth as silk. It's almost as if there is a hydraulic mechanism at work, damping the force that you apply to the ring. Needless to say, there is an engraved depth of field scale on the lens barrel. The manual 'click-stops' are sure and there is a 'precision feel' to changing apertures. The images speak for themselves. They are crisp, contrasty, and well color balanced. In short, this lens is a joy to handle.



Rock formations at Slippery Rock Creek, McConnell's Mill State Park, Lawrence County, PA. Taken with a Canon 1Ds and 28mm Contax Zeiss lens.

However, as compared to a standard Canon lens, the Contax Zeiss requires a bit of extra effort to use. To start with, an adaptor is needed to allow the lens to mate with a Canon EOS body. There are several adaptors that can do the job. I have found the one available from Stephen Gandy at Camera-Quest to be superb. The Contax/Yashica RTS Canon lens adaptor is the one that is needed (for the adventurous there are also adaptors available that allow Nikon, Leica, Olympus and Pentax lenses to be used with Canon EOS bodies). Yes, the adaptor costs \$175, but it is well worth the price, as it is as cosmetically and functionally perfect as one can get. The appropriate side of the adaptor is fitted to the lens resulting in a Canon EF mount that can be used as smoothly and easily as any Canon lens. The adaptor contains no glass and allows the lens to retain the ability to focus to infinity. As a result, the full utility and quality of the optics are preserved.

Since the lens is fully manual, there is no communication between it and the camera body. As a result, the camera will indicate '00' as the aperture setting and the metering mode will need to be set to manual. The image is most easily composed with the lens wide open. The lens is then stopped down to the desired aperture, the shutter speed is adjusted to balance the exposure using the in-camera light meter, and focus is obtained manually before opening the shutter. Focusing is best done using the hyperfocal distance and the depth of field scale on the lens, as it is difficult to focus precisely with the lens stopped down.

Once the lens is mounted, it is important to recognize that the camera's light meter is extremely sensitive to stray light entering the viewfinder. Merely keeping an eye to the viewfinder is not sufficient to keep the meter from being fooled. One's hand must actually be cupped around the viewfinder in order to effectively keep out stray light and allow accurate light meter function. After the shutter speed is set, this issue becomes inconsequential since the settings

have been applied manually and will not change with an altered meter reading. It should also be noted that the 28mm Contax lens can be used with either a filter or the Contax lens shade, but not both, as the use of both will result in vignetting.

Clearly, using these lenses takes extra time and effort. They aren't for everybody. If you are shooting moving subjects, if you hate fiddling and if you don't use a tripod then these lenses aren't for you. However, if you are using a full frame digital or film camera and are taking photographs of static subjects, desire superlative image quality, and want to have an enjoyable, immersive photographic experience, then you really owe it to yourself to give these lenses a try. I found using the 28mm lens to be such a joy that I have a 21mm on the way!

Special thanks to Jeffery Behr for enduring the long list of questions I had when first trying out the Contax/Canon combination