

# Photography With The Leica M8 in Marrakech



Smoke and Flame. Imlil, Morocco – January, 2007

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 50mm. ISO 320

## On Location

This isn't a field test report on the Leica M8. This isn't a travel report on Morocco. Rather, it is simply some anecdotes, observations, opinions, and photographs arising from 6 day days of shooting in Marrakech in early January, 2007.

The trip was noteworthy, for me at least, because it was my first visit to North Africa, and also my first real opportunity to do some serious photography with the new [Leica M8](#). I'd been using the camera since its introduction in late 2006, and had become very taken with it. After some 30 years of shooting with M Leicas I was predisposed to like it, and did. But, nothing compares to actually working with a tool rather than simply experimenting and testing.

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## Marrakech

The city's name alone is evocative. Images of exotic, dimly lit, twisting laneways; people in strange garb, unknown tongues, and foreign yet enticing odors and strange music. Dope dens, white slavers, the Casbah – the whole schtick. They're all there (though the dopers and slave trade weren't on this trip's itinerary). The old city (the medina) was founded in 1100AD, and with the exception of ubiquitous cell phones in almost everyone's hands, one would be hard pressed much of the time to know if you were in the 21st century or the 11th.

The main square, the *Place Jemaa el Fna*, is straight out of the tourist books, with its snake charmers, sword swallows, acrobats and costumed water sellers; not to mention hustlers of every description. But once past it, and past the first few lanes of covered markets (souks), one enters a dimly lit world of open-stall markets, and twisting lane-ways that simply exude exoticness from every sweaty pore.



**Pink Square. Marrakech, Morocco – January, 2007**

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 50mm. ISO 160

## **Photographing People**

It's the people that are the most fascinating subjects for photography in Morocco, yet also the most problematic. Some Moslems are averse to having their photographs taken. In some predominantly Islamic countries, such as Bangladesh, this is rarely encountered. But, in Morocco, even pointing a camera casually in someone's direction is often enough to earn a stern look, a palm-out warning, or even, especially with women, their covering their faces with a scarf. Even women already wearing veils will turn away.

Balancing not wanting to give offense, and yet responding to some of the most exotic street photography opportunities imaginable, leads to developing a few strategies. For example, I would sometimes ask my wife to pose as if I was taking her picture, while I was actually photographing the people behind her. Even then, it was not uncommon for people to turn away or cover their faces.

I should note as well that Europeans (including Americans, Australians, Canadians, and the like) stand out no matter what we wear, or how dark our skin. We are simply *other*. And as such we are either ignored, regarded with suspicion, or, as tourists, treated as a source of income. This is not to say that Moroccans are not very friendly. They are. Friendly and very hospitable. But as a photographer, just be aware that no matter how you might try you are always obvious in your presence and intent.

Consequently I found myself looking for shooting opportunities and compositions which didn't give offense. This meant looking for scenes where people were seen in the context of their wider environment. Candid portraits, other than of someone like a water seller who will pose for a small tip, are not easy to come by. And since long lenses are not part of the game plan, and not even possible with an M Leica, I very often found myself taking a shot with a 50mm lens, when a 150mm or even longer would have been preferable. This meant some extreme cropping was necessary. But the reduced detail and increased grain don't bother me in the least. If anything they add to the sense of mystery that some of these shots evoke. The high inherent resolution of the M8 and its lenses go a long way toward allowing some of these frames to be worthwhile, even though in a few cases I have cropped just 2-3 MP vignettes from 10MP files.



**Marrakech Lane. Morocco – January, 2007**

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 28mm. ISO 320

## **The M Advantage**

One's ability to effectively do street photography demands appropriate technique. This means a small camera, held discretely in one hand. No long lenses, no motor drives or large battery grips, and definitely no flash in the souks.

See an opportunity, position yourself, lift the camera to the eye, frame and shoot. Camera down before anyone has time to notice, or to object. If they object after the fact, smile an apology, and move on. It works.

An M Leica is the ideal camera for this type of shooting. It is small, as are its lenses, responsive, and so the new Leica M8 was my camera of choice for this trip, as Leicas have been for my street and documentary photography for the past 30 years. My favourite lens for the M Leica is the 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar, and I used it for probably 80% of the nearly one thousand frames that I took during my week in Morocco. I also had on loan from their manufacturers the new 16-18-21 Tri-Elmar, and the Zeiss 15mm f/2.8 Distagon – an abundance of wide-angle riches. My 50mm Summilux was also along, but mostly for the ride, as I found little use for its wide aperture this trip, preferring instead the versatility of the original Tri-Elmar.



**Covered. Marrakech, Morocco. January, 2007**

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 28mm. ISO 320

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## **Is it Safe?**

Personal safety is always a concern, especially when walking around a foreign city with expensive camera gear. I found that by reputation as well as in reality Marrakech appeared to be quite safe. I have felt much more threatened in the back streets of New York and London than I ever did in Marrakech.

Wanna-be guides are everywhere and it can take some resilience to get rid of them. All they want to do is get you to visit their cousin's shop in the souks where they promise they can get you a deal on a Berber carpet or silver earrings. As the saying goes – *just say "No"* – though you may have to repeat it six or seven times. It's just harassment, not really threatening – though it can feel like it. Nowhere near as bad as the markets in Turkey though.

As for beggars, there are some, but frankly I see more on the streets of Toronto than I did in Marrakech, and they're more persistent here. Also, Islam has a positive attitude toward providing alms to the poor. A few coins are the right thing to do, and one sees this all the time in the souks, where shopkeepers frequently are the ones making donations, while the tourists pretend that the beggars aren't there.

The primary language in Morocco is Arabic. Though everyone studies French in school as their second language, some speak it better than others. Outside of the main tourist haunts though almost no one speaks English, so some ability with French will definitely come in handy.



Carriage. Marrakech, Morocco. January, 2007

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 28mm. ISO 320

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## About the Photographs

I try not to shoot a new location with any preconceptions. Some people pore over books, trying to learn as much about a place as possible beforehand. I do the opposite. I rarely look at photographs of a place, and only read enough to get the lay of the land. It is usually afterward, if a place really interests me, that I study up on it.

In the case of Morocco, and Marrakech in particular, I found that this allowed me to spend the first few days with very fresh eyes. In fact, the best work I did was during the first half of the trip even though I shot more during the second half. I attribute this to what I call, *the saturation effect*.

When a place is completely new, especially somewhere as visually exotic as Marrakech, I see with fresh eyes. But even just a few days later, what initially might have struck me as novel

and therefore worth shooting, becomes the new norm. In other words, it's the delta, or variance from what one is used to seeing that leads to visual stimulation, and therefore the possibility of fresh work.

On day-one my overwhelming impression of the medina was its sense of *mystery*. I even wrote that word at the time in emails to a few friends. And what I see now, afterwards, is that my most successful photographs from that week are imbued with that feeling.



**Medina Wall. Marrakech, Morocco. January, 2007**

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 50mm. ISO 320

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## **Technical Issues**

The M8 turned out to be both a joy to use, and a curse. Or at least I was the one to do the cursing. Here's why.

In my initial M8 review I commented that I found the camera's power switch, which surrounds the shutter release, to be too easily moved by accident. It has four positions; OFF, SINGLE FRAME, CONTINUOUS, and SELF TIMER. A small protrusion on the leading edge is what rotates the dial to one of these four positions. In casual use and testing I found that it would end up in the wrong position from time to time. Normal handling of the camera,

even when it is around ones neck or over ones shoulder is enough to occasionally move it off the intended position.

But when doing serious street shooting, the problem became almost intolerable. The way I work, and the way most Leica shooters have since the 1930's, is to carry the camera in one hand, with the shoulder strap wound around the wrist. The lens is usually pre-focused to the hyperfocal distance, and the exposure pre-set for the ambient situation. When a moment to take a shot presents itself, the camera comes up to the eye, the shot is taken, and then the camera goes back down to ones side.

With the M8 though, this lost me more shots that I was actually able to take. Either the camera was found to be turned off, or set to self-timer mode, at least 50% of the time. Just the simple act of handling the camera, letting it dangle from one hand, and brushing the focusing hand against it, were enough to move the lever to the wrong position. I do not exaggerate when I write that I lost literally dozens of shots as a consequence.



**Cart and Donkey. Marrakech, Morocco. January, 2007**

**Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 50mm. ISO 1250**

Is this just me, or is this a serious design fault? I know that other M8 owners that I have talked to have mentioned that it happens to them as well, but maybe I'm just a klutz, because for me it happens almost continuously. Once again, just as with the infrared sensitivity problem and

the subsequent need for lens filters, it is hard to imagine that Leica had real testers working with camera prototypes before the M8 was released to the public. Its faults are just too obvious, and the poorly designed power / mode switch glares as an issue when the camera starts to be used in real-world shooting situations.

Users of the M7 may note that this is essentially the same switch. But, and it's a big but, while the M7 has just two positions, On and Off, the M8 has four, and it's this that appears to be the problem, along with detents that are too loose. You now have two of the four possible positions that will prevent taking the shot you want. (Update: *I inadvertently indicated in a previous version of this file that one could shoot with the M7 in the OFF position. My bad. Of course this isn't the case; I just expressed myself inappropriately*).

In the end I was forced to jury-rig some pieces of black electric tape to lock the lever in place, otherwise I might not have gotten any worthwhile shots.

I have passed my comments along to Leica. Maybe the use of the hand grip will be of help. I hope to try one soon. But, more likely, the switch itself needs to be redesigned. At last that's my considered opinion.

*"Other than that, how did you like the play Mrs. Lincoln?"* Old Joke – sorry.

This flaw aside, I found the M8 to be a superb tool for this type of shooting. Some of the things which I had previously wondered about, such as the need to go into the rear-screen menus to set ISO, turned out in concentrated use to be a non-issue. I found that I could change sensitivity quickly and easily enough for my needs, though faster access to exposure compensation is definitely needed. I know this peeves some users whose opinions I respect, including Sean Reid and Nick Devlin. I suppose that this just goes to demonstrate how personal the ergonomics of a camera can be.

Battery life was fine, easily 250-300 frames on a charge, though the temperature was mild. Image quality was superb – everything that my initial testing had promised it would be. The only lens which I currently have an IR cut filter for is the 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar, and so I had no issues in this area, since as mentioned it was my most used lens. None of the shots made with the 15mm Zeiss or the wide angle Tri-Elmar displayed any IR issues, more because of the subjects than for any other reason.

In the end the Leica M8 and set of lenses which I used turned out to be ideal for the type of photography which I was doing in Morocco. A small, light weight DSLR would have also been appropriate, but only with a moderate-sized lens. Also, holding a camera out at arms length, the way one does with most digicams, is simply an impossible way to shoot in such a camera-phobic country. You'd be better off with a view camera on a tripod (except the donkey carts would likely knock it over).

UPDATE: Since the above was first written I have had the opportunity to work with the [Leica Handgrip M](#). It almost completely solves the M8's handling problem for me. I just wish I'd had it on this trip.



**Transport. Marrakech, Morocco. January, 2007**

Leica M8 with 28-35-50 Tri-Elmar @ 35mm. ISO 320

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## **Recommendation**

In the end, travel and photography locations are like camera ergonomics, as mentioned above. Highly personal. Countries like Morocco are not everyone's cup of tea. Language issues, cultural issues, health and safety issues, all play a role in how comfortable one can be in various countries. When it comes to photography though, Morocco has a lot to offer. The Atlas mountains are stunning, the appeal of the Sahara desert needs no explanation, and together with the exoticness of Marrakech, provides ample fodder for the adventurous amateur or professional.

This was my first trip to Morocco. But It likely won't be my last.

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## **Recommended Reading**

On my last evening in Marrakech, looking for something to read on the long flight home, I came across [Restless for Morocco](#), by PB Rogers, in the hotel bookshop. This turned out to be an excellent first-hand account of adventure travel in Morocco, by a middle aged UN military

officer who used his days off over several years posting in that country to explore the back roads and remote villages. It was an excellent counterpoint to our own experiences. Highly recommended.

Source: <http://www.luminous-landscape.com/locations/m8-marrakech.shtml>