

Nikon D3X

A “Medium Format” Studio Camera for Photojournalists

By John Rettie



When I first became a pro photographer, back in the early 1970s, I started with a 35mm Pentax camera. But when I signed up with a couple of stock photo libraries, one told me it would only accept slides shot on 120 rollfilm. There was no way I could afford a Hasselblad so I bought a used Mamiyaflex twin-lens reflex camera with two lenses.

During one of my first trips across the

United States I tried to shoot as much as possible, including some action, with the Mamiyaflex but found that my shots were not as good as those I obtained with the Pentax. About the only time where I found the larger camera superior was an occasional landscape photograph.

My memory is hazy, but I don't think I kept that camera more than a couple of years and by 1975 I was able to upgrade to

a Nikon F and Nikkor lenses. Since then I've shot fewer than 20 rolls of 120 film. I never did supply the stock agencies with any slides, although someone suggested I should have made enlarged dupes from the 35mm slides and they'd never have known the difference!

▼ Of the 2350 images John shot with the D3X at the Dakar off-road race in South America, this was one of his best.



The seals in the tough magnesium alloy body are what sets the D3X apart from any medium-format camera (Photos courtesy of Nikon).



from film to digital—that's over. It must be as even *Arizona Highways* magazine, which was one of the last holdouts that insisted on film, now accepts digital images. It's a repeat of what happened before—only this time it's full frame (35mm size sensors) versus smaller APS-C-size sensors.

Why all this waffling back-story?

Earlier this year, when Nikon sent me a D3X for review I told them I would be using it to shoot the Dakar off-road race in South America. At first they were concerned as Nikon is positioning the D3X as a studio camera, not as a photojournalist's tool. I told them that I'd like to see if a “studio” camera could be used for action photography because medium-format cameras were not suitable for this type of work in the days of film.

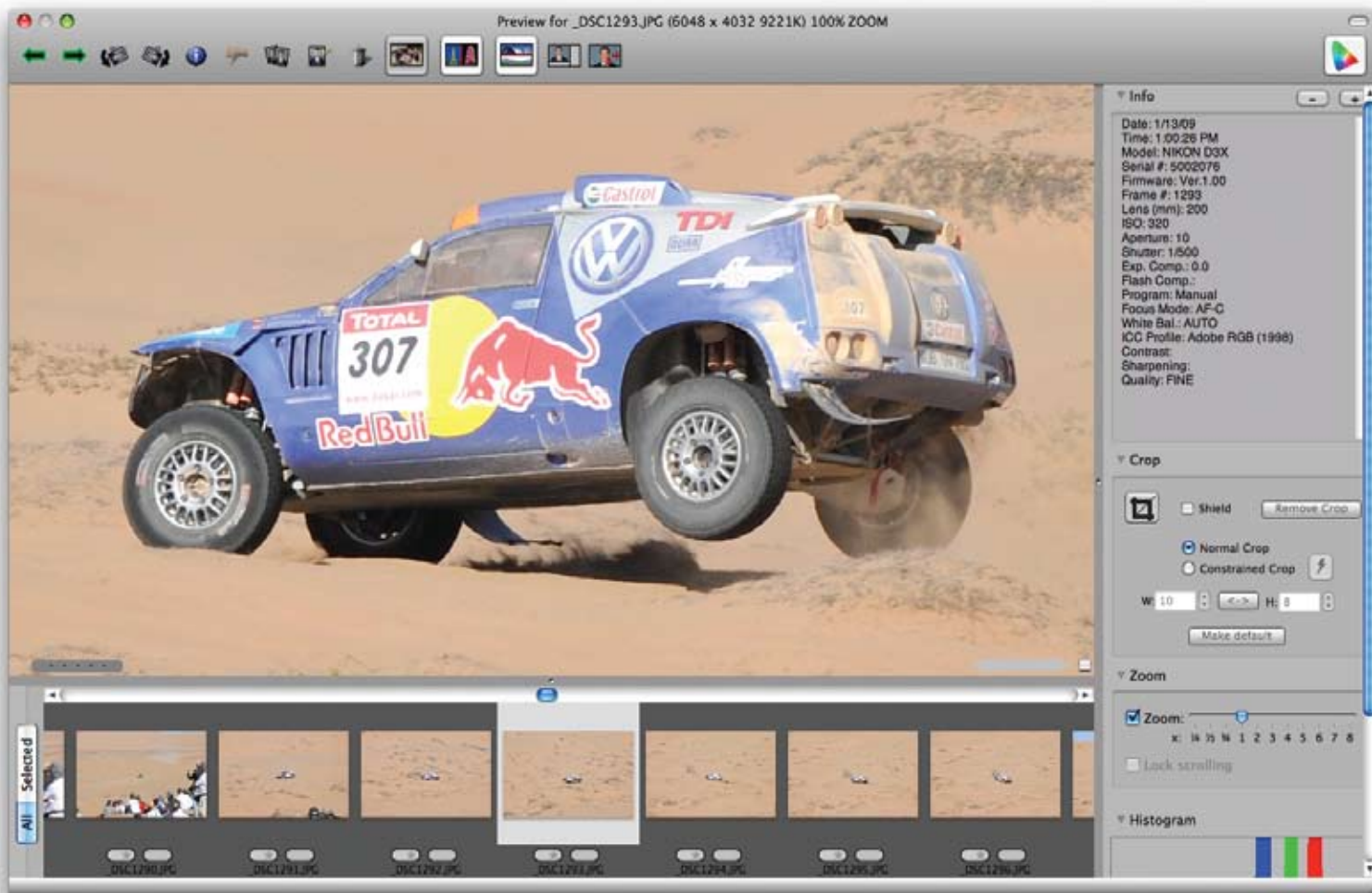
Of course, I had no qualms about the performance of the \$8000 D3X as it is really a \$4500 D3 with a sensor that packs in 24.5 megapixels instead of 12.3 megapixels. I knew the burst rate would not be as fast and that it would produce noisier images at higher ISOs. Other than that I expected the camera to perform in the same outstanding way—and it did.

Not once did I find the 5fps shooting rate too slow, and, because I avoided shooting at higher than ISO 1600, I was not concerned about noise. Where the camera really shined was in its ruggedness. Shooting off-road race cars in the desert terrain in Chile and Argentina meant that the camera was guaranteed to get covered in fine sand. I knew from past experience that this could prove to be a serious problem. Because of this I avoided changing lenses and kept a 70–200mm zoom on the body for most of the week I was shooting in the dusty environment.

Although most modern DSLRs have built-in dust removal systems, the D3X does not. Despite this I never cleaned the sensor and, after using the camera for three months while shooting over 3300 images, I checked and there were only a few very small dust particles on the sensor that did not even show up in actual photographs. It strikes me that even without a sensor-cleaning system, modern sensors are not nearly as vulnerable to attracting dust as they were not long ago. I know that a couple of my older DSLRs would have

I'll bet the majority of professional photographers in their 50s are likely to have had similar experiences. We were gaining our knowledge just as the industry transitioned from medium format to 35mm cameras as the standard. The reality was that by then 35mm lenses delivered decent quality but, more important, film technol-

ogy had improved so much that “small” 35mm film provided quality that was more than sufficient for the majority of work produced by a majority of photographers. Fast-forward now, to the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and we're once again in a similar situation that occurred 30 years ago. I'm not talking about the switch



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gotten plenty of dust spots after the type of shooting I did with the D3X.

That’s about it on the con side of this first look review. There are not many negatives, as the noise up to ISO 1600 is fine and the speed is fine for all but the fastest sports. Dust is not a problem—if you don’t change lenses too often in dusty environments.

On the positive side of the equation it has all the favorable attributes of the D3—namely a tough body with decent “weather sealing,” good ergonomics with well laid out buttons and dials, a great 3-inch 920,000-dot rear screen, dual storage cards, built-in vertical grip and large capacity Lithium-Ion battery.

Then it has the 24.5-megapixel CMOS sensor with a physical dimension of 35.9x24mm, which is all but identical to a

single frame of 35mm film. Although Sony and Nikon are reluctant to discuss details, it is obviously essentially the same sensor as found in the Sony A-900. However, the all-important processing “brain” in the D3X is very different.

The result is a very high quality image (6048x4032) that can be blown up considerably. At one stage I was standing on the edge of an enormous sand dune in the Atacama Desert—actually it was more of a major hill. There was no way of knowing exactly where the race cars would come through the dunes at first so we all had to stand some distance away. I really needed an 800mm lens but all I had was the 70–200mm zoom. Yet I was able to crop images and blow them up to an equivalent size. Granted the final image

This heavily cropped image gives a photo that is the same size as if it were shot with an 800mm lens, though the perspective is obviously very different.

(see above) was only 1584x1172 in size but that was plenty big enough for use up to a 4x6 print. Put in perspective that’s not much smaller than an image obtained by the original Nikon D1!

As an aside, another tremendous use for the camera was as a telescope. Where we were standing we could see dust clouds about five miles away when the vehicles first appeared over a ridge. I was taking “pictures” and then zooming in on the rear LCD and there was sufficient detail to see what type of vehicle was on its way. Of course a 16X telescope or pair of binoculars would have been better but the D3X was a great substitute for my needs.

During the nine days I was on location, I shot 2350 images on the D3X. I began shooting RAW and JPEG but quickly realized that I’d end up with an unwieldy amount of data. Each RAW file averaged 22MB while JPEGs range from 3.3MB to 20MB with an average of 9.5MB. Since I have been back from the trip I have not



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needed to open a single RAW file as all my clients only need JPEGs. (Another problem with the RAW files in the D3X was that they could not be opened by Lightroom, which was the program I used to sort my images when the camera was so new that Adobe had not yet released an update). I saved 35GBs of space by not shooting RAW all the time.

The other irony of the enormous files produced by the D3X is that I have had to downsample them on several occasions, especially when shooting model portfolios as they have proven to be too large for some people to handle. I could, of course, have used a DX lens and automatic cropping would have produced a 10.5-megapixel image, which is smaller than what you'd get from the 12.3-megapixel D300 camera.

My bottom line conclusion—the camera is tremendous if you really need high-resolution files. If my experience is anything to go by, I feel 24.5 megapixels is overkill for perhaps 90 percent of photographic needs. It is nice to have the data there if needed but the added space required for storage plus the greater computer power and time required for processing is a definite drawback.

It really is like going back to the days of comparing a medium format camera with a 35mm camera. Personally, at this time I'd much rather have the D3 with its superior low light capabilities and use the money saved to buy better lenses. On the other hand the D3X proves that you can have a great studio camera that is also more than suitable as a photojournalist or sports camera without anything more

This photograph of John Rettie, shooting with the D3X in the Atacama Desert in Chile, was captured by David Kennedy.

than a few disadvantages, which is more than can be said for traditional medium format cameras. In reality you're getting both a medium format studio camera and a 35mm photojournalist's camera in one body—which is pretty amazing!

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Further Information

Nikon D3X
www.nikonusa.com