

Rollei 35RF



Review by Jonathan Eastland

First published in Freelance Photographer magazine; April-May 2003.

SUBJECT new Rollei 35RF.
DATE January 2003
REPORTER Jonathan Eastland.

Reprinted as reviewed in Freelance Photographer magazine; April-May 2003, with some extra illustrations.



ROLLEI 35RF; FRONT VIEW, BODY FITTED WITH SONNAR F/2.8, 40MM AND SPECIAL TRIGGER WINDER.

ROLLEI 35RF

Cosina's apparently relentless push into the 35mm 'classic' camera market was bound, sooner or later, to persuade others in the business that perhaps, after all, the market was not as washed up as the many digital pundits would have the world believe.

Rollei Fototechnik of Braunschweig in Germany, for long the manufacturer and purveyor of one of the world's best known and arguably, best loved, cameras, the twin lens Rolleiflex, recently struck a deal with Cosina, the result of which enables Rollei to market the Voigtlander Bessa R in alternative attire.

Launched at photokina 2002 as the Rollei 35RF complete with 40mm f/2.8 Zeiss Sonnar HFT standard lens, the kit retails at £1395.00. Not as much as the thumping two grand being asked for a new Leica MP body, but an amount substantially more than the cost of a standard Bessa R fitted with a Voigtlander 35mm f/2.5 'Pancake'.

A glance is enough to confirm the origins of the Rollei 35RF body. With few exceptions - the Leica-M bayonet lens mount being the most prominent - it has all the hallmarks of a Bessa R body. Only the decor, a tough, sprayed and baked-on silver paint for the die cast aluminium top, bottom and front plates in addition to its comfortable to-the-touch-non-slip grey rubber composite panel grips and Rollei 35RF bright metallic polished name, differentiate it from Mr Kobayashi's regular babes.



ROLLEI 35RF FITTED WITH SPECIAL TRIGGER WINDER.

The 35RF also differs from the Voigtlander version in having fitted to its rangefinder viewing system a set of bright line frames covering the initial objective selection offered by Rollei of 40mm, 50mm and 80mm. The frames are activated by turning a click-stopped lever on the top plate, there being no linkage in the lens mount to automatically project the required frame as a lens is mounted.

The camera is fitted with the standard Voigtlander Bessa-R vertical run laminar multi bladed focal plane shutter speeded from 1s through to 1/2000ths + brief time setting 'B' and flash synch via hot-shoe or pc socket at 1/125ths or slower. There is a definite 'clack', much like the sound of a Nikon FM2 without the mirror noise, as the shutter is released. During the review period of several weeks, I found my reluctance to use the camera for the kind of street and people photography I use my Leica's for, was based more or less on the one factor of a higher noise level than I am used to. After an initial enthusiastic start, I was soon aware of heads turning in my direction whenever the camera was used, and often, not even in the close proximity of others.



ABOVE; ROLLEI 35RF -THE CLEAN TOP PLATE LAYOUT.

I tried to maintain a pragmatic view on this, arguing silently for those who cannot afford the engineering quality of a Leica, but who want a 35mm rangefinder camera with a built-in light meter and trigger wind facility, there are not many options. It's this, a Konica Hexar RF or something older.

The combined view/rangefinder of the Rollei 35RF/Bessa-R works well, giving a bright and contrasty image, though the lozenge shaped bright patch for the distance measuring is too small and not really contrasty enough for a lot of scenes affected by strong side and back lighting. The viewfinder also suffers from flaring in strong point source light conditions such as may be encountered in a theatre and this may have the effect of momentarily nullifying effective use of the rangefinder bright spot .

Setting the film ISO employs a lift-and-turn collar on the shutter speed dial; easily accomplished once the film advance lever is moved out of the way. However, I found setting the film speed accurately a minor bind, even with good reading glasses. The window and the film speed markers on the secondary dial are just a wee bit on the small side. Center-weighted TTL average metering with an EV range of 1-19 is activated by lightly pressing the shutter, a function which also checks battery power. Correct-exposure display and warnings against over or underexposure are user-friendly employing +/- triangles and a circular red LEDs. Somewhat oddly perhaps, these LEDs glow red through the range/viewfinder light gathering window on the camera front when the meter is activated.

Cosina's design philosophy for the Rollei 35RF, like their Bessa bodies, appears to borrow some features from older mechanical cameras, incorporating them into a neat and practical package. The focal length frame selector bears a vague resemblance to the same feature on old Kristall 35 cameras; the rapid film rewind lever crank looks very old Canon. The film advance and shutter arming lever is similar to a design first seen on 1970s Olympus OM cameras and Cosina has used Yoshihisa Maitani's clever visual device featured on the OM1 to lower the apparent height of the camera by adding a break in the contour line of the top plate. In the Rollei/Bessa-R, the break features only on half the top plate, but it nonetheless assists in effecting apparent smallness.

My overall impression of the 35RF is that it works well, does the task required of it competently but lacks the engineering refinement of more expensive brands and some older 1950s and 60s cameras. It may be knit picking, but the lever component of the rapid film rewind of the Rollei looks as if it has been pressed from a metal flat in a not very accurate die.

So what is it that warrants the considerably higher retail price of this model compared with the few hundred pounds necessary to purchase a bog standard Bessa R and screw threaded 35mm Voigtlander Panacake lens, both of which have been very well received in just about every photographic journal?

The fitted-as-standard Rollei Sonnar f/2.8 40mm HFT lens is what makes the substantial difference, allowing that is, for a reasonable increase in manufacturing customising cost of the 35RF body over the Bessa R. The outward appearance of the 40mm Sonnar objective is certainly finely engineered and finished, as one might expect from a company of Rollei's calibre.

There has been some internet debate as to who actually makes the lenses for this camera. The 40mm is a five element, four group Zeiss design, manufactured and assembled under licence at Rollei's Braunschweig facility using German Schott glass, according to a statement from Maik Otto at the factory. Both the 50mm and the 80mm will be made in the same plant.

All three objective designs are based on models used for other older Rollei products but as I was only able to review the 40mm, a little history may be useful at this juncture.



ABOVE; ROLLEI 35RF 40MM SONNAR - 2/3RDS CROP FROM WHOLE FRAME. KODAK EBX 100 ISO, 1/125TH SEC @ F8, CENTRE WEIGHTED UNADJUSTED METERING.

The 40mm f/2.8 Rollei HFT Sonnar first appeared on the Rollei 35S and SE miniature 35mm cameras from 1974. An f/2.3 version appeared on the Rollei XF 35 model. But this camera was no where near as successful as the 35S type that was later reissued under the Rollei 'Classic' guise. The original Sonnar 40mm was without doubt, a superb example of optical design, having the capacity to produce sharp and contrasty prints up to 16 X 20 inches. I used a 35SE for several years and always rued the day I sold it.

Almost thirty years later, the same design using current glass and coating technology, held the promise of similar expectation in its ability to produce crisp, snappy and well resolved images. I was not disappointed.

Today, 40mm would not normally be my focal length of first choice; I do prefer the slightly wider angle offered by a 35mm. But, this is perhaps just a visual notion; I used the old Rollei 35SE for countless Parisian night shots over a couple of winters and when Olympus produced their diminutive 40mm f/2 pancake lens, it became a regular companion on street forays for several more years. There is something about the 40mm angle of view; perhaps comparatively, its ability to manifest a visual effect with a different spatial perspective closer to that obtained with a 75mm on a 6X6cm medium format than the more normal 80 - 100mm.

*RAIL TRACK PICTURE NEXT PAGE;
ROLLEI 35RF/40MM SONNAR. RAW SCAN ADJUSTED FOR LEVELS AND COLOUR CORRECTION AS BOTH WERE WAY OUT FROM THE ORIGINAL KODAK EBX TRANSPARENCY. FOCUS POINT AT END OF VERTICAL SLEEPERS.*



By the end of a cold bright day in the northern French village of Cassel and its environs, I had quite got back into the swing of seeing the 40mm vista. So much so that I switched the Sonnar over to a Leica MP-6. Using almost all of the window in which the bright line frame for the 50mm was projected, permitted fairly accurate framing.

Rollei intend to offer this lens independently at £649.95 which is little more than the current list price of the chrome Leica 50mm f/2.8 Elmar collapsible. Indeed, breaking into the Leica market is clearly the strategy; all three lenses have Leica L39 screw threads fitted with M bayonet adapters, enabling use on any M camera as well of course, without the adapter, on any L39 screw camera. This may work for the 50mm and the 21mm when it comes, but the other two really need accessory viewfinders if they are to be used with any accuracy on anything other than the Rollei 35RF body.



ABOVE; ROLLEI 35RF/40MM SONNAR 2.8 HFT. FILM; KODAK EBX. FULL FRAME SCAN ON NIKON 4000ED TO 18MB. THIS FRAME CROPPED TO APPROX 2/3RDS ORIGINAL IMAGE. RAW SCAN. NO LEVELS APPLIED. NO U/S MASK. SPECULAR HIGHLIGHTS ARE WELL HANDLED BY THIS LENS WITH NO APPARENT FLARING. GOOD COLOUR DETAIL IN SHADOW AREAS. SLIGHT MAGENTA CAST IN NEUTRAL AREAS. VERY SHARP. ALL FRAMES METERED WITH ROLLEI 35RF CENTRE WEIGHTED TTL METER SET AT 100ISO AND BALANCED FOR VIEWFINDER 'CORRECT' DISPLAY. RESULT IN MOST CASES IS ABOUT 1/3RD STOP UNDER.

The 40mm Sonnar sample is well made. There is an aesthetic difference between this and say a chrome finished Leica 50mm Summicron, but the engineering of the Sonnar is, from an outward perspective at least, just as accomplished as the latter. The aperture ring is click stopped at full and half values; it is serrated for about 75% of its circumference allowing rapid and positive finger tip control. The focus ring is fitted with a finger grip and operates very sweetly; and the lens is heavy, which indicates Rollei have not spared on the use of fine metals for the barrel manufacture. It comes fitted with a natty screw-over lens hood and velvet rim lined metal cap.

In the past, Rollei have produced several superb professional level cameras, both highly specified and highly regarded medium format and 35mm tools. The current Rollei 6000 series, much underrated in this country, is a prime example of a superbly manufactured camera. Earlier attempts with the smaller but similar 2000 and 3000 series of the 1980s were equally well engineered, but somehow lacked wide appeal. Only the 35S cameras took off with more than two million of the different models manufactured.

Will the 35RF do as well? I somehow doubt it. But this opinion ought to be qualified. The Cosina body provides a relatively inexpensive means for the company to dip a toe in the apparently burgeoning 35mm rangefinder market place while adding time proven and first class objective alternatives to the existing Voigtlander, Konica and Leica choice. If these are successful, which I am hedging they will be if competitively priced, look out for a 21mm or something wider. For now, Rollei Fototechnic has no plans to design and build its own 35mm rangefinder body.

For the image quality appraisal, I used the 40mm Rollei Sonnar with its factory supplied adapter ring mounted on a Leica M6TTL camera which enabled comparisons to be made between a much earlier screw thread 35mm f/3.5 Leitz Summaron and a late 1980s 35mm f/2 Summicron, this length being probably an alternative choice for users and closer to the straightforward Sonnar design - no modern aspherical (and much more expensive) elements included, than the longer 50mm.



ABOVE; WHOLE 35MM FRAME AREA OF OBJECT FOR SHARPNESS/DETAIL RESOLUTION APPRAISAL. KODAK 400 PORTRA UC SAMPLE SCANNED AT 4000ppi ON NIKON 4000ED FILM SCANNER PRODUCED A FILE OF 65.3MB FROM WHICH DETAIL IS SHOWN ENLARGED BELOW.



ABOVE.; LENS: 1959 LEICA-L SCREW 35MM F/3.5 SUMMARON WITH LEITZ ADAPTER ON M6TTL 1/1000th S @ f/4.5. SMALL SECTION FROM WHOLE FRAME SCANNED AT 4000ppi. RE-SIZED TO 8.5CMS @ 300ppi. LIGHTENED 20%. 400 PORTRA GRAIN STRUCTURE CLEARLY VISIBLE, RESOLVED DETAIL AND SHARPNESS V.GOOD, CONTRAST LOW.



ABOVE;; LENS: 1988 E.LEITZ/WETZLAR SUMMICRON-M 35MM F/2 SUMMICRON ON M6TTL. 1/1000TH S. @ F/5.6. SAME SCANNING DETAILS AS PREVIOUS IMAGE. NO U/S FILTER APPLIED TO ALL THREE. THIS IMAGE SHOWS MORE DETAIL THAN (1) BUT STILL LESS THAN FOR THE ROLLEI 40MM SONNAR. EDGE ACUTANCE IS SOFT COMPARED WITH HARDER EDGED SONNAR. SUMMICRON CONTRAST IS ALSO LOWER.



ABOVE; LENS: NEW 2002 ROLLEI 40MM F/2.8 SONNAR HFT MADE BY ROLLEI IN GERMANY WITH SCHOTT GLASS FITTED TO M6TTL WITH ROLLEI SUPPLIED NON LEICA ADAPTER. 1/1000TH S @ F/4.5. SCANNING DETAIL SAME AS FOR THE LEITZ SUMMARON ABOVE. DENOTES A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN RESOLVING ABILITY WITH DETAILS OF THE RIGHT HAND DISC CLEARLY VISIBLE. MUCH SHARPER OVERALL, HIGHER OVERALL CONTRAST.

The results were interesting, if a little predictable in the case of the 1950s vintage Summaron. The 35 f/2 Summicron provides the benefit of an extra stop in its maximum aperture - compared with the 40mm Sonnar, and a quite different, slightly softer image. There was no doubting the Sonnar's ability to resolve fine detail crisply and clearly, even when using Kodak's new Portra 400 UC at the larger apertures. Slower speed emulsions such as the Kodak EBX I used in France rendered a typically cold neutral Zeiss effect but clearly, the images contained stacks of minute detail over a wide tonal range.

Current Rollei 35RF lenses:

(from Rollei press release.)

Sonnar 40mm f/2.8 HFT

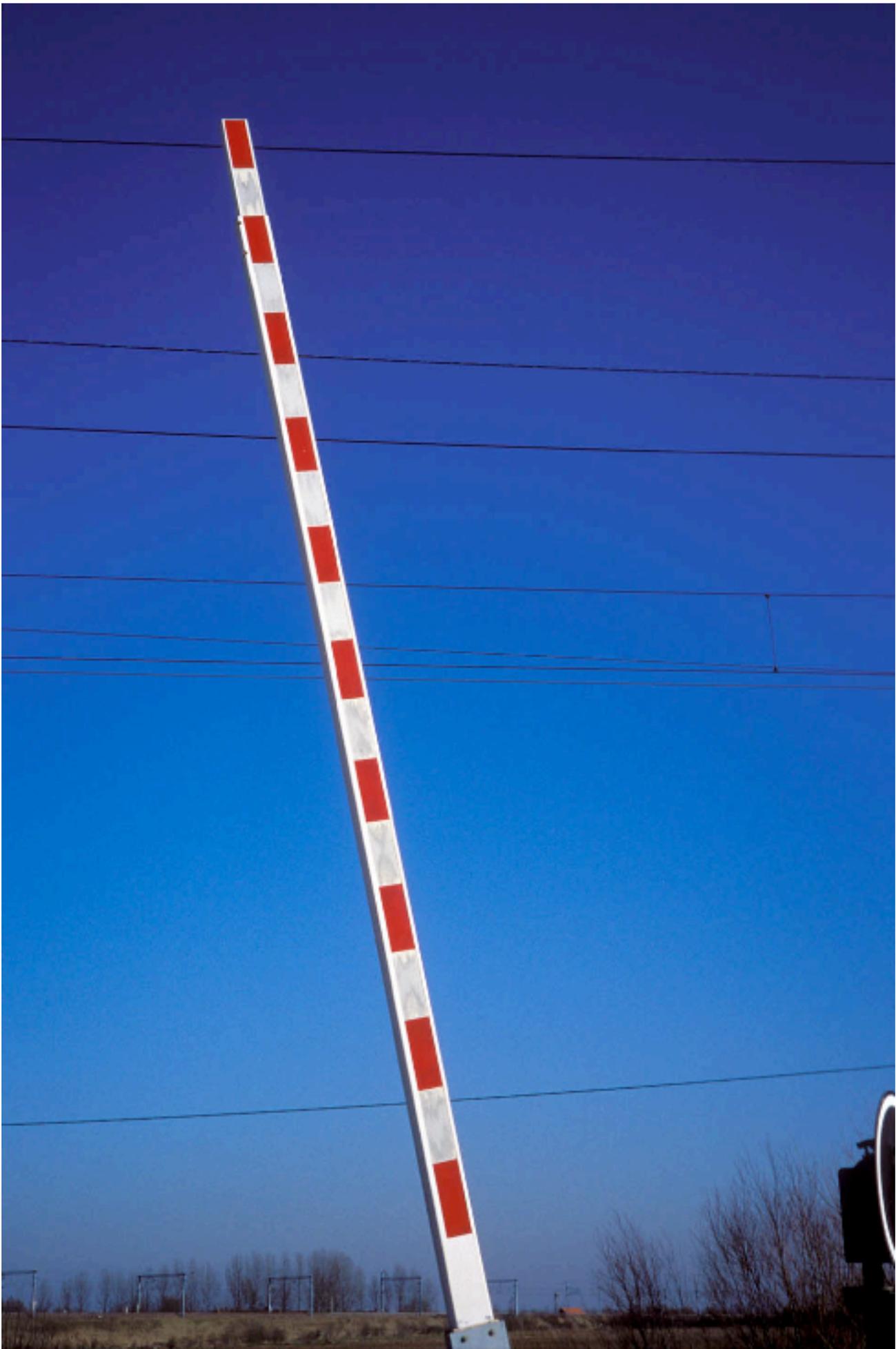
The famous candid lens of the legendary Rollei 35, with its ideal focal length for outdoor and indoor photography. A lens ideally suited for news photography. Its initial aperture of f/2.8 gives it a wide margin for shooting in low light with excellent focusing results. (5 elements in 4 group design.) Price £649.95.



ABOVE; ROLLEI 35RF - 40MM SONNAR F/2.8. CONTRE JOUR. THE LENS HANDLES BACK AND SIDELIGHTING VERY WELL WITH NO OBVIOUS FLARING OR CHROMATIC ABERRATIONS. DYNAMIC RANGE IS EXCELLENT.

RAIL BARRIER ILLUSTRATION, NEXT PAGE;

ROLLEI 35RF/40MM SONNAR. AUTO LEVELS APPLIED, NO OTHER ADJUSTMENTS. FILM; KODAK EBX 100 ISO. 1/125TH S @ F/8-11. EXCELLENT ACROSS THE FRAME SHARPNESS AND TYPICAL ZEISS COOL COLOURING. RATHER MORE MAGENTA THAN I LIKE BUT THIS IS A COMBINATION OF LENS COATING, FILM CHOICE AND IN WINTER WHEN THIS SHOT WAS MADE, A NATURALLY HIGH LEVEL OF MAGENTA LIGHT IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE.



Planar 50mm f/1.8 HFT

The typical standard lens, with outstanding correction and sharpness, light in weight and very compact. A focal length well adapted to available-light photography. Well-suited for a wide range of subjects, from interiors up to half-length portraits, with or without artificial lighting or flashlight, even in unfavorable lighting conditions. (in preparation for the first half of 2003) (7 elements in 6 group design.) (No price yet.)

Planar 80mm f/2.8 HFT

A medium focal length for portraiture, also well-suited for landscape details and candid shots from a certain distance. In medium-format photography, it became famous for its excellent flatness as the standard focal length of the well-known twin-lens Rolleiflex. Experts consider it one of the best available lenses for creative photography. (5 elements in 4 group design.) (No price yet.)

Technical specifications

Rollei 35 RF

Negative size: 24 x 36 mm on size 135 film

Lens mount: M bayonet

Shutter: Vertical-travel laminar metal focal-plane shutter; 1 s - 1/2000 s and B

Camera body: Made of die-cast aluminium

Focusing: With coupled coincidence-type rangefinder

Exposure display: Overexposure warning, correct exposure, underexposure warning

Metering system: Center-weighted TTL average metering upon light depression of shutter release

Metering range: EV 1 - 19 (ISO 100/21[∞]; 1 s at f/1.4; 1/2000 s at f/16)

Flash synchronization: PC terminal and hot-shoe contact; sync speed 1/125 s and slower

Film advance: By one or several turns of advance lever; double-exposure lock; optional T Winder can be attached to bottom plate

Film rewind: By crank in rewind knob

Frame counter: Additive, with automatic reset when camera back is opened

Film-speed setting range: ISO 25/15[∞] - 3200/36[∞] in one-third increments

Exposure-meter power supply: Two 1.5V alkaline-manganese (LR44) or silver-oxide button cells (SR44)

Dimensions (mm/w x h x d): 135,5 x 81,0 x 25,5

Finish: Metal cover plates silver-finished

Copyright:Jonathan Eastland, February 2003.

This .pdf document has been prepared on an Apple Mac computer. For best printed viewing it should be printed on a good quality coated brilliant white paper.

Other .pdf documents featuring camera reviews by Jonathan Eastland are available on the Ajaxnetphoto.com website at >www.ajaxnetphoto.com< and the Ajaxnetphoto.com News & Information blog which can be found at >www.ajaxnetphoto.blogspot.com< subscribe to receive continuous updates of new postings on photography related matters on this popular site.

Buy photographs and prints on-line at >www.ajaxnetphoto.com/printordertemp.html<, and handbooks on Leica rangefinder cameras at >www.ajaxnetphoto.com/editions.html<.

Thank you for downloading this document.