

Equipment Review

It seems I was using my stuff for long enough, so I can write a few lines about how it works for me. I will add more sections to this article. Each section will be dedicated a certain piece of equipment that I owned and used. This article represents a purely subjective opinion and cannot be considered a review per se. I have to remind you that I don't care much about the hardware (those metal things), but the art is more important for me. And I don't have much knowledge in all that technical stuff. So, please take it with a bit of salt. If you need a better review - search the Internet or start at www.dpreview.com, www.fredmiranda.com and www.luminous-landscape.com

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Canon EOS 1D Mark II

This is my primary camera (and the only one so far), which I use pretty extensively for year and half. As you know I do different kinds of photographs, from landscapes and architecture to weddings. Though my requirements to the camera are lower than of some professional photographers that specialize in specific fields, I may say that I explored and used many if not all of the features the camera has to offer. And below you will find my opinion on some of the qualities:



Crop Factor

Canon 1D Mark II has 1.3 crop factor (CF), which means that the sensor is of smaller size than the Full Frame (FF) found in 35mm film cameras. This crop factor falls right in between of FF and APS size (1.6) sizes. And this is a very nice tradeoff for me. The 1.6 CF makes the use of lens somewhat confusing and hard, FF is better, but after Canon EOS 10D I am missing the extension of telephoto. CF 1.3 makes it a nice transition from 1.6 to FF, which I am planning to buy (Canon 5D with full frame is released this fall). You may say that with 1.3 we still lose the very wide-angle focal distance. You are right, but I don't need that often and most of the time 16mm (of 16-35 L f2.8 lens) is more than enough. The distortion starts to pitch in and quality suffers. With CF 1.3 the 16mm lens have the same view as 21mm, which is quite a nice wide angle. On the other side the 200mm (of 70-200 L f2.8 IS) reaches a bit farther - 260mm. Have I thought of FF in regards of lens? Not really, FF for me means more as a better dynamic range.

Speed & Focusing

This camera is very fast, I would say lightning fast. It has 8.5 frames per second rate. Sometimes to impress my friends I run a few shots just to let them hear the sound of sewing-machine. Yes, it sounds exactly the same and produces several images in a fraction of second. The other thing that says about the speed of this camera is the

improved speed of auto focusing. Comparing it with 10D (which is fast enough) I would say that 1D Mark II is considerably faster, may be even several times faster. You don't have to worry about how long it would take to get the focus. As well it acquires focus in dimmer light. Though there were a few situations when it would not focus at all. Such situations happen when it is dark and the contrast in the focusing area is too low.

The AI-Servo mode, which track a moving subject, works very well, though beware that the first image can be out focus. It's not the bug or lack of something, that's how the algorithm works. You may read more in the [blog post](#). Canon incorporated 45 focus points in this camera, but I use them as 9, though they actually form 9 groups; and if the focus cannot be acquired in the center of the group, adjacent points are used.

ISO & Noise

You don't have to fear using ISO 1600 or even 3200 because of the noise. The noise at high ISO is mild and with some help of filters and software packages you can easily make almost unnoticeable. The high ISO gives you the necessary speed in low light situation and allows you to produce great images with little noise and slight color degradation. You may notice that a green color cast lurks in the deepest shadows even when everything else is reddish or yellowish (in candescent light). I have used the camera for long exposures, up to 30 seconds, and the results were great. No problems with noise, however some people say that you may see noise and dead pixels. Well, I have not tested or used the camera to its extremes.

Dynamic Range

When I was using Canon 10D, it was a real issue not to blow the highlights. Most of the times you have to dial in a negative exposure correction and still would get a messy result. With Canon 1D Mark II you can almost completely forget about such an issue, at least I forget in most situations. The exposure measurement is right to the point (it uses the current focus point) and the expanded dynamic range allows getting more gradations of tones. It's hard to blow the highlights and the dynamic range definitely bigger than in 10D. In some articles I read that it is about 9 stops, which is equal to black and white negative film. I heard that Canon 5D has even more stops - some say 11.

Auto White Balance

What "White Balance"? Is there such a setting? Well, I use the only setting - Auto White Balance (AWB). I have to admit that in a very few situations, such as studio shots and when I need the exact rendering of the color, I use the custom white balance. In all other situations I rely on the AWB, in 99% of the lighting conditions it produces good if not great results. I may try to interfere and change the settings to add a color cast when I see it fit. But usually I leave it at AWB and I don't remember when I have to correct the color in Photoshop.

Battery & Weight

The battery allows producing about 2000 shots without recharging it. Sometimes I use a single battery for the whole wedding and notice that the battery is still in the "green zone". So far I have not noticed any problems or issues with the battery. It works and works, as the bunny in the Energizer commercial. The only thing that you have to do is to don't forget to [condition](#) it when you buy the camera and drain it completely once a month. Then it will serve you in its full power and for a long time.

The weight of the battery adds to the weight of the camera and it makes about 3 lbs or 1.2 kg. Adding the weight of lens and flash it becomes a hefty chunk of equipment to carry, though it reduces the shakiness. Of course, it tends to make your tired faster and grow more muscles in you body as well.

Flash

During weddings the flash most of the times is the only source of light for the photographer. That's why it is important that this light source worked as you need, not as it wants. In the case with Canon 1D Mark II and 550 EX flash it works as you need in 90% of the time. And I wouldn't blame the flash or the camera for the remaining 10%, because I don't use the flash directed right on the subject. I bounce it of the ceiling or walls, which makes it harder to calculate exposure. However the camera considers the distance to the subject (using the current focus point) and gives very good measurement for the flash. By the way, I use flash either in A or M modes and use [Light Sphere II](#) to diffuse the light.

Fire Wire & Tethering

Sometimes I need to direct connection with the camera to transfer the photographs or control the settings and see photographs on the computer. For such purposes Canon provided Fire-Wire connection, which allows quickly transfer the files and use the camera remotely via computer. The included software allows taking photographs while you look at the monitor of your computer connected to camera. In a few short seconds after the shutter was released you see the image on the screen - bright and big. You can evaluate all the qualities of the image and

change the settings as needed. There is only one problem I experienced - releasing the shutter through the software. Somehow it didn't work, while there is a button on the screen for that. That could have something with the installation or some settings in operating system. Anyway I didn't bother to explore this issue, just used the shutter on the camera.

Vertical Grip & Shutter

The camera provides vertical grip with a main dial and shutter button. So instead of twisting your arm, you just grip the camera in a vertical position and keep shooting. Under the thumb you will find the same button in both positions, though reach for the dial on the back of the camera will be somewhat different. Maybe something is wrong with me or I cannot learn the new trick, but I keep twisting my arm and hold the camera in horizontal position. Well, it's just silly me, though I like shooting vertical frames.

There were some comments on the sensibility of the vertical shutter button on some cameras. I have not noticed any differences so far. Both buttons are very sensitive and it takes time to get used to. Sometimes I inadvertently shoot two frames when the drive mode is set in multiple frames per second.

Computer Inside

Yes, the camera is more like a computer, which has so many functions that it takes time to learn the software. I try to refrain from changing the settings in the camera. I use the settings, which are described in one of the [blog posts](#) on my website and keep using them. The one thing that impressed me most is the ability to change the contrast curve in the camera. It works only for JPEG files, because RAW files are not processed at all. The curve I use is slightly deeper the darkest shadows and a bit increases the tones in $\frac{3}{4}$ of the image - it improves the impact of most of the images. Though the camera has several settings for sharpening I set it to the minimum, because some images may require different level of sharpening. I will not talk about all the settings and possibilities provided by Canon in this camera, you may find them in reviews on other websites.

Compact Flash and Secure Digital Card

The last feature, which I have to mention, is that the camera has two slots for two different types of cards: CF and SD. You may make the camera to write backup files on the other card or fill the second card when the first one is full. It is very useful for weddings, when the images cannot be repeated and you have to be sure that you won't lose any. I suggest read another review at Luminous-Landscape.com by Alain Briot.

Tripod Gitzo 2227 Explorer



That's a quite jump from the camera in the previous review to the tripod review. But it seems some people are interested in my opinion (or some opinions) about this tripod. So here I will try to provide my point of view on this piece of my equipment. I used this tripod for more than a year and I should honestly say that I am very pleased with its performance, durability and reliability. This is my third tripod in a row, and two previous tripods just could not rise to the bar. Yes, the Gitzo 2227 Explorer is expensive, but it's not about how much it cost, this is about how much it worth. And I would say that it is definitely worth those \$450 bucks, which I paid for it. And here are the points why:

Flexibility

There is something magic in the way you can adjust and form the tripod that you can get the camera exactly the way you need. The extensible column could be positioned almost in any way. Sometimes I think that if the camera is a rifle, then with this tripod you could shoot behind the corner - you extend and position the column in the horizontal plane, and here you are - looking behind the corner. Such flexibility allows to move the camera to the places, which other tripods would not be able to.

The other thing about flexibility - the legs could be positioned at any angle from 0 to 90 degrees. There were several occasions when I somewhat suspended the camera in the air. The leg looked more like a spider web, with the camera in the middle. The legs were locked and placed on some rocks or other surface (higher than the middle point), which left the camera firmly positioned.

Locks & Sturdiness

Twist it to loosen up, twist it to tighten up. That's that simple. No clips or knobs to screw around with. It may take some time to get used to, because sometimes you may have not tighten the upper section of the leg, when you want to loosen up the lower section. At least that happen several times with me. Have I mentioned that all this operations you can do with one hand, and without trying to get you finger under that clip? You don't have to use you bare hands or even opposable thumb - just grab it and twist. And it will hold. Or yeah, it will hold. tight and the way you want it to.

One small thing, there is no definite position of the angle of the tripod's legs, but there is a small embedded indicator which suggests a good spread of the legs. Though I rarely use it.

You may wonder, how sturdy the tripod is. I have to say that even when there is a heavy camera and telephoto lens, the tripod stays still and unmovable. Though the wider you spread legs of the tripod (reasonably) the better it holds. Anyway use a delayed shutter release (i.e. 2 seconds) and/or mirror lock, it will help you produce sharper images.

Height & Folded Size

Some people may not be comfortable with the size of the tripod when it is folded down. There are only three sections and when you fold it, it will become 26 inches of length. I am a tall guy and this doesn't bother me at all. Thought it may not work in your case. And when you extend the tripod to its full height it will be 67 inches. When I do that the camera is well above my head, so it becomes hard to focus and compose the frame.

Weight

Hmm, the tripod is made of carbon Fiber and is light weight. It doesn't weight as a feather, and after a long trip you may feel some tiredness in your arms. But I have to say, that this is a very small trade off for the performance it provides us with. As the specifications say, the weight of the tripod is 4.41 lb. For me it means that I have to visit the gym a bit more often, or better use the tripod more often and get used to its weight.

Reliability

I cannot praise this quality of the tripod more. My previous tripods almost fell apart (literally) and only after a few trips to mountains. And those tripods were not that cheap that I would not expect something special. There were (and will be) very many situations when this tripod was used in demanding conditions. It held the camera in waves of the ocean, on the snowy slopes of the mountains, in muddy shores of brooks and creeks and swamps filled with mosquitos (all right, mosquitos were interested in me not in the tripod). As well there were regular situations such as rainy days/nights in big cities. And I don't remember a single instance when the tripod let me down. Just wash it with water and poured it out. I even didn't always let it dry, so you can see streaks of water trickling when you use it next time. Locks? Nothing could make them badge or give in. The only thing, which fell off is a small rubber thing that "protects" the joint of each leg at the central point. But who cares?