

The
Nikon Z 9
The Ultimate Photographic Machine



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THE NIKON Z 9

THE ULTIMATE PHOTOGRAPHIC MACHINE



The Nikon Z 9 with the Z MC 105mm f/2.8 VR S macro. One of my favourite combinations for routine macro photography for subjects up to 1:1. I have no doubt that this camera will convince the many remaining professional photographers who are still using DSLR's to convert to mirrorless. The colour rendition, contrast and quality of the raw files from this camera are simply outstanding.

INTRODUCTION

Back in March 2021 after much hearsay and chatter, Nikon finally revealed the development of their flagship mirrorless camera, the Z 9. For many, the announcement had been a long time coming. The continual rumblings in the stalls were frequently vented in Nikon's direction, sighting their lack of commitment and support for the professional sector in an expanding mirrorless age. For most veteran Nikonians, this prattle is not unusual, it's a well-known fact that Nikon are not concerned about being first over the line with any new emerging technology, and this was certainly the case with the Z 9. For the next seven months, the photography world on and off-line were abuzz with hype on what ground-breaking innovations this camera would have. There was no doubt that the Z lineup needed a pro-level camera as most of the professional sector were still using high-end DSLRs. Many believed that this long-awaited flagship could be the impetus for the migration of the remaining sceptics to the mirrorless future.

In typical Nikon fashion, little was given away on specifications other than its release, which was scheduled before the end of 2021. Some of the innovations we were told would be revolutionary and a first in the mirrorless world. Before its official launch in late October, speculation reached fever pitch in late summer, with social media and YouTube hypothesising and bombarding us daily on virtually every aspect of the camera, from its design to sensor resolution. I watched with interest as the theories unfolded. I had already been using and testing a Z 7II for several months. It was, for me, my first introduction to mirrorless technology. Up until then I was happy to keep shooting with my D850s, which had served me faithfully since its announcement back in July 2017 coinciding with Nikon's 100th anniversary. Good as the Z 7II is, and I was impressed with the innovation and technology in it, the omission of a few items which my D850 had were fundamental to the way that I work.



Razorbill Alca torda A good test for any autofocus system is its ability to consistently nail fast flying and erratic birds for example, puffins and razorbills. I have found the Z 9 to be extremely reliable in challenging situations, only occasionally would it drop focus, but quickly regain it. Its state of the art autofocus makes capturing images such as this more successful than with some other cameras in the past.

There is always excitement when Nikon reveals a new flagship camera. Having owned many of them over the years, the launch of the D850 was like that D3 moment for me back in the summer of 2007. I had no doubt the launch of the Z 9 would be a momentous event, and when it finally came Nikon did not disappoint. I was completely captivated by the grandeur and the extent to which their marketing division went in order to introduce, as they put it, this 'unstoppable machine' to the photography world. Four teaser videos demonstrating some of its key features had us waiting in anticipation for the next one. A four-axis tilting monitor, followed by ground-breaking 8K video, innovative autofocus and high frame rate capabilities were the precursors to the impending unveiling of the Z 9; an additional touch was the 24-hour timer counting down to its launch. Highly original, and certainly a change in marketing strategy for Nikon. I'm in no doubt rival companies watched with envy at the highly elaborate pre-planned presentations and interviews with Nikon key personnel and high-profile photographers.

I was simply blown away when this camera was revealed, at last, a pro-level mirrorless body with many of the characteristics and features of a high-end DSLR, but with considerable innovative technology under the hood. Many thought Nikon were latecomers

to the mirrorless world. Not so, in my opinion. It is often an advantage to wait, evaluate the competition and capitalise on the latest technology. The introduction of the Z mount in the late summer of 2018 gave Nikon's engineers the freedom to create new, state-of-the-art lens designs that simply were not possible with the F-mount. It was the other essential element and was crucial to their expanding mirrorless future and lens line-up. Interestingly, the Z mount also has the largest diameter and the shortest flange distance currently available on any full-frame system.



The development of the new Z mount will allow Nikon optical engineers to develop a new and innovative range of lenses for the Z system.



Ordesa is one of my favourite places for autumn workshops in Northern Spain. The 45Mp stacked sensor provides more than enough resolution to satisfy the most discerning landscape photographers. Having a camera as versatile as the Z 9 means not having to carry different bodies which adds to the overall weight when travelling. Nikon Z 9 Z 14-30mm ultra wideangle lens.



The design and build quality of the Z 9 is quite similar in appearance to the DSLR flagship, the D 6, but slightly smaller and lighter. It has the same build quality and rugged architecture we've come to expect with pro-level cameras from Nikon.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

My first experience with the Z 9 was back in mid-December 2021 when I received a box from Nikon. There is always an adrenaline rush when a new camera or lens arrives. Removing the body carefully from its box, my first impression was its resemblance to the D 6. The camera felt solid in my hands, rugged and highly capable of meeting the needs of daily professional use. Compared to other Z cameras, the Z 9 is no lightweight, but considering what it packs under the bonnet, it's still a little lighter and smaller than the flagship DSLR the D 6. In addition, the current Z lenses are, on average, more compact and lighter than their F-mount equivalents, so there are advantages to be had regarding the overall weight.

The build quality of this camera emulates a typical flagship DSLR rather than any other Z camera. The ergonomics are typical Nikon design with a nice deep grip which extends around the base of the camera. Historically, all Nikon pro-bodies have an integrated grip making vertical and horizontal shooting comfortable and smooth. The vertical grip has a dual shutter button and other function controls; I prefer pro-camera bodies for this reason. The camera also has a release mode dial, as in DSLRs along with a dedicated AF mode button. The U1/U2/U/3 settings (common on other Z cameras) are absent. The Z 9 reverts to menu banks, which I favour. The only downside is you still have to select them individually. I would have thought Nikon might have given us the option to pair them so you can change the configuration in a single action.



The three function buttons on the front of the camera. I find these easy to reach and navigate. There is a lot of choice as to what you want to have quick access to.

There are four main programmable function buttons, three are on the front of the camera and can be quickly accessed with your fingers. Everyone will have their own particular preferences in my case Fn1 button is set for depth of field preview, and Fn2 for quick access to my menu, where I have key settings which I can change quickly without having to go directly to the main menu screen. Fn3, I use to alternate between exposure information and clearing the screen without taking my eye away from the viewfinder, useful when shooting at higher magnifications. I was glad to see the return of the 10-pin remote terminal, I missed this on the Z 7II. It's an important accessory for me as it provides a connection point for other specialised macro equipment. It also means that I can use the WR-R11a and WR-T10 remote units with the Z 9.



There are some notable design changes to the rear of the camera. The secondary screen has gone and been replaced by a series of buttons, Lan, Mic Qual and WB. I find this suits my way of working and have quick access to change current settings and add a voice memo to an image when necessary. Also, the most obvious change is the relocation of the playback button which has been relocated to the bottom right of the camera which took a little getting use to.

Moving to the back of the camera, Nikon have made some design changes. The secondary screen is gone, the transposition of many of the buttons are more in keeping with other Z cameras. I have no problem with this as I had been using the Z 7II for a while. Located along the bottom of the vertical grip are the Lan, Mic, Qual, WB and Information buttons. The Qual and WB buttons are extremely handy and quick to access. I don't, as a rule, shoot Jpegs. I see little point in duplication, cards are much more reliable these days, but I get it that some wedding and event photographers need this. I prefer to produce jpegs from processed raw files where all of my adjustments will be integrated.

The Z9 has four auto white balance settings. I don't routinely use these as I prefer to work with pre-set colour temperatures for several reasons. I have pre-programmed various white balance settings and can access these quickly via the WB button depending on what and where I'm shooting. Like high-end DSLRs, the majority of the Z 9 buttons are backlit making them much easier to see when shooting in low light. The most notable design change is the relocation of the playback button from the traditional top left corner to the lower right part of the body. At the start, I frequently found myself habitually hitting the



I prefer to use a series of custom configurations instead of auto white balance settings, which I can quickly access when in different situations. It is better to use a custom white balance setting when focus stacking as it keeps continuity in the stack sequence.



*Far left
The view of all of the network ports on the Z 9. It makes it one of the most efficient cameras for image transfer. An import aspect for sport and event photographers who need to expedite images quickly back to broadcasting networks etc.*

*Left
View of the dual CFexpress slots. The door is more robust in the Z 9 and is unlikely to open easily. It requires more force especially if your hands are wet. Using high performance cards with a very fast read/write speeds will ensure you get the best from the camera when engaging the higher burst rates.*

protect button. You can pre-programme it to function as a playback button if you wish, but with a little perseverance, you eventually get accustomed to it. Nikon has also included the dedicated AF mode button. I always found this extremely useful. You can change AF area and AF drive modes quickly and assign AF area modes to the function buttons if you wish as some photographers do.

On the left side of the camera are an array of data transfer ports. Most of these are not essential for my normal routine work but are important especially for sports and event photographers who need to transfer images back to various media and broadcasting networks. A glance at the network menu gives you an idea of just how comprehensive the Z 9 is in this regard. SnapBridge has been an integral part of many Nikon cameras for some time now. You can move images from your camera to your phone or laptop, or operate the camera via the app. The Z 9 pushes the boundaries even further by transmitting directly to a laptop when paired with Nikon's free wireless transmitter, or upload directly to an FTP site using a network. It great to have the choice!

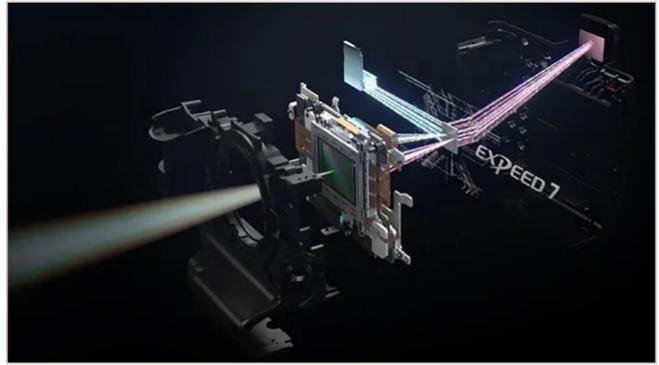
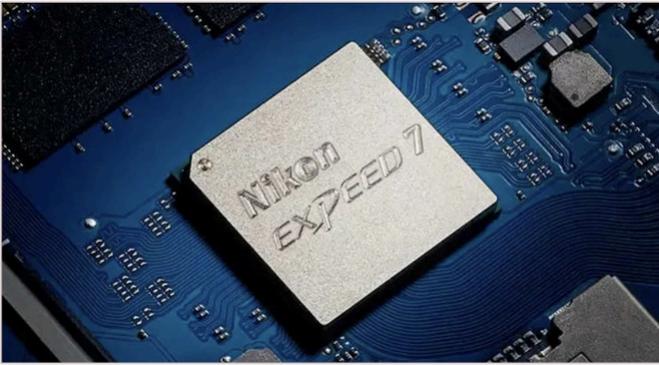
The camera's right side houses the memory card compartment. If I recall correctly, there were many comments regarding the weakness of the door in the Z 6 and Z 7 series cameras. I can testify to this having damaged it on the Z 7II. The Z9 has a more robust design necessitating greater force to open by pressing the button downwards and then pushing the door forward.

Overview of some Key Features

Nikon introduced numerous new features exclusive to the Z 9 at the time. It is not my intention to list every single one as there are many. Some of the main ones that attracted my attention are listed below.

- Stacked backside CMOS sensor
- Removal of the mechanical shutter
- Autofocus recognition of multiple subjects
- Bi-directional and glove-sensitive LCD screen
- Return of the 10-pin terminal (at last)
- Bracketing button
- Low light LCD mode; a very useful feature
- Large image buffer
- Dual button card formatting
- Return of the AF mode button
- Built-in GNSS, is a must for me.
- Proper Memory Banks as opposed to U1/ U2/ U/3, which I did not like
- Clutter-free Live view via the DISP option button extremely useful in macro
- 120 Hz EVF refresh rate
- Sensor Shield to reduce dust and debris adhering to the sensor (a great feature)
- New raw algorithms a welcome addition
- Blackout-free shooting
- 3 D tracking (glad this is back)
- Extended battery life and also backward compatibility with some previous EN-EL18





At the heart of the Z 9 is Nikon’s powerhouse processing engine EXPEED 7. Ten times faster than previous generations of processing units. It’s capable of handling highly complex AF and AE calculations and a mind-blowing speed of 120 cycles per second. The Z 9 also has integrated dual data streams from the stacked CMOS sensor. One stream is directed to the EVF while the other writes the information to the memory card. It provides an uninterrupted viewing experience and is blackout free.

SOME KEY SPECIFICATIONS

It is not my intention to delve into the specifications critically, this review is already quite lengthy. There are many articles/information on the web and social media describing all of Z 9’s features and capabilities in-depth. I will mention those aspects of the camera that were of specific interest to me.

Sensor and Dynamic Range

Prior to the launch of the Z 9, there were many opinions and conflicting reports regarding the resolution and other aspects of the sensor design. Some thought it was a combination of the D850 and Z 7II sensors with a tweak, that is certainly not the case. The Z 9 is a completely redesigned stacked CMOS sensor, a powerhouse of speed able to consistently shoot at 47.7Mp with mind-blowing readout speeds. The video specifications are equally impressive, delivering 8K performance with the addition of ProRes putting it ahead of its competitors. It was reassuring for me that Nikon was able to match the resolution output of the D850 and Z 7II with the same default ISO of 64, this meant there was no sacrifice on resolution in preference of performance. No photographer likes to downsize in pixels when others are increasing resolution.

Image Quality

Having used the Z 711 for a while, I expected the Z 9 to replicate the image quality and perhaps a little more. I was impressed by just how good the Z 9 is. It appeared to have the edge on the Z 7II but it’s marginal, perhaps slightly more noticeable at higher ISO levels. The absence of a mechanical shutter does

eliminate in-camera vibration producing very sharp results at slower shutter speeds, this is particularly apparent when photographing at reproduction ratios above 1:1. I find I need to worry less with this camera when attempting difficult focus stacks in the field.

Other bench testing reviews have indicated a slight reduction in dynamic range but having shot a wide range of subjects in different lighting conditions, I have not seen a noticeable difference in real-time when operating at its default ISO of 64. My experience to date with this camera, is I prefer not to underexpose too much for the preservation of highlights as pushing the darker aspects of the image, especially at higher ISO levels can generate a slight increase in noise, but it’s marginal, to be honest.



The previous page. Small Lichen community *Caloplaca flavescens* and *Caloplaca citrina*. The image resolution is amazing resolving the most intricate detail on this tiny letter on a gravestone. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro.

Geranium Species A 2.5X image of the tiny stamens in this delicate flower. In-camera vibration is eliminated making it much easier to compose complicated stacks without the worry of vibration. Z MC 105mm VR S macro mounted on Novoflex BAL-PRO 1 bellows.



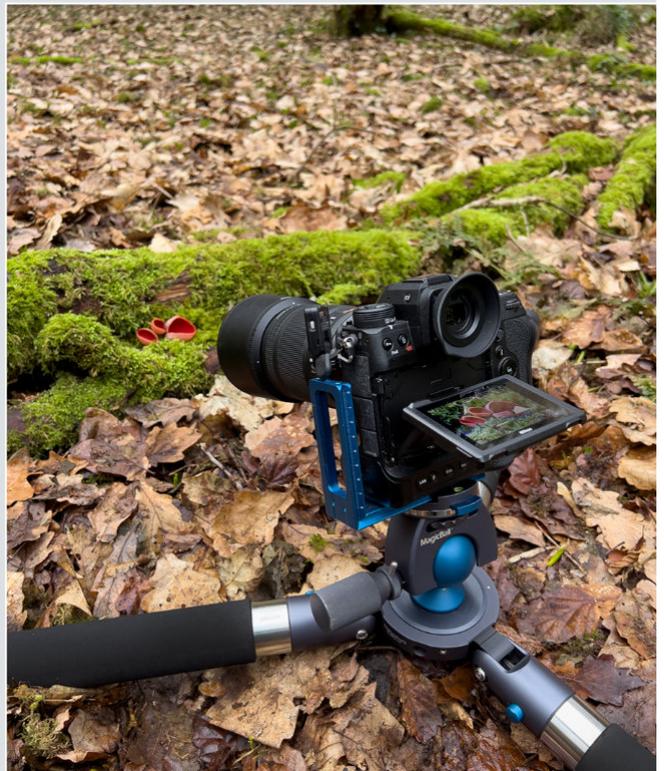
*Turkey Tail *Trametes versicolor* and Scarlet Elf Cup Fungus *Sarcoscypha austriaca* The four-axis screen is handy when you are working at ground level and photographing above head height. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro supported on the Novoflex PRO 75 and MagicBall an excellent combination for macro photography.*

Raw Storage File Formats

The Z 9 has three raw recording modes, lossless compressed, high-efficiency star, and high efficiency. I have not studied these in any great detail but have read several reviews online about them. I tend to be a percentage player and have stuck to lossless compression for the time being as there may still be issues with some raw software programs. I also want to retain the maximum in terms of detail and dynamic range, so I'm not prepared to compromise an image in any way.

Monitor/LCD Screen

Some photographers might be disappointed that Nikon decided not to introduce a fully articulating screen in the Z 9. I'm essentially a stills photographer, so it's not a major concern for me, but some videographers may have an issue. The 8cm (3.2in) 2100k-dot LCD screen design is an improvement over the D850 and will, for the most part, suit the majority of stills photographers. The mechanism is fairly robust and has multi-directional tilt, which makes it easy to deal with high and low-angle shooting. I find this useful when photographing subjects close or at ground level or lichens higher up on a tree trunk. The cradle has an elaborate hinge design allowing rotation up, down, and horizontally. When the camera is in portrait orientation, you can tilt



Being able to view subjects at ground level with relative ease is great. It saves me having to get flat on my chest to look directly through the viewfinder.

it up at right angles to the back which is extremely handy. Another new feature is the information now rotates when you shoot vertically making it easier to read.



Cleopatra Gonepteryx cleopatra Photographing butterflies in flight is extremely challenging. Trying to predict the moment when the insect will fly can be hit and miss. Insects are a group that have not been added as yet but considering the enormity of the task I'm not surprised. I was shooting at the full 20 fps with in short bursts but encountered no issues with bottlenecking since there was a short gap between each session. It did drop focus a number of times but considering the difficulty I did get some very acceptable images. Depth of field and subject position in the frame are also difficult to control.. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, shutter speed 1/4000sec.

Fame Rate

There tends to be a lot of hype regarding frame rates. In macro it's generally of less importance since most of the time you are shooting single-frame images. It's particularly relevant when capturing flight or behavioural images of birds and animals. I think 20 fps is quite impressive, rising to 30fps if you are shooting jpegs which I seldom do, and it's blackout-free. I have found the buffer capable enough to sustain continual shooting for a while. Also, having the capability to shoot at 120fps is mind-blowing, even if it's at 11Mp. The D3 was only 12Mp, yet some of my best and most memorable images were shot on this camera and blown up for exhibition at 30x40 inches.

Storage Media

I was glad Nikon opted for dual CFexpress Type B slots; this makes sense, in my opinion. These cards are more than capable of handling the massive amounts of data being processed by the Z 9 every second without congestion. The cards, in general are robust compared to the more delicate SDs. To unleash the full potential of the Z 9 you need to consider cards with a fast minimum write speed if you want to sustain continual high burst rates. There are plenty that claim this in the specifications, but

in reality, many underperform often well below the stated claims. I use Delkin Black, but there are others equally tried and tested. It is worth reading online some of the tests that have been carried out which will help you decide. Older XQD cards are compatible ensuring there are no card redundancies which is sometimes the case with a new camera. I routinely set the second slot for overflow, rarely anything else unless I'm shooting something important with no chance of a reshoot.

Picture Control System

Many photographers tend to focus more on the camera's key features such as aperture shutter speed and ISO. Picture Controls are also important and define the look of the image. The profiles in the Z 9's menu are optimised for aspects that characterise the look of the image such as saturation, brightness, contrast, and clarity etc. The default picture controls are Standard, Neutral, Vivid, Monochrome, Portrait, Landscape and Flat. There are also additional creative controls which are available. I prefer to use Neutral for most of my macro images as it's close to the original subject's colour and gradation. Standard is another profile I sometimes use when I want to add a little

more punch to the image. When shooting landscapes, I frequently switch to the landscape profile if the lighting conditions were flat. It adds a little more vibrance and contrast, but not just as much as vivid, which is good at accentuating subjects where you want to focus on colour and saturation. You can also make minor adjustments to individual profiles when you want to apply a particular style to your photos. You do this through Nikon's picture control utility software.

If you are a committed jpeg shooter, choosing the correct picture control is extremely important. Unlike raw, when the jpeg format is selected the colour profile setting at the time will be embedded into the image which cannot be undone in post-processing. You need to be aware of this before commencing your photography. There are also advantages to selecting the correct picture control even when shooting raw. Using Nikon's Studio Software, you can change the picture control profile to another non-destructively, this gives you the widest choice and allows you to apply other profiles to the image before processing.

Sensor Shield

The Z 9 is the first camera in the Nikon range to have a protective shield for the sensor. It's not activated by default, but I strongly advise engaging it. The shield is very effective in protecting the camera from dust and other micro particles when out in the field. I have had the camera for well over a year now and have not needed my sensor cleaned at all. The dual-sensor coating seems to be very efficient in keeping dust spots to an absolute minimum. The shield does not engage automatically when you change lenses only when the camera is switched off. Nikon recommends that you turn the camera off between lens changes which I do routinely anyway.



The sensor shield does a terrific job of keeping dust spots to an absolute minimum. Almost sixteen months on and my sensor is still clean.



I prefer the Neutral Colour Profile; it's my default choice for most of my macro photography. I do switch occasionally when shooting landscapes depending on the lighting conditions at the time. Combined with one of my custom colour temperatures it allows me to achieve an accurate colour reproduction on this frosted grass stem.

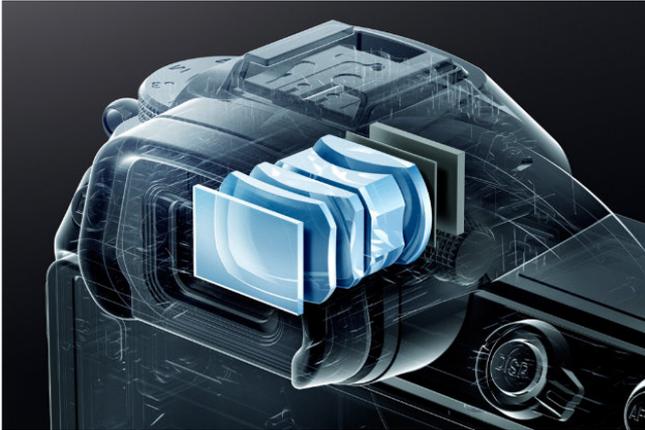
EVF Viewfinder

Prior to using the Z 7II, I wasn't a fan of electronic viewfinders. Having used and seen several from other cameras, I found the colour temperature, lag and the overall experience of using one to be disappointing. However, my opinion changed when using the Z 7II. I found it extremely useful in low light when shooting macro, particularly in heavily shaded woodland. At first glance, you may not appreciate the difference in the EVF of the Z 7II and the Z 9. However, I did notice the increase in the refresh rate from 60 Hz to 120 Hz in the firmware upgrade to version 2 which produced an all-round smoother experience. The 3000-nit OLED screen is very bright and delivers 100% coverage. I have not experienced any lag or decreased resolution in the Z 9. It is the closest experience I have had to an optical viewfinder in a DSLR. Although only 3.69 million dots, the EVF in the Z 9 is a noticeable improvement yet again from the other Z cameras.

One advantage of EVF viewing is being able to see the camera's settings on screen



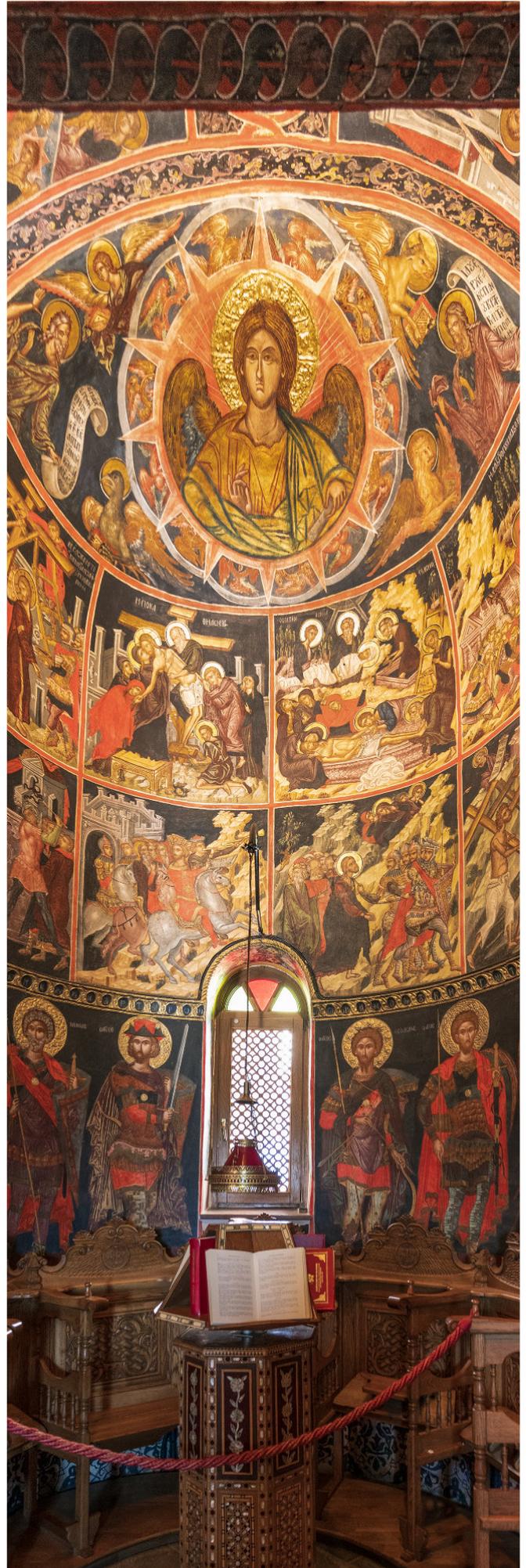
Without doubt the best EVF viewfinder experience I have had to date with any mirrorless camera.



The 3000 nit OLED screen is extremely bright delivering 100% coverage. Great in low light conditions in woodlands.

before pressing the shutter. You also have a choice in your viewing experience. The 'apply settings to live view' function allows both the EVF and the LCD monitor to mirror each other in terms of brightness, colour, and contrast. However, deselecting this function and its similar to looking through an optical viewfinder on a DSLR to a point. I prefer this setting over the former. You can also adjust the colour temperature of the EVF if you prefer a warmer visual experience in addition to having access to the settings in the i menu while using the main and sub-command dials. Image review is also possible when you need to be sure of the shot, another benefit of an EVF. Since moving to mirrorless technology, I find myself using the EVF much more frequently than the monitor. I have to admit that every time I picked up the D850 it became less enjoyable, not because it was underperforming, but because the viewfinder experience became more of a disappointment. Once you accustom yourself to an EVF it is difficult to go back to an OVF.

The view inside the Holy Varlaam Monastery Meteora Greece. The lighting was quite dim and only had a few moments to make a hand-held shot. The EVF excels in these situations as did the ibis allowing me to nail this image very quickly.





*Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* The Z 9 nailed pretty much every single bird coming in fast on a tail wind. I decided to try the 200-500mm f/5.6 which produced excellent results with no lag in focus whatsoever.*



Atlantic Puffin Fratercula arctica One of the most photographed seabirds and a test for any autofocus system as they are so incredibly fast flying. Autofocus performed extremely well with these challenging birds. I engage focus first and then hit back button focus to initiate 3D tracking. I find this method to be pretty effective in the majority of situations. Z 9 Nikon 200-500mm f/5.6 1/2500 sec, ISO 2000.

Autofocus and 3D Tracking

One could devote a whole review to autofocus. I will only briefly touch on this topic as there is so much information currently out there on the Z 9's autofocus system. It always seems that some are never happy about what a camera's capabilities are, or how much progression has been made on autofocus. I don't believe there is any camera currently out there with impeccable autofocus despite what's been said. How did we all manage to get amazing images 10 years ago when autofocus was much less sophisticated than now? I don't want to arrive at a stage where a camera makes every single decision for me, and I guess that's what some people want. My current experience with the Z 9's subject detection shows it to be pretty impressive. When you consider the ground-breaking speed of the AF calculations that the Z 9 makes, it's simply mind-blowing coupled with deep-learning AI gives an unparalleled user experience. I was a big fan of Group AF on my D850, it was my preferred choice in many situations. I don't routinely photograph people, sport or cars, but occasionally I do and I find it's excellent and rarely misses. Subsequent firmware upgrades have refined the autofocus subject detection even more.

I was glad to see after much whining and complaining Nikon brought back 3D-tracking to the Z 9. Although it's been around for a long time in DSLRs, Nikon was the first to perfect it. The Z 9 takes it to another level utilising complex algorithms and AI to give more consistent results. Combined with subject detection it performs incredibly well even when the quarry is moving erratically. There are many ways to configure the autofocus system. With subject detection, I assign it specifically to the subject group which is marginally faster. However, nothing is completely foolproof. There are occasions when it drops focus, sometimes due to a sudden change in the background. Nevertheless, in the majority of situations, it's excellent and where the background is clearly defined there seems to be little in the way of problems that I have encountered. Many photographers have their own methods for setting up autofocus and 3D tracking. In my case, I use the shutter button as normal to engage focus and I reprogrammed the back button focus button to activate 3D tracking once focus has been achieved. I find this to be a reliable and successful method in most situations.



Ophrys spruneri Northern Greece. GPS is an important aspect to my work. Being able to include the coordinates into the metadata means it can be located at a later date. It also provides a valuable record for the species in that location. Z9, Z MC 105mm VR S ISO 200.

GPS

Finally, Nikon has integrated GPS into their flagship camera. They opted for the Russian-based Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) rather than the American GPS format. The one advantage of the GNSS system is you can utilise the satellites from all of the different systems, unlike GPS which is restricted to its own satellites. I have waited so long for GPS to be integrated having struggled with the GP-1 unit for many years. It was always an afterthought on Nikon's part, and I had gone through several cables during that time. The GNSS remains active on the fly even when the camera is switched off with no appreciable drain on battery power. Integrating GPS data is an essential part of my work embedding coordinates of rare and endangered plants etc. into the metadata. I also find it indispensable when working abroad making it easier to see precisely where you have been. To activate it you need to go to the setup menu and switch it on. You can also activate the camera's clock and make location logs if necessary. I keep the GPS activated at all times.

iMenu

The iMenu is another convenient feature that is fully customisable, allowing you to access commonly used settings. It's integrated into the touchscreen, where you have immediate access to your chosen settings rather than having to navigate the menu systems. I have customised mine to give me quick access to certain features.

Voice Memo

One feature I do use frequently, is the voice memo. You can only add the information when reviewing the image, not while taking it. The file format is different and is saved to your memory card as a .wav file, which has the same corresponding file number as the image, the only difference being the extension. I find this beneficial when I want to add additional information to a photo concerning the subject's ecology or when photographing abroad. I missed this feature on the Z 7II, although Nikon included it on the Z 6II, which I find strange. It's available for stills photography but not video.

New EN-EL18d Battery

Another important aspect for me is battery life. Historically DSLRs always suffered from poor battery performance, especially when using the monitor. I need to have a battery that can sustain the camera all day without needing replenishing. Some aspects of my photography can be demanding on battery power. The Z 9 uses the latest EN-EL18d battery which has a longer duration than any other in a Z camera. However, in-camera charging is only possible with versions b, c, and d. I do have a spare Nikon battery for the Z 9, but I rarely ever use it. The performance of the battery has exceeded my expectations. I was impressed by just how much shooting time I got from it even when using both the EVF and the monitor in addition to reviewing important images in-camera. I frequently have power left at the end of a day's shooting. The battery can be charged externally or in the camera. I think we have reached the point where battery life is no longer the weak link of mirrorless cameras. Being able to shoot all day on a single battery and charge it at night will satisfy the vast majority of photographers.

Extended Shutter Speeds

One addition I do make use of is the extended shutter speeds. Having to time exposures beyond 30s was a nuisance when shooting with ND filters frequently at sunrise and sunset. The Z 9 has the capability in manual mode to take long exposures up to 900 sec (15 mins). Located on the top LCD screen is another interesting feature new to the Z 9, a



Dingle Peninsula Southwest Ireland. Extended shutter speeds is a welcome addition in the Z 9 giving greater flexibility when it comes to shooting exposures longer than 30s. I frequently had to resort to timing them on my iPhone. They are also very useful when using ND filters. There is also a stopwatch located on the top LCD screen giving you a countdown of the time remaining.

stopwatch counting down the selected exposure time when you engage long exposure speeds. I'm not sure why they put it on the top LCD screen, which is not illuminated. Most of the time when you engage these extended speeds it's likely to be in very dim light, or at dark when it's difficult to see without a torch. An alternative would have been the top left corner of the monitor screen. Those photographers who do a lot of long-exposure photography will welcome these additions in the Z 9.

Wireless Remote Devices

One aspect I should point out is the lack of wireless remote-control units for the Z 9. I was stuck with the MC30 electronic release initially. The only Nikon wireless units that are compatible with the Z 9 are the WR1 which is far too big, in my opinion, for fieldwork and the WR-R11a and WR-T10 receiver and transmitter. The latter is the only wireless remote system from Nikon that works from the 10-pin remote terminal. However, this system is no longer available in the UK or Europe. To my horror, I lost my WR-T10 on a mountain and finally found a replacement in Austria. Wireless units have a much greater range than infrared devices and

are more reliable. There are a few independent units, but they all require cables. I hope Nikon addresses this in the very near future.



The WR-R11a and the WR-T10 receiver and transmitter units. One of only two Nikon wireless control units that work with the Z 9. Its a very sleek design and highly effective over a reasonable range. The small receiver occupies the ten pin terminal; no wires or cables. There is a new compliance directive brought in by Europe regarding the use of wireless devices that have a radio element included. It may be difficult to obtain this unit at the moment.



Bluebell Hyacinthoides non-scripta An alba (white form) among the masses of blue. Early morning with dew still on the flower is one of my favourite times to photograph. The EVF in this shady part of the woodland makes precise focusing much easier. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro ISO 200.



*Wood Hedgehog Mushroom *Hydnum repandum* One of the first subjects I photographed with the Z 9. I was impressed with just how good this camera is from the start and is similar to working with a DSLR. There is of course a little tweaking at the beginning with every camera to customise it to your style of shooting. It was, the turning point for me and I knew that my DSLR days had come to an end. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, ISO 200 supported on the Novoflex PRO 75 TrioPod and the MagicBall.*

IN THE FIELD

From the moment I held this camera in my hand, I knew beyond hesitation it would be a transformation for me. I was reminded of that D3 moment I had all those years ago. Any doubts I had about retiring my D850's were quickly forgotten. It was a relatively easy migration, having used the Z 7II for a while I was already accustomed to most of the features on the Z series cameras. My first outing with the Z 9 was to woodland near my home. By the end of the first day's shooting, I felt I had a mirrorless camera that performed more like a DSLR. I was blown away by it and have been ever since. With all new cameras there is a settling-in period as you customise and tweak the camera's settings to your liking and your style of photography. The removal of the mechanical shutter works for me virtually eliminating in-camera vibration when shooting high-magnification macro and working with larger telephoto lenses. Also, no failure or wear from parts and no limit to the number of images captured by the sensor.

The EVF is a pleasure to use, it's bright, crisp and superb in low light. Woodlands where dense leaf cover shades the ground vegetation is where it excels. I have found

myself gravitating more towards the EVF than the monitor, especially when shooting macro. It may not have the resolution of some other cameras but its 120Hz refresh rate provides a smooth clear viewing experience in my opinion.

Another useful feature is silent shooting, I only need this occasionally but can engage it when it's needed. The camera offers options e.g., blinking lines etc. to simulate an exposure when shooting in this mode. The camera also has a built-in simulated shutter sound which I keep active most of the time. Photographing in the field is a dusty atmosphere and in combination with a breeze produces dust and other micro-particles. Mirrorless cameras are by nature more at risk of having contaminated sensors due to the close proximity to the mount. I have found the sensor shield in the Z 9 to be extremely efficient and it dramatically reduces dust getting in. Images are in the majority of cases dust-free or an occasional spot. I also use the virtual horizon line and the histogram a lot whether shooting landscapes or macro but could not engage both at the same time on the Z 7II. The Z 9 allows me to customise the information displayed in both the viewfinder and monitor offering me a greater choice in what to keep visible.





Red-crested Pochard Netta fufina One of the most challenging situations for autofocus to deal with. The bird at lighting speeds was ducking and diving. It would lose focus on the dive and pick it up again on resurfacing. Z 9 handled this situation pretty well only occasionally dropping focus. Z 9, ISO3200, 1/2000 sec.

From the outset, I was impressed with the image quality and its ease of use. Whether I'm shooting landscapes or macro the files look similar to those I got from the Z 7II. My default setting for macro hovers around 200-400 ISO. I have no issues in this range at all. I can comfortably rack it up to 800 or even to 1600 when photographing smaller subjects at higher magnifications, particularly when working in partially shaded woodland without any real concerns. The dynamic range drops a little as you increase the ISO, but that's to be expected with any camera.

Good as the Z 7II is, autofocus in some situations had me reaching for my D850. Tracking small, fast-flying birds with an erratic nature is always challenging. I felt these sorts of situations were better suited to DSLR technology at that time. The Z 9 removed any doubts I had and clearly addressed these and many other issues. I also like the choice of variable frame rates depending on what you're shooting. I don't always want or need to shoot 120fps (frame

per second), 30fps jpeg or 20fps raw. The camera (option d1) gives me the choice of reducing these besides, I don't want the tedious task of wading through all of the downloaded files (especially at 120fps) with only small marginal differences.

I found a considerable improvement in autofocus performance and it's even better with the latest firmware updates. I put this to the test by photographing a wide range of birds. Those that dive and surface continually are among the most challenging for any autofocus system. The Z 9 performed incredibly well only occasionally dropping focus, but quickly picking it up again when the bird surfaced. I have photographed birds with this camera at very high ISO settings and have been more than happy with the results. I have already mentioned my experiments with butterflies in flight while running a workshop in northern Spain. Considering the speed these insects move in close-up and the limited depth of field the Z 9 was not always successful, but it did produce some very acceptable images considering AI has not been applied to insects. These types of images could not have been achieved that easily with the D850.

Previous page Provence Chalk-hill Blue Lysandra hispana I took the Z 9 with me in early spring for a workshop in Northern Greece. I found myself using the Z 105mm with the camera for shooting butterflies and other routine macro subjects rather than Nikon's 200mm macro which was my trusted combination for years.



Cleopatra Gonepteryx cleopatra Another example of photographing butterflies in flight from Ordesa National Park in the Spanish Pyrenees. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, ISO 800, shutter speed 1/4000sec.



Great Black-backed Gull Larus marinus While running a seabird workshop in Ireland we had multiple encounters with these birds and some good opportunities for flight shots. The Z 9 with this type of background nailed virtually every single image in sharp focus. Z 9, 300mm f/2.8 ISO 1250 1/2000 sec Auto ISO.



Silent Valley and Ben Crom Dams from the summit of Slievenaglough Mourne Mountains. A cold, challenging day and a 2 hour hike to shoot this 38 image panorama of the high summits producing a tiff file size of 820Mb. The all-round versatility of this camera is impressive. Photographed on the Novoflex TrioPod-M, and the ClassicBall 3II inverted for panoramic photography also Z 24-70mm f/4 lens. See photo insert of the setup!

I don't use Auto ISO a lot but when I do I prefer shutter priority and manual mode, where I have complete control. It is extremely advantageous in certain situations, especially with birds when you want to maintain a fixed shutter speed and where light levels are variable. If you are not sure how this works, there are many examples on the internet that will explain the principle in detail.

A camera with the bulk and weight of the Z 9 would not normally be the obvious choice for a landscape photographer. The Z 9 transcends that perception in every aspect. Its versatility and high-resolution stacked CMOS sensor allow it to compete across all photographic disciplines. Its low default ISO setting of 64 in combination with its astrophotography capability make it the most comprehensive of any Nikon camera to date. What I love about the Z 9 is its versatility and adaptability to my photographic requirements in every aspect. The image quality I get from it even at higher ISO levels is excellent. It's endured all types of weather conditions from snow to rain and with no effect on its performance. Nikon has done a really excellent job here with weather sealing. Another useful feature is having the ability to customise the EVF and monitor. Whether I'm shooting landscapes or macro, I can quickly switch between different screen options via the DISP or Fn 3 button, which I have programmed to have distraction-free viewing. I find this very helpful when photographing complex subjects and working at magnifications above 1:1.

The weather sealing on this camera is excellent. There are many exposed parts where moisture could potentially get in. I have had the Z 9 in situations where I have been continually drying the rain drops of it with no issues whatsoever.





Kinard County Kerry. One of the big advantages of mirrorless for the landscape photographer is not having to remove ND filters when recomposing. You can see what you are shooting irrespective of the density of the filter. Combined with the extended shutter speeds makes the process so much easier. Z9, 14-30mm, f/11 ISO 100.

Since going mirrorless, I no longer need to keep removing ND filters when recomposing a scene. Being able to see your image on screen irrespective of filter density, this a real advantage in the field. Also, the extended shutter speed range means no more using my phone. The GNSS in the Z 9 is brilliant, no connection issues and it works on the fly in the background even when the camera is switched off. My 10-pin terminal can be utilised to connect the WR-R11a and WR-T10 wireless receiver and transmitter which works perfectly. These units are incredibly difficult to obtain now due to changes in legislation regarding radio waves. Unfortunately, this unit is one of only two wireless options for the Z 9. You can use SnapBridge, but I find it too inconvenient to hold a phone all of the time.

Working beyond 1:1 in the Field

Another important aspect of my work involves photographing at magnifications beyond 1:1. I have spent many years testing and working with various pieces of equipment to obtain the most reliable results. The majority of major photographic brands have virtually neglected this aspect considering pre-digital they designed and manufactured many different specialised pieces of macro equipment. I find the Z 9 camera ideal for this work. Gone are the days of worrying about in-camera vibration, it's no longer an issue with this camera. I've already mentioned that it is no secret that I am an avid

user of Novoflex equipment and for good reason, their innovations on the macro front are well-known and respected throughout the world. I have been using the Novoflex BAL-F and BALPRO-1 bellows systems among other accessories that they manufacture for the majority of higher reproduction ratios. Novoflex has also designed a Retro Reverse Adapter that allows complete automation including metadata transfer with the Z series cameras and lenses. I have also been testing the latest Z MC 105mm f/2.8 VR S and the Z 50mm macro lenses with the Novoflex bellows which work flawlessly producing outstanding results. If you're an occasional macro shooter and own the Z 24-70mm f/4 S zoom when reversed on either Novoflex bellows systems magnifications in the region of 3:1 are possible. You can also use the Retro Reverse Adapter on its own with the lens reversed. The image quality is excellent either way. It's an ideal approach to explore the smaller world without having to purchase a dedicated macro.

Old habits die hard and in my case that's true. I prefer to use the viewfinder in preference of the monitor for macro in the field. With Focus Peaking activated, I can carefully select my ideal focus point to ensure I get the maximum depth of field for the selected aperture, which I can also see in real time in the viewfinder. Shooting macro with the Z 9 has many advantages over the D850.



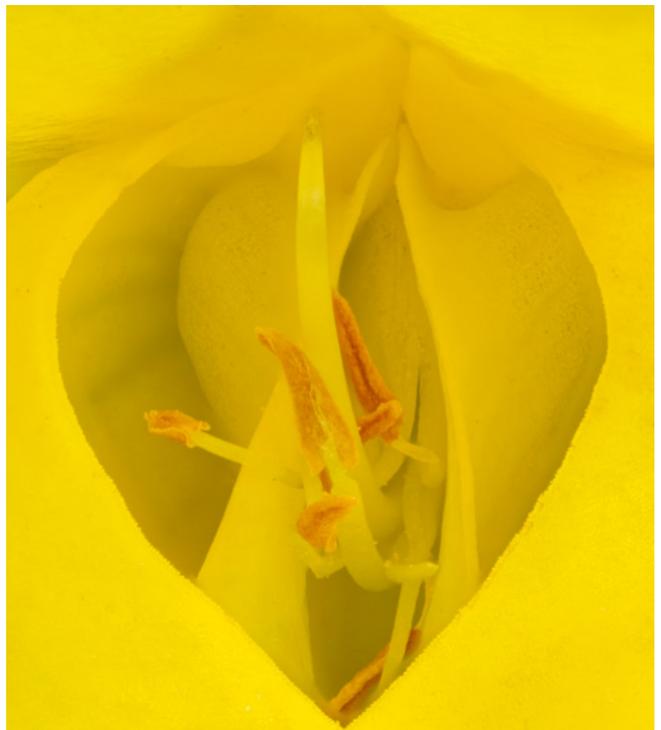
Z 24-70 lens reversed on the Novoflex BAL PRO 1 bellows, an ideal setup if you don't have a macro. Magnifications to 3:1 are possible with this setup.



The Z 105mm macro attached to Novoflex BAL PRO 1 bellows via Nikon Retro Reverse Adapter. Magnifications to 3:1 are possible with this setup.



Lisianthus species. The Z 24-70mm f/4 produces extremely sharp results when reversed.



Gorse stamens Ulex europaeus. A 2.5X magnification of the stamens using the Z 105 macro.

Focus shift is also useful when focus stacking landscape images for increased depth of field and macro at magnifications up to around 0.75. You can specify the number of shots and can also adjust the focus step width to a point. However, stepping distances are pre-set and advancement is controlled via the camera using the lenses autofocus system in incremental steps. Employing autofocus is not the best approach to get reliable results at higher magnifications. I don't use Focus Shift most of the time for that reason. But for the majority of photographers it's adequate. There are other methods for achieving better results with fewer artefacts.

For the majority of my macro photography below 1:1, I use the Z 105 and the old, but still

superb, 200mm f/4D IF-ED micro nikkor, sadly now discontinued. It was another milestone for Nikon in 1993 being the world's first 200mm macro. There are many reasons why this lens is so good, working distance, angle of view and tripod collar are among the most important qualities. I am disappointed that Nikon has chosen not to update this lens despite it being probably one of the most important macro lenses they ever made. Many of my best images have been captured with this iconic lens. The Z 9 in combination with the 200mm macro in the field is hard to beat. I think Nikon applied the same logic to the Z 9 as they did when they produced the D850, a camera suitable for all photographic genres. It's not surprising that it earned the title of being the finest DSLR ever made. A lot has



Crested Coral Clavulina coralloides and Arcyria cinerea A typical example where focus stacking benefits the subject. It would be impossible to hold all of these slime moulds in sharp focus. Photographed with the Novoflex BAL PRO 1, the Z MC 105mm VR S macro with the Nikon Retro Reverse Adapter approximately 1:5X. Composite image.

been said and published about the Z 9's speed and autofocus capabilities and much of its promotional advertising has focused on that aspect. However, this camera is more than that. It's capable of meeting the needs of a wide range of photographic genres. For me, it's an amalgamation of a D850 and a D 6 rolled into one. It is, without a doubt, the best camera that Nikon has produced to date.

A FINAL WORD

The mirrorless sector has seen many changes in the last few years and will continue for some time to come. The professional sector is generally cautious and never quick to act irrationally when it comes to new technology. The Z 9 will, I believe, be the game-changer for the remaining pro-DSLR users. However, many have a considerable investment in F-mount glass and other accessories. The migration to Z lenses will take time, having said that Nikon has gone some way to help with the transition. Many new Z lenses have been added to the line-up and more are on the way. Do I miss, or have any regrets about moving from a DSLR to mirrorless technology? Not in the slightest, Nikon has produced a camera that has superseded the best that DSLR technology could provide. It has, without a doubt,

improved many aspects of my work. If you are a D850 user and are hoping for an updated version at some point, then you will be disappointed. The Z 9 is an incredible camera primarily aimed at action and general event photography. Just as the D850 was the most versatile DSLR that Nikon ever made. The Z 9 is, in my opinion, the mirrorless equivalent with even more under the hood. Its high-resolution sensor defines it as an incredible all-round camera more than capable of handling just about every photographic discipline from sport to portraits, weddings to wildlife and landscape to macro. Few cameras possess this level of versatility. It's a big accomplishment for Nikon, proving yet again as a company it's still innovative, groundbreaking and has, to a point, listened to its customers and what they want. I think this is the camera that the professional sector has waited for and, to be honest the future is mirrorless if you believe otherwise then disappointment awaits you.

Despite what some in the photography world say, I don't think Nikon has ever been behind in the mirrorless world. I think it's more a question of having observed, planned, and waited until the technology was available to deliver their vision. Although some may see the Z 9 as being costly, it's the least expensive



Destroying Angel Amanita virosa One of the most deadly fungi and highly poisonous. Whether you shoot sport, landscape or macro the Z 9 has them all covered! I also like the overall colour balance of the NEF files. The insert shows the initial set up in the field just before the photograph was taken. Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, ISO 200, Novoflex PRO 75 and MagicBall.

pro-level camera, Nikon has manufactured to date, even cheaper than their competitors. Its popularity has snowballed even a year later, there is still a waiting list. The majority of photographers are prepared to pay in advance for a camera that most of them have never handled, a testimony to the Z 9's popularity. Also, to Nikon's credit is their commitment to improving the camera's performance. They have been proactive with several firmware updates since its launch back in December 2021.

Having praised this camera continually throughout this review, I also recognise the Z 9 is not for everyone, although based on its publicity, I think everyone wants it even for the kudos of owning one. There are no bad cameras these days despite what YouTube would have you believe. Many photographers are too easily influenced by what they hear and watch. It's important, in my opinion, to define your field of interest first, that will help you to make the correct choice. If you are primarily a landscape photographer, then speed and fast autofocus would not be an essential requirement. If sport and action account for most of your photography, then the Z 9 has distinct advantages for you and your work. What you also need to be aware of is with any new camera comes additional cost;

accessories and equipment that you often overlook in your budget. If you like to travel light and have a compact bag, then you might want to think again, a Z 9 might be a tight squeeze. It is larger, heavier, and deeper than any other Z camera. Another issue is memory cards if you have been running on SDs on a previous camera then you will have to purchase CFexpress type B cards. If you want to maximise on the Z 9's speed, then you will need cards that have a fast read/write speed. If you use a quick release system then a typical universal L-bracket will not work effectively on the Z 9 because all of the ports will be unavailable, and you will have to remove it each time to access them. Not a major inconvenience for most photographers. If access is important then you will have to purchase a custom-made design adding more overall bulk and cost to the camera. These additional accessories may be more relevant in the general photography sector but are still worth considering since they add to the overall cost.

Finally, given a choice would I go back to working with a DSLR? The simple answer is no, mirrorless is the future and the Z 9 was worth the wait in every aspect.

Z 9 Gallery One



Dahlia Firepot

You don't always need to travel great distances in order to get photographs. Sometimes they are right in front of you. My garden has many different types of flowers throughout the seasons. I frequently like to photograph them for my own pleasure. Dahlias are one of the most attractive summer flowers and come in many colours and sizes.

Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, f/8, ISO 200.

Cornflower Centaurea cyanus

Some know it as Bachelor's Button. Cornflowers are wild flowers that appear in summer. Historically, they were often seen growing among cornfields during which is where its name originates. They are also commonly found in gardens due to their bright colours and make excellent photographic subjects.

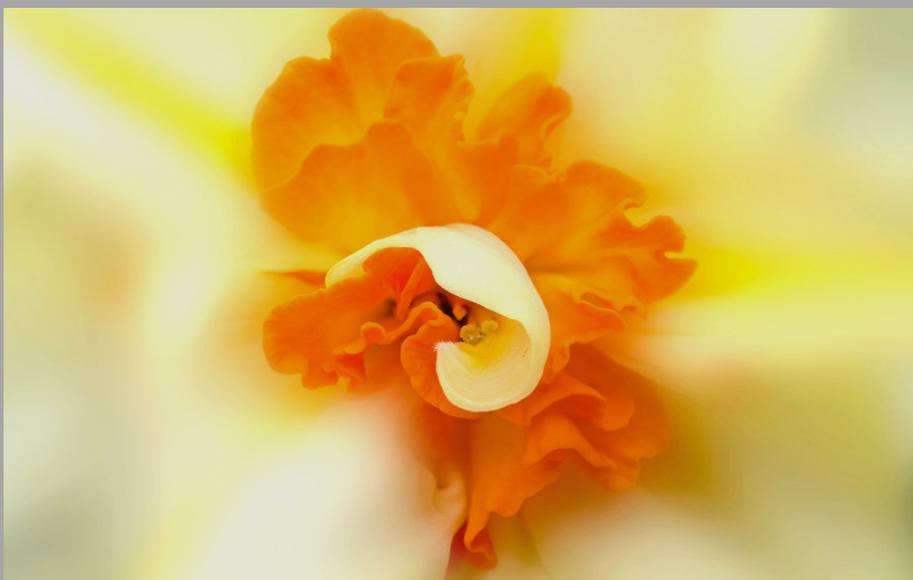
Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, f/8, ISO 200.



Daffodil Narcissus Le Torch

A beautiful species associated with spring with large yellow petals interspersed with orange corona segments. I find flowers in general to be the most challenging photographically. Being static they require a lot more thought and deliberation when it comes to portraying their beauty.

Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, f/11, ISO 200.



Z 9 Gallery Two



River Bubbles Shimna River I was attracted to these tiny patches of bubbles in the swirl of a waterfall. It was not possible to use a tripod due to the movement in the water.

Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, f/11, ISO12800.



Monkey Orchid Orchis simia

I was running macro workshop in Northern Greece targeting many of the wonderful orchid species that grow there. I wanted to show in detail the individual flowers of this beautiful species.

Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, f/11, ISO 200.



*Judas Tree Cercis
siliquastrum*

A very colourful tree with bright rosy-pink flowers, found mainly in Southern Europe. It's one of the finest examples I have ever seen and photographed. The curve of the trunk and branch structure made a wonderful composition. I climbed the nearby hill to gain height and distance to make the shot.

Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro, f/11, ISO 125.

Z 9 Gallery Three

*Scarlet Elf Cup Sarcoscypha
austraca*

A brightly-coloured cup fungi that is found in woodlands in late winter and early spring. The bright scarlet cups emerge from small decaying branches lying on the ground where moisture levels are high. They make excellent subjects for photography.

*Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro,
f/11, ISO 100.*



*European Swallowtail Papilio
machaon gorganus*

One of the most attractive butterflies and commonly encountered throughout western Europe. While running a workshop in the Pyrenees, I spent some time experimenting with flight shots. I was amazed just how well the Z 9 performed. It didn't nail all of them, but it did remarkably well considering insects are not one of the designated groups.

*Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S macro,
f/11, 1/4000 sec ISO 800.*



*Small Stagshorn Calocera
cornea*

A brightly coloured fungi that is common in autumn growing on decaying branches and tree stumps. The specimen is very small and employed focus stacking to achieve complete sharpness throughout the subject.

*Z 9, Z MC 105mm VR S
macro, f/11, ISO 800.*



Z 9 Gallery Four



Top Fanad Lighthouse

One of the most photographed lighthouses in Ireland. It's a dangerous place to be in high winds and fatalities have occurred there.

Z 9, Z 14-30mm ultra wideangle lens, f/11, ISO 100.

Above Lough Shannagh Mourne Mountains

A large naturally occurring lake formed 10,000 years ago during the last ice age.

Z 9, Z 14-30mm ultra wideangle lens, f/11, ISO 400.

Left O'Sullivan's Cascade

One of the most beautiful waterfalls in Killarney National Park County Kerry.

Z 9, Z 24-70mm wideangle lens, f/11, ISO 64.

Z 9 Gallery Five



Holy Monastery of Varlaam Meteora Kalambaka Greece

No tripods allowed in here. It was quite dark in the main entrance hall. I made use of IBIS on the Z 9 with excellent results. It really makes a difference when shooting in dimly lit places. Z 9, Z 14-30mm ultra wideangle lens, f/5.6, ISO 800.



Holy Monastery of Varlaam Meteora Kalambaka Greece

A great place to run a workshop with plenty see and photograph. Z 9, Z 24-70mm wideangle lens, f/11, ISO 100.

Z 9 Gallery Six



*Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus**

The blue sky behind the bird as it came in fast on a tail wind makes it easy for the Z 9's autofocus to lock on which it did not dropping a single shot in the burst.

Z 9, 300mm f/2.8 G ED VR II, f/5.6, ISO 800.

*Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica**

I find the Z 9's autofocus to be much more reliable especially when the background behind the bird tends to be busy. Puffins are by nature very fast-flying but my hit rate improved significantly with the Z 9.

Z 9, 300mm f/2.8 G ED VR II, f/5.6, ISO 3200.



*Razorbill *Alca torda**

Classic image with a bill full of sand eels. Even though the bird was pacing up and down the Z 9 maintains focus accurately making capturing images such as these more straightforward.

Z 9, 200-500mm f/5.6, ISO 1600.

Further Information



Ross Castle, Killarney, County Kerry

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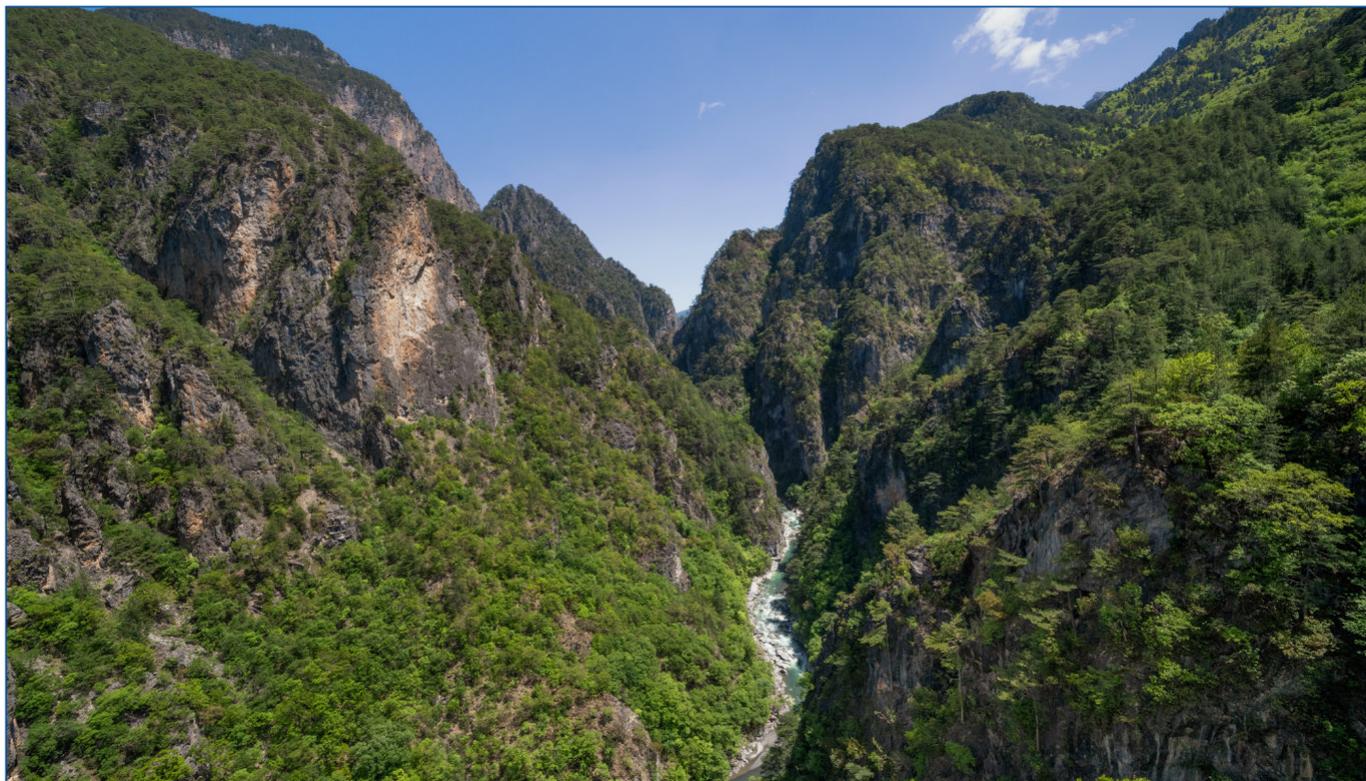
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Further information on the Nikon Z (and other Nikon Services) can be obtained at:



Further information on the Novoflex products relating to this review can be obtained at:





Aoos Gorge, Konista, Northern Greece



Robert Thompson is a professional freelance natural history photographer, author and conservationist. He is a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and the Irish Photographic Federation; an acclaimed macro specialist in the UK, and the author of a number of books on natural history and photography. He is also a Novoflex Ambassador for the UK and has sat on the Natural History Distinctions Panel for the Royal Photographic Society. His work is widely published in the UK, Ireland and internationally, with numerous photographic credits in a variety of publications including, Nikon Pro, Nikon NPS, Nikon Owner and other media sources.

He is a frequent writer and contributor to the photographic press and specialist natural history publications. As an active conservationist, he has worked on many high-profile natural history projects in his own country in conjunction with various government organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. He also has an interest in dragonflies, butterflies and moths, for which he has specialist knowledge. He has had several solo exhibitions of his work and is a frequent traveller, running workshops in some of the most picturesque alpine regions of Europe and at many of Ireland's most iconic locations.

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*Holy Monastery of Rousanou, Meteora,
Kalambaka, Greece*