

Winter In Iceland With The Sony a7R

by
E.J. Peiker

When I packed my gear for my annual winter trip to Iceland, I packed the usual assortment of fast lenses and a Nikon D800E. Of course I also packed a tripod, tripod head and all the accessories that I would need in the harsh winter climate of this island nation that sits at the doorstep of the Arctic Circle between Greenland and the UK. I also threw in the Sony a7R and Zeiss 24-70mm f/4 full-frame E-mount lens along with my Novoflex adapter that allows me to use my Nikon lenses on the a7R. Sometime between the time I packed and taking the first picture, this trip turned into a stress test for the a7R. It wasn't a premeditated or even a conscious decision but that is what I ultimately decided to do. About 95% of the photos I took were taken on the a7R. I used it so much that on those rare occasions when I did use my D800E, initially my fingers went to the wrong places on the camera. After 8 straight days of shooting almost exclusively with the a7R in temperatures from 9 degrees to 40 degrees Fahrenheit, winds exceeding 100MPH at times, in rain, sun, and complete white-out snow conditions, here are some of my findings...



Nupstadur - Iceland (Sony a7R, Zeiss 24-70 f/4)

Pros:

- I did not end any of the days with a sore shoulder or back pains. This is the norm for the heavier Nikon gear. While I still went to bed very tired after long 18 hour days every day, I didn't go to bed achy all over needing to take Ibuprofen - my kidneys surely enjoyed that. The

reduction in weight and the lower lever-arm over the shoulder weight of the a7R is beyond the mere 2.2lb that this camera/lens combo saves over an equivalent D800E with Nikon 24-70mm lens. The speed at which you can get out of the vehicle and be ready to shoot is just amazing since you can comfortably keep the a7R with Zeiss 24-70 on your lap all day.

- The dynamic range of the camera is incredible. Of course this is expected since this camera uses a newer generation of the same sensor as the D800E, one that after two years on the market is still completely unmatched by anyone else.
- I was pleasantly surprised by the speed and accuracy of the autofocus. I was expecting poor performance in low light or when using 8 stops of neutral density for waterfalls but it was never an issue. Of course it isn't as fast as DSLR phase detect AF but for what I do, I will trade speed for the accuracy of contrast detect AF for landscape photography any day.
- Manually focusing Nikon lenses is a pleasure. I have settled on a method where I compose the shot and get a rough manual focus and then hit the C2 button, which I have configured for magnification, and fine tune the focus with focus peaking on the high setting enabled. The focus is incredibly accurate when you do this and with some practice only takes a few seconds.
- Being able to see the depth of field clearly in the viewfinder helps to determine if stacking should be used or not. You can go into magnified view mode and cruise around the picture to insure that every critical thing is in focus.
- Being able to see the shot you just took in the viewfinder is great especially when taking ocean wave shots. You know right away if you timed the wave right without ever taking your eye off the viewfinder.



Faxi Foss - Iceland (Sony a7R, Zeiss 24-70mm f/4)

- During the second half of the trip, I had the new firmware version (1.0.2) installed. This dramatically improved my enjoyment of shooting with this camera. The camera start-up delay,

and consistency of the delay completely disappeared. I would turn on the camera and almost immediately it was ready to go.

- The Zeiss 24-70mm f/4 lens is great to work with. It does distort heavily as I outlined in my review of that lens (<http://www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Sony-Zeiss%2024-70mm%20Review.pdf>) but there is now a third party lens profile for Adobe Camera Raw, Photoshop and Lightroom available that corrects this. Figuring out all of the places in the convoluted Adobe folder structure that the profile needs to be installed is not so easy but once you do, it does the automatic corrections well. The image stabilization works wonders in gusty conditions.
- As a walking around town camera, the a7R coupled with the Zeiss 24-70 is superb. No big heavy camera with big zoom lens attached - nobody questions you about being a "professional" in historic places and it is so light and easy just to carry in your hand ready to shoot at any instance. It makes high quality street shooting fun again. I never once even took out my RX-100 point and shoot.
- Even the relatively slow moving Icelandic Horses were no problem at all for the camera to focus on.



Icelandic Horse - Iceland, (Sony a7R, Zeiss 24-70mm f/4)

Cons:

- As I said in my review of the a7R (<http://www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Sony%20Alpha%207R%20Review.pdf>), battery life just sucks! At temperatures right around freezing, I was able to get about 120 shots per

battery charge on average. After warming the battery backup I could get another 25 shots before terminal exhaustion. This is even worse than my testing for my review but I believe this is due to using an image stabilized autofocus lens rather than manual focus lenses that do not draw any power. Fortunately I had 3 fully charged batteries with me each day but on two occasions I ran out while a few hundred yards from the car and had to run back to get another battery since I forgot to stick one in my pocket. You are constantly playing the battery conservation game, turning the camera off between shots even if you are only going to be moving position for a minute or so.

- One completely unexpected issue occurred when I thought my rear LCD had failed. While photographing the always misty Seljalandsfoss in southern Iceland, suddenly only my electronic viewfinder (EVF) would work and it would not switch back to the rear LCD when I removed my eye from the EVF. When shooting misty waterfalls one quickly turns the camera away from the waterfall after a shot to keep moisture off of the front element of the lens. After a minute of panic and rebooting the camera, I noticed a single tiny spec of mist on the eye detector that is used to determine if an eye is on the viewfinder. This droplet was easily less than 5% of the detector in size yet it was enough to fool the camera into thinking there was an eye on the EVF at all times. This sensor is recessed fairly deeply above the EVF so getting a cloth in there is not real easy but once I was able to dab the sensor with the corner of a lens cloth, operation returned to normal. This happened two more times in misty conditions during the trip.
- While I am writing about the EVF; it is usually wise to wear sunglasses when photographing in bright sunlight and snow covered terrain to prevent snow-blindness and eye fatigue. I have a special pair of prescription sunglasses that are not polarized since polarized sunglasses can interfere with your view of an LCD or can result in issues when using a polarizer on a lens.



Seljanlnadsfoss - Iceland (Sony a7R, Nikkor 70-200 f/4, Novoflex adapter)

Using sunglasses in bright conditions, even with the EVF set to its brightest setting results in a relatively dark image in the viewfinder in very bright conditions. I did get used to this but it has never been a problem with an optical viewfinder. I do think the camera needs one more notch of brightness adjustment for the EVF.

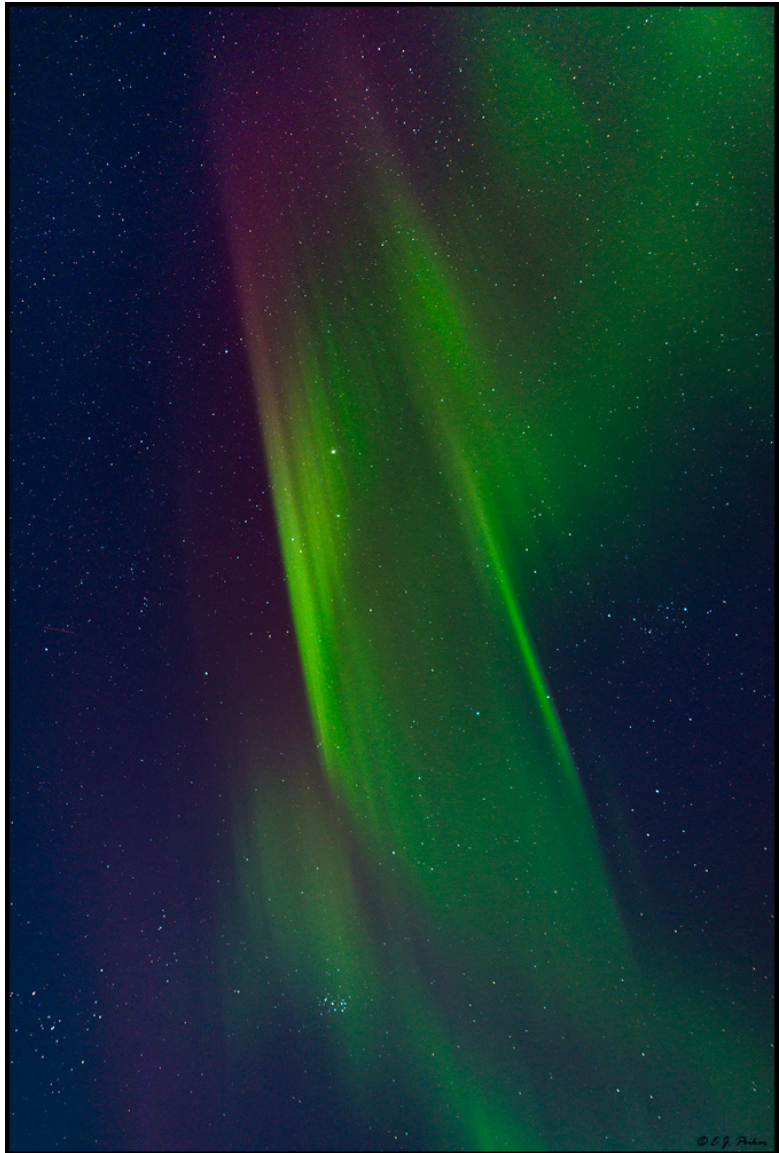
- For the first half of the trip I was totally annoyed with the camera start-up times which vary from instant to 3 seconds relatively randomly. But on one of the nights when it was raining with level one hurricane force winds and a good WiFi connection I did the recent firmware update. After that it was never an issue again with consistent start-up times of under a second. It still takes a long time to start the camera after a battery change as the camera goes through a complete reboot but at least regular camera start-up are nearly instantaneous.

Overall, my experience with the a7R in Iceland was a very good one. The camera shot through

three hurricane force

windstorms, a blizzard, rain,

and just about any nasty condition you can throw at a camera. It just kept on ticking. It took great shots with both the autofocus native E-mount 24-70mm lens and my Nikon mount lenses from 14mm to 200mm. The only real issues were the battery life and the mist spec on the eye detection sensor. I think my summer trip to Iceland will result in better battery life since the temperatures will likely be about 20 to 30 degrees Fahrenheit warmer. I will fashion a small tool that can easily clean the eye detection sensor for future shooting situations in mist - something like a tiny pec pad over a coffee stirrer should do the trick. The Sony 24-70mm f/4 lens' image stabilization works wonders in the strong gusty Iceland winds. The Sony 70-200mm f/4 is just becoming available and a Zeiss 16-35mm f/4 or similar will be announced soon. With just those three lenses one could do an entire Iceland trip that is geared towards landscapes in a kit that weighs only slightly more than what a D800 with just a 24-70 weighs. Image quality is superb and the AF speed is adequate for most landscape photography scenarios.



Aurora Borealis - Iceland (Sony a7R, Sigma 35mm f/1.4, Novoflex Adapter)

My complete 28 page review of the a7R can be found here:

<http://www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Sony%20Alpha%207R%20Review.pdf>

For the complete review that analyzes all of the different lens performance parameters of the Zeiss 24-70mm f/4 lens can be found at <http://www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Sony-Zeiss%2024-70mm%20Review.pdf>



Laxa i Kjos - Iceland (Sony a7R, 24-70mm)

Disclaimers:

E.J. Peiker conducts consulting services and product design services for a number of photographic product companies. The companies change from time to time:

E.J. Peiker writes for and is supported by Singh-Ray Filters and receives non-monetary compensation from Singh-Ray Filters. www.singh-ray.com

E.J. Peiker is a Wimberley Professional Services featured photographer and receives non-monetary compensation from Wimberley. Visit Wimberley at www.tripodhead.com

E.J. Peiker is a member of Nikon Professional Services and receives some services free of charge from Nikon USA www.nikonpro.com

E.J. Peiker is a consultant for LensCoat and receives compensation for time spent working on LensCoat products from LensCoat. www.lenscoat.com

E.J. Peiker is sponsored by Hunt's Photo and Video - New England's largest photography retailer. Visit them at www.huntsphotoandvideo.com/

E.J. Peiker is a co-founder of www.Naturescapes.net and leads photographic workshops under the NatureScapes Certified Workshops banner

Those that know me know I would not endorse a product even for compensation if I did not feel it were a superior product.

Legal Notice: *Written and Photographic Content © E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer. The text and photographs contained herein may not be copied or reproduced without written consent. This newsletter may be forwarded without restriction unaltered and in its entirety only.*



Malarif - Iceland (Sony a7R, Zeiss 24-70mm, 12 vertical images stitched)