

The Poor Man's Digital Leica ?

## THE PANASONIC LUMIX GF1 MICRO FOUR THIRDS CAMERA

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I'll get to the bottom line right away. It's a pretty impressive package.

What is the appeal of this camera? If you are one of those shooters who, like myself, spent a good bit a time with in the 1960's with an old Leica (and believe me, mine was "old" even in the '60's) and miss the "digital equivalent" of a similar form factor with interchangeable lenses and image quality better than 35mm film (can you say Tri-X 400), then you will probably like the GF1. If you are one of those photographers who just wants a smaller form factor than the DSLR you're currently carrying, but have been put off by the current crop of P&S cameras due to slow autofocus, shutter lag, high ISO noise levels, and overall compromised image quality (compared to your DSLR), then you too will probably find the GF1 of interest. If you are looking for good image quality in a relatively inconspicuous (compared to a DSLR) "street" camera for personal projects and travel, you will likely find the GF1 appealing.



GF1 with 20mm (40mm equivalent) "pancake" lens and Canon G10 for size comparison.

I purchased a GF1 with the "pancake" prime 40mm f1.7 lens in December, 2009. The lens is actually a 20mm focal length, but the Micro Four Thirds (MFT) sensor has a 2X multiplication factor. Later I added the 28-90 (equivalent) Image Stabilized Lumix lens, which is remarkably small for that zoom range. My motivation was to find a good "street" camera to use for some personal projects. Earlier this year I started a personal project in Latin America. I quickly became aware of the downsides of using my large (and heavy) Canon 1Ds MKIII and "L" glass for the kind of street photography I had in

mind. I was often in places and situations where I didn't want my camera to shout "professional photographer". I kept wishing I had something smaller and lighter that could fit into my jacket pocket, and still give me the image quality I needed for 16x20 prints at ISO 400 using available light. At the time, I didn't feel there was anything on the market that would meet those requirements. At least not anything that I could afford for personal work. The Leica M8.2 (and now the M9) was not an option primarily due to cost. A new M9 with just one lens (35mm f2 Summicron) currently costs more than \$10,000 street price.

**A little history:** The "Micro Four Thirds" format (abbreviated MFT) was introduced by Olympus and Panasonic in August of 2008. The new MFT cameras eliminated the reflex mirror and allowed the creation of smaller interchangeable lens cameras. In September of 2008, Panasonic introduced the G1 along with some new lenses. The G1 has a built-in bright electronic viewfinder (and looks like a traditional smaller DSLR). The MFT format uses the same sensor as the full size Four Thirds format, but the mount is downsized and the distance between the rear lens element and the sensor is half of what the Four Thirds format requires. This new "micro" format allows significant downsizing.

In late Summer and Fall of 2009, Olympus and Panasonic introduced two new cameras based on their MFT format bodies. By eliminating the built-in viewfinder (as found on the G1), but keeping the same sensor and electronics, they created a rangefinder-like form factor with the image quality of the larger cameras. Olympus came out with the first model of this new genre, the EP1, and soon followed it with the EP2. Panasonic introduced their **GF1** in October. In April, 2010, Panasonic and Olympus introduced more models using the MFT format, but the **GF1** is still the compact flagship for Panasonic. The Olympus and Panasonic models have a lot of similarities, and some significant differences. If you want more details on how the GF1, EP1 and EP2 compare, a Google search on the web will locate plenty of reviews as well as information as to where these new cameras fit in relation to the latest Leica models.

**UPDATE:** As of May 13, 2010, it is apparent that other manufacturers have noticed the appeal of this market niche and are announcing similar "mirrorless" interchangeable lens compact cameras. Sony just announced a series of NEX models that use an APS-C size sensor which is larger than the Four Thirds sensor and promises excellent image quality. Also this Spring, Samsung came to the party with their NX series of MFT cameras followed by Ricoh with their GXR-A12 which is designed with interchangeable "lens/sensor" modules, which is a design unique to Ricoh. Each of these new entries has their strengths and weaknesses. Overall, I still feel the GF1 would be my first choice based on "speed" of shooting, build quality, image quality, features, quality lenses, and size. Obviously, everyone should do their own research and make a purchase decision based on what best meets their needs. By the way, Canon and Nikon have yet to enter the fray, but I would bet money they won't be far behind.

## **IMPRESSIONS**

## **The “GOOD” Stuff**

- Small and lightweight. Almost as small as the Canon G10 / G11. Actually, without the lens mounted, a bit smaller than the G10. With the pancake lens, about the same depth as the G10 with the built-in lens extended.

- Very good image quality. 12.1 Megapixel resolution. The GF1's MFT sensor has a surface area of approx 225 square mm compared to 43 square mm for the sensor in a Canon G10 or G11. Obviously the larger sensor helps with the noise levels. Shooting RAW, the ISO's up to 800 are quite good with only minimal noise (and even less noise with the new Adobe Lightroom 3 based on my own tests using the Lightroom 3 beta). At ISO 200, you'd be hard pressed to see much difference from a larger sensor DSLR. I use it at ISO 400 for B&W and it is beautiful.



Hand held backyard image using GF1 and Leica 35mm (70 equivalent) f2 Summicron lens.



Flare control is very good with the f1.7 Pancake lens. Shot at f8 directly into the Sun.

- Fast autofocus and overall shooting speed. This was important for me. I feel like it responds almost as quickly as many consumer DSLR's. The Autofocus speed is significantly faster than the Olympus models. **The slowness of the Olympus models eliminated them from my list as a street shooting camera.** The new MFT lenses can also be manually focused.
- LCD viewing screen is very high resolution, bright and crisp. The best LCD I think I've ever seen. Better than my Canon EOS 1 series III bodies.
- Lots of controls. ISO's in 1/3 stop settings from 100 to 3200. Full aperture and shutter settings, selectable metering modes, autofocus modes, file sizes, etc.
- Interchangeable lenses. The GF1 is available as a kit with a 20mm (40 equivalent) f1.7 prime lens that is a superb performer. Sharp and contrasty to the edges wide open. NO chromatic aberration detectable. It's called a "pancake" lens due to its slender profile. My informal tests show it to have very good flare control for such a fast lens. As mentioned previously, the Lumix 28-90mm (equivalent) is very compact and performs remarkably well for its modest price. Check out the reviews regarding these lenses.
- MORE interchangeable lenses. One of the strengths of this camera (and the Olympus models) is the ability to use MANY different lenses. You can use almost any lens for the MFT format from any manufacturer. With the appropriate adapters, you can also use your old Leica screw mount, M mount, and R mount lenses, Contax/Voigtlander glass,

Pentax, Nikon, and Canon manual focus glass, etc. With the manual focus lenses, you have to manually focus of course, but the camera will still auto expose for you with the correct shutter speed for the selected aperture if you wish. I had great results using the Leica 35mm f2 Summicron and Leica 75mm f2 Summicron M mount lenses on the GF1 (thanks for the loan of the lenses Peter Ogilvie and Maurice Sherif). An aftermarket adapter for the Leica lens was a reasonable \$70. I should note that manual focusing the Leica lenses is inherently slow compared to the very fast autofocus of the new Lumix lenses, but it's nice to have the option of using your legacy lenses. You have to focus the manual lenses using the live view on the LCD or use the optional electronic viewfinder. You can also "pre-set" aperture and distance for "zone" focusing.



GF1 with Leica 35mm f/2 Summicron lens.



GF1 with Panasonic f/1.7 20mm pancake lens (40mm equivalent), lens hood, and LVF-1 viewfinder.

- Robust build quality. Mostly metal body. Made in Japan. There is something to be said for a relatively small camera body that really feels good. The metal, the weight, the absence of plastic, the smoothness of operation, the feel of quality. Not equal to the old Leica perhaps, especially with the bright LCD to remind you that this is modern digital technology. But enough of those real camera qualities to make you smile and appreciate the fact that someone is finally making the camera you have been longing for at a price you can afford. Even if it doesn't have a true rangefinder manual focusing system.

**UPDATE:** As of May 13, 2010, my GF1 sample has approximately 6000 shutter actuations (possibly more), has traveled to Latin America, has been used by some of my colleagues, and has not displayed a single quality control issue or problem of any kind.

- Built-in flash. Nice little pop up flash when you need a little fill or its just too dark to get the shot of your friends in the cellar. Hot shoe for attaching a real flash unit.

- Very good low light autofocus. Built-in autofocus low light assist beam works well.

- Optional LVF-1 electronic viewfinder. I have this little unit and it works well. The resolution is not very high, but it has a built in diopter and is quite bright. The unit attaches to the flash hot shoe and gives an accurate "through the lens" view. Basically it

shows you what the sensor sees plus all the settings, focus lock indicator, etc. Think of it as a miniature version of the big LCD. Useful for those who prefer to look through a viewfinder on occasion or when shooting in bright sunlight. Also useful for manually focusing your legacy lenses. WYSIWYG. Note: you can NOT use an external flash unit and the electronic viewfinder at the same time as the viewfinder mounts on the flash shoe. However, you still have the ability to use the built-in pop-up flash.

- Excellent battery life. Haven't really calculated the average use per charge, but it seems to be much longer than most P&S cameras and I suspect it is similar to many consumer DSLR's. I have not found myself running out of juice yet.

- 720 fps High Definition Video. This is not something that I use, but it appears to work well for those who want it. An eight GB SD card will capture about 1 hour of video.

- RAW files. Currently supported by Adobe's Camera Raw 5.6 and higher for Photoshop CS4 / CS5 and Lightroom. Included with the camera is Silkypix software which also supports the RAW format.

- Cost. Under \$900 with the superb 20mm pancake lens. Compare it to the new Leica X1 which is \$2000 with a slower non-interchangeable lens. The Leica M9 and Leica lenses provide beautiful images... for \$10,000 +.

### **“Other” Stuff.**

- The use of a single “push and dial” switch to toggle between exposure compensation and aperture / shutter settings takes some getting used to. I would have preferred separate dials on the top of the camera body. One for aperture, one for shutter.

- The LVF-1 electronic viewfinder does not have as nice a view as the Olympus version. The Olympus electronic viewfinder (for the EP-2 camera) shows more detail and displays a larger view. The downside of the Olympus viewfinder is that it is MUCH bulkier. The GF1 viewfinder gets the job done with a more compact footprint.

IN SUMMARY, I can say with confidence that this is pretty much the “street” camera I've been waiting for. There is a lot to like. I've been using it mostly for B&W. The images I've made so far, in my opinion, are better than what I used to get with my old Leica using Tri-X 400, WAY BETTER. It is not perfect, but as one of the early models of a whole new genre, I think it is a very worthy tool. A keeper for sure. Will it replace my EOS-1 DSLR bodies and “L” glass for my commercial work? NO. Will it be the camera that I grab first for my own work? Definitely! And yes, I think it is deserving of the Leica comparison.

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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

NOTE and Disclaimer: Tony Bonanno is just a working photographer. His opinions and impressions are strictly his own based on many years of experience pursuing his photographic specialties. He is not a professional reviewer. Panasonic did not provide any equipment or support for this review. His website is <http://www.bonannophoto.com>.

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NOTE: February, 2011. Panasonic introduced the Lumix GF2 in December, 2010. Most of the serious photo community has not been very receptive to the new model. Many of us were anticipating a model that would be even more attractive to the enthusiast and serious photographer, a logical successor to the GF1. Instead, the GF2 appears to be a more “consumerized” version, somewhat smaller than the GF1. Fewer manual controls and the inclusion of a “touchscreen” in lieu of the top dial. Image quality is fine, but the overall handling and feel is not what photographers like myself found so appealing in the GF1. Consequently, there has been a surge of interest in obtaining the GF1 while they are still available. Prices of the GF1 as of March, 2011 have risen as demand is outstripping supply.