

Should You Switch from DSLR to Mirrorless?

A different perspective on the typical DSLR vs mirrorless articles

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NIKON D800E + 70-200mm f/4 @ 140mm, ISO 500, 1/500, f/5.6

The viral reports from Nikkei – the ones that say Nikon has switched focus completely from DSLRs to mirrorless – are hardly news to anyone who's followed the camera world for

the last few years. Canon is in exactly the same boat. With few exceptions, camera companies have moved on from DSLRs to mirrorless. Should you?

I'd like to start by saying that this is not a DSLR vs mirrorless article. Like everyone else, we've already written [one of those](#), and truth be told, mirrorless won that debate a while ago. Mirrorless cameras now have countless benefits and vanishingly few drawbacks over DSLRs, at least in specifications and feature sets. Mirrorless is the inevitable future of the camera industry, [as we've said](#) for years now.

However, there's still a massive audience of photographers who shoot with DSLRs. Maybe that includes you. If you're still shooting with a DSLR, chances are high that you've thought about the pros and cons of moving to mirrorless, and maybe you're not sure about the right path. Is it a good idea to make the leap?

By now, no doubt, you understand the tradeoffs and the cost of switching. So, instead of talking about things like lens lineups or feature sets in this article, I'd like to delve into some of the more nuanced qualities of changing camera systems – the creative differences and reasons why you don't always need to chase the hype train.

Image Quality; Quality Images

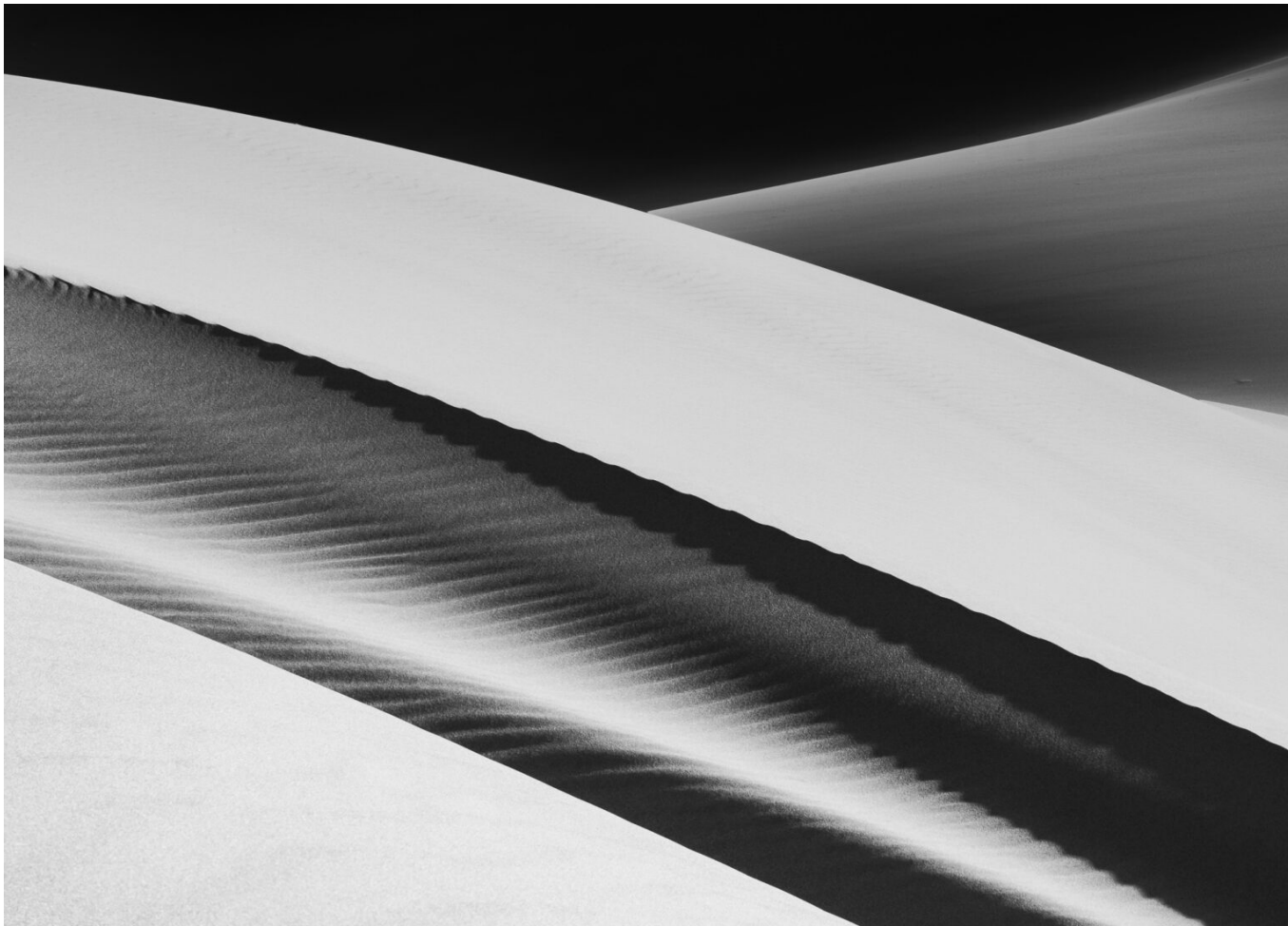
There is no inherent difference between DSLRs and mirrorless cameras in image quality. That said, almost all the R&D money from camera makers is going into mirrorless cameras, so today's cutting-edge performance is increasingly found on the mirrorless side of things. These come in all forms, including high ISO performance, pixel count, and dynamic range. (There also is an inherent advantage in designing lenses for mirrorless cameras, thanks to the shorter flange distance and larger diameter mounts of most mirrorless systems.) Yet I've heard a sentiment like this from some photographers: *"I don't know why, but DSLR photos look better to me."*



NIKON D780 + Tamron 17-35mm f/2.8-4E @ 25mm, ISO 100, 1/400, f/9.0

On one hand, empirically, DSLR photos aren't any better. Heck, if you shoot a DSLR in live view – or, say, rip out the mirror – you're already effectively shooting with a mirrorless camera. I guarantee there's not a person reading this article who can reliably tell the difference between a DSLR photo and a mirrorless photo in a side-by-side test (given the same sensor, like the Nikon D780 vs Z6 II).

But, somehow, the "DSLR photos look better" sentiment feels truer than it should, especially to some photographers and DSLR holdouts. When I squint, I can see it too: that perhaps the average quality of photos has gone down in the mirrorless age, even looking at work from the same photographers.



NIKON D800E + 70-200mm f/4 @ 86mm, ISO 100, 1/10, f/16.0

If that's true, it has nothing to do with sensor differences. Any difference would be the result of *process*. It's the same reason why I've never once taken a decent photo with my phone, even though many other photographers have. Quite simply, I don't put in the right effort, since I use my phone as a tool for quick snapshots and nothing else.

Today's mirrorless cameras are more competent than DSLRs. They are also easier to carry along and use in a mobile workflow. They incentivize faster, *more* image production and sharing. 11 FPS used to be flagship-level speed in the DSLR world, and now, when an entry-level mirrorless camera boasts that number, [I call the camera uninspiring](#).

I was struck by a reader's comment on [one of Libor's recent articles](#): "*You asked: How often do I take out my camera? Answer: For me it has been months. I have a backlog of 50K unprocessed NEFs to go through; plus thousands of inherited photos from a dead relative. Frankly I'm overwhelmed by the backlog.*"

The glut is real. It stops us from going out and practicing photography; it shuts us down. Or, if it doesn't shut us down, it leads us to give each photo less attention than it deserves,

since we're working with so many photos in total.



NIKON D800E + 24mm f/1.4 @ 24mm, ISO 100, 0.6 seconds, f/16.0

DSLRs can lead to this problem, too, but I doubt I'm alone in realizing that I take more photos with mirrorless on a typical outing than I did with a DSLR. I pull my mirrorless camera out more often in the first place, since it's less hassle – and each time I do, I take more photos than I would before.

In other words, the “cost of a photo” is even lower with mirrorless than it was with DSLRs. This isn't a complaint, for the most part. I'm thrilled that photography is more affordable and accessible these days; experimentation is also more feasible, and difficult subjects like birds in flight are easier to capture than ever before.



NIKON Z 7 + 100mm f/2.8 @ 100mm, ISO 125, 1/640, f/6.3

But it's a different experience of photography. In a way, a speed bump has been removed. With mirrorless, if you don't consciously think about slowing down and taking the best possible photo, it's easier to take "happenstance" pictures – and a lot of them. It's also easy to spend insufficient time post-processing your better photographs, since you have more ground to cover and always more photos to process.

That's why, even though the image quality of mirrorless matches or exceeds that of DSLRs, the *quality of an image* may not. I don't think this should scare you away from switching; in the right hands, the better technology of mirrorless cameras can allow you to broaden and maybe even improve your work. However, better photos aren't inevitable just because your gear is newer or has better specs.



NIKON Z 7 + NIKKOR Z 14-30mm f/4 S @ 18.5mm, ISO 64, 20 seconds, f/5.0

The Experience of Photography

Do you remember those viral teasers for the Nikon Df before it was officially announced? A lone landscape photographer in the middle of who knows where, Scotland maybe, *at peace* as he took a photo through the camera's viewfinder. "Pure photography," "No clutter, no distractions" – man did those teasers draw attention. Photographers speculated that the Df wouldn't have a rear LCD, or that it would use dials for everything and eliminate the menu. I don't think I've ever refreshed Nikon Rumors so often.

The Df's eventual release [didn't meet those lofty expectations](#), but that's beside the point. What Nikon had touched on, maybe without realizing it, was the importance of the *experience of photography*.

Leica is onto something here with their marketing, too. It's not just image quality or features that matter in a camera. There's also the spark that makes you want to pick up the camera in the first place and really look forward to taking pictures.



NIKON Z 7 + NIKKOR Z 14-30mm f/4 S @ 14mm, ISO 64, 8 seconds, f/13.0

I'm not saying that the only possible source of the "spark" is the camera itself – or that a DSLR has that spark, and mirrorless doesn't. I know plenty of mirrorless photographers who feel more enthusiastic about photography than they ever did with a DSLR, because now they look forward to taking their lightweight gear places they would never go with a bulkier kit.

But for some photographers, "bringing out the big camera" and "taking it slow" are part of their process of photography. I know I'm like that, maybe even too much. If you've read Photography Life regularly, you probably know that I've been using large and ultra-large format cameras for most of my recent landscape photography. I'm often using these cameras instead of digital, for reasons that are only tangentially related to image quality. The main reason is that I've found a process I adore, that makes me excited to take pictures again.



Chamonix 4x5, Nikkor 90mm f/8 @ f/22, 1/60 second. Kodak Portra 160. No filters, some rear tilt.

There's a rarely-spoken impulse behind most discussions about camera equipment: that the ultimate goal is to get the lightest possible kit that excels at what you photograph. That's a reasonable goal to aim for, and it's something that mirrorless does well. But it's not the only decent direction you can take as a photographer.

Sometimes, it's better to aim for a process that you enjoy, even at the expense of the camera's weight, features, or speed. And there's no denying that the process is different between shooting with a mirrorless camera compared to a DSLR. There's the difference in the viewfinder, for one, and there's also the difference in the time and effort it takes to use the camera (with less effort not always being a more enjoyable experience).

If you've found your rhythm as a DSLR photographer, I think switching to mirrorless may be wrong for you. To gain a lighter bag and a set of features you'll rarely use, is it worth giving up that spark? Surely not. To many photographers, the "experience of photography" makes a bigger difference to the quality of their photos than the camera's feature set,

because it's a more direct factor in how much they enjoy taking pictures, and how often they do so.



NIKON D800E + 105mm f/2.8 @ 105mm, ISO 200, 1/320, f/5.6

Conclusion and Recommendations

Mirrorless cameras aren't just the future, but also the overwhelming present. At most, we'll probably get two or three more DSLRs *ever* from Nikon and Canon – maybe none – and probably some from Pentax if Ricoh finds the market big enough to keep making them. If you're intent on getting a new and improved camera, mirrorless is the way to go these days.

But this article is not targeted at photographers who constantly need the newest specs in the world for their work – most of whom have switched to mirrorless already. Instead, it's targeted at photographers who use a DSLR at the moment, see all sorts of headlines about mirrorless features, and wonder if it's time to overhaul a DSLR kit that they're broadly happy with. My answer is no.

If you still shoot with a DSLR and enjoy it, you don't need to buy into the hype and switch. You probably *do* need to accept that DSLR development won't go much further in the

future, but that's not so bad if it's already developed enough for your needs.

If you switch to mirrorless, your "quality of images" isn't guaranteed to improve at all, even if the camera has better features. I say you should find a process that works for you, stick with it, and not worry so much about gear. That's the easiest way to jump off the advertising/hype train and focus your attention on actual photography.



NIKON D800E + 70-200mm f/4 @ 70mm, ISO 100, 6 seconds

What if you've already switched to mirrorless, and you're just reading this article for fun? Good on you. I suspect you switched for a reason, and for most of you, the high performance of today's mirrorless cameras has probably exceeded your expectations.

It did for me. I adore my mirrorless + large format film kit for the flexibility, image quality, and *process* I'm getting these days. But at the same time, I've had to be mindful of slowing down and thinking through my photos so that I don't take too many smartphone-style snapshots with my Z7.



NIKON Z 7 + NIKKOR Z 20mm f/1.8 S @ 20mm, ISO 3200, 15 seconds, f/1.8

In the comments, I'd like to hear from you if you still shoot with a DSLR. Are you feeling left behind with all the mirrorless content online these days? Or, is "jumping off the hype train" giving you more time to go out and shoot, and be satisfied with the gear you already have? I'm sure the cost of switching plays a role for many photographers, but hardly all of them; the DSLR is still the tool of choice for many professionals and others. If that includes you, I hope this article gave you a better sense of when it might be time to switch, and when it's time to stay.



I expected this article to be somewhat popular, because gear discussions and mirrorless vs DSLR in particular usually are! Even so, the number of comments has outpaced my expectations. I can't respond to every comment I got this time, but I'm reading all of them and am grateful for the interesting and thoughtful responses so far. The dozens of replies I wrote will be easiest to see by sorting the comments by "Oldest" instead of "Newest" below. Thank you! -Spencer