

The Markins M10 Q-Ball

The Quest for The Holy Grail

By Marsel van Oosten



Introduction

One of the best tips I ever got that really improved the quality of my photography, was to use a tripod. Using a tripod slows you down, making you think more about composition and point of view. It's often not taking the time to think your shot over, that ruined it before you even pressed the shutter. Another obvious advantage of using a tripod, is that it enables you to work with low light levels, thus longer shutter speeds. Shooting that gorgeous sunrise with a handheld camera at $f/16$ is most likely not going to give you the tack sharp results you were hoping for. Unless image blur is what you're deliberately after, using a good tripod will eliminate camera shake resulting in sharper images. Stability is the key factor to image sharpness.

The first steps

My first tripod was a Manfrotto 144. It was cheap and not too heavy, so it seemed like a good choice at the time. But with a tripod alone, you're only half way there. You don't want to connect you camera directly to the tripod itself, as you won't be able to move it anymore. You also need a good head. Not wanting to spend more money or lugging around tons of gear, I got myself a very tiny, lightweight mini ballhead; the Manfrotto 052. Using this combo did indeed improve my photography, but soon I realized there was still quite a lot of movement in both the tripod as well as the ballhead. The tripod's construction and material simply weren't all that great, and the ballhead – although very cute – was just too small and flimsy to support an SLR (an F50 at the time) with medium sized lens.

Upgrading my support system

My next tripod was a carbon Gitzo Mountaineer 1228 with center column. Very compact, extremely lightweight and stable, this proved to be a hefty but wise investment. Because of the low weight, I now took my tripod everywhere and used it more often than ever before. Together with the tripod I got the magnesium Gitzo 1275, an off-set ballhead. This combo was a huge improvement on the previous one, but still not perfect. Being small and lightweight and having a center column, meant the tripod wasn't as rigid as it could be, but that was something I already

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knew when I bought it. It was the head that was disappointing. The whole off-set design wasn't at all as rigid as I had hoped for, while at the meantime it was also quite large. It was then that I realized that no matter how good your tripod is, if the head isn't just as great, neither will your pictures.



Gitzo Off-Set Ballhead - Courtesy of Gitzo Manfrotto

The Holy Grail?

So the next step was a Gitzo 1325, the larger brother of the 1228, but without the center column. Although larger, heavier and unfortunately even more expensive, the center column-free construction makes this tripod one of the most rigid ones on the planet. So what goes with the ideal tripod? I decided it would be the Novoflex MB50 Magicball, an extraordinarily designed ballhead with a bright blue colored ball and a free moving clamp attached to it, allowing for swift and smooth movements in all directions. And apart from really good looking, it was also small, lightweight and had friction control. This feature offers variable 'drag' (tension) that makes it easy to control. For a moment I thought I had the perfect setup...



Novoflex MB50 MagicBall – Courtesy of Novoflex

Revelations

Last September I attended the 3rd [Annual Nikonians Photo Adventure Trip](#) in Manitoba, Canada. One of the nice things of this trip, apart from finally meeting the faces behind the names and making new friends, was to exchange tips and experiences on the gear we all used; what do you use, why do you use it and are you happy with it? It was during this trip that I met Mr. Mah,

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president of Korean based ballhead manufacturer [Markins](#), and that I tried their new ballhead, the M10 for the first time. And when I did, I suddenly realized that up to that moment I wasn't using the perfect setup...

On ballheads

Even with a top quality camera and lenses, an extremely stable support is a must to get razor sharp results with excellent detail and contrast. A professional grade head can support heavy loads, lock solidly, and move smoothly.

Two types of heads

Basically, there are two types of tripod heads; the *3-axis 'pan-tilt' heads* and the *ball-and-socket heads*.

The three-way heads permit vertical and horizontal adjustment for composition, but versatility for multi-directional adjustment as well as swinging and tilt-shifting can be troublesome or even quite impossible.

A ballhead is a lot easier and faster to use than a three-way head. Optimum vibration damping of your support system is assured when there is effective mass coupling between the load (the camera), the head, the legs and the ground. When the load is directly atop the apex of the support structure, good mass coupling is assured. The center of gravity in the ballhead, which is exactly at the apex of the tripod, is lower than that of the pan-tilt head, therefore it is also inherently more stable. Aiming and horizon leveling can be done with one simple motion, and to lock the ball rock solid takes nothing more than a quick twist of the main knob.

When it comes to tripod heads, a ballhead is often the best choice.

Ballheads: To pan or not to pan?

The ball-and-socket heads fall into two categories: those that come with an integral panoramic bed, and the mini-balls that don't. A pan(oramic) bed is a separate rotational table at the base of the head, that is independent of the main ball. It permits free movement in the left to right axis, even when the ball is fully locked. This can be very useful when tracking a moving subject, when taking multiple shots that you will later use for panorama stitching, and it makes compositional adjustments in macro work much easier. Also, a panning bed allows you to aim left or right when the camera body is flopped into the ballhead's drop notch for taking vertical shots. Without a panning bed, the only way to do this is to twist the center column of your tripod – providing it has one. You can avoid 'flop' by using an L-type plate on your camera body, or by using a collared lens, although these collars come only on long lenses. My Novoflex MB50 MagicBall, although drop dead gorgeous, didn't have a panning bed, and more than often I found myself praying to any kind of supreme being that it did.

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Connectivity

Ballheads also differ in the way they mount camera bodies and large telephoto lenses. There are three different categories:

- Use of a conventional threaded stud for screw-on mount
- Use of a special 'fixed cavity' style of quick-release clamp
- Use of an 'open channel' style of quick-release clamp

Mounting your camera directly to the head's standard screw is both tedious and insecure, so it's pretty safe to say that you're much better off with one of the two alternatives.

Fixed cavity quick-release clamping systems often feature spring-loaded latching, which makes them rapid to use. However, these systems are designed in such a way that they only accept one size mounting plate, offered by the single supplier. Thus the same plate must be used for every piece of equipment, from your lightest camera body to your heaviest telephoto. Once attached to your camera or lens collar, these flat topped plates often have a tendency to twist when the clamp is flopped into the head's drop notch for the vertical format, or when trying to pan from left to right with the head set to a high amount of friction control. I experienced this flaw myself with my first ballhead (the Manfrotto), also a fixed cavity design. This plate pivot is not something you want to happen when you have your 600 f/2.8 attached. As a consequence one must insist on "architectural" plates, with a flange to help prevent this twist or pivoting rotational movement, at least for light loads.

The open channel type quick-release mechanism is nothing more than a basic clamp with compressing side jaws that grip the plate the camera is attached to. This clamping system permits the use of mounting plates of various sizes, short ones for light loads and long ones for heavy loads. The plates are not flat topped and therefore will not pivot. Another advantage of the open channel design is the ability to adjust the position of the plate inside the clamp, especially useful when doing close-ups and macro photography. You can shift your equipment towards or away from your subject instead of moving the tripod.

I have worked with all three systems and now understand why the top professionals find the latter to be way superior to the other two.

Size does matter

All available ballheads come in different sizes, quality and prices and with different features. Ideally, a good tripod head should be low height to get the lowest center of gravity, and low in weight because the heavier the tripod head, the higher the center of gravity and the more unstable it gets. It should also be capable of supporting more than three times the weight of your heaviest camera-lens combination, while still easy to carry. Next to that it should be easy to use, accurate and dependable under any weather circumstances and preferably maintenance free. Finally, a good ballhead should be sturdy with high torque and have a low damping factor. I know, it sounds impossible, but it's out there...

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What I first noticed about the M10 was how great it looks. The hard and durable matte black finish of the anodized aluminum oxide, has an attractive silky glow on it that almost instantly made me feel like Gollum when he first saw The Ring: '*My precious...*'

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'The precious belongs to us...'

But looks can be deceiving - something I experienced myself with the MagicBall - so the question is: is the M10 as good as it looks?

A quick try

During the Nikonians trip to Manitoba I had the opportunity to give the Markins M10 a quick try with my F100. Nikonians founder J.R. Palacios lend me both his Markins quick-release plate as well as the M10, which at that moment was attached to a Gitzo 1325. And although I only tried it for a couple of minutes, that proved more than enough to convince me that this is one hell of a ballhead.

One month later my own M10 arrived.



The M10 and its controls – Courtesy of Markins

The Box

As the M10 is small, so was the box in which it arrived. Inside it was a piece of grey foam, wrapped around the head itself, and a user manual. That is; what I expected to be a user manual, was nothing more than a tiny leaflet with some basics on how to set the friction control and on maintenance. Ballheads like these are not cheap, and one would expect at least some explanatory photographs, as well as some tips and advice on how to get the most out of your new ballhead. The current text is just way too basic and at times not very clear. I especially found the section on how to set the friction control to be extremely confusing. A real shame in my opinion,

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and a bit of a disappointment to be honest, nevertheless understandable since this is a direct translation from Korean. However, I have heard that a new manual is in the making, so that should probably be fixed by now.

Luckily, the head itself wasn't at all a disappointment. Actually, it was even smaller and lighter than I remembered, while still as gorgeous- a work of art. The matte black, silky surface is hard anodized. Hard anodizing is an electrochemical process where a layer of the aluminium is converted into aluminium oxide. The resulting oxide layer between merges with the aluminium, giving it excellent protection and long life, making the M10 almost unscratchable, so it should keep its looks for many years to come.

The plates

The head came with a Markins quick-release plate; the P50U for my F100+MB15. The Markins P50U is an international standard 45 mm dove-tail plate, made of high quality duralumin, which I believe is also used in aircraft machinery. It is light-weight, low-profile and extremely strong. Next to that it is also a bi-directional plate which makes it very versatile to use. Plates for the open channel system are not flat topped, but have an anti-twist flange at one side of the plate that grabs around the edge of the camera body or lens collar it is attached to. This will prevent the plate from pivoting, but it also means you'll have to get one that is specifically made to fit your equipment in order to work properly. For instance the F100 with the MB15 requires a different plate than the F100 without it. If you accidentally choose the wrong plate, chances are it won't fit and plate pivot may occur. The same goes for lens collars, although there are less varieties in lens collar plates due to the rather universal shape of most lens collars. Basically, the larger the lens, the larger the plate. Originally I also wanted a plate to fit my Nikkor 80-400 VR, but later on I decided to get the replacement collar (the NC80-400) made by Kirk Enterprises which not only is a huge improvement on the rather flimsy original, it also serves as a quick-release plate itself. Anybody that has this lens should get this fantastic item; the original simply isn't good enough and allows for some vibration, even when connected to a world-class ballhead.



To connect the plate to the camera is very easy; there's a large bolt in the plate that you can screw into the camera body or lens collar. should not fall into the temptation to use a simple coin for this, a regular screw driver will fasten it better. Nonetheless I always keep a medium sized coin in my camera bag in case I would have to take it off or if it would need retightening, while I get a good tool.

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Most flat topped plates that are used for fixed cavity quick-release systems use a cork-like material atop the plate as some sort of 'friction' surface, which simply doesn't work as well. And it can be extremely frustrating to have to recompose your shot because of an accidental nudge that moves your lens a few degrees. With the Manfrotto plates I more than often experienced this when I tilted the camera to vertical: the lens would slightly droop because of the weight of either the lens (when the plate was connected to the camera) or the camera (when the plate was connected to the lens).

There is a table at the Markins website (www.markins.com) that shows the different plates and camera brands, but like the manual it is a bit confusing. Best thing is to skip the plates main page as it won't help you choosing the right one for your camera or lens. Instead, go directly to 'For Fit Cameras', where you will find the different camera brands and their models. Connection plates are offered for most camera and telelens manufacturers, but for other systems you can use Markins generic plates.

The Clamp

The Markins quick-release shoe is compatible with Arca Swiss, Kirk, RRS and Foba, and is very light and robust. The M10 Q-Ball comes with a quick-release shoe included, so you don't have to order one separately.

The clamp itself is of a very simple design with rounded corners and edges to protect both the photographers hands as well as the camera bag. By turning the large knob the clamp opens and closes, there's nothing more to it. Just slide the plate in and tighten the knob and your gear is locked rock solid.



However, it is not all hallelujah. First, the open channel design isn't as fast as the fixed cavity system and it isn't as intuitive. When using the clamp for the first time, you will find that it takes

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some practice to slide the plate in quickly. Although deceptively simple-looking, I experienced on multiple occasions that I didn't get the plate securely fastened quickly. Sometimes I hadn't opened the clamp enough to let the plate slide in and I had to look underneath the camera body to see what was causing the trouble. On one occasion I thought I had fastened the plate inside the clamp, but in fact the clamp had only caught one side of the plate, meaning my equipment was not at all securely fastened and if it weren't for the camera strap that was still around my neck...

One of the great advantages of the open channel system - the ability to shift your gear forward and backward or from left to right inside the clamp in order to make small compositional adjustments - also inhibits another potential danger. In the event of not locking the tightening knob enough, the plate + equipment could simply slide out of the clamp and fall into the abyss you were just trying to photograph. To prevent this from happening, Markins have added a safety-stop at one end of the shoe as a standard feature. This consists of a simple stop-screw which can easily be removed, for example when you want to be able to slide the plate into the clamp from either side, or when using a large plate connected to a telelens.

Despite potential pitfalls, I still prefer the open channel system because of the versatility it offers. It just takes some practice.



Setting things up

Attaching the M10 to my Gitzo is as simple as it gets. Simply screw the ballhead onto the tripod base screw until it stops, and you're ready to go. But however simple this might seem, there is a small thing that bothers me.

As simple as it is to fasten the head to the tripod base, it is equally as simple to get it off again. Some tripods do not offer a locking mechanism to prevent the head from accidentally unscrewing itself out of the platform. If so, the only thing you can do is screwing it really tight or use a "lock-tight" type of glue, that will nevertheless allow you to remove the head when needed.

Without experience, to lock the head tight is easier said than done. The M10 has a panoramic base which allows the head to turn around its axis, and this feature is controlled by a small knob just above the pan base. To attach the head to the tripod top base you need to tighten this knob, otherwise the force you would use would simply cause the head to rotate inside the pan base, making it impossible to securely fasten the head to the tripod. At one occasion I had fastened the panoramic knob so tightly, I had trouble loosening it again on location; the weather was cold – and so were my bare fingers – and the knob was just too small to really grab it and unscrew it.

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For this reason I would have liked the knob to have some sort of internal locking mechanism by pushing or pulling it.

Ready, set, go?

When for the first time I attached my gear to the head, I was impressed. Never before had I felt such a rock solid setup. There was absolutely no noticeable vibration or slip of any kind and it felt as if the camera and the head were made of one piece. Confidence inspiring to say the least. Actually, the only movement I could detect, was between the F100 and the MB15. I would never have thought that to be the weak spot of my setup...

With the camera now on the head, I suddenly realized that – especially with a bi-directional plate - there are quite a number of setup possibilities. It is wise to experiment a bit with this, as in some situations interference might occur between the clamp's knob and your gear or the head's sleeve.

With the free turning sleeve of the M10, you can position the main locking knob basically anywhere you like, but considering most people would flip their camera to the left for shooting vertically, the head's drop notch should also be on the left. That means that the main control knob will be located at the front of the ballhead, facing forward. At first I had the main knob located to the right, but that would mean I'd have to take my right hand off the camera in order to control it and that the drop notch would be at the front; not a very logical setup. That said, there will be plenty of occasions on which you want to change the position of the drop notch in order to tilt the camera upwards (drop notch located at the rear) or downwards (drop notch located at the front). These are common movements of a camera with a short lens attached, and it is one of the disadvantages of this type of ballhead that you constantly have to reposition the drop notch to allow you to make them. This is definitely one of the aspects where the MagicBall offers more freedom of movement, much more rapidly.

But even with the sleeve positioned as it is, there are still some different configurations possible regarding the orientation of the clamp and the clamp's knob. In my first basic setup, I located the clamp's knob at the right side, underneath the camera body. This is not a good configuration, as the knob is now very close to the bottom of the camera, making it difficult to control it.

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*With a setup like this, the clamp's knob is difficult to control.
Here the M10 is mounted onto a Manfrotto leveling base atop a Gitzo 1325 tripod.*

Having the clamp's knob at the left side also isn't a good idea. You keep the same problems and get one more: when you flip the camera to the vertical image format, the clamp's knob won't allow the camera getting perfectly level.



With this configuration, you can't flop the camera to fully vertical

Therefore, the best configuration (with the plate connected to your camera) is to have the quick release clamp lying side-to-side, with the clamp's knob facing front. That way, the knob will be underneath the lens instead of poking you in the chin, the only left alternative. Also, it will enable you to slide the camera left to right within the clamp, which can be useful when doing close-ups and macro photography. You can shift your equipment without moving your tripod.

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Also not good; the knob has become a chin-poker



The best setup; drop notch at your left for shooting vertical, both clamp's knob and main friction control facing forward.

When you have the plate connected to a telephoto lens (the tripod collar), things are different though. As panning movements will be more likely than tilting, the position of the drop notch is not as important as with a short lens. That means that with a large lens you can position the main locking knob wherever you want it. Personally I prefer not to change the sleeve setup for two reasons: in the middle of the action I don't want to find myself searching for the main control knob; and I take more shots in the vertical format when shooting tele than when using wide angles, so the drop notch would still need to be at the left side.

The clamp however is a different matter. With lens collars it's best to turn the clamp so that its channel runs in the same direction as the lens. This way you can move the (mostly longer) plate back and forth within the clamp. This can be useful for choosing the best center of gravity position of the gear, or for making compositional adjustments when using tripod collared macro lenses.

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With the safety-stop removed, the plate can slide back and forth inside the clamp to get the best weight distribution. Here the F100 with 80-400VR and Kirk replacement collar are mounted on the head.

Whatever setup you choose: practice it so it becomes second nature.



Control

Locking and unlocking whatever load you have on top of the M10 is very intuitive and fast. With just a single main control knob your gear can easily be locked or released by only 1 or 1/2 turns.

With my gear loaded on top of it, the ballhead moves silky smooth, even and controlled in every direction. There are no sudden stops or any internal friction; it really glides. Simply tightening the main knob will lock it rock solid. With some heads I have experienced a slight 'creep' of my gear after fastening the head, which is especially annoying when using large telephoto lenses or when shooting macro. With the M10 I am convinced this will never happen.

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Even with heavy lenses the M10's clamp locks the plate rock solid.

Science-friction

Perhaps the best feature of the M10 is the 'pre-tensioning' control, also known as the friction control. Basically this is a tiny thumbscrew located on the main locking knob which can be operated with your thumb or any other finger, and that allows you to set the exact amount of minimum friction that you want for any given load. This is how it works:

First you mount the lightest camera and lens combination that you use, while making sure that both the main knob and the thumbscrew are fully untightened. Then you set the amount of friction you want by turning the main knob clockwise. Ideally it should still allow you to smoothly move the camera, but at the same time not flip over when you let it go. Next you turn in the little thumbscrew all the way until it is locked down, and you're done. The main knob now no longer can be turned past this minimum friction setting, but you can still move it between full lockup and you preset level of free drag. I used my F100 and 20-40 zoomlens being the lightest combination, and noticed that with this gear on the M10 I don't even have to lock the ball anymore. The minimum amount of friction I set earlier is enough to keep it in place when I let it go, while at the same time I can still move it smoothly when I want to make compositional adjustments.

You can also use this feature when you need some sort of stabilized damping effect, for instance when tracking a moving subject. With a fully unlocked and free moving ball this simply wouldn't work.

When you mount a larger lens however, the load becomes heavier and therefore requires a higher amount of friction to prevent it from flopping. Instead of starting all over again, I recommend adjusting only the main locking knob to increase the amount of drag. At this stage I would have liked the main knob of the M10 to have index, like the panning base has. This would enable me to memorize the ideal friction settings for the lenses I use most, for instance 1 for the wide angle, 3 for the medium zoomlens and 5 for the large telezoom. Mr. Mah, are you reading this?

If you want to unlock the minimum friction setting by turning the thumbscrew counter clockwise, you might first need to turn the main locking knob clockwise a little bit. This would release the thumbscrew and make unscrewing it easier.

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On location

Since the arrival of my M10 I have been able to test it under different circumstances on various outdoor locations. I have used it in dry conditions and high temperature in southern Spain, as well as in wet conditions and disappointingly low temperatures in my home country, The Netherlands. In both circumstances the ballhead performed flawlessly and kept on doing what it does best; combining super smooth movements with rock rigid locking. Whether I used a light landscape setup or a heavy telephoto combo, it always delivered on stability, fastness and ease of use. The fierce winds on one of the Andalucian mountains the evening I was taking some landscape shots, weren't able to move my camera even the tiniest bit. The sudden drop in temperature also didn't have any noticeable impact on the head's performance.



The M10 in action in a Spanish zoo. The F100 with the 80-400VR is flopped to vertical using the head's drop notch...



...and the final result.

I particularly liked working with the friction control in combination with the 80-400VR. Tracking monkeys that were jumping from one rock to another was a breeze and my movements were much smoother than with the MB50 MagicBall or any other head I ever used before. This smoothness also helps making tiny compositional adjustments when doing landscapes or macro. I can still lively remember the time I first had to unscrew the main locking knob to do this, thus releasing all drag and making it nearly impossible to keep the suddenly free moving camera/lens in the same position. Now I just add a little pressure to the camera into the direction that I want it to move, and it does so in a very smooth and controlled way.

Conclusion

The M10 being my first ball-and-socket head, I can not compare it to similar products by the makes of Arca Swiss, Bogen or Kirk. However, judging on the data I have seen on weight, load capacity, load/weight ratio, height and price, the Markins M10 Q-Ball is the lightest of all, the smallest, capable of the same or even higher maximum load, and at a highly competitive price. Based on these facts alone, the M10 already is a clear winner.

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Arca Swiss B1	Kirk BH-1	Bogen 3435QR	Markins M10
Weight: 1.7 lbs 772 grams	2 lbs 909 grams	2.2 lbs 1,000 grams	1.12 lbs 510 grams
Load capacity: 90 lbs 40.9 Kg	88 lbs 40 Kg	22 lbs 10 Kg	88 lbs 40 Kg
Load/Weight ratio: 53	44	10	78.4
Height: 4.5 inches 114mm	4.5 inches 114mm	5.5 inches 140mm	3.94 inches 100mm
Price USD: \$400	\$340	\$244	\$310
Price %: 129%	109.7%	79%	100%

Out in the field the M10 lives up to the highest of expectations. Being as lightweight and compact as it is, this head is the ideal travel companion for any photographer that has to carry his own gear and walk around with it.

When I compare it to the MB50 MagicBall, that one weighs 610g and will carry a maximum load of 7kg, whereas the M10 weighs a mere 510g and has a maximum load capacity of up to 40kg (!). The MB50 is somewhat less expensive, but not so much that it justifies these enormous differences.

On the downside: sliding the plate into the quick-release clamp really takes some practice and isn't as fast as most fixed cavity systems, although this disadvantage is something that applies to all open channel systems. The same thing goes for extreme tilting of the camera, which you can only accomplish by using the drop notch, meaning you have to rotate the head first. Maybe I still have to practice this more often to make it go as quick as with the MagicBall. And finally there's the absence of an index for the main friction control knob that could have been very useful, and the fact that you first have to securely tighten the pan bed knob in order to be able to tightly fasten the head to the tripod base plate.

That said, the M10 is one hell of a ballhead and worth every single penny. If you're serious about photography and you want your shots as sharp as they can be, look no further. Combined with a great tripod, this little piece of precision equipment will efficiently turn your setup into a solid concrete pillar. When it moves, it's only because you want it to, and when it does, it's super smooth and precise. Add to that the fact that the M10 is self-cleaning, self-lubricating and virtually maintenance free, and you will come to the same conclusion: Get one. Now.

Marsel van Oosten

About the author

In 1988 Marsel van Oosten bought his first Nikon. Little did he realize then what the impact of this seemingly trivial event would be on the following years. Starting off as a typical happy snapper, his photographic ambitions soon started growing and so did his camera bag. 16 Years later, photography has become a healthy obsession.

Marsel specializes in landscape and wildlife, using his trusty F100. Being an avid fan of digital imaging however, he's planning to switch to a DSLR this year, and to finally say farewell to his Coolscan and his lab.

Marsel works as a creative director at his Amsterdam-based advertising agency, and is a member of the Nikonians MAT team.



Product availability and price

The Markins M10 is approx 330 Euro incl. VAT (280 Euro or approx 340 US Dollars excluding VAT) and it comes with a two year warranty. Heads and accessories are available online at Nikonians Photo Pro Shop (<https://www.photoproshop.com>) and there is additional product information at www.markinseurope.com and on www.markins.com

Markins products are available in Asia directly through Markins at www.markins.com