

Stuck at LAX with a Bessa L, Snapshot Skopar, and Time

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It was my turn to stand in line for the pre-security security check at LAX. While I stood for 2+ hours waiting to have my toiletries searched by a big guy wearing rubber gloves and a smile my wife and the twins wandered freely about. It had been a great holiday seeing my family and friends, but now it was time to go back to work. 10,000 kilometers away in Taipei I had students dreading my return and I couldn't disappoint them. On to the check-in counter and yet another line. This time it was my wife's turn to do the waiting and mine to wander about with the kids. I grabbed the Bessa L and some Tri-X out of the bag, put the kids in the stroller, and walked off.

Why the L?

Well, there was the Bronica...but I suspect that by the time I opened up the tripod, put the camera on it, taken a meter reading, and done all the little things one need do before taking a photo with a medium format SLR (like removing the darkslide) I would have been approached by some very authoritative-looking "homeland security" folks and politely asked to move on. I also had the rangefinders, but I was dealing with a pair of 2-year old boys and wanted to use something lighter and more simple to use. Just point and shoot but still with the amount of control, speed, and inconspicuous nature of an RF with the added bonus of not being so valuable as to cause a heart attack if one of the twins decided to play "baa-ski-ball" with it. I mean, it was only 69 bucks off of CameraQuest. For that price, I was shocked that it had lasted as long as it had, especially with the abuse I've reigned down on it. What? Typhoon? Cool! I'll take out the L! In Use So off we went. The first stop was the convenience store for some over-priced chocolates and Hot Wheels to keep the kids busy and quiet. Yes, chocolates. And yes, I paid for it later when trapped with them 30,000 feet up for 14 hours. The lighting in the LAX international terminal is very even and diffused, so exposure was a breeze. Plus, with the LED meter readout located on the back of the top plate and facing a 45 degree angle, I could get a reference reading without even lifting the camera up to my eye. There wasn't much in the way of action going on and I didn't have shutter slap to deal with, so I felt safe using a slower shutter speed so that I could get a better DOF. The focus ring "stops" on the 25/4 Snapshot Skopar make it very easy to find hyperfocal at f5.6...it's just one click in...so I settled on an exposure of 1/30 second at f5.6, opening up to 1/60 second at f4 when need-be.

I circled around the terminal a few times pushing the stroller with one hand and taking photos with the other. The L was attached to my body via a Gordy's wrist strap, so it was very convenient to grab and shoot. With it being a mid-week day and the majority of foot traffic being confined to lines, most of the terminal space was relatively empty. Combined with huge American flags hanging down at every check-in island and I had a great environment for dramatic images. I avoided the obvious "no-nos" like security checkpoints and was never approached by DHS, the LAPD, or airport security personnel. By the time my wife went through the check-in line I had already made a few laps around the terminal and exhausted a roll of HP5+.

A week later when I finally finished processing all the film from my trip back home I was reminded that the camera was just a black box. The photos taken with the Bessa L/25mm Skopar stood side-by-side with those taken with other body and lens combinations in quality. Do more advanced cameras give you more opportunities to take photos? Sure. But they also take some away. The point is, if you can "see" the picture then you can take the picture and that's a much more valuable skill to any photographer than the ability to adjust the white balance of a camera or picking the right imaging mode. The Bessa L is a reminder of that and a great tool to help develop that skill.

Voigtlander Bessa L

Good: Cheap so there's no "I-can't-do-that-I-might-scratch-it" fear factor. Decent quality. TTL meter placed externally for easy reference. It gives you no more than you need to take a photo.

Bad: Scale-focusing makes telephoto lenses a virtual impossibility. Requires a separate viewfinder for each lens.

Ugly: Was discontinued some time ago so new "old" stock is dwindling. The alternative is a Zeiss version, which costs a lot by comparison ("a lot" being an understatement).

Cosina-Voigtlander 25/4 Snapshot Skopar

Good: Least expensive of the CV lens stable. Very sharp with low distortion. Focusing "click stops" make scale focusing easier. Compact like all Skopars.

Bad: No RF coupling, but not needed on an L, anyway.

Ugly: Was discontinued last year and replaced by a more expensive RF-coupled version this year. Same optical design, though.{mos_smf_discuss:8}