

Ducati Sogno: Italy's Pocket Leica



It's hard to appreciate the Ducati's small size without a Leica in the photo for scale.
(Leica IIIa at left, Ducati at right and Zorki I behind.)

More than just a miniature Leica

The overall appearance and general specifications of the Ducati Sogno, introduced shortly after World War II, strongly resemble those of the Leica IIIc of the same period but on a much smaller scale. Like the Leica, it featured a cloth focal-plane shutter, collapsible lens in interchangeable mount, and separate-window rangefinder with eyepiece focus adjustment. A range of telephoto and wide angle lenses was made available, with appropriate viewfinder attachments, and all lenses coupled to the rangefinder; the 35mm normal lens even had a Leica-style focusing lever. But the differences are, I think, more interesting than the similarities.

The most obvious difference between the Ducati and the Leica is the size: Small even among half-frame cameras, the Ducati is much smaller, perhaps 2/3 of the length of the Leica, and much thinner as well -- the entire body is only about the thickness of a standard 35mm film cartridge. This, of course, leads directly to the second most obvious difference - the Ducati, while using standard 35mm film, requires a special small-diameter film cartridge to fit into the body. Given the small number of Ducatis made (the example shown here is Serial Number 02625), these special film cassettes are rare indeed.

Although outwardly resembling the Leica in layout, the Ducati is somewhat left-handed: the shutter release is located to the left of the lens mount on the front panel, and what looks like a rewind knob at the upper left is actually the wind knob. It takes only a half turn clockwise to advance the film and cock the shutter. The shutter speed dial is in the traditional location to the right of the rangefinder housing, and concentric below it (looking rather like the Leica IIIc's synch dial) is the eyepiece adjustment lever. There is only one strap lug, located at the upper right corner next to the rewind knob.

The lens is an uncoated 35mm f/3.5 Vitor in a very quick-focusing collapsible mount. The lens cap snaps into a recess in the body of the lens mount, rather than onto the end of the lens barrel itself - therefore, it is impossible to extend the lens to the taking position without first removing the lens cap. Unlike the Leica of the late 1940s, the Ducati lens is mounted by a high precision, quick release bayonet similar to that on the later Leica M3, with its release button set at the 9:00 position on the front panel. Because the lens is so small, there's no way to grip it to rotate the bayonet except by means of the focusing lever. To load film, the bottom plate and back cover come off as a unit, similarly to the Zeiss Contax, with a single latch centrally located on the baseplate.

The shutter design, while a horizontal cloth curtain focal plane type, is almost the exact opposite of the Leica shutter in concept. Where the Leica shutter travels at a fixed velocity, varying exposure times by adjusting the width of the traveling slit between the two curtains, the Ducati shutter's opening is fixed at about 20mm. To obtain speeds higher than 1/20 second, the velocity of travel is increased by increasing spring tension via rotation of the shutter speed dial to a higher speed

setting. At the higher speeds, the spring tension can be quite distinctly felt at the shutter dial. One result of this arrangement is a shutter which runs very quietly at the slower speeds but has quite a snap (and places quite a strain on the curtains and ribbons) at the top end; another is that the shutter has no way of capping itself during rewinding, as it consists of a single curtain with an opening in it, a la Graflex, rather than two curtains which can be independently controlled. Ducati's solution to this dilemma seems odd at first glance, but the designers found a way to turn it into a positive advantage: a pair of metal 'barn door' panels are mounted just in front of the shutter curtain and coupled to the shutter release button. As the button is pressed, the doors slowly swing forward - when they are fully open and the release button has travelled to the end of its stroke, the shutter curtain is released to make the exposure. The doors close again as the finger is removed from the button, so that they cover the film as the shutter is rewound. The special feature that the Ducati designers derived from this arrangement is that the doors cannot open if the lens is in its collapsed position, owing to the obstruction of the retracted lens barrel - therefore the shutter release is blocked and it is impossible to make an accidental exposure with the lens retracted. This feature, taken in conjunction with the unusual lens cap design, also prevents accidental release of the shutter with the lens cap on the lens, another fairly common problem with rangefinder cameras.

The fixed-aperture shutter design, with the opening as large as the entire negative, eliminated the distortion of fast moving subjects typical with conventional focal plane shutters, and it would have been able to provide electronic flash synchronization at all shutter speeds, had this been an option at the time the camera was made. Unfortunately it wasn't, and the Sogno, like the Leica and Contax cameras of its time, was not equipped with flash synch.

The quality of construction and design in the Ducati appears comparable to the products of Leitz and Zeiss, and this, along with the camera's attractive design and rarity, has given it a great appeal among collectors of Leica copies as well as subminiature and half-frame cameras. With street values increasing perhaps 500% over the past ten years, if you find one of these at a garage sale I'd probably go ahead and get it.