

A hands-on review of the
Epson R1800
UltraChrome Hi-Gloss photo printer



by

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Introduction: a larger version of the R800

In February 2004 Epson introduced a new desktop printer: the Epson R800. I immediately purchased this printer and reviewed it. (My review is available here. Since the R800 and the R1800 share many common features it is important you read my R800 review since I will not be repeating what I said in it here).

Just about a year later, in April 2005, Epson released a larger version of this printer: the R1800. In many ways the two printers are similar. However, there are some significant differences which justify writing a separate review. To make this review more interesting to read, and more useful to you in helping you decide which printer to buy, I have structured it as a question-answer session, using questions I have been asked over email or during my recent workshops.

What is the main advantage of the R1800 over the R800?

The main difference, and the most important reason to purchase the R1800 versus the R800 (or upgrade from the R800), is the maximum print width. While the R800 can print 8.5" wide maximum the R1800 can print 13" wide making it very attractive if you want to make prints such as 12x18 or larger. In fact the R1800 has the same maximum width as the Epson 2200. The R1800 can also print up to 44" long.

This makes choosing between the R1800 and the 2200 difficult. Let's look at the differences between these two printers right away.

Which printer should I get, the R1800 or the 2200?

Tough choice, but not a bad one to have ;) Your choice should be made on the basis of the type of prints you make.

I see three main print categories (for the purpose of this printer comparison) and below are the winners (in my opinion) for each category:

Black and white prints on matte paper: moderate advantage to the 2200

Choose the 2200 if you plan to print black and white prints on matte paper. Why? Because the 2200 has a light black ink in addition to the matte and photo black. The R1800 has only the matte and photo blacks.

I have also heard that the lack of a light black ink makes creating totally neutral black and white prints more challenging. This is a claim difficult to prove since I personally cannot get a truly neutral black and white print from the Epson Printer Driver no matter which printer I use (and I have used nearly all Epson fine art printers...). So, while there may be some truth to this statement it is necessary to print from a RIP from both the R1800 and the 2200 to make a reliable comparison. Since, to my knowledge, no RIP currently supports the R1800 this comparison will have to wait.

Color prints on matte paper: it's a tie

In my estimate printing color prints on matte papers on the R1800 and 2200 results in a tie. There are, as can be expected, differences in the prints but these differences are of an

aesthetic nature more than of a technical nature. The difference is due to the different ink sets used and to the profiles unique to each printers.

Color prints on glossy paper: huge advantage to the R1800

If your goal is to print color prints on glossy paper, such as one of my favorites, the stunning Epson Premium Glossy Photo Paper, the R1800 is unmatched. Why? Because it features a Gloss Enhancer cartridge which is used to lay a transparent glossy coating over the whole print. This coating makes metamerism virtually invisible and gives a much glossier finish to the print. The R1800, and the R800, create the highest quality glossy color prints of all Epson printers, including the 4000, 7600 and 9600 which all exhibit metamerism with glossy papers.

Price is an important consideration for me, what do you suggest?

The difference in price between the R1800 and the 2200 is \$150 approximately. With the R1800 priced at \$549 and the 2000 at \$699 (direct from Epson) this makes the 2200 27% more expensive than the R1800.

So what do I suggest? Well, if price is the determining factor, and if you are not ready to pay 27% more for just better black and white print quality on matte papers, then by all means get the R1800. You will still get very acceptable black and white matte print quality and everything else being equal you will also get stunning glossy prints while saving money. It doesn't get any better than that right now.



Will the 2200 disappear and the R1800 replace it?

Not in the immediate future. At this time it appears that Epson wants to maintain two different lines of 13" wide desktop printers: the R1800 and the 2200. Epson does not seem to want to replace the 2200 with the R1800. From a historical perspective the 2200 evolved from the 2000, which was the first Ultrachrome 13" printer. The R1800 on the other hand evolved out of the 1270-1280 lineage which used a dye based ink set.

Which prints will last longer? Those from the R1800 or those from the 2200?

It's a tie. They are both quite similar in terms of archivability. The 2200 had the advantage over the 1270/1280 in terms of archival quality. Prints from the 2200 last for 75 to 200 years (depending on which paper is used) before noticeable fading occurs while prints from the 1270/1280 only have a 10-15 year life span. This is because the 2200 uses the pigment-based Ultrachrome ink set while the 127/1280 used a dye-based ink set.

The R1800 uses a variant of the 2200 Ultrachrome ink set. The R1800 ink set has an archivability comparable to that of the 2200 ink set, thereby making the issue of print permanence between these two printers a tie.

What is the exact difference between the R1800 ink set and the 2200 ink set?

The R1800 uses the UltraChrome Hi-Gloss ink set, a variant of the original Ultrachrome ink set which features Red and Blue inks instead of light Magenta and Light Cyan. The 2200 uses Light Magenta and Light Cyan instead of Red and Blue. All other ink colors are the same in both printers. The use of Red and Blue ink is said to give the R1800 a larger color gamut. While I tend to agree it is hard to say for sure since the Gloss Enhancer also gives the impression of a larger color gamut when comparing glossy prints from the R1800 to glossy prints from other Epson Ultrachrome printers. The fact is that between the Gloss Enhancer and the Red and Blue inks the R1800 does provide a larger gamut with glossy color prints in my opinion.

Will Epson offer a "Pro" version of the R1800 such as the 4000, 7600 or 9600?

While I have no way of knowing for sure (I am not privy to Epson's confidences...) my educated guess is yes, most likely. Who doesn't want to print 44" wide glossy color prints with no metamerism? Certainly not me! In fact, I can't wait to do so! Not only will very large Gloss Enhanced prints look stunning, but the use of 220ml cartridges will drop the cost of printing, when compared to the printing costs of the R1800, to just slightly above those of the 9600/7600 and 4000. There will be an increase in cost however due to the use of an extra ink cart: the gloss enhancer. Currently, printing 12x18 prints on the R1800, using the minuscule ink cartridges that Epson provides for this printer (the same size carts as for the R800...) is very costly. Clearly, given the quality of glossy prints on the R1800, and the appeal this quality has among photographers, there is no way Epson cannot consider offering a larger version of the R1800 either as a 4000 printer type or as a 7600/9600 printer type as some point in the future.

When will such a printer be released?

No idea at all but it could be within a year. The 9600 has been out since Mid 2002 (I got one of the very first units and received it in June 2002), which means nearly 3 years as of now (April 2005). I say we are just about due for a replacement. As usual, watch out for price drop and special offers direct from Epson as indications that new models are coming.

I like to print color prints on glossy paper and black and white prints on matte paper.

What should I do?

If your goal is to get the highest quality prints on both types of paper then you need to get two different printers, such as the R1800 and the 2200. If you print on one type of paper

more than on the other then get the printer that does the best job for this type of print (see above).

Personally, I use the 4000 and 9600 for black and white prints on matte paper and the R1800 for Glossy color prints on glossy paper up to 12x18. For Glossy prints larger than 13" wide I use the 4000 or 9600. Unfortunately glossy prints from the 4000/9600 do not look as good as on the R1800 (they have metamerism and are not as glossy).

As an aside, when printing black and white photographs on matte papers I use Quadtone Rip from Roy Harrington. I can't get a truly neutral black and white print at all (in my experience) when printing from the Epson Driver. The print quality delivered by Quadtone Rip is stunning and at about \$50 it is hard to beat the cost of this black and white printing engine.



Are there other advantages to the R1800 over the R800?

Yes.

1- Easier roll paper feeding

Epson has added numerous features to the R1800 to make paper loading a lot easier than on the R800. For one, if you use roll paper, you now can feed out the paper through two grooves in the front paper tray. This prevents roll paper from curling up and potentially going back into the roll of paper, thereby creating a paper jam, or scratching the print on the printer.

As a side note, using roll paper on a desktop printer is not necessarily a good idea unless you plan to dry mount your prints. Rolled paper does suffer from curling and the smaller the width and core size of a roll the more significant this curl is. On the 9600, with 3" cores and 44" wide rolls, curl is minimized and with certain papers dry mounting is not necessary. On the R1800, the combination of a small core and small roll width make curling a huge problem. If you do not plan to dry mount your prints I recommend you print long images on large sheets of paper that you cut down to 13" wide so they can feed into your printer. Otherwise you might end up with a beautiful print that you cannot look at because it keeps wanting to curl back onto itself...

2- Easier matte paper feeding

A rubberized matte paper support handle/grip is provided with the R1800. This handle is designed to make feeding matte paper easier.

3- Three section rear paper guide

The rear paper guide is now taller than on the R800, thereby providing the necessary support for 12x18 sheets.

3-Better placement of control buttons

The on/off and other control buttons are now located to the right front side of the printer instead of on top and in the middle. This is a huge improvement since it was very easy to hit one of the buttons on the R800 accidentally while lifting the printer lid, replacing ink cartridges, or even loading or unloading paper. This happened to me several times in fact.

4- Easier CD tray feeding

The R1800 allows you to print directly onto inkjet-printable CD's (no, it doesn't play CD's, that's for the next generation of Epson printers ;-) a feature that is nice to have if you want to print your own CD's. The R800 offered this feature as well but used the front paper tray to both load CD's and unload prints coming out of the printer. For CD's you simply pushed this tray up. This occasionally caused problems if you forgot to lower the tray while trying to make a print...

The R1800 has solved this issue by offering a separate front tray which is used only to print CD's. This tray is held up by the printer cover and a second tray is used for prints coming out of the printer. When you want to print a CD you lift the printer cover and the CD tray is lowered into printing position. A separate CD loading carrier is then used to feed CD's into the printer.

How good are the “canned profiles” for the R1800?

They are not bad at all. In fact, with Epson printers released in the last year or so, “canned profiles” (read profiles provided by Epson) have become better and better. Add to this that most paper manufacturers now make profiles for their printers available for free, and you will find that the need for custom profiling is now no longer necessary when you first get your printer. Of course, as your requirements for print quality increase, you will find out that there is no substitute for a custom profile made for your printer only. This is because each printer is unique and therefore to get the most out of it custom profiles are necessary. But, as I said, Epson has worked very hard to provide us with profiles which in my estimate are delivering a very acceptable print quality right out of the box.

Conclusion

If you have questions not answered in this essay, or if you want to add your own opinion of this printer, feel free to email me at alain@beautiful-landscape.com

And, if you want to see first hand what a print from the R1800 looks like visit my current print of the Month page at <http://beautiful-landscape.com/Print-of-the-month-25.html>
My April 2005 Print of the Month is printed on the R1800.

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