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# FEARSOME .50

BY JOSEPH VON BENEDIKT





## THE DESERT EAGLE .50 ACTION EXPRESS IS THE MOST POW- ERFUL SEMIAUTO AROUND. AND NOW IT'S BIGGER.

**B**eing rather a practical sort, my reaction to the big .50 AE Desert Eagle semiauto handgun has always been "Why?" It's too heavy to carry comfortably, it's too big to even pretend to conceal it, and it's much too powerful for the average shooter to fire comfortably. Shooting one rapid-fire is impossible, no matter what Hollywood portrays. Not to mention the fact that .50 AE ammo is expensive—if you can find it.

While that's all true, it's also the most powerful semiauto handgun in the world, at least that I'm aware of. It's got the good looks of a military Humvee: big, rawboned and very capable. It has the distinction of being almost a legitimate bear stopper—and I mean charge stopper, not just killer. So when offered the chance to review the reintroduced version with a 10-inch barrel, curiosity got the best of me, and I jumped at the chance.

The Desert Eagle is foundationally different than most semiauto pistols—in myriad ways. It's gas operated rather than recoil operated. It has a rotating bolt that locks into the breech of the barrel when it goes into battery. The barrel itself is of fixed design, and it's a complex, machined arrangement with an optic rail on top and gas port and piston housing below.

Here's a closer look at each of these unique characteristics. Unlike most semiauto pistols, which harness recoil to function the slide, the Desert Eagle bleeds off a small amount of gas through a port at the bottom of the barrel and harnesses it to drive the action.

The port is 5.95 inches in front of the breech of the fixed 10-inch barrel and is housed in what I'm going to term an integral gas block. A piston protrudes from the front of the slide assembly, fitting inside that integral gas block when the handgun is in battery. When the pistol is fired, gas bleeds from the barrel after the bullet passes the gas port, acting against the front of the piston and pushing it rearward, causing the →

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← slide to retract and the bolt to rotate out of battery.

A hefty, 1.65-inch wide extractor draws the empty cartridge case from the chamber, and a spring-loaded plunger-type ejector heaves it clear. Dual mainsprings on twin guide rods return the slide forward from the rear of its stroke—the bolt picking up and chambering a fresh round, the locking lugs rotating into battery as the breech closes.

Rotating bolts with proper locking lugs are used in a few semiauto pistol designs, so the concept is not particularly unusual. What it does for the Desert Eagle is enable the handgun to handle the pressures of

the mammoth-dropping .50 AE cartridge safely because it's a stronger design than that of the more common tilting-barrel lockup.

The bolt face is rather complex, but in essence it is a three-lug design. A spring-loaded plunger locks the bolt in place when out of battery to prevent it from rotating out of alignment with the lug recesses in the barrel breech. When the slide closes, the rear of the barrel pushes the plunger back into the slide face, allowing the bolt to rotate into battery.

Fixed barrels have always been touted to have, arguably, advantages in the accuracy department.

Without delving too deeply into the debate, I'll just point out that the Desert Eagle does have a fixed barrel, meaning that the barrel attaches to the frame of the handgun rather than floating in the slide.

How? The barrel's integral gas block dovetails around the front end of the slide, and a rotating lever located in the frame just above the front of the trigger guard locks the rear of the barrel solidly into place in a mortise inside the frame. Proponents of fixed barrels, which are also used on the well-known Beretta M9 currently issued to many of our troops, argue that the lack of barrel movement logically leads to greater accuracy.

A marvel of complex CNC machining, the barrel sports a 1913-type optic rail with nine cross slots and a little more than 4.5 inches of mounting surface; a dovetailed front sight drift adjustable for windage; and of course the gas block/gas port and the intricate machining of the locking lug recess and feed ramp at the breech. It's a rather impressive bit of engineering and manufacturing.

Ergonomically, Desert Eagle pistols take some getting used to. For one, the grip is larger than is comfortable for most folks. Hey, if you want to shoot the world's most powerful semiautomatic handgun,

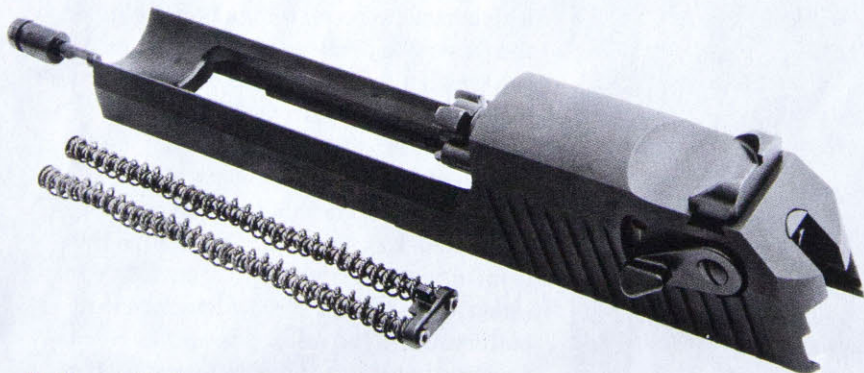
### ACCURACY RESULTS | DESERT EAGLE MARK XIX

.50 Action Express	Bullet Weight (gr.)	Muzzle Velocity (fps)	Standard Deviation	Avg. Group (in.)
Hornady XTP JHP	300	1,626	19	1.66

Notes: Accuracy is the average of four, five-shot groups fired from a sandbag benchrest. Velocity is the average of five rounds measured 10 feet from the muzzle with a Shooting Chrony chronograph. Abbreviation: JHP, jacketed hollowpoint



**A** Desert Eagles use a rotating bolt with three locking lugs that engage directly into the barrel breech. A big extractor and plunger ejector ensure reliable feeding.



**A** Desert Eagles employ an impressive recoil spring arrangement. Dual guide rods are each fitted with two springs, adding up to four in all.

### MAGNUM RESEARCH INC. DESERT EAGLE MARK XIX

**TYPE:** single-action semiauto

**CALIBER:** .50 Action Express

**CAPACITY:** 7+1

**BARREL:** 10 in.; polygonal rifling with RH 1:19 twist

**OAL/HEIGHT/WIDTH:** 14.7/1.8/6.2

**WEIGHT:** 4 lb., 12 oz.

**CONSTRUCTION:** machined steel

**SIGHTS:** fixed, drift-adjustable for windage

**TRIGGER PULL:** 4 lb., 6 oz. (as tested)

**GRIPS:** rubber w/MRI eagle emblem

**FINISH:** black oxide

**SAFETIES:** thumb, internal firing pin block

**PRICE:** \$1,683

**MANUFACTURER:** Magnum Research Inc.,

MAGNUMRESEARCH.COM, 508-635-4273

suck it up and accept that fact that it takes a big grip to house a magazine for big cartridges.

Also, the safety is a big, heavy, rotating lever affair that I find difficult to activate or deactivate when shooting one-handed. Of course, Desert Eagles just aren't one-handed kind of guns, and the safety is easy to function with the support-hand

## **Where the Desert Eagle excels is delivering accurate, tremendously powerful, effective fire downrange.**

thumb. It has the added advantage of blocking the firing pin, making it a very strong, reliable safety. It's ambidextrous, too.

Technical data from Magnum Research, which makes this particular Desert Eagle, tout the pistol as having comfortable grip dimensions that "...permit rapid, accurate, instinctive shooting."

Accurate I'll accept, but the other two attributes are stretching it pretty thin. In my experience, never have I fired a semiauto more difficult to achieve either rapid fire or instinctive shooting with than the Desert Eagle.

That is not its cup of tea, and I think Magnum Research's description does the pistol a disservice. Where the Desert Eagle excels is delivering accurate, tremendously powerful, effective fire downrange. Semiauto pistols that permit rapid fire and instinctive shooting are a dime a dozen; those that deliver like a runaway freight train are not.

The magazine functions in typical fashion, with a release button just behind the trigger guard on the left side, though the magazine's sheer size takes some getting used to.

The slide lock lever drops a locked-back slide on a magazine →

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← full of fresh cartridges rather comfortably, but it takes considerable hand strength to accomplish the reverse and lock it open. Four stout mainsprings on dual guide rods must be compressed a full 2.9 inches before the slide lock lever engages. That's a lot of travel for a semiauto pistol slide.

A generous grip beavertail extends well rearward, offering some protection from the massive recoil and the crosscut saw-like effect the recoiling slide would have on the web of your hand if caught.

Trigger weight on my test gun is four pounds, 11 ounces, with about nine ounces of variation over a

series of five cycles tested with my Lyman digital trigger pull gauge. Spongy but smooth, it's actually a pretty usable trigger. Of single-action design, it has neither a decocker nor double-strike capability.

Both front and rear sights are fixed, dovetailed parts that may be drift-adjusted for windage but have no elevation adjustment. While certainly the most durable setup for a heavy-recoiling handgun, I'd like an elevation-adjustable rear sight—especially on the longer, 10-inch version—to enable me to regulate point of impact and refine downrange precision.

Mounting an optic, on the other hand, is a cinch thanks to the machined, integral rail atop the barrel. Just be sure it's an optic that can take the substantial recoil of the .50 AE cartridge.

I mounted an old, much-loved Leupold Vari-X 2.5-8 EER handgun scope on the 10-inch Desert Eagle for accuracy testing, gathered up several boxes of Hornady .50 AE with a 300-grain XTP/JP bullet (the only ammo type I had available) and headed to the range.

Rated at 1,475 fps velocity and 1,449 ft.-lbs. of energy from a six-inch barrel, the ammo produced an



▲ Though slightly spongy in feel, the Desert Eagle's trigger was smooth and broke at four pounds, 12 ounces. A rotating takedown lever locks the fixed barrel in place.

## THE .50 ACTION EXPRESS

Born in 1988, the .50 AE is, as far as I'm aware, the most powerful factory cartridge chambered in a production semiautomatic handgun. Boosting a 300-grain bullet out of the muzzle at close to 1,500 fps, it generates 1,500 ft.-lbs. or more of energy. It recoils with authority and is obnoxiously loud, but it has panache and genuine capability to back up its braggadocio.

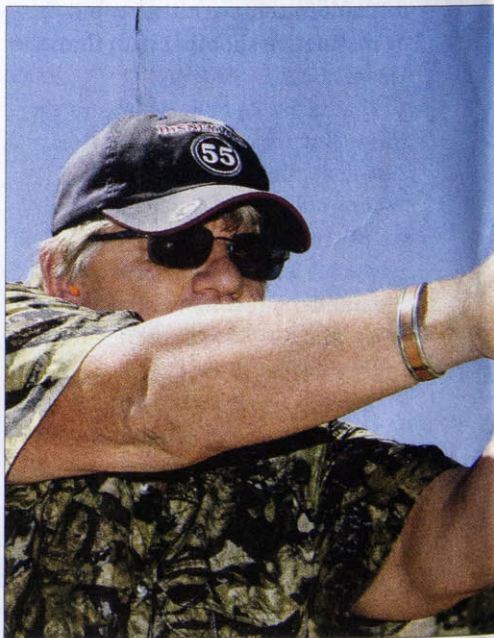
Ammunition is currently most available from Hornady. Appropriate reloading dies can be purchased through RCBS, Lee and Hornady, and Starline makes .50 AE brass.

Of rebated rim design, the .50 AE's case head measures the same as that of the .44 Magnum. The case is tapered, courtesy of an early-life argument with the BATFE, and at just over 1.25 inches is not particularly long. It doesn't have to be: Capacity increases exponentially with diameter, and cavernous .50 AE cases contain plenty of propellant.

Of limited practical use except by fanatical big game hunters with a thing for autoloading pistols, most .50 AE owners find fulfillment in lobbing monstrous projectiles downrange with bowling-ball effect. Don't count on the thunderous report to ensure privacy at the range, though. Muzzle blast may thin the timid among the shoulder-to-shoulder ranks at the local range, but the allure of a monster semiauto pistol will have most range goers admiring your hand cannon and panting for a chance to shoot it.—JVB



No shrinking violet, the .50 AE is the biggest dog on the semiauto porch—so big it broke the chain on the author's steel gong at 145 yards.



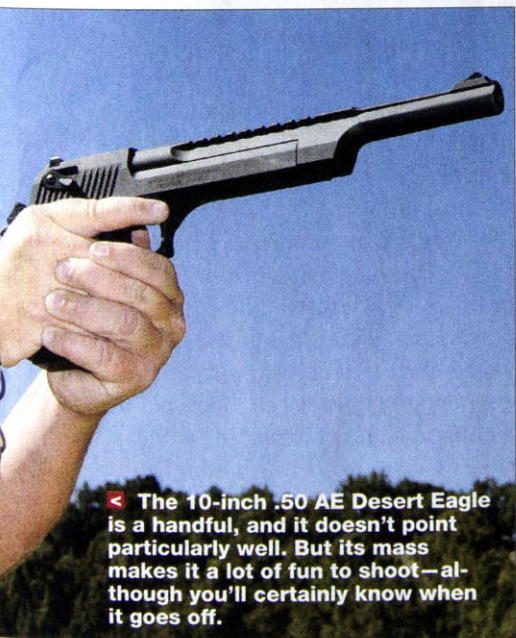
average 1,626 fps from the 10-inch barrel, which gives a calculated 1,761 ft.-lbs. of energy—impressive figures from a semiauto handgun.

Though the six-inch Desert Eagle has always been the iconic badass of its breed, the 10-inch barrel clearly offers some advantages. Aside from the improved ballistic numbers indicated above, the added weight dampens recoil, and the much-increased sight radius enhances iron-sight accuracy. Were I to choose one for big game hunting, I'd opt for the longer barrel.

Shooting characteristics are like the Desert Eagle's ergonomics; they take some getting used to. Recoil is substantial; weight is enough to make unsupported shooting challenging; and muzzle blast is enough to plaster even bushy eyebrows to your forehead. Oh, but it's fun. Loads and loads of fun.

Balance of a six-inch Desert Eagle isn't bad. I can't really say that about the 10-inch version. It doesn't point particularly naturally, and it doesn't feel like an extension of oneself. But boy does it ever settle nice and steady in a supported field position, making it lethal out past where the six-inch gun begins to fade.

After my accuracy testing →



**<** The 10-inch .50 AE Desert Eagle is a handful, and it doesn't point particularly well. But its mass makes it a lot of fun to shoot—although you'll certainly know when it goes off.

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← was complete, I put up a 10-inch Caldwell Magnum Rifle Gong and stretched the 10-inch .50 AE's legs. Shooting from the hood of my Chevy shooting bench at 145 yards, I hit the gong several times in a row, to my amazement breaking the chains it swung on and tearing the gong from its stand with the last shot. I've shot that gong with a .300 Wby. Mag., and it survived just fine.

## The Desert Eagle pistol may not be versatile, but it's got world-class authority.

With the gong out of the game, I fired three careful shots at an unscarred target face. The resulting 145-yard group measured less than three inches.

Throughout my shooting the pistol never hiccupped—though to be fair 100 rounds of only one type of ammo is hardly a down-and-dirty reliability test.

Carrying the 10-inch Desert Eagle around is challenging. It's too big to stick in a holster on your belt; it would pop the most loyal of suspender buttons. It won't fit in most handgun cases, and it has to be disassembled even to fit in the case it comes in. Though I didn't have one on hand, a big, generous shoulder holster for scoped, long-barreled hunting revolvers would likely be the best option.

A creative anomaly in a gun genre that doesn't typically encourage outliers, the Desert Eagle pistol may not be versatile, but it's got world-class authority. It may not be comfortable to carry or shoot, but it would be mighty comforting when the chips are down and you're facing something toothy with uncivilized intentions.

It's like the classic muscle cars of the '70s; few car nuts own one, but they all admire them. 