

## TESTFIRE



By Tracy Short

*Deer on the move? No problem for a Benelli R1 and Burris Euro Diamond. Photo Ren Apatu.*

# THE BENELLI R1

## with Burris Euro Diamond 3-10x40

**A FEW YEARS BACK I WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO TRY** THE VERY FIRST BENELLI ARGO (AUTO-REGULATING-GAS-OPERATED) RIFLE TO HIT THE COUNTRY. IT IMPRESSED EVERYONE WHO LAID EYES ON IT WITH ITS SLEEK LINES AND VERY INNOVATIVE DESIGN AND REPRESENTED SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TO ANYTHING ELSE ON THE MARKET. IT WAS A LITTLE MORE EXPENSIVE THAN MOST OF THE OTHER SEMI-AUTO RIFLE OPTIONS BUT HAD SO MANY INNOVATIVE FEATURES THAT YOU COULD EASILY JUSTIFY ITS VALUE.

The rifle was very comfortable to shoot and was in 30-06 chambering; I must say I have a lot of respect for this cartridge, the 30-06 is never wrong. It became apparent that there was only one slight problem with the first rifles; they did not shoot as well as people hoped they would. This problem was addressed by Benelli and I ended up shooting one of the new ones and was most impressed with its accuracy among other things.

Now, a few years down the track, I have been sent the latest version of the Benelli Argo from New Zealand Agents Beretta New Zealand, also in 30-06. This new rifle is referred to as the Benelli R1 semi-automatic rifle and is distinctly different to the previous rifles I have seen. My Testfire rifle was the synthetic version with three interchangeable combs of different heights and a ComforTech stock with a good grip coating (GripTight) designed to reduce



*Beretta New Zealand stock the R1 in wood/blue.*

*Not available in New Zealand at this stage, the R1 in camo is popular in the States. For some reason camouflage rifles have never really taken off over here; perhaps that will change in time.*

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recoil. It also comes with three (optional) recoil pads, 13 3/8", 14" and 14 1/8" and a five shim drop change kit-a rifle to fit everybody.

Up top was a Burris Euro Diamond scope which has a lot of cool features that I will discuss later in the Testfire. It was mounted in Burris Signature rings with plastic inserts and a one piece steel base.

## The rifle

This is the most innovative semi-auto rifle to hit the market for some time with the most adjustments for fit of any sporting rifle I can think of. It does not have military parents as most other semi-auto rifles do and is basically the same system as the Benelli M4 Super 90 shotgun albeit with a detachable magazine. There are many target rifles with sophisticated adjustable stocks but it is quite uncommon on a hunting rifle. For a person who is serious about

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accurate off hand shooting, precise fit and extremely low recoil with plenty of firepower then this is the rifle for you.

Benelli have tried hard to keep this rifle light by using synthetic polymers and aluminium for non-critical parts; the lower part of the action which contains the trigger and magazine is high grade aluminium with steel for the bolt and top of the action for example. The whole package tipped my scales at 4.12 kgs. There are possibly a few weight conscious Kiwis out there who may feel this package is slightly too heavy, however I feel the benefits to shootability of a heavier rifle justify the inconvenience of lugging it around.

I have a personal preference for bolt action rifles for various reasons however I can see the benefits of a rifle like the R1 for a lot of hunting applications. Number one reason for buying a semi-

auto is the availability of very quick follow up shots so this is a rifle that I would be very comfortable taking into the bush during the roar or for hunting sambar in the tight stuff. Most of my hunting is glassing open country and shooting from a prone position hence my preference for an accurate bolt action with a stock design more suitable for shooting off my day pack. The R1 is less suited for this type of shooting because of its narrow fore-end and stock design, but it still shot very well off my shooting rest. If you do shoot at moving targets and shoot mainly off hand then you would struggle to find a rifle more suitable for the job, it is a bush hunter's special with longer shots well within its range.

The rifle also comes equipped with very impressive open sights. I tend not to use open sighted rifles these days but in certain

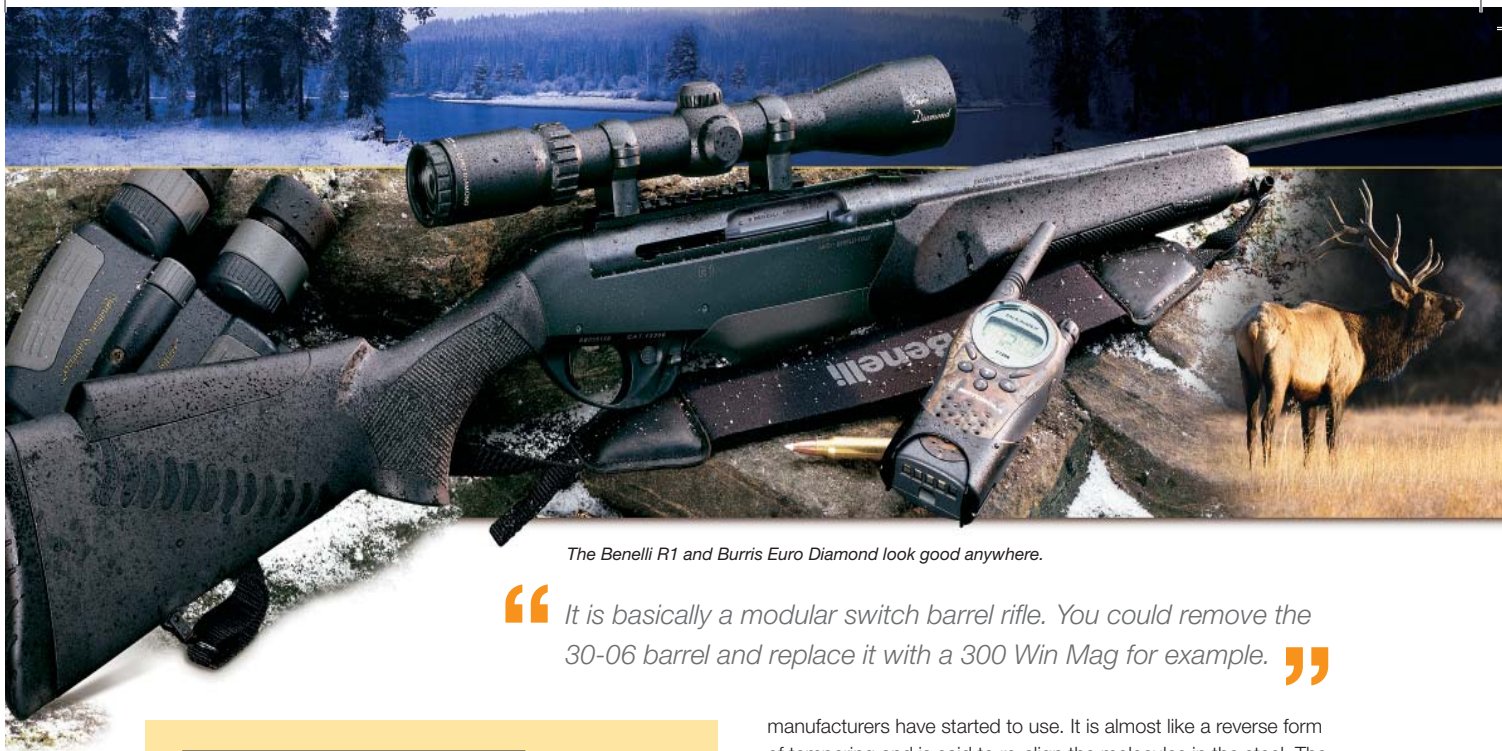
situations such as very heavy rain in thick bush I would be very comfortable using this rifle with its open sights. It points very much like a shotgun and I could just see myself in amongst

a mob of goats with this baby, especially with the larger magazine that is available, but note that the 10 shot magazine that is available as an optional extra makes the R1 an MSSA which requires an E category licence endorsement. The one that came with my R1 held four shots and you can put one in the chamber as well.

The action is gas operated and has a big three lug rotating bolt head that locks up in the action; the rifle will not fire unless the bolt is properly home. It is chrome plated and has a plunger ejector and a claw extractor. The gas operating system is very clever and works well with low recoil and reasonably fast function. Benelli have put the gas port ahead of the chamber for less fouling and the two gas pistons are self cleaning and fit up against the bolt so there are no action bars or linkages. I have fired a lot of shots out of this rifle and the earlier Argo's



Tracy on an earlier sambar hunt. The R1 would be ideal for stalking deer in heavy cover with its ability to deliver quick follow up shots according to the author.



The Benelli R1 and Burris Euro Diamond look good anywhere.

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Five shots with 168 grain handloaded Berger VLD's-23mm. Top stuff from this Italian semi-auto I reckon.

and have never had a miss-fire or a jam up. I have used a lot of reloads also which are more likely to cause malfunction in a semi-auto and the R1 came out with utter reliability. It's a good rifle.

The detachable magazine clipped in and out, fed sweetly and is well made. It looks expensive, but I was pleasantly surprised at the price when I supplied one of my customers who wanted a spare one. The magazine also allows you to seat the projectile out as far as you like if you reload. I loaded some 168 grain Bergers and seated them long. The rifle shot these extremely well proving to me that this rifle has high capability.

Another cool thing is the way it all strips down. It is basically a modular switch barrel rifle. You could remove the 30-06 barrel and replace it with a 300 Win Mag for example. I haven't discussed the price and availability of replacement barrels but it is certainly an option, anyone can change the barrel in two minutes with this rifle. You would require another bolt head to go to a magnum calibre which is also a simple swap over. As a bonus, you can take the barrel off to clean it properly from the breach end which is a much more effective and easier way to clean a barrel effectively which is impossible with most other semi-auto sporting rifles. Stripping and reassembling the R1 has no effect on your scope settings and the manual gives very clear instructions that make the job easy. Anyone who has stripped down a Benelli shotgun will have no problem getting their head around the R1.

The 20 inch barrel through the borescope looked smooth and free of imperfections. I assume it is produced by Sako being from the same stable so to speak. It also had the flawless appearance that I see when inspecting Sako and Tikka barrels. The barrel is Crio treated which is a deep freezing process that some barrel

manufacturers have started to use. It is almost like a reverse form of tempering and is said to re-align the molecules in the steel. The benefits are said to be longer barrel life, easier cleaning and better barrel harmonics for accuracy. There are people who swear by the process and others who believe it to be a myth. I am sitting on the fence at the moment, but will say that Crio treating the R1 barrel won't be any sort of disadvantage I believe.

The trigger is pretty typical of a semi-auto rifle or shotgun. It is no match trigger but breaks cleanly at a reasonable weight. Looking at it I am sure a gunsmith could do a lot with it however the implications to safety could be serious being a semi-auto. I would suggest that with practice and familiarity very accurate shooting could be achieved with the trigger in its out of the box state. I had no problem shooting it very accurately off a rest. Offhand might be a little harder to achieve but practice makes perfect.

The safety is a shotgun style button by the trigger. It is quick and easy to activate and I would have no problem recommending its use and reliability. It worked fine for me and I am confident that Benelli have got it right.

#### On the range

The Benelli is just the softest rifle to shoot. If you don't like recoil and want to shoot a larger calibre then this could be the answer for you. The trigger as stated is crisp but typical of a semi-auto trigger, but did not hamper the accuracy I achieved. The fore-end is very narrow and didn't sit all that well in the front rest making the rifle slightly less stable than I would like, but despite these things I was very impressed with the groups I got. The best being with handloaded 168gn Berger VLD's which measured under 1" with most shots in a ragged hole. I did almost no load development with the rifle so was pleased to see out of the box accuracy like this.

#### The Scope

The Burris 3-10 Euro Diamond with a 30mm tube and Ballistic Plex reticule is a very well designed scope packed with features giving it all round versatility as a hunting scope. For someone wanting a scope with relatively good long range capability and a big wide field of view plus a low power range suitable for close up bush hunting this scope will appeal. With the Euro Diamond you get easy target acquisition up close, especially on a moving target. The optics are great to look through and it has a very non critical eye relief which I think is an important feature for optics on a hunting rifle, especially a semi-auto. I would have thought that a lower powered scope with a big field of view would have been better to put on this rifle but the Burris was great on low power and gave the rifle a lot greater long range capability. A good multi-

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“ This is the most innovative semi-auto rifle to hit the market for some time with the most adjustments for fit of any sporting rifle I can think of. ”

purpose scope. The Ballistic Plex reticule is a great idea for more reasons than long range shooting. It also makes sighting in a much easier job and has range finding applications. I personally would find it hard to buy a scope these days without some form of multi-use reticule like the Ballistic Plex, Mil-Dot or similar with their built in bars for shooting at different ranges. Another feature that I like very much about the Burris which is something I have only seen on a couple of other brands is that there is no fiddly power ring to increase or decrease magnification, you simply turn the whole

ocular lens or rear of the scope. You can manage this much more quickly and easily than a power ring. You can also do it more easily when wearing gloves or in the dark. The only disadvantage I can think of with this system is more with bolt actions if you use flip up caps that may be put in a position that interferes with the bolt. I am not big on flip up caps anyway, they tend to slap me around the eyes or nose on rifles that recoil to any degree. The Burris came with a nice and quickly removable fleece stretch over cover. It also came with a lot of information stickers relating to different calibres and bullet weights that could be stuck on the rifle or scope for quick ballistic information. All in all this scope has all the features of a good all round hunting scope and comes standard with a lot of extras that would cost more with other brands.

### Specifications

<b>Stock:</b>	ComforTech
<b>Magazine Capacity:</b>	4+1 (30-06)
<b>Weight:</b>	7.2 LBs (without scope)
<b>Overall Length:</b>	44 inches
<b>Action:</b>	Drilled and tapped with base
<b>Length of Pull:</b>	14"
<b>Drop at Heel:</b>	1 3/4"
<b>Drop at Comb:</b>	1 1/4"
<b>Price:</b>	\$3250 (rifle only)

*Beretta New Zealand report that they are stocking The ComforTech and Wood/Blued models in .300Win Mag, .300WSM, .270WSM with a 24 inch barrel and 30-06 and .308 with a 20 inch barrel. The Wood/Blued model is available in .308 and 30-06 with a 22 inch barrel.*

### Conclusion

Last words on the rifle? I like it. If I was to add a semi-auto to my guns this would be my choice. It's more expensive than some other sporting semis but when you look at the features it is pretty good value in my opinion. And it is a purpose built sporter, not a military derivation. The only negative that I can say is that it is a little on the heavy side. Normally I can find a lot that I don't like about semi-auto sporting rifles but not with this one. The scope also performed very well and is suited to the rifle. Recommended for all bush stalkers who want the security of backup shots and who don't want to be worried about the long shots either. 