

THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING DIGITAL PHOTO MAGAZINE

11-17 NOVEMBER ISSUE 477

Photography week



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FOUR WIDE-ANGLE LENSES
THAT ARE PERFECT FOR
ASTROPHOTOGRAPHY

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WHAT'S HOT

THE WEEK'S TOP HEADLINES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

LEE FILTERS ANNOUNCES THE CIRCULAR BIG STOPPER

New LEE Elements range features round versions of five popular filters



The newly announced LEE Elements Big Stopper, left, and circular polarising filter.

LEE Filters has unveiled new versions of five of its most popular filters, with one crucial difference: they're circular, not square. The new range is called LEE Elements, and comprises a circular polariser, two variable NDs, the 6-stop Little Stopper ND, and of course, the iconic Big Stopper ND, which provides 10 stops of light reduction and is hugely popular with landscape photographers.

The main difference between square and circular filters is how they attach. Square filters require a holder to be placed in front of the lens, while circular ones can be screwed directly onto the lens. The new LEE Elements filters will come in four sizes: 67mm, 72mm, 77mm

and 82mm, which will cover a good number of lenses.

The filters incorporate multilayer-coated optics for high-level optical performance, with minimal vignetting. They're constructed with a black anodised aluminium frame, and are made to be easy to attach and detach from lenses, even when the user is wearing gloves, with a knurled finish providing an all-weather grip.

The stackable housings on the filters mean they can also be combined. So if you have both a Big and Little Stopper, you can place them on top of each other for 16 stops of light reduction. Or, you can fine-tune the level of light reduction by using one or both of the variable ND

filters, which provide 2-5 or 6-9 stops of light reduction.

The variable and polarising filters have silent operation thanks to their fluid rotation mechanics, meaning they're useful for video too. LEE has included scratch-resistant and anti-reflective coatings on all the filters, and has also added the hydrophobic (water-repellent) and oleophobic (oil-repellent) coatings from its Panavision cine filters. They come with their own hard case for additional protection.

The Big Stopper and Little Stopper are priced from £216, the circular polarizer will cost from £162, and the variable polarisers will cost from £270. US pricing is to be confirmed.

MANY GENRES IN ONE

Shot on assignment for Cruise America, this image shows the blend of portrait and landscape photography typically required for lifestyle work



All images © Jordan Banks

LIFESTYLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Professional photographer Jordan Banks takes us through the process of capturing unique lifestyle images, and keeping clients happy

Lifestyle photography is a term we hear bandied around a lot in today's marketplace, but what exactly is lifestyle photography? Lifestyle is a genre of photography that simply aims to capture real-life situations in an artistic manner, producing the perfect representation of a scene in a natural way, reflecting everyday emotions

whilst also including elements of the surrounding environment that contribute to the story. Traditionally, lifestyle photography is thought of as a style of relaxed and natural portrait photography but, for me, the perfect lifestyle photographer would generally be required to combine various disciplines of photography, including classic portraiture,

photojournalism and landscape/cityscape photography.

Over the coming pages, I'll take you through my process of producing original, unique and powerful lifestyle imagery – from the prep work to the shoot and, finally, the delivery and presentation of your work – to produce lifestyle images that will blow your clients away.



FEATURE

PLANNING YOUR SHOOT

Before you pick up your camera, some advance planning and a storyboard will help both you and your client understand the brief

Prior to undertaking any shoot, I like to have a meeting with my clients to brainstorm, and produce a brief and a creative direction that we all agree on. To produce the type of images my client requires, I need to be sure that I fully understand their requirements.

You hear horror stories from clients and photographers, and most of the time it's due to a lack of communication between the parties. Once you have

a clear and precise brief, produce a storyboard for the shoot. For me, it's one of the most important processes in the planning stages, as it guarantees that I've understood what the client wants – they see my storyboard prior to signing off on the shoot. A storyboard also acts as a constant source of direction and creative inspiration throughout the commission.

Finding the right locations for your shoot is imperative to its success. You'll be looking to evoke a certain feeling or

emotion, and the setting plays a huge part in this. Not only do you need to make sure the location is correct, but also the time of day when you're shooting, so that you can capture the correct ambient lighting in line with the brief and storyboard.

A client will usually have a style or message they're trying to get across. Remember that you're shooting for someone else, and it's not all about what you like, so try and put yourself in their shoes during the creative process.

MANAGE CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

Managing expectations is a trick I've learnt to incorporate into my workflow. In such an image-rich world, clients are often, understandably, unaware of what level of images can feasibly be achieved in a particular timeframe. The tendency is to think that it's just a case of clicking a button, and that almost every shot from a pro should be perfect – as we all know, this isn't the case. A simple conversation to explain the process, and what's actually involved in creating their vision, usually goes a long way in managing expectations.

STONE-COLD SUCCESS

The brief here was to capture moody and wintry conditions in Yellowstone National Park



FEATURE

PLANNING YOUR SHOOT CONTINUED



Above
RUNNING SMOOTHLY
Getting the right styling, in keeping with the brand you're shooting for but without overdoing it, is one of the toughest aspects of any lifestyle shoot

WORK WITH A CREW
You don't always need a big crew, or even a crew at all, but when you do, my advice is to make sure you spend some time doing your research to find the best people for the job. Everyone will have their own requirements, but I always look for people with experience, a good work ethic and, above all, someone I'm confident I'll get along with. We're going to be working long hours together in close quarters, so it's important that we gel.

Left
ROCK SOLID
At one of our first meetings, images of Antelope Canyon were put forward as a suggestion for this particular shoot



F E A T U R E

CHOOSE YOUR GEAR

There's no right or wrong setup for shooting lifestyle photography, but a few fundamental items can help you to capture better results

In terms of the kit you use for shooting lifestyle, it's a matter of what works best for you. Personally, I carry two Nikon Z 7s, with a range of lenses covering everything from 14mm to 200mm.

In general, one camera body will be fitted with a wider-angle lens around the 24-35mm region, and the other with a 70-200mm lens. This allows me to quickly switch my focal lengths depending on the scene.

The main source of lighting for most lifestyle shoots is natural light, but there will be occasions when you need to incorporate a lighting rig into your setup. I carry two Elinchrom BRX 500s with large and strip softboxes to fill light, a range of adaptors to focus the light, and a beauty dish for any portraits that may be required. I also carry a tripod to make sure I have the perfect frame, and that my composition doesn't change even slightly.

USEFUL LIFESTYLE ACCESSORIES

Diffuse, spread and shape natural and artificial light

BEAUTY DISH

The light created when using a beauty dish is somewhere between direct flash and a softbox, producing a look that can add drama to portraits.



REFLECTOR SET

A portable reflector can add that little bit of fill light to shadowed areas, particularly useful on bright days when harsh shadows can cast across the face of subjects.



LARGE SOFTBOX

Modifiers, such as an on-flash softbox, diffuse the light from your light source. The Elinchrom Rotalux Deep Octabox is a popular choice, and can be used inside or outside.



COLOURED GELS

Adding coloured gels to your choice of artificial lighting can help to modify the feel and tone of the shot. Lee, Rosco, Bowens, Profoto Rogue and Elinchrom all offer pro gel options.



SHOOT A WIDER VIEW Use 24-35mm for a different perspective

Shooting with a wide-angle lens allows you to capture first-person perspectives, and become part of the action. This is a really useful method of image-making that gives the viewer the impression that they're involved in the scene. Be sure not to go so wide that things begin to warp, and instead look at the 24-35mm focal length to keep within the natural ranges of the human eye.



STAND BACK AND ZOOM IN

Take a back seat and let your long lens do the reaching

Stand back, zoom in and let the scene play out. Shooting at the 135-200mm range allows you to stand back and record the action as it happens. When the camera isn't right up in your subject's face, they tend to relax a little, which can provide you with an opportunity to capture some more natural-looking images. Longer focal lengths are also great for compressing the scene, and giving a more intimate or energetic feel to the frame.



F E A T U R E

CHOOSE YOUR GEAR CONTINUED

MY KITBAG

SELECTION OF LENSES

It's a good idea to have at least two lens options, so that you can cover a range of focal lengths and scenarios. As a minimum, go for a wide-angle and standard zoom.

COMPACT DRONE

What will set your work apart from others is being able to offer a different perspective to the client. A drone enables you to shoot lifestyle scenes from above.

SELECTION OF FILTERS

As an ambassador for LEE filters, I carry a range of options with me. The LEE85 system is ideal for smaller mirrorless camera bodies.

BACKUP CAMERA

Although unlikely, you never know when your camera might fail. At this point, a spare camera becomes invaluable for rescuing a shoot and delivering the goods.

MAIN CAMERA

Pro camera choices are very subjective, but flagship mirrorless models are becoming increasingly common for lifestyle, and they save space in your gear bag too.



FEATURE

POST-PRODUCTION

Finish your images with a natural yet powerful edit

UNDER-EDIT AND OVER DELIVER

The main point with editing is to not get carried away and over-edit your images. Lifestyle photography is all about portraying real life in an authentic way, so over-saturated or contrasty images just don't work, as they're not believable.

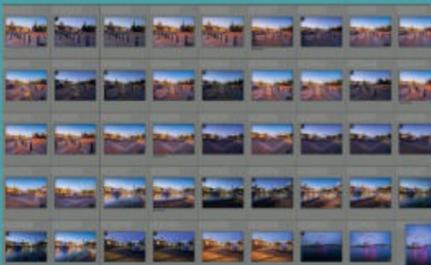
When you've been hired as a professional, presenting your work in a highly professional manner is important. For a portrait session, I'll put together a slideshow and image combinations that can be viewed in my studio. For commercial clients, I'll also produce a slideshow accompanied with my hero shots, or even mock options for editorial, billboards and marketing in general. This doesn't necessarily mean that your images will be used in this way, but it shows that you've gone the extra mile to fulfil your client's requirements.



LIFESTYLE CHANGES The intro to a slideshow presentation for Credit Suisse

USE THE BEST SOFTWARE FOR EVERY EDITING STAGE

Set up a workflow to get the very best from your images, using Adobe Lightroom, Photoshop and Luminar



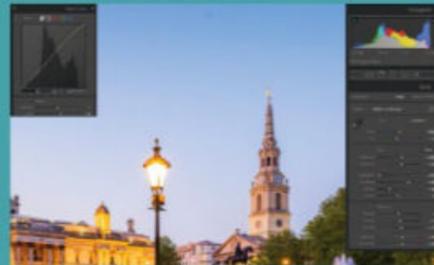
1 LIGHTROOM CULL

The first step in the post-production process is to cull and rate images prior to any editing. There are specific apps designed just for image culling, but I prefer to use Lightroom, as I'm then able to tag and organise images into catalogues for locations, subjects or even time of day.



2 LIGHTROOM EDITING

I exclusively use Adobe Lightroom to process my raw files. Capture 1 and Adobe Camera Raw are options too, so find the program that works best for you. I find Lightroom to be a more enjoyable and smooth editing experience, as I can have all my images in one place alongside quick and efficient tools.



3 PHOTOSHOP CLEAN-UP

I export the raws to Adobe Photoshop as high-res TIFF files for a final clean up and dust removal. I also tweak the vibrance and tones, as the colour channels change slightly between software and file format. Once I'm happy with the image, I'll export a high-res TIFF and low-res JPEG to give my client a couple of options.



4 LUMINAR 4 TOOLS

Some clients want a specific look that isn't possible to achieve on location, such as more texture in the sky or more punch, and in these instances I turn to Luminar 4 for quick and effective sky replacements. The sliders control the blend and light over the entire scene, so the new sky and foreground match up perfectly.

G A L L E R Y

XPOSURE

THE WEEK'S MOST INSPIRING READER PHOTOS



A SMIDGEN OF RED

AMANDA COLLINS EADE

"This is Azizi, a young male lesser hedgehog tenrec. He was 12 months old when I took this image. I wasn't entirely sure that he would make it through the winter, but he is very sweet, curious, and sociable, and is accustomed to being handled and photographed. I photographed him indoors, as he lives in a heated vivarium. The image was shot purposely in low-key."

<https://bit.ly/3GFb2Eh>

GALLERY

THE WEEK'S MOST INSPIRING READER PHOTOS



BEEN SO LONG

LUIS SOTO

“This was taken at Buchupureo on the coast of central Chile. This great rock formation is called Iglesia de Piedra (Stone Church), and it’s constantly hit by the incredible force of the Pacific Ocean.”

<https://bit.ly/2YFpsmG>

GALLERY

THE WEEK'S MOST INSPIRING READER PHOTOS



ABOVE ETIVE

CHRIS DAVIS

"I shot this image at sunset, overlooking Glen Etive in the Scottish Highlands."

<https://bit.ly/3Am6231>

GALLERY

THE WEEK'S MOST INSPIRING READER PHOTOS



LAKE TURN

JOHN

"This is an aerial shot of a speedboat on Laurel Lake in south-central Kentucky."

<https://bit.ly/3Ajy0wl>



FACEBOOK

<http://bit.ly/39py9lg>



FLICKR

<http://bit.ly/2VIgsJ0>

PHOTOGRAPHY WEEK WANTS YOUR PHOTOS!

Taken a portrait you're particularly proud of? Shot a sensational sunset you'd like to show off? Then join the *Photography Week* Facebook community and share your best photos today! You'll get feedback from fellow readers and the *Photography Week* team, plus the chance to appear in *Xposure*, or even on our cover!

I N S P I R A T I O N

IT'S COOL, THAT

THE BEST THING WE'VE SEEN THIS WEEK



Morning at Countryside by Mara Leite, Overall Winner



Enchanted Winter by Michael Allberry, Commended, Classic View



The Sentinals by David Lyon, Highly Commended, Your View



Glenfinnan Viaduct by Malcolm Blenkey, Winner, Lines in the Landscape

Images © The photographer and courtesy Landscape Photographer of the Year

TUNNEL VISION IS THE BEST LANDSCAPE IMAGE OF 2021

Sunlit treescape wins contest celebrating UK's countryside, heritage and urban life

The winners of the 2021 Landscape Photographer of the Year contest have been announced, with Mara Leite taking the top prize for her image of a footpath running through a tunnel of trees.

"Mill Lane is a famous footpath in Halnaker, West Sussex," says Mara. "I was looking for a different composition when I decided to turn the other way and saw this beautiful sight."

Landscape Photographer of the Year is

now in its 14th year, and is one of the UK's most prestigious photography competitions. The contest aims to celebrate the richly diverse landscape of the UK.

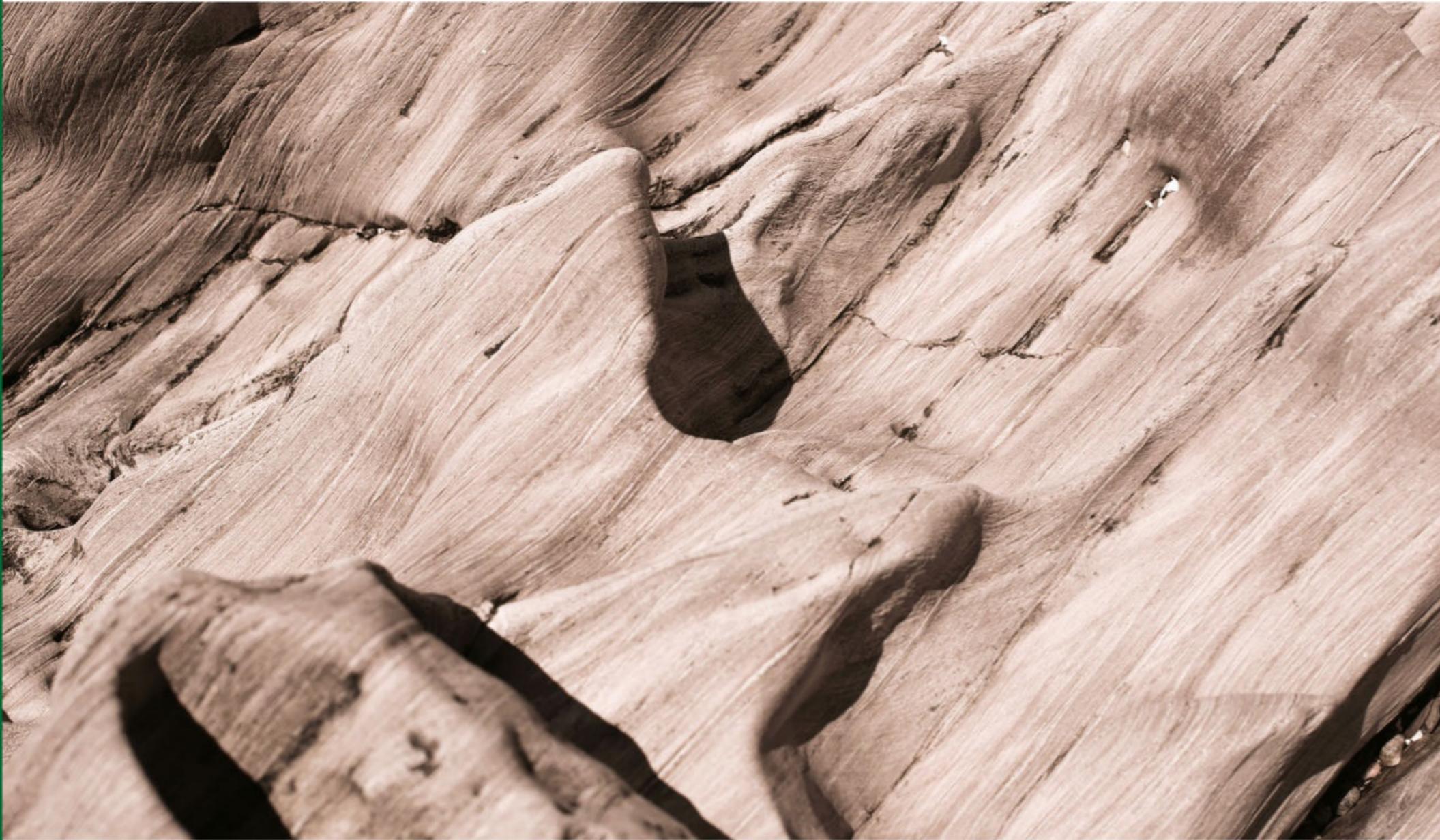
Click the link to see more winning and commended photos at the LPOTY website. Images from the contest will feature in an exhibition which runs from November 15 to January 9 at London Bridge railway station before going on tour, and in the Landscape Photographer of the Year Collection 14 book.



S K I L L S

CRASH COURSE

ESSENTIAL PHOTO SKILLS MADE EASY



MOVE AWAY FROM AUTO

Jason Parnell-Brookes shows you how to leave the safety net of auto behind, and get creative with Aperture Priority mode

1
HOUR

In this Crash Course we're going to show you how to move out of the comfort zone of your camera's fully auto shooting mode and experiment with the semi-automatic Aperture Priority mode. This mode is great for shooting static subjects, like our rock formations, but if there are none to hand then look for anything stationary, such as trees, some urban architecture, or perhaps a statue. We chose to shoot rock formations because they give you the opportunity to capture

some wonderfully abstract shapes and colours, so they're a great place to start your photographic journey while you learn more about your camera.

Aperture Priority mode allows you to take control, and get creative, while still having a safety net. In this mode you get to decide what aperture value (the size of the opening in your lens) and ISO sensitivity you want, and the camera automatically selects an appropriate shutter speed to give a well-balanced exposure.

Typically this will work as follows:

widening your aperture to $f/2.8$ or $f/3.5$ will let more light into the camera, so the camera will increase the shutter speed to counteract this flood of light. Conversely, narrowing your aperture to $f/8$ or $f/16$ will let less light pass through into the camera, so the camera will set a longer shutter speed to ensure a good exposure. There's more to it than that, though, as the aperture value also affects the depth of field, or which parts of the scene are in sharp focus and which are blurred, further expanding your creative options.



S K I L L S

STEP BY STEP TAKE CONTROL WITH APERTURE PRIORITY



1

SPIN THE DIAL

Set your mode dial to Aperture Priority, denoted by an A. You can now set the aperture using the relevant control – as you do so the camera will adjust the shutter speed as required to deliver a correctly exposed shot.

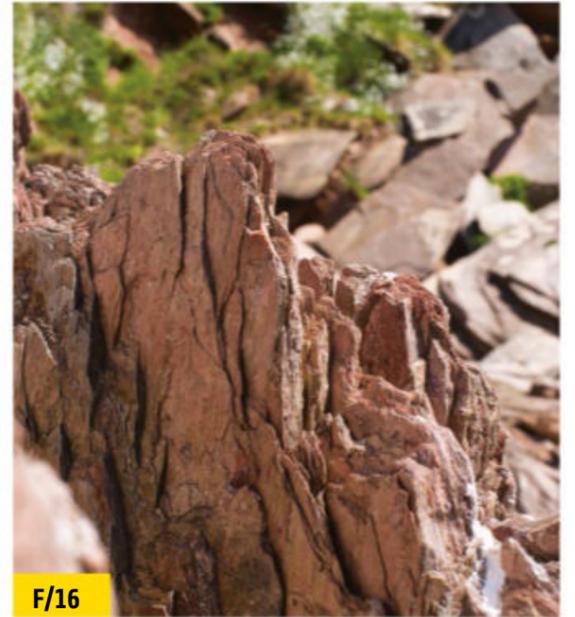
2

DEPTH OF FIELD

Aperture directly affects depth of field. If you want just a small slice of your frame to be in focus (a shallow depth of field), choose a wide aperture like f/2.8; if you want to have as much as possible of your scene in focus (a long depth of field), choose a narrow aperture like f/16.



F/2.8



F/16



CLUTTER



NO CLUTTER

3

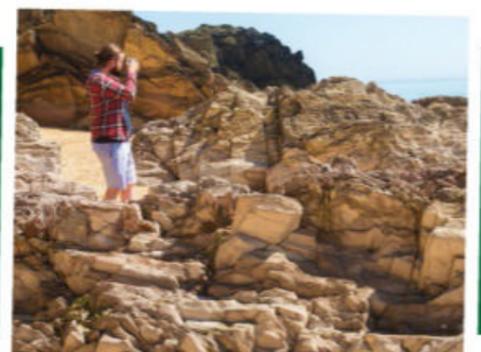
FIND THE RIGHT POSITION

Now find the right position from which to take your shot. If there are extraneous and unsightly objects in the frame, try and reposition yourself so that they're obscured or excluded from the frame – an easy solution is to put the subject between you and the offending object.

THE SCALE OF DISTANCE

If measuring the minimum focusing distance with your hand (see step 5) doesn't do the trick, set manual focus and twist the focus ring on the lens until it reaches the minimum

focusing distance. On some lenses you can see this by looking at the distance scale, which will tell you in feet and metres how far in front of your lens the camera is focused.



S K I L L S

STEP BY STEP TAKE CONTROL WITH APERTURE PRIORITY



4

FILLING THE FRAME

By excluding unwanted objects from the frame you're creatively refining your photo; now take this one step further, and get really close to your subject to fill the frame. Here we got in close and focused on the rock until nothing else was visible through the viewfinder.

5

MINIMUM FOCUSING DISTANCE

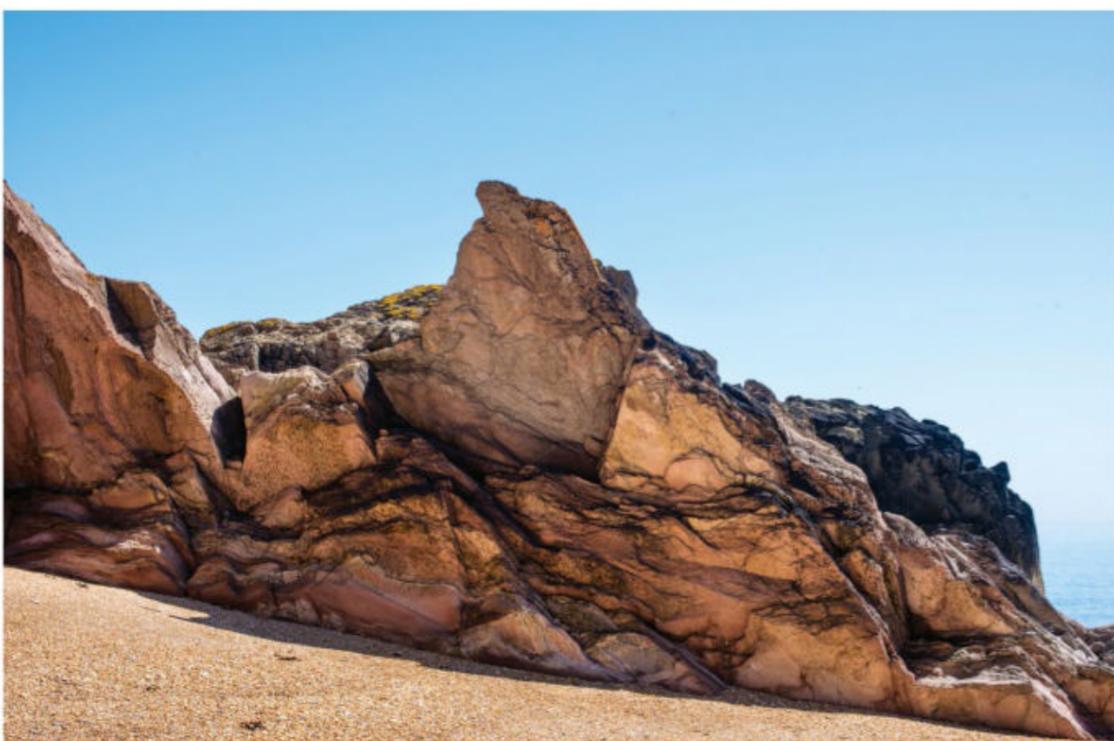
All lenses have a minimum focusing distance. This is the shortest distance at which a lens can focus; that is to say, if a subject is closer to the lens than this distance, the lens won't be able to focus on it. On our 50mm lens that was about 45cm, which we checked by placing our hand in front and seeing how close we could focus until the lens became unable to focus.



6

APERTURE CHOICE

Our final settings were f/8 and ISO100, and because it was a bright day the camera set a shutter speed of 1/500 sec. We chose f/8 because the scene was undulating, and we wanted a reasonably broad depth of field to keep it sharp from front to back.



QUICK TIP

As it was a sunny day we were able to shoot at ISO100; in less favourable lighting you may need to up your ISO to obtain a fast enough shutter speed at your chosen aperture

E D I T I N G

PHOTOSHOP

LEARN ESSENTIAL EDITING SKILLS FAST!



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<https://bit.ly/3EwS1D4>



DOWNLOAD THE
PROJECT FILES
<https://bit.ly/3w1de4h>

ON A PC OR MAC



HOW TO...

MASTER SHADOWS AND HIGHLIGHTS

This powerful tool has more to it than meets the eye, and it's ideal for landscapes

Photoshop's Shadows/Highlights command has long been one of the most useful tonal tools on offer in the software. Initially, the tool offers two simple sliders: one lets you lift the shadows, while the other darkens the highlights. However, as you'll discover in this video tutorial, hidden away are a wealth of

other options that give you a fine degree of control over the balance of tones in your scene.

Shadows/Highlights really comes into its own with landscapes. Like our Icelandic seascape here, a typical landscape photo will be dominated by very bright and very dark tones, as skies tend to be lighter than the land

below. This makes it tricky to achieve a balanced exposure, as the contrast between the two areas is so great.

Thankfully, there's often far more detail hidden in the highlights and shadows than meets the eye. The trick is in knowing how to tease it out, and the Shadows/Highlights command is one of the best tools for this job...



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G E A R

GROUP TEST



TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

Turn your gaze heavenwards with these wide-angle primes, ideal for capturing the night sky

Ultra-wide-angle prime lenses are enormously versatile. They're great for everything from shoehorning architectural interiors into the frame when your back's against the wall, to shooting cityscapes and sweeping landscape vistas. Venture out on a star-studded night, meanwhile, and you can take in the majestic panoply of the heavens above. On a full-frame camera, a focal length of around 14-20mm is ideal.

You'll need a lens with real pulling power when it comes sucking in light, so it pays to go for a fast aperture of around f/1.8 to f/2. This avoids sending your camera's ISO setting into the stratosphere,

as you keep exposures short enough to stop stars and other celestial bodies in their tracks, so they don't appear to be trailing across the sky.

It's not just the speed of the lens that's important: for effective astrophotography you'll want good sharpness across the whole image frame. Unwanted aberrations that occur when using a fast lens at its widest aperture can be a spoiler. These include vignetting, 'coma', which gives pinpoints of light a comet-like tail, and 'astigmatism', which creates lines from dots of light. Some lenses are prone to a combination of coma and astigmatism, often referred to as 'batwing coma'.

Another potential problem is spherical aberration, which can cause points of light to take on a halo effect.

All of these can be reduced by narrowing the aperture by an f/stop from its widest setting, although then you're not taking advantage of the lens's speed. With that in mind, we've rounded up four of the best prime lenses for astrophotography, to suit a wide range of full-frame cameras. Mount options include Canon EF, Canon RF, Leica L (used by the latest Panasonic and Sigma mirrorless cameras), Nikon F, Nikon Z, Sigma SA and Sony FE. Let's see which offers the most stellar performance.



Laowa 15mm f/2 Zero-D

Wide and fast, the diminutive Laowa delivers a generous viewing angle for stargazing, with 'zero-distortion' credentials

Price: £899/\$849

Compact and lightweight for an ultra-wide-angle lens, the little Laowa is nevertheless sturdily built, and matches the others on test in being full-frame compatible. It's available in a wide range of mirrorless mount options including Canon RF, Leica L, Nikon Z and Sony FE – the variety in production is made easier by the Laowa being a fully manual lens with no electronics.

As with any fully manual lens (fixed-aperture lenses aside), you need to adjust the aperture via an onboard control ring instead of from the camera, as well as focusing manually, and no lens-related EXIF data is stored in image files; hands-on adjustments are no particular problem for astrophotography, where you'll typically shoot wide-open and focus manually anyway. Focusing is made easy by the smoothly operating control ring, which comes complete with a distance scale and depth of field marking. A plus point for video capture is that the lens features a 'declick' switch for stepless aperture control.

The viewing angle of 110 degrees is second only to the Sigma lens in this group. And despite its short focal length, the Laowa features a bayonet-fit, petal-shaped lens hood that enables the inclusion of a modestly sized 72mm filter attachment thread. By contrast, the Sigma 14mm has a fixed, integral hood and therefore no filter thread. The optical path is based on 12 elements, which include two aspherical elements and three ED (Extra-low Dispersion) elements.

Vignetting isn't overly severe when you're shooting wide-open at f/2, but batwing coma towards the corners of the image frame is more pronounced than with any of the other lenses on test. As usual, the irregular shape given to pinpricks of light in this region is greatly reduced when stopping down a little. However, with only five diaphragm blades, the aperture isn't particularly well-rounded when stopping down. Sharpness away from the centre of the frame also leaves a little to be desired, throughout the aperture range.

SWITCH TO MANUAL
As a manual lens, the Laowa has the usual trappings that work in your favour when taking a shot in the dark.

DOF MARKERS

Although it's not a particular benefit for astrophotography, there are depth of field markers for apertures of f/5.6, f/11 and f/22, which is helpful for zone focusing.

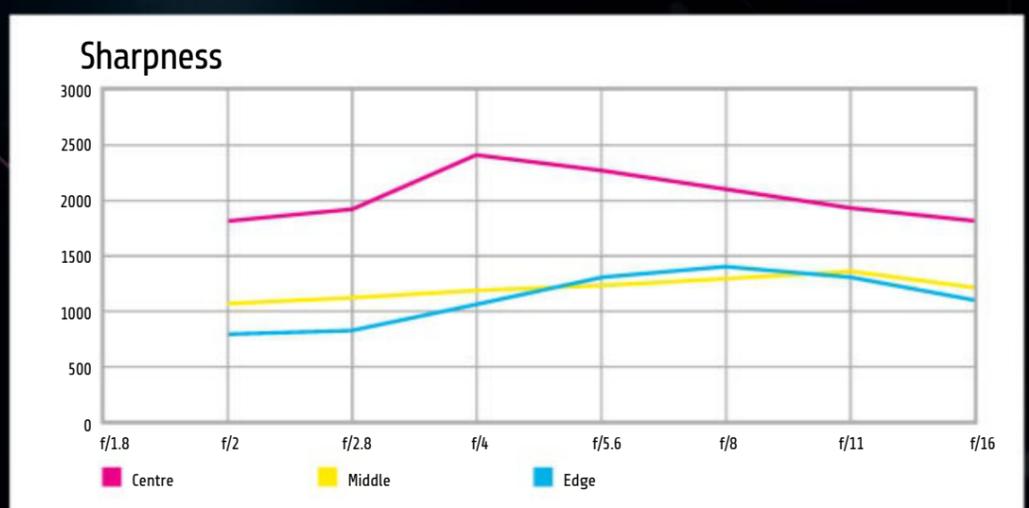


FOCUS RING

The tactile, mechanically coupled focus ring has a smooth and fluid feel, enabling high-precision adjustments.

APERTURE RING

The aperture ring has click steps for full f/stops, rather than the more usual third or half stops, but there's also a declick switch, which is useful for shooting video.



Nikon Z 20mm f/1.8 S

The most wide-angle of Nikon's current Z-series primes, the 20mm retains the f/1.8 aperture rating featured by most of its siblings

Price: £999/\$1,047

With a focal length of 20mm, the Nikon doesn't have such an extravagant viewing angle as the Laowa and Sigma lenses on test but, at 94 degrees on a full-frame body, it can still cover a vast portion of the night sky. Add in the fast f/1.8 aperture rating, and the lens has excellent astrophotography credentials. On a 'DX' (APS-C) format mirrorless body, such as the Nikon Z 50 or Z fc, the effective viewing angle is naturally more restrictive, equating to 70 degrees.

We've been universally impressed by the quality and performance of Nikon's S-line, Z-mount lenses, and the 20mm not only follows suit but also comes up trumps. Typical of the breed, it has a tough yet lightweight build that features a comprehensive set of weather seals. The design looks pretty basic, with a single control ring and auto/manual focus switch, but looks can be deceiving.

The electronically coupled focus ring allows for exquisitely fine and precise adjustments, and can also be assigned to other functions when the lens is in autofocus mode, like control over ISO, stepless aperture adjustment and exposure compensation. Back in autofocus mode, focusing is speedy, unerringly accurate and virtually silent, driven by a stepping motor of the high-performance lead-screw variety.

The minimum focus distance is impressively short, at 20cm from the focal plane, the Nikon only being beaten in this respect by the Laowa lens on test, which focuses down to just 15cm. This enables extreme close-up shooting, giving you the freedom to get creative with exaggerated perspective effects. It's not particularly useful for astrophotography, but nevertheless, it's nice to have.

Optical finery includes three aspherical elements and three ED (Extra-low Dispersion) elements. For outright image quality, the Nikon eclipses all of the other lenses on test. It's like a surgical scalpel in terms of sharpness, resolving the tiniest levels of detail across the entire image frame, right into the extreme corners. Coma and astigmatism are virtually non-existent, even when shooting wide-open, and barrel distortion is even more negligible than in the 'zero distortion' Laowa. It's simply a spectacular lens for astrophotography.

LIGHTWEIGHT BUT ROBUST

Although larger than the Laowa and Tokina lenses, the Nikon has a similarly lightweight build, but is robust and weather-sealed.



WEATHER SEALS

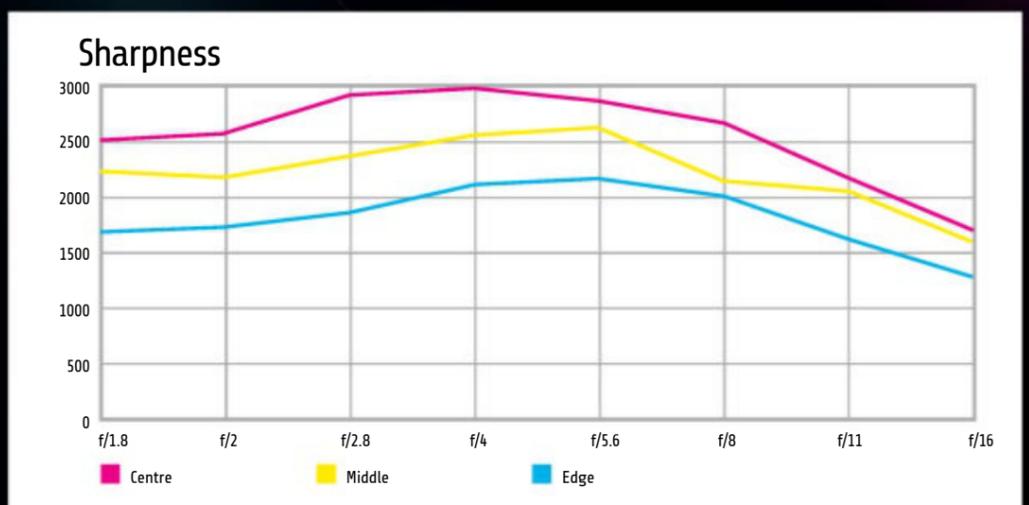
The construction includes extensive weather sealing, both on the metal mounting plate and around all the joints in the barrel.

FOCUS RING

The focus ring allows high-precision manual focus adjustments, and hands-on control of many functions.

SWITCHGEAR

Apart from the multi-function focus ring, the only other onboard control is a switch for auto/manual focusing.



Sigma 14mm f/1.8 DG HSM Art

It's the outright 'widest' lens in the group, and with a fast f/1.8 aperture rating, this Sigma is a prime candidate for shooting the stars

Price: £1,399/\$1,599

Combining a 14mm focal length that delivers a 114-degree viewing angle with a fast f/1.8 aperture is no mean feat. Sigma reaches for the stars with this lens, which, while also being eminently useful for architectural interiors and sweeping landscapes, has 'astrophotography' written all over it.

From Sigma's 'DG' lineup, the lens was primarily designed for DSLRs and is available in Canon EF and Nikon F mount options, as well as Sigma's own SA mount. More recently, it's been repurposed for mirrorless cameras, with Sony FE and Leica L versions coming on stream. As usual, the L-mount edition is also compatible with Panasonic S-series and Sigma fp cameras.

But you can't squeeze a quart into a pint pot, as amply demonstrated by this lens. The wide viewing angle and fast aperture demand hefty, large-diameter elements towards the front of the optical path; indeed, the front element has a large 80mm diameter. No simple piece of glass, it's the embodiment of a highly demanding manufacturing challenge, in the shape of a precision-moulded aspherical glass element, which is bulbous and extends beyond the front of the lens barrel. A knock-on effect (or perhaps the opposite) is that the Sigma is the only lens on test to feature an integral lens hood that gives essential physical protection to the front element. That means there's no filter attachment thread.

Other optical highlights include four aspherical elements in total, four SLD (Special Low Dispersion) elements and three top-performance FLD ('Fluorite' Low Dispersion) elements. Autofocus is driven by a Sigma ring-type HyperSonic Motor system, which is more usually known as 'ultrasonic'. It's typically quick and whisper-quiet, and comes with the usual full-time manual override facility, as well as a focus distance scale beneath a viewing window.

When shooting wide-open, batwing coma towards the corners of the frame is more noticeable than with the Nikon and Tokina lenses, but less pronounced than with the Laowa. Sharpness is impressive across the whole image frame, but the Sigma is still no match for the Nikon. Colour fringing is minimal, but distortion is more perceptible than with any of the other lenses in this group.

A HEAVYWEIGHT CONTENDER

Typical of Sigma's acclaimed 'Art' lenses, there's no compromise in terms of impacting image equality at the expense of cutting the size or weight – it's twice as heavy as other lenses on test.

INTEGRAL HOOD

Unlike the other lenses on test, the Sigma has a fixed, integral hood that gives physical protection to the bulbous front element.

HIGH PRECISION

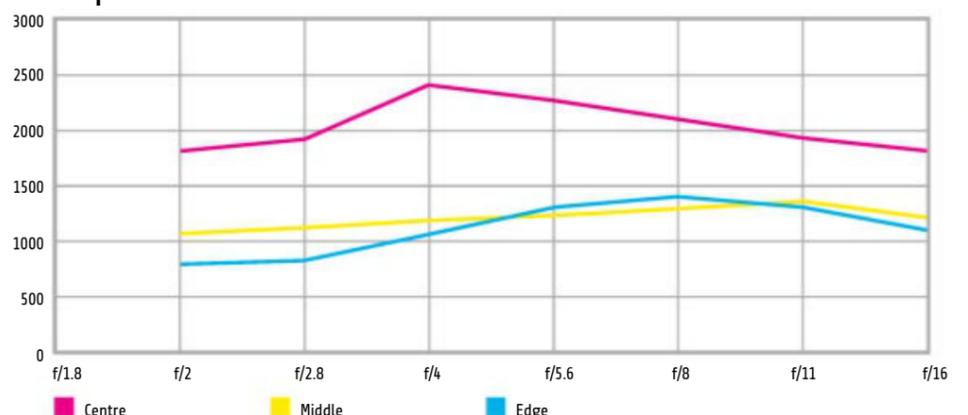
At the front of the optical path is a particularly large precision-moulded aspherical element, with a diameter of 80mm.

FOCUS SCALE

The ring-type ultrasonic autofocus system comes complete with a focus distance scale and depth of field markers.



Sharpness



Tokina Firin 20mm f/2 FE AF

From Tokina's 'Firin' lineup, this is one of three lenses designed exclusively for Sony mirrorless cameras, and the joint widest

Price: £599/\$649

There's currently a trio of Firin lenses in Tokina's glass arsenal – the name harks back to a Gaelic word for 'truth'. There's a 100mm macro optic boasting full 1:1 magnification, and a dynamic duo of ultra-wide 20mm lenses; we've gone for the autofocus model for this group test, with the other being a manual-focus lens. Whereas the latter is fitted with an aperture control ring, focus distance scale and depth of field markers, the autofocus edition has a relatively spartan look and feel. Indeed, there's no focus distance scale, and the only external moving part is the focus ring.

Switching between auto and manual focusing relies on the use of in-camera menu rummaging, but the lens is compatible with Sony's DMF (Direct Manual Focus) mode, which enables manual override during autofocus. Autofocus itself is driven by a ring-type ultrasonic actuator but, compared to that of the Sigma lens, it's relatively pedestrian and more clearly audible.

Making the most of its narrower viewing angle than the 14mm and 15mm lenses on test, along with a modest f/2 aperture rating, the Tokina is the most compact and lightweight lens in the group. It tips the scales at just 464g, and has a relatively small 62mm filter thread, being supplied complete with a bayonet-fit, petal-shaped hood. The build quality doesn't feel as rock-solid as in some of Tokina's more conventional lenses, designed with DSLRs in mind, but there's a high-precision feel to the handling. As with the Laowa lens, the Tokina lacks any weather seals.

High-tech optical components include two glass moulded aspherical elements and three SLD (Special Low Dispersion) elements, the latter designed to reduce chromatic aberrations and enhance clarity. Sharpness is at its peak when shooting wide-open, at least at the centre of the frame, which really hits the spot for astrophotography. In the area between the centre and the edges, the Tokina beats the Sigma lens for sharpness at a directly competing aperture of f/2, but the Tokina's wide-aperture sharpness drops off more than in any other lens on test towards the edges and corners. On the plus side, coma and astigmatism towards the corners of the frame are almost as negligible as in the Nikon lens.

SIMPLE BY DESIGN

With a minimalist design, the Tokina has no external moving parts apart from its focus ring, deferring auto/manual focus selection to in-camera menus.

FOCUS RING

Instead of Tokina's usual 'one-touch clutch' focus ring with a push-pull action for auto/manual focusing, full-time manual override is available in the 'DMF' focusing mode of Sony cameras.

STRAIGHTFORWARD LAYOUT

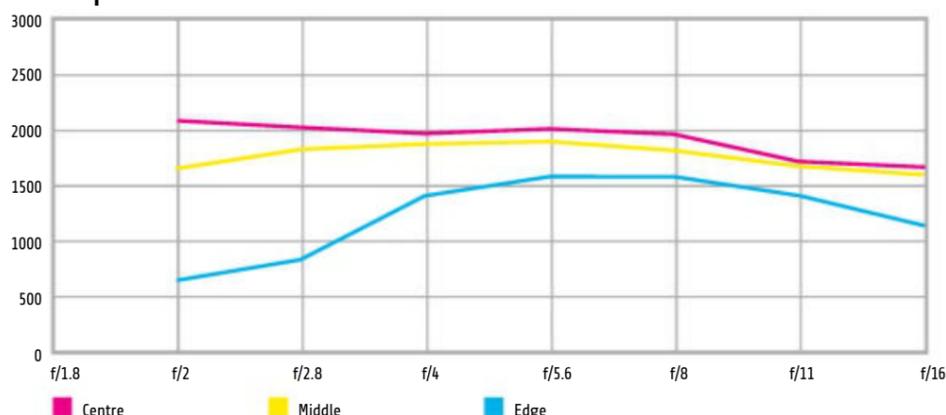
Unlike its manual-focus Firin 20mm counterpart, the autofocus edition has no aperture control ring, nor a focus distance scale.

AUTOFOCUS MOTOR

Despite the lens having a ring-type ultrasonic motor, autofocus isn't particularly fast, and is clearly audible.



Sharpness



G E A R

GROUP TEST WIDE-ANGLE PRIMES



TOKINA
Firin 20mm
f/2 FE AF

PRICE £599/\$649
WEB WWW.TOKINALENS.COM
MOUNT OPTIONS S-FE
ELEMENTS/GROUPS 13/11
MAX MAGNIFICATION FACTOR 0.1X
MIN FOCUS DISTANCE 0.28M
NARROWEST APERTURE F/22
DIAPHRAGM 9 BLADES
AUTOFOCUS ULTRASONIC (RING TYPE)
HOOD BAYONET FIT (SUPPLIED)
FILTER SIZE 62MM
DIMENSIONS 73X82MM
WEIGHT 464G

FEATURES
A highly self-contained lens, the beauty lies in the optical prowess rather than fancy external features.



BUILD QUALITY
It feels a little insubstantial for a Tokina lens, but the lightweight build suits mirrorless cameras.



HANDLING
Handling is basic with no frills, but the focus ring operates with smooth precision.



PERFORMANCE
Centre-sharpness and control over coma and astigmatism are great, corner sharpness is lacking.



VALUE FOR MONEY
The least expensive lens in the group by some margin. The image quality makes it a bargain.



SIGMA
14mm f/1.8
DG HSM Art

PRICE £1,399/\$1,599
WEB WWW.SIGMA-IMAGING-UK.COM
MOUNT OPTIONS C-EF, L-L, N-F, SIG-SA, S-FE
ELEMENTS/GROUPS 16/11
MAX MAGNIFICATION FACTOR 0.1X
MIN FOCUS DISTANCE 0.27M
NARROWEST APERTURE F/16
DIAPHRAGM 9 BLADES
AUTOFOCUS ULTRASONIC (RING TYPE)
HOOD INTEGRAL
FILTER SIZE N/A (INTEGRAL HOOD)
DIMENSIONS 95X126MM
WEIGHT 1,170G

FEATURES
The ultra-wide viewing angle and fast f/1.8 aperture are at the core of its astro-friendly features.



BUILD QUALITY
The build quality is exemplary, from the internals to the sturdy, weather-sealed casing.



HANDLING
Handling is excellent in every respect, although this hefty lens is comparatively bulky and heavy.



PERFORMANCE
There's some batwing coma when shooting wide-open, but it's less pronounced than in the Laowa.



VALUE FOR MONEY
The Sigma is a lot more expensive than the other lenses, but still well worth the money.



NIKON
Z 20mm
f/1.8 S

PRICE £999/\$1,047
WEB WWW.NIKON.CO.UK
MOUNT OPTIONS N-Z
ELEMENTS/GROUPS 14/11
MAX MAGNIFICATION FACTOR 0.19X
MIN FOCUS DISTANCE 0.2M
NARROWEST APERTURE F/16
DIAPHRAGM 9 BLADES
AUTOFOCUS STEPPING MOTOR
HOOD BAYONET FIT (SUPPLIED)
FILTER SIZE 77MM
DIMENSIONS 85X109MM
WEIGHT 505G

FEATURES
There's not much to see from the outside, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.



BUILD QUALITY
Lightweight, yet sturdy, the lens has a strong, weather-sealed construction.



HANDLING
Simple but effective, its handling is excellent and the customisable control ring is a useful bonus.



PERFORMANCE
The Nikon stands head and shoulders above every other lens on test for outright image quality.



VALUE FOR MONEY
It's certainly not cheap, but the image quality and all-round performance make it great value.



LAOWA
15mm f/2
Zero-D

PRICE £899/\$849
WEB WWW.VENUSLENS.NET
MOUNT OPTIONS C-RF, L-L, N-Z, S-FE
ELEMENTS/GROUPS 12/9
MAX MAGNIFICATION FACTOR 0.25X
MIN FOCUS DISTANCE 0.15M
NARROWEST APERTURE F/22
DIAPHRAGM 5 BLADES
AUTOFOCUS MANUAL FOCUS ONLY
HOOD BAYONET FIT (SUPPLIED)
FILTER SIZE 72MM
DIMENSIONS 77X82MM
WEIGHT 500G

FEATURES
It's not a feature-rich lens, entirely lacking in electronics, but the manual elements work well.



BUILD QUALITY
There's a solid feel to the construction of this lens, even though it lacks any weather seals.



HANDLING
The focus and aperture control rings work intuitively, the latter boasting a declck switch.



PERFORMANCE
Astro image quality is good rather than great, impaired by noticeable batwing coma at f/2.



VALUE FOR MONEY
It's pricier than the electronics-laden Tokina, but is still pretty good value for a 15mm prime.



OVERALL

The viewing angle and aperture are modest, but the Tokina delivers for astrophotography.



It loses out to the Nikon lens for astro image quality, but offers a truly extreme viewing angle.



Not for the first time, a lens from Nikon's Z-mount S-line stable is the standout winner.



A compact and lightweight lens for a variety of mirrorless cameras, it's a smart buy.

