



Take the wide view

Want a quality landscape lens? **Matthew Richards** compares eight top wide-angle primes

Like optical shoehorns, wide-angle lenses help you to squeeze more in. When taking great landscape photographs (using the advice in our main feature, page 16) they enable you to include huge, sweeping vistas in the frame, and exaggerate the perspective between the foreground and background for creative effect. They're not just for the great outdoors, either. When you're photographing interiors of buildings and have

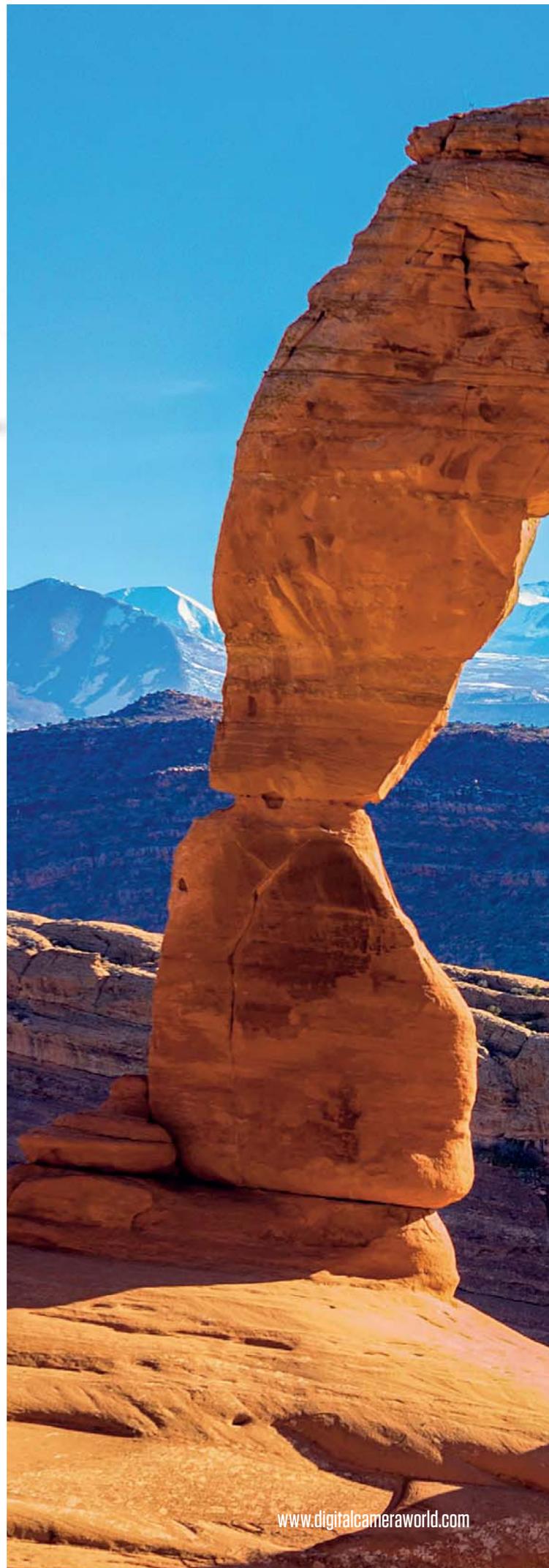
your back against the wall, a wide-angle lens enables you to pack everything in – including, if needed, the kitchen sink.

Apart from specialist fisheye lenses that give a specific creative effect, there are very few wide-angle prime lenses available for DX-format (cropped-sensor) cameras. It's a great shame because, while ultra-wide zoom lenses like the Nikon DX 10-24mm provide versatility in terms of focal length,



The contenders

SAMYANG 14mm f/2.8 IF ED UMC AS	£330/\$330
SAMYANG 20mm f/1.8 ED UMC AS	£460/\$570
IRIX 15mm f/2.4 Blackstone	£600/\$600
SIGMA 24mm f/1.4 DG HSM A	£600/\$850
NIKON AF-S 24mm f/1.8G ED	£630/\$750
SIGMA 20mm f/1.4 DG HSM A	£630/\$900
NIKON AF-S 20mm f/1.8G ED	£650/\$800
ZEISS Milvus 18mm f/2.8 ZF.2	£2000/\$2300



there's a lot to be said for going for a prime lens. Image quality is often superior and many photographers only tend to use ultra-wide zooms at or near their shortest focal length anyway.

A wide range

When it comes to FX (full-frame) Nikons, however, most mainstream manufacturers offer an extensive range of wide-angle primes in a variety of focal lengths (and it's worth remembering that FX lenses can be used on DX cameras). Compared with standard zooms at their widest focal lengths, advantages of wide-angle primes can include reduced barrel distortion, better sharpness towards the edges of the frame, reduced colour fringing and less vignetting (darkened image corners).

It's worth noting that with FX standard zooms (as opposed to primes) these problems tend to be at their most apparent at the lens's shortest focal length, which in most FX standard zooms is 24mm. At zoom settings of 28mm or 35mm, the effects of distortion and vignetting are likely to be reduced, and corner sharpness improved. There's therefore less of a need to swap to a 28mm or 35mm prime lens to optimise image quality. For this big test, we're therefore concentrating on lenses that have a focal length of

24mm or shorter. The aim is either improved image quality at 24mm, or a significantly wider viewing angle, or both.

There are of course some excellent ultra-wide zooms on the market which keep problems like distortion and vignetting to a minimum, but they tend to be bulky and expensive: Nikon's AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, for example, weighs in at a kilo, and costs £1620/\$1900. A small, light and less expensive prime lens can therefore be preferable when you want to go wide. Prime doesn't always mean

small, mind: Sigma's new 20mm Art lens tested here is a beast of a lens. The question then is if the bigger build pays dividends in terms of image quality.

Half the lenses on test only have manual focus, but that's not as much of a drawback as you might think. Wide-angle lenses deliver a big depth of field, so focusing accuracy generally isn't critical. Depth of field markings are often included for use with the focus distance scale, enabling zone focusing and use of hyperfocal distances (see Jargon buster, below). This is often preferable for, say, street photography and landscapes, as it enables you to preset the focus distance so you can concentrate on shooting. And all the manual focus lenses on test will still trigger the focus confirmation lamps in your



A relatively small, lightweight and less expensive prime lens can be preferable when you want to go large on viewing angle

What to look for...

WIDE VIEWING ANGLES ARE OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY WIDE-RANGING FEATURES

LENS HOOD

The Samyang 14mm and Sigma 20mm lenses have built-in hoods and therefore no filter attachment thread. All other lenses are supplied with a bayonet-fit, petal-shaped hood.

FILTER THREAD

All lenses on test have internal focusing, so the front element neither extends nor rotates, and all but two (the Samyang 14mm and the Sigma 20mm) have a filter attachment thread.

AUTO/MANUAL FOCUS

The Nikon and Sigma lenses on test have ring-type ultrasonic autofocus, which is fast and whisper-quiet, with full-time manual override. The Irix, Samyang and Zeiss lenses are purely manual focus.

WEATHER SEALS

The Samyang and Sigma lenses have no weather seals, the Nikon lenses have a rubber seal on the mounting plate, and the Irix and Zeiss lenses have full weather seals.



Jargon buster

ZONE FOCUSING

Use of a lens's focus distance scale and depth of field markings enable you to adjust the focus ring so that a 'zone' of the scene will be sharp, within defined near and far limits.

HYPERFOCAL DISTANCE

This is the focus distance for a given focal length and aperture combination at which everything from the closest possible point to infinity will appear sharp.

FOCUS RING

Manual focusing is possible with all of the lenses on test. However, the rotational travel of purely manual focusing lenses is typically much greater, which enables more precise focusing.

APERTURE RATING

Aperture ratings are usually quite 'fast' – between f/1.4 and f/1.8. The Irix, Samyang 14mm and Zeiss lenses are a little slower, between f/2.4 and f/2.8.

Comparison table

HOW THE LENSES COMPARE

								
	SAMYANG 14MM F/2.8 IF ED UMC AS	SAMYANG 20MM F/1.8 ED UMC AS	IRIX 15MM F/2.4 BLACKSTONE	SIGMA 24MM F/1.4 DG HSM A	NIKON AF-S 24MM F/1.8G ED	SIGMA 20MM F/1.4 DG HSM A	NIKON AF-S 20MM F/1.8G ED	ZEISS MILVUS 18MM F/2.8 ZF.2
	www.samyanglensglobal.com		www.irixlens.com	www.sigma-global.com	www.nikon.com	www.sigma-global.com	www.nikon.com	www.zeiss.com
Street price	£330/\$330	£460/\$570	£600/\$600	£600/\$850	£630/\$750	£630/\$900	£650/\$800	£2000/\$2300
FX/DX	FX	FX	FX	FX	FX	FX	FX	FX
Effective focal length (DX)	21mm	30mm	22.5mm	36mm	36mm	30mm	30mm	27mm
Elements/groups	14/10	13/12	15/11	15/11	12/9	15/11	13/11	14/12
Diaphragm blades	6 blades	7 blades	9 blades	9 blades	7 blades	9 blades	7 blades	9 blades
Min aperture	f/22	f/22	f/22	f/16	f/16	f/16	f/16	f/22
Autofocus motor type	None (manual focus)	None (manual focus)	None (manual focus)	Ultrasonic (ring-type)	Ultrasonic (ring-type)	Ultrasonic (ring-type)	Ultrasonic (ring-type)	None (manual focus)
Manual override of AF	N/A	N/A	N/A	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	N/A
Viewing angle (FX)	116 degrees	95 degrees	110 degrees	84 degrees	84 degrees	95 degrees	94 degrees	100 degrees
Min focus distance	0.28m	0.2m	0.28m	0.25m	0.23m	0.28m	0.2m	0.25m
DOF markers	None	None	f/8, 11, 16	f/8, 16	f/16	f/8, 16	f/16	f/4, 8, 11, 16, 22
Filter thread	None	77mm	95mm plus gelatin	77mm	72mm	None	77mm	77mm
Hood type	Petal, built-in	Petal, bayonet	Petal, bayonet	Petal, bayonet	Petal, bayonet	Petal, built-in	Petal, bayonet	Petal, bayonet
Main barrel material	Plastic	Plastic	Metal	Plastic	Plastic	Plastic	Plastic	Metal
Weather-seals	None	None	Yes	None	Sealed mount	None	Sealed mount	Yes
Included accessories	Soft case	Hood, pouch	Hood, hard case	Hood, soft case	Hood, pouch	Soft case	Hood, pouch	Hood
Dimensions (diameter x length)	87x94mm	83x86mm	114x100mm	85x90mm	78x83mm	91x130mm	82x79mm	96x107mm
Weight	530g	488g	653g	665g	355g	950g	355g	675g
FEATURES								
BUILD/HANDLING								
PERFORMANCE								
VALUE FOR MONEY								
OVERALL								

The winner is...

Sigma 24mm f/1.4 DG HSM | A £600/\$850

What's good: Excellent build quality, superb image quality, fast f/1.4 aperture.

What's bad: The Sigma lenses lack weather seals, and the 20mm is quite big and heavy.

Our verdict: The Sigma 24mm is the outright top performer in the group.

Combining impeccable build quality and handling with the ease of autofocus and stunning image quality, both Sigma lenses on test are simply superb, and great value. The fast f/1.4 aperture rating is good to have, especially as both lenses continue to deliver great image quality when shooting wide-open. Go for the 20mm lens if you want to maximise your viewing angle, though the smaller 24mm is more manageable, boasts less barrel distortion and features a filter attachment thread.



The Zeiss 18mm is the king of the manual focus options, but the Irix 15mm is a close second, and is about a quarter of the price. Samyang's manual lenses aren't built to such a high standard, but are still robust and deliver good image quality, with the 14mm offering better value.

The Nikon 20mm and 24mm f/1.8 autofocus lenses are refreshingly compact and lightweight, but they lose out to the Sigma lenses for overall image quality, aperture speed and value for money.

Runners-up

Irix 15mm f/2.4 Blackstone £600/\$600

What's good: Tough, ultra-wide viewing angle, advanced features.

What's bad: No autofocus, not as sharp as the Zeiss in the corners.

Our verdict: Immaculate design, build, handling and image quality.



Zeiss Milvus 18mm f/2.8 ZF.2 £2000/\$2300

What's good: Great image quality, beautifully crafted, weather sealed.

What's bad: No autofocus, four times the price of the Irix.

Our verdict: It's a gorgeous lens, but very expensive compared to others.



NEXT ISSUE

THE BEST NIKON-FIT FLASHES FOR EVERY BUDGET