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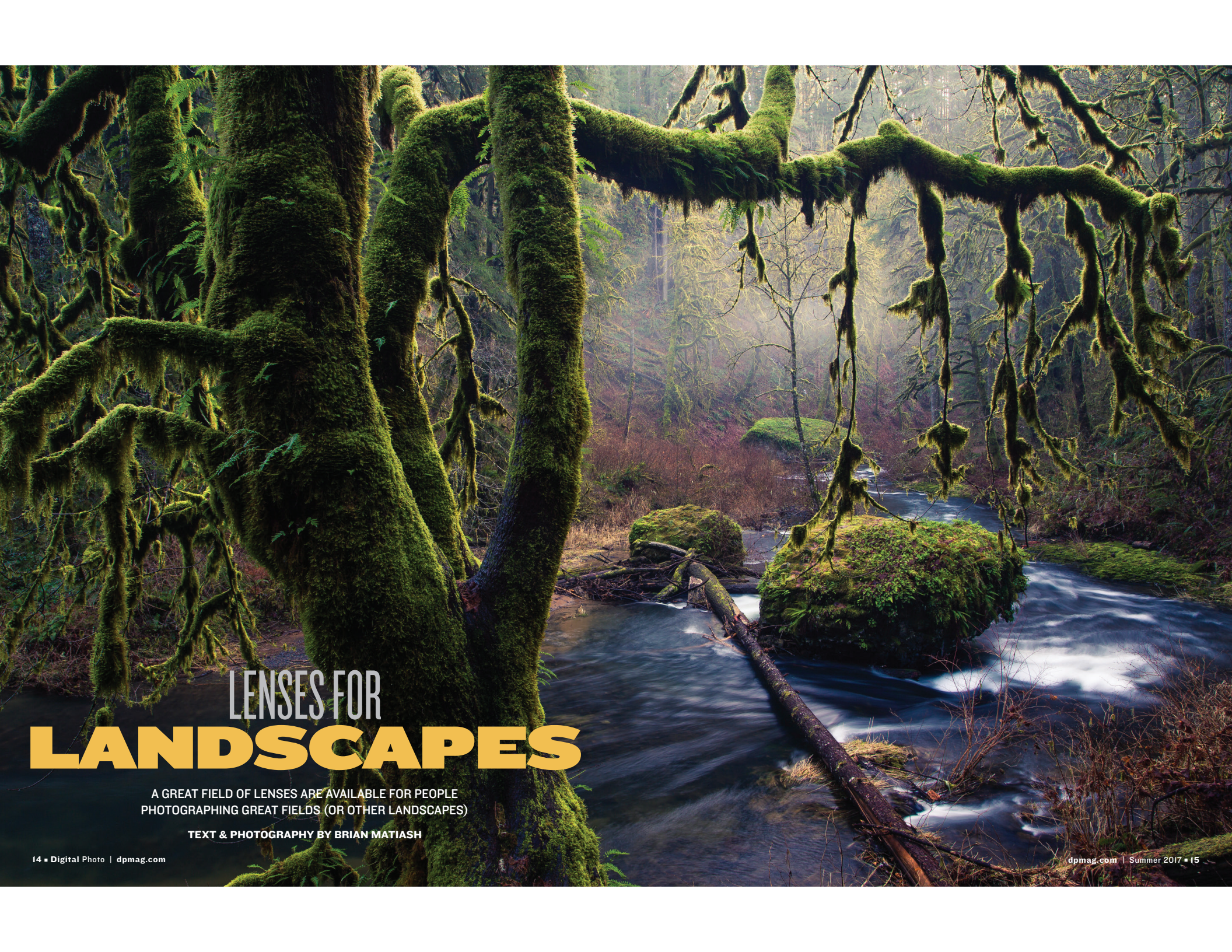


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**LENSES**  
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# LENSES FOR **LANDSCAPES**

A GREAT FIELD OF LENSES ARE AVAILABLE FOR PEOPLE  
PHOTOGRAPHING GREAT FIELDS (OR OTHER LANDSCAPES)

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN MATIASH



# LANDSCAPE LENSES

What mental images come to mind when you think about “landscape photography”? In my mind, those words evoke imagery of rocky expanses, verdant forests and giant waterfalls. But the more I spend time thinking about it, the imagery becomes more granular. I continue picturing the trunk of a cactus and its spines being backlit by the setting sun. I think about the mesmerizing patterns formed along the undulating walls of sandstone slot canyons. And how can I forget that one moss-covered rock sitting perfectly still as a never-ending rush of water rages all around it.

I mention all of this to underscore a point that partaking in landscape photography can mean many different things to many different people. However, what unifies us all is that we strive to share a piece of this amazing planet with each exposed frame, and when you render that down to a technical level, the lens you choose plays a critical role in that endeavor. Whether

Providing a clear anchor at wide focal lengths (18mm, in this case) for viewers is critical. By prominently framing a tree center-frame, you give the eyes a place to start exploring the rest of the busy frame and can return to it as fatigue from browsing sets in.

you use a super-wide focal length to capture an expansive vista or go tighter to showcase a blossoming fern, your lenses will help you figure out the visual story you’re aiming to tell.

Let’s begin by talking about the myriad lenses available to the landscape photographer and why they would make a worthy addition to any lens arsenal. To start, let’s agree that the two key factors when discussing lenses are focal length—or range, if it’s a zoom lens—and the maximum/widest aperture. Discussions around quality of glass and fringe features like image stabilization are important, but not at this juncture.

A third factor is also worth highlighting, and that’s prime versus zoom lenses. There’s no shortage of discussions covering

## GEAR

Whether you prefer prime or zoom lenses, use an SLR or mirrorless camera, or have a full-frame or cropped sensor, there has never been a better time to be a photographer. There are so many lens options for you to choose from, at a wide array of prices, and for virtually every camera manufacturer. I’m a Sony mirrorless camera shooter as well as a Zeiss Global Lens Ambassador, so it’s safe to say that I prefer Zeiss prime lenses, but I also have some choice zoom lenses that I’d like to recommend below. As always, remember that you can first rent just about every lens out there before deciding to buy. I find this to be a very cost-effective way to determine how to smartly invest in your lens arsenal.

### MID-FOCAL-LENGTH LENSES

If I had to choose one zoom lens to take to a location that I’d never been to, it would be a 24-70mm lens. Both sides of this focal range offer something for photographers to create unique and memorable photos. A 24mm is a great wide-angle focal length that allows you to capture your scene while minimizing barrel distortion, and the 60-70mm range is great if you’re photographing a person in a forest, especially because it introduces some pleasing compression.



**SONY**  
**FE 24-70MM F/2.8 GM**

Many Sony full-frame mirrorless shooters have been clamoring for a faster mid-focal-range zoom lens, and Sony has heard the pleas. The FE 24-70mm F2.8 GM is one of Sony’s first lenses to bear its G Master moniker, offering premium build quality with exceptional optical output. With a fixed f/2.8 aperture, handholding in lower-lit areas becomes more feasible, and while the image quality is outstanding, this lens is quite bulky and heavy for some.

**Price:** \$2,200. **Website:** [sony.com](http://sony.com)



**CANON**  
**EF 50MM f/1.8 STM**

Canon users have long since enjoyed their “Nifty Fifty,” and with good reason. I think I know more Canon shooters who own this lens than don’t. It’s exceptionally fast, capable and priced more reasonably than almost any other lens on the market.

**Price:** \$126. **Website:** [usa.canon.com](http://usa.canon.com)



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# LANDSCAPE LENSES

the benefits of one versus the other and, while they may each hold some merit, it will ultimately boil down to your preference (and budget). Prime lenses have a fixed focal length that requires you to “zoom with your feet,” but one of the clear benefits is that they’re typically smaller, lighter and have a larger maximum aperture than zoom lenses. The key limiting factor, though, is that you’re fixed to a specific focal length.

Your other option is to go with a zoom lens. The obvious benefit here is that your lens offers variable focal lengths, making it easier to include more or tighten up on the scene in front of you without moving. This benefit typically comes at the expense of being larger, heavier and with a smaller maximum aperture compared to prime lenses. With that said, it’s almost always more affordable—and practical—to use zoom lenses at longer focal lengths.

Just compare the cost to get to 200mm with a standard 70-200mm f/4 telephoto zoom lens versus a 200mm f/2 prime lens.

## WIDE-ANGLE LENSES

If I had to wager a guess, I’d say that most landscape photographers veer toward the wider end of the focal length spectrum, and that makes sense. In a lot of cases, our aim is to convey the grandeur of the scene in front of us. Tall, sprawling trees and meandering mountain ranges often require wider focal lengths to “fit it all in.” So let’s start there. Nowadays, there’s a vast array of lens options that afford photographers with dizzyingly wide focal lengths. Whether your camera uses a cropped or full-frame sensor, odds are that you can find a lens that offers you a focal length as wide as 16mm or wider. That’s a lot of space to cover. The important point to remember is that the wider

## GEAR

### WIDE-ANGLE LENSES

Admit it. There are many landscape scenes that are too grand to not be captured in a single frame. There are plenty of instances when you want to fit that giant mountain along with the sweeping tree line and that perfectly still lake into a single frame. This is where your wide-angle lens shines. Some of these lenses can even capture the full 180 degrees in front of you. On top of that, you can get some cool in-camera effects by leveraging the barrel distortion typically found with these lenses, especially when filling the frame with your subject.



**SONY VARIO-TESSAR T\* FE 16-35MM F/4 ZA OSS**

This ultrawide-angle zoom lens was one of Sony’s most anticipated leading up to its release. As far as Sony’s lineup is concerned, this lens is a capable and reliable utility player. It’s also the only ultrawide-angle zoom lens that Sony offers, so your options here are a bit limited. If there’s any major criticism to have, it would be the maximum aperture of f/4. While this isn’t the biggest issue for typical landscape shooters (who fall in the f/9 to f/16 range), it can be a drag for night and astral photography.

**Price:** \$1,350. **Website:** sony.com



**CANON EF 16-35MM f/2.8L II USM**

Canon has since updated its lens offering in this focal range to include an f/4 version with image stabilization, but if you’re at all interested in night or astral photography, this lens won’t let you down. It’s a well-constructed lens that’s a worthy addition to any photographer’s arsenal.

**Price:** \$1,600. **Website:** usa.canon.com



**ZEISS BATIS 2.8/18**

These days, I’m almost always using the Zeiss 18mm Batis lens because it produces stunningly sharp photos without being bulky. Its lens construction is also exceptionally helpful in both low-light and cold-weather conditions. The bright, crisp OLED display shows me what focus distance the lens is set at (especially helpful for astral photography when you need to focus to infinity), and the grippy rubberized focus ring is easy to turn when wearing gloves in colder environments.

**Price:** \$1,500. **Website:** zeiss.com



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# LANDSCAPE LENSES

your focal length, the more important it is to direct your viewers through the frame. If you present a photo with no clear direction or anchor, your viewer will get lost, quickly lose interest, and move on. Therefore, orchestration of what you choose to include, especially at wider focal lengths, is critical.

You may have noticed that I haven't touched on aperture much here, and that's with good reason. When I recently audited my landscape library, the clear majority of photos were taken

using apertures ranging from between  $f/11$  and  $f/16$ , and that doesn't surprise me. In most of my wide-angle photos, my aim was to convey vast scenery, and while I often included a clear focal point, I didn't want to drop focus by using a fast aperture. So I'd argue that at wider focal lengths, having a fast aperture wouldn't benefit you as often as you may think. Of course, there's one notable exception: night/astral photography. In that situation, having an

By using a longer focal length (105mm, in this case) with a telephoto lens, the relational distance between the objects in the foreground and background is clearly visible. This helps provide the viewer with a sense of depth in the photo a wide angle would lack.

ultrawide and ultrafast lens can be a massive boon, especially if your goal is to get pin-sharp stars.

## MID-FOCAL-LENGTH LENSES

Most people loosely define a mid-focal-length lens as one with a focal range between 24mm and 70mm. You're not quite ultrawide nor are you getting to that tight telephoto zoom area, but you're covering the general angle of view that we humans use to see with our own eyes, and that's an important point to bring up. If you're composing a landscape photo at a focal length that most closely covers our eyes' angle of view, it's that much more important to pique your viewers' attention.

In other words, if your goal is to share a landscape photo at a mid-focal range, try to come up with a vantage point that's not the same as if someone were just standing in the same spot, looking at the scene with their own eyes. Don't just hold your camera (or position your tripod) so that it's at eye level, the way we typically perceive the world in front of us. Creatively composing your photos at these mid-focal ranges will do wonders in getting your viewers' attention.

## TELEPHOTO-ZOOM LENSES

Now we find ourselves at the longer end of the focal length range and, in my opinion, the most fun class of lenses to use for landscape photography, yet the one that's possibly least used. In most cases, landscape photographers who work in the telephoto range use zoom lenses that cover the 70-200mm span but can also go beyond that up to 400mm. Of course, these lenses tend to be larger and heavier and, at the expense of my own frustration, are painted white by the manufacturer. Landscape photographers who also partake in wildlife photography may also invest in telephoto prime lenses that typically hit at the 300mm, 400mm and 500mm focal lengths.

The longer end of the focal range



offers its own set of unique challenges and benefits. These longer focal lengths require you to be even more discerning with what you choose to compose in your frame. Whereas at 16mm, all you need to do is point your camera and virtually everything in front of you will be in frame, at 70mm and longer, identifying the key focal points in your frame becomes that much more important.

The benefits come with the added lens compression introduced at these longer focal lengths. At 16mm, it can be quite challenging to convey a sense of depth and distance when photographing a mountain range. You'll certainly be able to capture all of it, as well as what's in front of it, but the distance from the foreground to the background won't be as apparent. By using the longer focal length of telephoto zoom lenses, you may need to tighten up on what you include in the frame, but the relationship of distance between the foreground, middle ground and background elements will be much clearer. An added benefit with lens compression at these longer focal lengths is that distortion tends to be eliminated almost completely when compared to wider focal lengths. **DP**

## GEAR

### TELEPHOTO LENSES

Over the past year or so, I've found myself using telephoto lenses more and more, because I find the resulting compositional opportunities quite rewarding. When you teeter at these longer focal lengths, you become more discerning about what you include in your frame and how everything is arranged. It becomes more about what you should exclude rather than how much you can include. Additionally, the sense of distance and scale of elements throughout the frame are very visually pleasing.



#### SONY FE 70-200MM F/2.8 GM OSS

The 70-200mm focal length is the most popular telephoto zoom range for photographers, which is why virtually every manufacturer offers this option to its customers. While Sony offers this lens with a fixed  $f/4$  aperture, the added benefits of the  $f/2.8$  version are significant for the extra light and shallower depth of field. Just know that the  $f/2.8$  version is notably larger and heavier than its  $f/4$  sibling.

**Price:** \$2,600. **Website:** sony.com



#### ZEISS BATIS 1.8/85

I genuinely believe that the 85mm focal length is one of the best and most creatively rewarding for landscape photographers. It requires you to pay extra attention to all those little and off-overlooked details—to see the forest for the trees, if you will. You'll also be able to easily make your subject pop off the background with the fast  $f/1.8$  maximum aperture.

**Price:** \$1,200. **Website:** zeiss.com

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