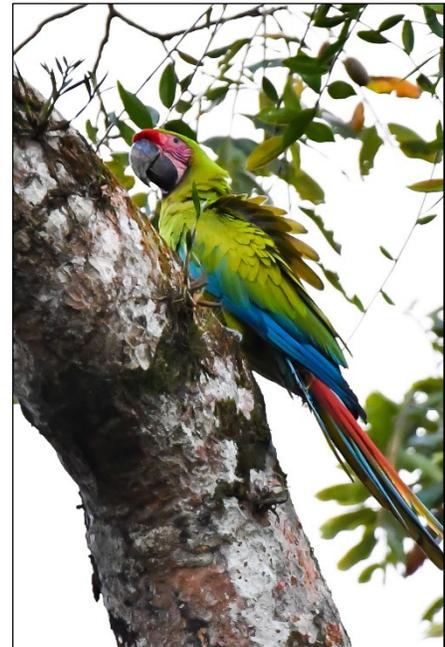


Why I switched my entire system to Sigma lenses

2017 brought about a big transition for me as a die-hard Nikon photographer. This shift was significant considering one of Nikon's well-known attributes is the quality of the glass they make in their lenses. It started off with one unique model of a Sigma lens and then snowballed into a complete change in my entire bag. So why would someone who has used Nikon since he started in photography over 28 years ago forsake the very lenses that make it one of the favorite brands in the world? The answer is three-fold: sharpness, cost and options.

Sharpness

I totally believe that with today's technology, the lenses produced by any of the common manufacturers are excellent quality and very sharp across the board. However, if there could be degrees of sharpness (which there are), Sigma appears to be at the top of the spectrum. Side by side testing is the only way to know for sure how lenses compare in this area but I also have many examples where I seen a sharpness difference immediately on the computer monitor. Even magnifying the photo on the back of the camera LCD revealed sharper rendering of the images then what I was familiar with from my Nikon glass. Other very talented photographers I work with have noticed the same thing almost immediately when trying out a new Sigma lens on their camera. Furthermore, a reading of various benchmark analyses of some of the latest Sigma glass has put it at the top as well. In last year alone, DP Review and DXOMark as well as others have rated Sigma lenses such as the 85mm F1.4 or 50mm F1.4 the best they have ever tested. And in many of these test sites, Canon and Nikon lenses rarely place in the top 10 of the reviews for best lenses. Tamron is also doing an excellent job with many of their latest lens releases and the value is there as well with this brand. However, when I get to the section about the model options, Sigma has lenses no one else does. This is not to say that Nikon and Canon do not have some wonderful examples of sharp lenses in many categories but rather to simply point out that Sigma has become a staunch competitor in recent years. Furthermore, when cost is considered, the big camera company products become much less interesting even if the sharpness is comparable. Finally, while there are other characteristics to consider when purchasing a lens (i.e. build, weight, vibration reduction, etc.) sharpness I imagine is at the top of many of our lists. Whether through side by side testing (can be done on your own if you use a tripod, take out all other variables and then compare the images of two lenses side by side magnified on a monitor), solid lens bench testing websites or through my own field comparisons, Sigma in my mind is producing some of the best lenses in the marketplace when it comes to outright sharpness and resolution.



Nikon D500 with Sigma 150-600mm C lens. 1/400 at F6.3, ISO 4000 at 600mm with an equivalent crop of 1170mm (handheld)



*Nikon D7200 with Sigma 10-20mm lens
(\$190 used). 1/320 at F16, ISO 900 at 10mm*

Cost

Not too many years ago, third-party manufacturers like Sigma were known only for price and not for quality or for the options they offered. For a long time, Sigma was what you purchased when you did not have the budget to buy the comparable Nikon or Canon glass. Thus, companies such as Sigma, Tamron and even Tokina, were never highly respected among serious or professional photographers. There is no doubt that this has drastically changed. A recent interview with Sigma's president recorded how seriously they have taken quality and how

many of their top lenses are now produced in Japan and hand-inspected before being distributed for sale. To have a quality comparable with the two historical glass kings (Nikon and Canon) and a big cost difference in many cases; makes price an even more exciting consideration for photographers of all levels. I always hear diehard photographers sharing the same advice with those starting out in photography, "Invest in the glass". However, that is easier said than done when the price increases of Canon and Nikon have made even the best-intentioned photographer question their reasonable budget restrictions and if the higher price is justifiable. Both Nikon and Canon have released the latest versions of some of their most popular lenses with increases in the ballpark of 20-40% in each product cycle. Lenses such as Nikon's famous F2.8 models like the 70-200mm F2.8 have in recent years been priced starting three versions ago at \$1,700 (70-200mm F2.8 VR1) and then \$2,400 (70-200mm F2.8 VR2) and finally the current model (70-200mm F2.8 VR FL) at \$2,800. This is a staggering price tag in and of itself but also is an alarmingly large increase each time. The other example is that the latest Nikon 24-70mm F2.8 VR is \$2,400 (over \$400 higher than the previous model).

So, considering value, let's look at some comparisons for both Nikon and Canon (in case the Canon users thought that value was on their side). Using the above two lenses (70-200mm F2.8 and 24-70mm F2.8) here is where the numbers come out if you were to buy Sigma instead of the comparable Nikon brand. As of this writing, you can get the Nikon 70-200mm F2.8 VR FL lens at \$2,800 or get the Sigma 70-200mm f2.8 OS for \$1,300. That is over a 200% difference in price (more on this in a moment). In the case of the Nikon 24-70mm F2.8 VR, the Nikon model is \$2,400 and the brand-new Sigma rendition is \$1,300. This is an increase of not quite double but \$1,100 is a lot of real money. It is true that buying used could bring any equipment prices down by 15-30% but still, new compared to new or used compared to used, the Sigma value advantage is significant.

Many Canon lenses have not seen the same amount of price increases as Nikon, but let's see how the cost difference could translate for the average photographer when his wish list is larger than his budget. Let's say a photographer comes to me asking for advice and has, in the order of importance, three lenses they would like to get. They first want the 70-200mm F2.8 followed by a general purpose F2.8 lens then followed by a super telephoto. If they bought only Canon brand models, the 70-200mm F2.8 would be approx. \$1,800, a 17-55mm F2.8 IS would be approx. \$800 and then the Canon 100-400mm IS Mk 2 would be \$2,000. That is a total investment of \$4,600. With an example budget of \$2,500 they would only be able to get the 70-200mm F2.8 and the 17-55mm F2.8. But, if they were willing to consider Sigma, they could get the 70-200mm F2.8 at \$1,300 (a savings of \$500). Then they could get the Sigma 17-50mm F2.8 OS for \$400 (savings of \$400). With just two lenses they would have freed up \$900. Then the incredible would happen. Sigma earlier this year released a 100-400mm OS lens with a lighter weight than the Canon counterpart at a price point of \$800. The money saved on the first two lenses could be used for a total investment of \$2,500 for three lenses versus \$4,600 for the same three in the Canon brand. That is a total of 46% savings and in this example, meant three lenses could be acquired for price of two. This is what I call value. Certainly, there are those that would suggest that Sigma lenses are not as sharp or do not focus as well as their brand name counterparts. Not only would I suggest they are incorrect but even if there is a little difference, does it really justify \$2,100 extra in cost? It is only human nature for the owner of all Canon or Nikon lenses who has invested tens of thousands of dollars in glass to stand by their choice while fighting tooth and nail against any other option. However, their passionate feelings are usually untested in direct comparison and furthermore, everyone has a budget so smart shopping for the equipment one does want is sometimes more important than staunch brand loyalty (Of course this is coming from one of Nikon's strongest supporters but also one who has made the switch away from Nikon lenses). The cost argument is not easy to ignore when comparing the quality products put out by all the current major lens manufacturers.



Nikon D500 with Sigma 100-400mm lens (\$800 new vs. \$1500-2000 for comparable Nikon or Canon model). 1/1600 at F8, ISO 1600 at 220mm

Options

Finally, for me, the switch to Sigma came because of the unique options they offered. What I mean by this is that there are lenses that Sigma makes that no one else in the business produces. In fact, it was one particular model of lens that caused me to explore Sigma and then never look back. Having gotten in to shooting more sports about 5 years ago, a F2.8 telephoto zoom became the most-used lens in my arsenal. While the 70-200mm F2.8 lens certainly is the minimum requirement for indoor or outdoor nighttime sports, (soccer, baseball, cycling, etc.) this lens range is not always enough. However, moving to a 300mm focal length for tighter shots creates another problem. A 70-300mm F4-5.6 lens gives you the range but not the light gathering ability you need. The only other common choice on the market is a

prime, 300mm F2.8. The weight of a lens like this goes to 6 lbs. and the price tag brand new is \$6,000. I even tried a used 300mm F2.8 and while the image quality was very good, not having the ability to zoom the lens got me in trouble each time I shot. When the action moved towards me, the 300mm was too much and the only other way to get the shot was to quickly switch to another camera with the 70-200mm mounted on it. But, Sigma had for years and to this day, offers a lens like no other. It is a 120-300mm F2.8 and while there are three different models, each one is a high-quality zoom lens at a maximum aperture of F2.8 with a maximum focal length of 300mm. This is incredible as it is not only the perfect lens range for low light telephoto sports but is also ideal for a lot of wildlife photography, which also is often shot in low light conditions as well. Used versions of this lens in various models can be purchased between \$1,000-2,700 with the brand-new model at \$3,600. Even new, this is half the price of the fixed 300mm lenses and the optical quality is outstanding. This lens has become my sports and wildlife mainstay and has often replaced my 70-200mm F2.8 in my camera bag. Finally, a very economical Sigma 1.4X teleconverter can be used on it for a focal length of 420mm at F4 which is still outstanding. This lens alone was what started my transition into Sigma.



Nikon D500 with Sigma 50-100mm F1.8 lens. 1/320 at F2.2, ISO 2000 at 100mm

But there are other options that no one else in the lens business produces as well to compete with Sigma's innovation. The other two favorites are the 18-35mm F1.8 and the 50-100mm F1.8. In these instances, the closest lenses you can find are either buying multiple prime lenses (35mm 1.8, 50mm 1.8 85mm 1.8 for example) or using something that has a F2.8 aperture. The reality of low light situations though is that F2.8 is not always enough and having to change your prime lenses in order to get different shots is a recipe for disaster as well. The 18-35mm 1.8 runs new at \$800 and the 50-100mm F1.8 is \$1,100. These still represent great values because buying two or three different prime lenses for each range that just one of these lenses covers will definitely be more expensive. It is the innovative options that Sigma offers that is the most compelling reason in my mind to transition my entire system over. And so, my Nikon 10mm Fisheye got replaced by a Sigma 8-16mm, my Nikon 12-24mm got replaced by the Sigma 10-20mm and my everyday lens, the Nikon 16-85mm, got replaced by the Sigma 17-70mm. On the telephoto side, my Nikon 70-200mm F2.8 is now a Sigma 70-200mm F2.8 and the Sigma 120-300mm F2.8, Sigma 150-600mm and Sigma 100-400mm have all become wildlife and sports mainstays. Even my Nikon 35mm F1.8, 50mm F1.8 and 85mm F1.8 are all now covered by the two Sigma F1.8 zooms mentioned above. Other favorite Sigma lenses in the bag are the Sigma 18-200mm C and 18-300mm C all-in-one lenses as well as the Sigma 24-105mm F4 Art lens that would be my go to more if I had a full frame camera body. Following in my footsteps, a couple of my team members have also transitioned to one or more Sigma lenses in their bags. And, the crazy part about it all is with the price savings we discussed above, often the transition made the seller money rather than costing anything.

Conclusion

It is important to realize that these are just my most recent experiences and opinions. Everyone has their favorite equipment for various reasons and that is fine. But when asked what major changes I made in 2017, switching to a complete Sigma lens system is at the top of my list. Whether it is because the lenses are sharper than even the professional photographer in me needs or the cost savings, I am sold on Sigma. But add in the unique focal length and aperture combinations that are out there and not produced by Nikon, Canon or Tamron, I think all of this makes a very compelling argument to at least give the Sigma glass a try. My personal feeling is that with all that Sigma has going for it, Nikon and Canon should think twice before charging as much as they do for lenses that may not always be worth the price. As always, it is my goal that articles like this are helpful to our students as they consider the equipment that best fits their own needs, expectations and budgets.