



Landscape

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Landscape Polariser

Many of us use Heliopan polarisers on Lee filter holders. Now Lee Filters are producing their own polarising filter, the 'Landscape Polariser.' The question is, is it better than its rivals? Most importantly, with a street value of £175, is it worth buying one? **Mark Bauer** has the review

There are some pieces of kit that are very easy to get excited about. High megapixel SLRs for example, that will enable you to produce pin-sharp, highly detailed 20 x 30 inch prints; wide angle zooms that are sharper than the most highly-regarded prime lenses; medium format cameras which handle like full frame SLRs, feature Live View technology and incredible high ISO performance. Non-photographers will find this somewhat sad, but this is the sort of gear that will set the hearts of landscape photographers racing.

Other pieces of kit fall into the 'dull but worthy' category and are somewhat harder to get excited about. Filters in general, and polarising filters in particular, fall under this banner. However, they may not be exciting, but polarisers are one of the most useful accessories that a landscape photographer can have to hand.

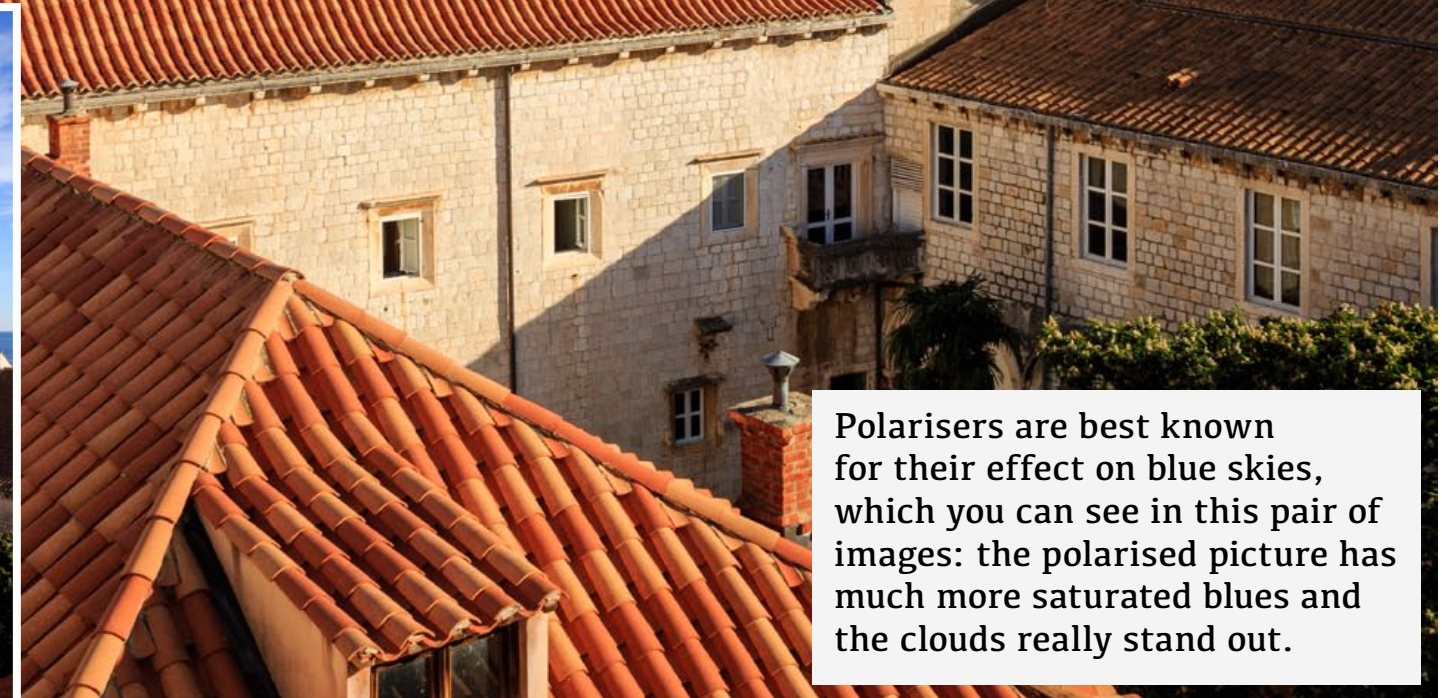
Polarisers reduce glare and reflections and restore natural colour saturation; unlike some other filters, their effects are impossible to reproduce during processing. Polarisers work by blocking polarised light. A thin foil of polarised material is sandwiched between two pieces of optical glass, and by rotating the front of the filter you can adjust the

amount of polarised light passing through. As you do so, you will see reflections come and go and the intensity of colours strengthen and fade. You don't automatically need to rotate the filter so that the scene is fully polarised – adjust it until you see the effect that you want.

Although best-known for their effect on clear, blue skies; polarisers are also useful for increasing the saturation on foliage, by cutting through the surface glare on leaves – they work brilliantly on dull days in woodland. They are also brilliant for photographing water and can be used to cut through reflections so that you can see beneath the surface, or to enhance reflections. If you are lucky enough to be in a position to photograph a rainbow, make sure you've got a polariser fitted on, as you can really make the rainbow 'pop'. »



Without Filter



With Filter

Polarisers are best known for their effect on blue skies, which you can see in this pair of images: the polarised picture has much more saturated blues and the clouds really stand out.



Polarisers aren't just for blue skies. The Lee Landscape Polariser has boosted the colour of the autumn leaves in this picture, and has given a nice warmth to the scene. What's really impressive is that this was shot at 16mm and there's no hint of vignetting.



Polarisers are great for photographing waterfalls and rivers, as they reduce glare off the surface of the water and increase the contrast between the white water and darker water.



» Lee Filters is one of the best-known and most highly-regarded manufacturers of filters in the world. The quality of their neutral density and neutral density graduated filters is unquestionable, but until recently, it would be fair to say that they had not produced a polariser of note. There was one in the line-up – a 105mm circular polariser which fits onto the front of the Lee Filter Holder via a special adaptor – but probably the best thing you could say about it was that it polarised the light effectively. The main problem with it

So, how is it different from its main rival, the Heliopan SH-PMC and does it offer anything more?

was that it was very thick, which meant that it was difficult to use with lenses wider than about 26mm (on full frame) without seeing the edges of the filter in the frame.

It could be argued that this doesn't really matter, as when you use polarisers with lenses wider than 28mm or so, skies suffer from uneven polarisation, resulting in ugly 'banding' on areas of blue sky. While this is undeniably true, it ignores the other uses of polarisers, such as increasing saturation on foliage in woodland, and in these situations, going wider is often both possible and desirable. Consequently, many photographers, myself included, would put third party polarisers on the front of their Lee filter holders. The Heliopan 105mm slim polariser was one of the most popular, and was the one which I used.

Of course, Lee isn't daft, and seeing that many of its customers were fitting Heliopan polarisers on their filter holders, they would have understood why and recognised the need for a competing product. They also understood that it would be necessary to go

a step or two beyond simply matching what the competition is producing. The result is their 'Landscape Polariser', aimed, as the name suggests, specifically at the needs of landscape photographers.

So, how is it different from its main rival, the Heliopan SH-PMC and does it offer anything more? Well, firstly, and most importantly, it's thinner. Not by a huge amount, but enough to make a difference. Lee claim that you can shoot as wide as 17 or 16mm with the Landscape Polariser. Why 17 or 16mm? Well, apparently, their tests showed a bit of a discrepancy between Nikon and Canon lenses; you can shoot as wide as 16mm on a full-frame Nikon but only 17mm on a Canon. With my Canon 5D Mk III, I have found that 17mm claim seems about right and in some instances, I have managed 16mm without vignetting – though I have still to establish what was different about those shooting situations. I generally use a filter holder with two slots behind the polariser ring; I'm confident that if you set up an adaptor with only one slot (in most situations, this is all you need) then you would be able to shoot as wide as 16mm without any problems. In comparison, shots with my Heliopan, there is noticeably less vignetting at 16mm; to avoid vignetting altogether with the Heliopan, you need to shoot at 20mm or above, in my experience.

Fortunately, being thinner doesn't mean that handling suffers. The polariser is easy »

Both of these images were shot at 16mm, one with the Heliopan and one with the Lee. In real world shooting, I wouldn't have used a polariser here, because of the uneven polarisation across the sky, but the comparison shows that the Lee causes significantly less vignetting.



Lee



Heliopan

» to attach and detach from the adaptor ring – if anything, it is slightly easier than the Heliopan. It is also slightly lighter, so the balance of the camera is affected less, and is easy to rotate, though the movement is certainly not 'sloppy'. Unlike its rival, it doesn't have index markings around the edge of the filter. These can be handy for pre-setting the amount of polarisation before you attach the filter to the camera, which you will need to do if you have an extreme ND filter screwed on to the lens, or if you are shooting with a rangefinder camera. This is a minor omission, however, as few landscape photographers shoot with rangefinders, and most who use the Lee system use their slot-in filters rather than screw-on NDs.

The other difference with the Heliopan is that the Lee Landscape Polariser introduces a slight warm cast to images. I must admit that I was initially sceptical about this, but after a couple of months of use, I have concluded that I like the effect. Many landscape photographers like their

images warm – back in the film days, many of us would have an 81B warm-up filter permanently attached to our lenses – and the Lee's colour is subtle enough not to be distracting. If you really don't like it, it's simple enough to remove in post-production.

In terms of optical quality, it is what you would expect from Lee Filters, with excellent clarity and sharpness, and a good polarising effect.

Overall then, this filter is highly recommended. If you are currently working with the older Lee Polariser, you should definitely upgrade, and if you are using another brand, even a slim mount, it is still worth serious consideration. ↩

MARK BAUER

Mark Bauer is one of the UK's leading landscape photographers with work published worldwide. He is the author of 3 books, including 'The Landscape Photography Workshop' (with Ross Hoddinott). To see more of his work visit...



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