

## Why I Diss L's

*I recently discovered that I may have acquired a reputation for disliking the Canon L series of lenses -- those red-ring marvels built for war, and costing it too. This isn't entirely groundless, but it's not quite as simple as that either. I don't so much dislike L's, as some people who are hell-bent on pushing them, as well as the pretty common perception that "nothing less will do."*

It's true that I not uncommonly point people towards alternatives to L's, or point out some issues that I feel they have. There are a number of reasons for it, I think. A part of it is a reaction to the very strong L snobbery that pops up on photography forums. It's not uncommon to find people blithely recommending L's as the panacea to every photographic problem, while at the same time ignoring the very real drawbacks they have -- not the least of which is price. Moreover, I have a pretty strong contrarian streak; if something becomes accepted wisdom, I always have to try to find the other side of the issue and present it.

However, a pretty big part is that I feel that L's very very rarely offer best value for money: quite often, you'll find that there's an alternative that's 90% as good for as little as, say, 20% of the price. For example -- and restricting this only to the Canon line of lenses:

L lens	Price	Alternative	Price	Difference (%)
EF 24/1.4L	\$1,119	EF 24/2.8	\$280	400%
EF 35/1.4L	\$1,134	EF 35/2.0	\$229	495%
EF 85/1.2L	\$1,499	EF 85/1.8 USM	\$349	429%
EF 135/2.0L	\$899	EF 135/2.8 SF	\$370	243%

The differences between the L's and the alternatives are that the L's are generally a stop or two brighter, always significantly better built, and (usually) better optically. But are they two, four, or five times better? For some people, perhaps, but for most of us, especially amateurs who can't capitalize our purchases, it's at least a legitimate question. In a couple of cases at least -- the 85's and the 35's, for example -- you certainly seem to gain awfully little by paying four or five times as much.

Another part is resentment -- that Canon doesn't design L's the way *I'd* want them designed. They tend to make them about a half-stop too hot, which means they're big, bulky, and damned expensive. Consequently, they ignore the darker but nimbler and more compact primes below them, leaving them stranded in late-1980's build, with none of the genuinely nice new inventions like ring USM and image stabilization, not to mention the occasional aspherical or UD element that could give them an extra kick without breaking the bank.

I by far prefer the way Nikon or especially Pentax designs their premium glass -- for example, the Pentax 31/1.8 Limited is optically an absolutely superlative lens in every way, very likely better even than the 35/1.4L -- but it "only" costs about \$900, and is much smaller, lighter, and more compact too. All of that is possible because they didn't try to make it an f/1.4. Or, take the Nikkor 85/1.4 -- same story: optically at least as good if not better than the 1.2L, but much more compact and easier to handle (although in this case not a whole lot cheaper).

In other words, I can certainly imagine dropping a grand or even more on a lens, but that lens would have to be an absolutely perfect fit for my needs. None of the L's are. They have real drawbacks, and these

drawbacks are too often ignored. I do not believe that I'm the only Canon shooter who values portability, value for money, and discreet appearance in their gear either. That's why I bring them up on occasion.

There are a few L's I do like. I even owned one of them briefly. These are the "baby L's" -- the f/4.0 zooms and the very occasional not-crazily-bright prime. I.e., the 17-40/4.0L, 24-105/4.0 IS L, 70-200/4.0L, 135/2.0L, 200/2.8L, 300/4.0L, and 400/5.6L. However, all of these would be "occasional-use" lenses for me, and it just doesn't make any sense to sink that kind of money into something that isn't on the camera most of the time.

So it's not so much that I dislike L's, rather than the people who push them -- and I feel that the drawbacks with them do need pointing out for people who might otherwise really start to believe that "nothing less will do."

Most of us are on a budget. If you had a grand and change to spend on lenses, you could get one L -- or a whole bagful of primes between 24 and 135, that will produce results that are (most of the time) indistinguishable, and weigh a lot less too. If my grumbling about price and bulk makes someone aware of the possibility who would otherwise not have realized it, it will have served some purpose.



*"October Flower." The L or the aLternative?*

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