

GROUP TEST

Superzoom lenses

One of the main attractions of a D-SLR over a compact is that you can swap lenses on demand. But there's a catch or two. Most digital photographers prefer to change lenses as little as possible, to avoid dumping dust on the sensor. And if you're on holiday, travelling or just walking around, wouldn't it be nice if you could replace a whole gadget bag full of lenses with just one do-it-all lens? That's where a superzoom comes in.

Superzoom lenses have been around for decades, but historically, these 28-200mm or 28-300mm beasts have been fraught with compromises. Older models were often big and bulky, and offered mediocre optical quality. More recently, manufacturers have made huge strides, increasing sharpness and contrast and reducing unwanted side-effects such as chromatic aberrations (colour fringing), ghosting and flare. It's all thanks to the use of computer-designed aspheric elements, high-tech lens coatings and precision-engineering methods.

Fit a superzoom lens to your D-SLR and you'll be prepared for almost any shooting situation. **Matthew Richards** tests eight of the best

All the lenses in this test group are specifically designed for D-SLRs with APS-C sensors, rather than full-frame cameras, so another bonus is that you can expect to get a generous telephoto reach neatly wrapped in a relatively small and lightweight package.

The maximum apertures at telephoto settings still tend to be a little slow, making camera shake a potential problem, but most of the latest examples feature built-in image stabilisation (IS) as well, giving them every chance of making great all-rounders. »

ON TEST

Canon EF-S 18-135mm f/3.5-5.6 IS	£400
Canon EF-S 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6 IS	£480
Nikon 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6G AF-S DX ED VR II	£590
Sigma 18-125mm f/3.8-5.6 DC OS HSM	£240
Sigma 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 DC OS	£290
Sigma 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3 DC OS HSM	£400
Tamron 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II Macro	£390
Tamron 18-270mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II VC Macro	£460



How we did this test

Superzooms are really designed for convenient handheld use, so our real-world tests included indoor and outdoor shooting throughout the entire zoom and aperture ranges.

We looked for smooth handling, fast and accurate autofocus performance, and the effectiveness of IS, where fitted. For outright optical quality, including sharpness and the absence of chromatic aberrations, test images were taken with the cameras mounted on sturdy tripods, using base sensitivity settings, self-timer and mirror lock-up to prevent shake.

The test images shown on the following pages show the min and max focal lengths available.





Canon EF-S 18-135mm f/3.5-5.6 IS

STREET PRICE £400

CONTACT www.canon.co.uk

Supplied as a kit lens with the new EOS 7D, the EF-S 18-135mm IS looks low-tech compared with Canon's high-performance, semi-pro body. The somewhat basic design lacks USM (UltraSonic Motor) autofocus and the standard micro-motor fitted is comparatively noisy.

Build quality is a step up from Canon's most basic 'kit' lenses. For example, the mounting ring is metal rather than plastic. However, out of two samples of this lens, one had almost no zoom creep at all while the other suffered quite badly, a problem made worse by this being the only lens in the group not to feature a zoom lock switch.

The latest-generation Image Stabilizer lived up to its four-stop promise in our tests and the upside of the modest 7.5x zoom range is that distortions are less of an issue than with some super-zooms. Sharpness was pretty good and, again, rather better than with the previous sample of this lens that we've seen, which raises questions about manufacturing consistency.



Canon EF-S 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6 IS

STREET PRICE £480

CONTACT www.canon.co.uk

At first glance, there's little difference between this lens and Canon's cheaper EF-S 18-135mm model. Both have an identical layout of Image Stabilizer and AF/MF switches and the zoom and focus rings are almost the same, although the focus ring is a little narrower on the 18-200mm. They're also almost exactly the same length when used at the 18mm end, although the 18-200mm is more than ready to extend itself under the force of gravity, so the zoom lock switch is a worthwhile addition.

As with the lower-powered Canon in the group, there's no finery, such as USM autofocus or a focus distance scale, and the overall build looks and feels rather basic.

The trade-off of having the extra zoom range is that distortions are more noticeable and there's a little more chromatic aberration (colour fringing), but at least these are fairly easy to minimise if you shoot in RAW and use the Digital Photo Professional software that comes bundled with Canon cameras.



Ratings

Features	●●●○
Build quality	●●●○
Handling	●●●○
Image quality	●●●○
Value for money	●●●○

The Verdict

With only a basic set of features and questionable consistency in build quality, this lens seems a little over-priced.

80%

Ratings

Features	●●●○
Build quality	●●●○
Handling	●●●○
Image quality	●●●○
Value for money	●●●○

The Verdict

Features and performance aren't captivating at the price and even the lens hood costs extra.

83%

Superzoom lenses



Digital
Camera
Editor's
Choice

Nikon 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6G AF-S DX ED VR II

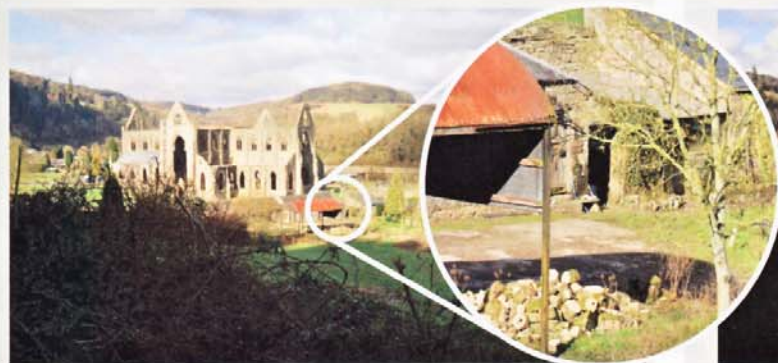
STREET PRICE £590

CONTACT www.canon.co.uk

Nikon launched its original 18-200mm AF-S VR back in 2006, but the newer 'VR II' edition boasts four-stop rather than three-stop Vibration Reduction, improved lens coatings and a zoom lock switch. As it turns out, zoom creep is much less of an issue than with the original lens, which would go into freefall between focal lengths of 24mm and 135mm, and both models generally stay firmly in place at 18mm.

Despite having an RRP that's £10 less than Canon's 18-200mm, the Nikon has plenty of extra goodies, including super-fast, practically silent AF-S autofocus complete with full-time manual override, switchable Normal/Active VR modes, a focus distance scale neatly positioned beneath a viewing window and better-feeling build quality all round.

Optically, the Nikon proved not only to be the sharpest lens on test, but also retained its sharpness better at maximum apertures throughout the zoom range.



Digital
Camera
Editor's
Choice

Sigma 18-125mm f/3.8-5.6 DC OS HSM

STREET PRICE £240

CONTACT www.sigma-imaging-uk.com

The Sigma 18-125mm is wonderfully compact, and at just £240 it's also the cheapest lens in the group. The catch is that the zoom range is also the smallest, but you still get a useful 29-200mm effective reach on a Canon body, or 27-187mm on a Nikon. Along with a very high standard of finish, the lens features Sigma's latest four-stop OS (Optical Stabilizer) system, which works a treat, as well as super-quiet and reasonably rapid HSM (Hypersonic Motor) autofocus. There's a lot to love here.

The Sigma's optics aren't quite as sharp as the Nikon's, but they're impressive nonetheless. Distortions and chromatic aberrations are well controlled, helped by the relatively meagre zoom range. Zoom creep in our test sample was non-existent, although you still get a zoom lock switch for good measure. Unless you really need the extra telephoto reach offered by the bigger lenses in the group, the Sigma 18-125mm makes an excellent choice for a wide range of camera makes and models.



Ratings

Features	●●●●●
Build quality	●●●●●
Handling	●●●●●
Image quality	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●●○

The Verdict

This is simply the best superzoom for Nikon users, even if it's more than twice the price of some lenses on test.

94%

Ratings

Features	●●●●○
Build quality	●●●●○
Handling	●●●●○
Image quality	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●●○

The Verdict

A highly accomplished lens in all respects. The only downside is that it has the smallest zoom range in the group.

90%



Sigma 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 DC OS

STREET PRICE £290

CONTACT www.sigma-imaging-uk.com

One of the very first lenses that Sigma produced with its proprietary OS (Optical Stabilizer) system, the 18-200mm is starting to show its age. Unlike other stabilised lenses in the group, you only get a three-stop rather than a four-stop benefit and you don't get Sigma's refined and near-silent HSM autofocus system, similar to Canon USM and Nikon AF-S. Then again, Canon's USM autofocus isn't featured on either of its superzoom lenses, so the Sigma still has potential at just half the price of the equivalent Canon 18-200mm.

Build quality feels good overall, but our review sample had a little zoom creep, about the same as with the Nikon 18-200mm, but much less noticeable than on the Canon 18-200mm. Optical quality was also a notch down from the other Sigma lenses in the group, with less sharpness and contrast, while chromatic aberrations were rather more noticeable, with colour fringing frequently adorning high-contrast edges of objects within scenes.



Ratings

Features	●●●●○
Build quality	●●●●○
Handling	●●●●○
Image quality	●●●○○
Value for money	●●●●○

The Verdict

The price is attractive for a stabilised 18-200mm lens, but with mediocre image quality, this isn't our first choice.

79%



Digital
Camera
Editor's
Choice ✓

Sigma 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3 DC OS HSM

STREET PRICE £400

CONTACT www.sigma-imaging-uk.com

A major step up from Sigma's older 18-200mm lens, this features Sigma's new-generation four-stop Optical Stabilizer plus you get HSM autofocus, which is quick and all but silent. Then there's the mightier zoom range, which is almost on a par with the Tamron 18-270mm.

For a superzoom lens with such a big range, the Sigma does an excellent job of combining silky-smooth zoom ring operation with zero zoom creep, and the manual focus ring is similarly smooth and precise, even if it lacks the Nikon's trick of enabling full-time manual focus override when you're in autofocus mode. Optically, the Sigma 18-250mm proved very convincing in our tests, with excellent sharpness, contrast and colour rendition, while distortions were reasonably well contained and resistance to ghosting and flare was also impressive. Considering it's much cheaper than the Canon or Nikon 18-200mm lenses, and £60 cheaper than the Tamron 18-270mm, this really is an excellent buy at the price.



Ratings

Features	●●●●○
Build quality	●●●●○
Handling	●●●●○
Image quality	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●●○

The Verdict

A cracking lens at the price, with excellent handling and reassuring build quality, along with a monster zoom range.

92%



Tamron 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II Macro

STREET PRICE £390
CONTACT www.intro2020.co.uk

This lens was something of a revelation when it was first launched, being almost identical in size and weight to Tamron's older 18-200mm lens, yet offering a more generous zoom range and better image quality. Indeed, sharpness and contrast are pretty much as good as almost any other lens in this group. Build quality is also impressive, and zoom creep is only an issue when using the 50-100mm focal range.

The major drawback is that, unlike every other lens on test here, the Tamron 18-250mm lacks an image stabiliser. Coupled with a relatively slow maximum aperture of f/6.3, this makes the effective telephoto reach of around 400mm almost impossible to utilise without increasing your camera's ISO to fend off camera shake in anything other than the brightest lighting conditions. Autofocus is only based on a standard micro-motor as well, making the Tamron look poor value compared with the Sigma 18-250mm OS HSM.



Tamron 18-270mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II VC Macro

STREET PRICE £460
CONTACT www.intro2020.co.uk

For sheer zoom power, this lens rules the roost with its amazing 15x range. It also features Tamron's VC (Vibration Correction) stabilisation system, which matches the latest Canon, Nikon and Sigma equivalents by offering a four-stop anti-shake advantage. This makes this lens much easier to use at longer telephoto lengths compared with Tamron's older 18-250mm.

Distortions aren't too bad considering the huge zoom range, and sharpness and contrast are extremely good, although chromatic aberrations are marginally more prevalent than usual. There's little to choose between this lens and the Sigma 18-270mm, but the Tamron's basic micro-motor autofocus system is noisier and its zoom ring is a little stiff and uneven by comparison.

Another slight curiosity is that Tamron sticks a 'Macro' badge on both its superzoom lenses, even though they're really not macro lenses and merely offer about the same maximum magnification factor as other lenses on test.



Ratings

Features	●●●○○
Build quality	●●●○○
Handling	●●●○○
Image quality	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●○○

The Verdict

Optical quality is great but lack of image stabilisation makes it hard to use the lens's telephoto reach without a tripod.

80%

Ratings

Features	●●●●○
Build quality	●●●●○
Handling	●●●○○
Image quality	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●○○


The Verdict

Very good optical quality and the mammoth 15x zoom range is unbeatable, but there's still room for improvement.

88%

The Verdict

Bigger isn't always better, so if you don't need maximum telephoto reach, there's a lot to be said for a more compact design and the Sigma 18-125mm OS proves that some of the best things do come in small packages. However, an effective telephoto reach of 300-430mm, compared with the diminutive Sigma's 200mm, is hard to resist, and a mightier zoom range gives you greater scope. Surprisingly, both Canon lenses fall flat, with unexceptional image quality and a lack of refinement.

For super-sizing your superzoom reach, the standout lenses are the Sigma 18-250mm OS and the Tamron 18-270mm VC, both of which deliver very acceptable optical performance, made all the more usable by effective stabilisation. Of the two, the Sigma wins out, thanks to its more refined HSM autofocus and smoother handling. For Nikon users who want the very best all-round quality and don't mind paying top dollar, the Nikon 18-200mm VR II gives top performance. 



Model	Canon EF-S 18-135mm f/3.5-5.6 IS	Canon EF-S 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6 IS	Nikon 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6G AF-S	Sigma 18-125mm f/3.8-5.6 DC OS
Street price (RRP)	£400 (£560)	£480 (£740)	£590 (£730)	£240 (£320)
Effective zoom range (Canon)	29-216mm	29-320mm	N/A	29-200mm
Effective zoom range (Nikon)	N/A	N/A	27-300mm	27-187mm
Mount options	Canon	Canon	Nikon	Canon, Nikon, Pentax, Sigma, Sony
Image stabiliser	4 stops	4 stops	4 stops	4 stops
Max magnification factor	0.21x	0.24x	0.22x	0.26x
Minimum focus	45cm	45cm	50cm	35cm
Autofocus motor type	Micro Motor	Micro Motor	Silent Wave	Hypersonic
Focus distance scale	No	No	Yes	Yes
Zoom lock switch	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Filter size	67mm	72mm	72mm	67mm
Lens hood	EW-73B, £25	EW-78D, £30	Included	Included
Dimensions (Dia x Length)	76x101mm	79x102mm	77x97mm	74x89mm
Weight	455g	595g	560g	490g



Model	Sigma 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 DC OS	Sigma 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3 DC OS	Tamron 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II	Tamron 18-270mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II VC
Street price (RRP)	£290 (£450)	£400 (£570)	£390 (£500)	£460 (£600)
Effective zoom range (Canon)	29-320mm	29-400mm	29-400mm	29-432mm
Effective zoom range (Nikon)	27-300mm	27-375mm	27-375mm	27-405mm
Mount options	Canon, Nikon, Sigma	Canon, Nikon, Pentax, Sigma, Sony	Canon, Nikon, Pentax, Sony	Canon, Nikon
Image stabiliser	3 stops	4 stops	None	4 stops
Max magnification factor	0.26x	0.29x	0.29x	0.29x
Minimum focus	45cm	45cm	45cm	49cm
Autofocus motor type	Micro Motor	Hypersonic	Micro Motor	Micro Motor
Focus distance scale	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Zoom lock switch	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Filter size	72mm	72mm	62mm	72mm
Lens hood	Included	Included	Included	Included
Dimensions (Dia x Length)	79x100mm	79x101mm	74x84mm	80x100mm
Weight	610g	630g	430g	560g