

# Bitesized Review

By  
John Hallett Photography



## **Bitesized Review: Lee 'big-stopper' Neutral Density Filter**

Whilst on a photoshoot in Snowdonia, north Wales, I had the chance to borrow a Lee 'big-stopper' neutral density filter. This piece of glass is so black it is impossible to see through it and hence it reduces the exposure by an incredible 10 stops. This has the effect of producing a silk-like appearance of moving water or clouds - and also star trails, since the long shutter speed it allows can pick up the rotation of the earth. Because it is so black it is impossible for the camera to set its exposure automatically - therefore it comes with a handy exposure guide so that you can note the exposure required without the filter and then calculate settings that can be manually dialled-in when using the filter.

It is part of a modular filter system whereby you buy one filter holder, one filter of each chosen type - and then adapter rings for each lens to allow the holder, and hence the filters, to be fitted to your entire range of lenses. This is a cost-effective solution if you have a lot of lenses with different filter thread sizes.

I hadn't got a filter holder adapter of the correct size and so had to hold the filter against the end of the lens for the duration of the exposure. This proved to be quite tricky since it required a long exposure (20-30 seconds) and any slight movement of the filter from the lens resulted in excess light entering - giving a lens-flare effect. This is a filter that definitely requires the proper filter holder.

*Lee filters are at the top-end of the modular filter system range because they are made of glass, as opposed to plastic. This gives reputed better quality images but also makes the filters more fragile and prone to damage. Treat them with care.*

Finding the correct exposure was also slightly more trial-and-error than the exposure guide implied and it took several attempts until I obtained a shot I was happy with.

But after a few attempts, and after tweaking the exposure a few times, I managed to get some decent results. Even though it is neutral density I noticed that it gave quite a pronounced colour-cast but this was easily corrected in Lightroom. Actually I needn't have bothered because ultimately I decided that a monochrome look worked the best.

So, would I buy one? Well, retailing at nearly £100 (Sept 2016) it needs careful consideration. Blurry-water, blurry-cloud and star-trail shots seem to be all the rage at the moment, but for how long?. If you do really want one and already have the Lee filter holder then the 'big-stopper' is a cost-effective option. Otherwise look around for a similar screw-in variety for one lens of your choice (I later got an 82mm 9-stop ND400 filter for just £20 off e-bay).

For the record, there are other manufacturers of 10-stop ND filters including Singh Ray, B&W, Hoya and Hi-Tech. There are some who claim that good quality welding-mask glass works just as well - and I may try this at some point to find out.

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## Pro's

- Good quality glass
- Cost effective if you already have a Lee filter system
- Obtains some stunning effects

## Con's

- Expensive
- Fragile
- Gives a colour-cast

So here's the image I settled for. Not bad considering it was my first attempt with this type of filter.



*Similar products from other manufacturers are also available.*

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