

Classic bins reborn

After more than 30 years out of the market, Barr & Stroud has launched a new range of binoculars. *Mike Alibone* takes the Saharas out into the field.

Review: Barr & Stroud Sahara 8x32 and 8x42 binoculars

WITH ITS BINOCULARS adopted for use by the military during two world wars, Barr & Stroud was the leading British optics manufacturer until its disappearance from the public arena in 1977. Now the vintage brand is back, investing in technology and injecting its former pedigree into new and modern designs.

The target market appears to be the budget-conscious, with four ranges combining to offer 20 models, none of which is currently retailing above £200. Surprisingly, the Saharas represent the lowest-priced category. The 8x32 and 8x42 are currently on offer at £94.99 and £99.99 respectively at the time of writing (RRP is a shade over £100 for both models, at

terms with the 32 mm model's close focus. Its limit of little more than 1 m produced tunnel vision 'barrelling' and required some minor adjustment of the dioptre away from its optimal setting to achieve sharp focusing at this distance. The 1.98 m close focus – measured under test at 2.1 m – for the 42 mm model appeared less restricted and made for more comfortable viewing. Apart from these two differences, the models are essentially the same in all other aspects of performance.

A binocular will stand or fall on the image it delivers and if there was such a thing as a value index of 'image quality per pound' then these models would score very highly. Colours and contrast are both very good, even though the colour tones appear to be very fractionally darker than reality, while the colour cast is just on the warm side of neutral. The overall image is generally bright and centre-sharp, although the resolution deteriorates and the image begins to soften as you move into the outer 30 per cent of the field of view, where the curvature of field is surprisingly low. Even the chromatic aberration is not overly intrusive – I've encountered worse in binoculars retailing at considerably higher prices.

The depth of field is good, reducing the need for continual refocusing with the broadly ribbed, rubber-covered focusing wheel, and the field of view is an acceptable 129 m at 1,000 m for both models.

The build quality appears to be sound, with a reasonable layer of rubber body armour, while both models are gas-filled and waterproof to a depth of 1.5 m for three minutes. I found both to be light in weight, well balanced and easy to operate, although on a personal level I decided the slightly larger 42 mm was more comfortable to hold in relation to my hand size. Some thought appears to have gone into the design of the strap attachment lugs, which are curved and smoothly contoured, and therefore do not stick uncomfortably into the hands when the binoculars are being held.

In terms of mechanics, the focusing wheel turns smoothly with only a modicum of resistance. Almost two full revolutions takes the image from close focus to infinity, while the dioptre – mounted on the right ocular – can be easily operated, with the rubber-covered eyecup click-locked in either its fully retracted or fully extended positions.

Accessories include a 'no frills' lanyard, stay-on objective covers and an articulated rainguard. With only a £5 difference in price between the two models both represent attractive buys, with perhaps the larger binocular offering more for your money at the lower end of the optics market.

Build quality is sound, with reasonable layer of rubber body armour

Good depth of field reduced need for refocusing

Image generally bright, though 8x42 (pictured) is better model in lower light intensities

Chromatic aberration not overly intrusive

Tech spec

	8x32	8x42
Model:	8x32	8x42
Price:	£104.95	£114.95
Size:	128x133 mm	133x136 mm
Weight:	596 g	670 g
Field of view:	129 m at 1,000 m	129 m at 1,000 m
Close focus:	1.01 m	1.98 m
Gas-filled:	Yes	Yes
Waterproof:	Yes	Yes
Guarantee:	10 years	10 years

£104.95 and £114.95 respectively). This is astonishingly good value given the design features incorporated and the resultant image delivered – especially by the 42 mm model.

Of the two objective sizes, I found the 42 mm to perform marginally better in two respects. Firstly, at lower light intensities it was fractionally brighter and, secondly, I had some difficulty coming to

Birdwatch

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