

# Group test

## Binoculars

Whether you're whale watching off the coast of Iceland, birdwatching in Costa Rica or on Safari in South Africa, a good pair of binoculars are an essential piece of kit...

A pair of binoculars can make all the difference. Whether you're on safari in the Serengeti, birdwatching in Costa Rica or just enjoying a day at the races, that eyepiece you're peering through can take you as close to the action as your wallet can afford. 'Bins' are an essential investment if you don't want to be left squinting in the direction of that leopard your guide has just pointed out, but it's crucial to pick the right pair for you.

Key to the world of binoculars is understanding those two numbers tacked onto the end of the product name. A 10x25 pair, for example, will be able to magnify a subject ten times – which means an object 100m in the distance will appear to be just ten metres away – and will do so employing a lens that is 25mm in diameter. The significance of the magnification is clear, but the size of the lens is just as important because this will determine how much light can get in. This can make all the difference when viewing subjects in low light – at dawn and dusk, for instance. Some manufacturers will also express the product's 'twilight factor', which takes into account poor light and reveals how well the binoculars will perform. It's a good idea to work this out, as it's wrong to assume that a pair with the highest magnification will work best.

As a rule, the bigger the binoculars, the better – you'll get more powerful magnification and brighter images. Yet for travellers, for whom size and weight are key factors, an agreeable compromise has to be found. You'll need to consider what it is you need the binoculars for and how much money you've set aside, and then test out each pair in the shop before you make your purchase. A good tip is to try them out during the day and then return to the store later that evening when the light has diminished. It's also a good idea not to try out binoculars that are clearly beyond your budget, because anything you test afterwards will feel inferior!

Finally, it's important to take into account the overall durability. Some are waterproof, some come in a rubberised housing, and make sure you check if a carrying case and strap are included in the package.



Image by Marc van der Ohjjs on Flickr

### Canon 8x25 IS

£384.99  
www.canon.co.uk

The Canon 8x25 IS binoculars are bigger than most of the others on test, but that's largely due to the extra image stabilisation (IS) technology – something none of the other binoculars have. Still they're only 12cm wide, weigh a manageable 490g and come with a padded carry case. The 8x magnification should be good enough for most outdoor activities, and the 25mm objective lenses mean you shouldn't have too much trouble viewing subjects in lower light. But really it's all about the IS, which, it has to be said, makes a noticeable difference. The technology actively works to counter any unwanted movement, and also suppresses chromatic aberrations and reduces colour 'smearing' to keep the image clear. On the downside, the technology does have to be battery powered, but the common CR123A camera battery used provides enough juice for up to six hours of continuous use. Altogether, an excellent choice, though the price may put some off.



★★★★★

### Olympus 8x25 PC I

£119.99  
www.olympus.com

Small and compact, these Olympus binoculars are great for travellers because they only weigh 280g and pack away nicely into their padded carrying case. Plus their 8x magnification and 25mm objective lenses are more than adequate for most activities the traveller may encounter on the road. They won't compete with the serious equipment of the professionals, but these don't pretend to be anything but basic, straightforward bins. The multi-coated lenses offer maximum brightness and contrast for their size, plus they'll keep out those harmful UV rays. Lens caps – always good things to have in order to keep your bins in tip-top shape – are included, though strangely only for the eyepieces. Their design won't necessarily appeal to all, but these binoculars are a good, hassle-free choice for those travellers concerned about weight and who don't want to spend too much on their first pair.



★★★★★

### Barr & Stroud Sahara 10x25

£89.95  
www.barrandstroud.com

Described as a 'rugged go-anywhere' pair of binoculars by the people at Barr & Stroud, we couldn't agree more. A durable rubber body not only protects against the inevitable bumps along the way, but is also waterproof to a depth of 1.5m for three minutes. So, even if you drop the Sahara 10x25 bins into a muddy puddle, and don't immediately fish them out, you won't have to buy a new pair. Weighing 370g and small and compact, they're easily carried around as well. The 10x magnification beats several of the other bins on test, and the 25mm fully coated BAK-4 lenses let in plenty of light, ensure good contrast and are totally fog-proof. The focus control wheel also takes you from close focus (two metres) to infinity in around



three quarters of a turn, so keeping a moving subject in focus is nice and easy. Throw in a padded carrying case, straps and lens cloth, and you've got yourself an impressive pair of compact binoculars – all the more so considering the remarkably low price when compared with the others seen here.

★★★★★

### Eschenbach Sektor F-Ww 10x25

£159.95  
www.eschenbach-optics.com

The smallest on test, German manufacturer Eschenbach's Sektor 10x25 roof-prism binoculars are definitely travel friendly. With a tough rubber body, when folded together these will easily fit into a jacket pocket – though they do come with their own compact carrying case as well. Weighing just 270g, these are also the lightest bins on test. However, don't let the small size make you think there's a compromise in performance, because you've still got 10x magnification, with a close focus of three metres. The 25mm, multi-coated objective lenses use BAK-4 glass, offering a wide-angle viewing experience and making these bins ideal for tracking fast-moving subjects. The twilight rate of



15.8 also means you won't have too much trouble in low light conditions. Although slightly more expensive than a few of the other pairs reviewed here, these binoculars are a quality buy, and the full five-year guarantee means you shouldn't have to worry about replacing them any time soon.

★★★★★

### Bresser Corvette 10x24

£124.95  
www.bresseroptics.co.uk

Another roof-prism pair of compact binoculars, the Corvette 10x24 from Bresser are not quite as small as the Eschenbach model, but will still fit into a larger pocket and weigh in just a little heavier, at 302g. The 10x magnification comes courtesy of fully multi-coated lenses, but being slightly narrower – 24mm in diameter – than the Eschenbach's lenses, their twilight rate is correspondingly lower, at 15.49. Nevertheless, the lenses are again made of high-quality BAK-4 glass, and ultimately there really is very little to tell them apart visually, as the images are both sharp and rich in contrast. Well built and with smooth focus control, the Corvette 10x24 look and feel durable, and the overall package is completed



with lens caps, a carrying bag and lens cloth all included in the price. They may not be quite up to the impressive standard of the Eschenbachs, but at £35 cheaper they are more than worth a look.

★★★★★

### Barr & Stroud Sierra 8x32

£139.95  
www.barrandstroud.com

As a point of comparison, we thought we'd include some medium-size bins to give you a sense of what a slightly larger pair can do. Costing less than some of the compact bins on test, these are great value for money – as is the other Barr & Stroud pair. The extra 10mm in the diameter of the objective lenses in the Sierra 8x32 do make a significant difference, allowing more light to enter and resulting in a twilight rate of 17.88. Yet, of course, the trade-off is the increased size and weight (599g), but that doesn't stop this pair from still being a very portable set of binoculars. As with the Sahara pair, these are waterproof to 1.5m for three minutes. The nitrogen-filled casing also ensures your lenses won't fog up in adverse weather



conditions, while the BAK-4 glass and fully coated lenses offer excellent images. Lens caps and a padded carrying case are thrown in too for good measure, but if weight is a key consideration you'll probably want to look elsewhere.

★★★★★