

Cosina-Voigtlander 21/4 Skopar Review

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Here's the next in my series of reviews of the lenses I use. As with the rest, this review is based on actually putting the lens on my camera and taking photographs with it over time. It's not just words based on manufacturers published specifications or just a few shots over a couple-day "loaner" period. I own it, I use it, I write about it. In this case, I've had the lens for ~3 months now and have put it through enough of its paces in order to develop what I believe to be a mature opinion on it. I hope those out there reading this review find it helpful and informative.

Why?

I like wides. I really like wides. I don't like wides for the typical "wide angle"-type subjects such as landscapes, but rather for my street photography. Composed correctly, a wide will give the viewer more of a sense of "being there". Plus you can get a lot more of the subjects environment in the image. The trick is that the wider the lens, the closer you have to be to the primary subject. In other words, the subject should still be prominent in the frame. That's how I like to use wides, anyway. They also come in handy shooting city architecture, especially in "compressed" cities like Taipei where there isn't a lot of footspace surrounding the buildings. Try backing up to get a full shot of the Taipei 101 building with anything less than 21mm and your butt will be pressed against the pickup counter of the Starbucks down the street.

So I like wides.

Established.

Let's move on.

As wide lenses go, prior to this purchase, I had the Cosina-Voigtlander 15/4.5, 25/4, and 28/1.9 (I don't consider 35 to be "wide"). See the canyon-like hole in the line-up? Yes, I'm being somewhat sarcastic. In reality, the 25/4 Snapshot Skopar has a virtually permanent home on my Bessa L. Plus, it's not rangefinder-coupled. Not a huge deal, but sometimes I do like a better idea of where my point of focus is going to be. Rather than waste (okay, maybe "waste" isn't the right term) \$1500 on the Zeiss-Ikon or double that on the Leitz equivalent, I decided to pick up the CV 21/4 Skopar. It's wider than the 25 but it's also RF-coupled, super compact, and fits between 15 and 28 well.

Good enough excuse, right?

Lets move on.

Out of the Box

I got a great deal on this lens from a local guy who deals on eBay. Bought it off eBay using PayPal and it was delivered via messenger the very next day. He even gave me a great deal on the Leica-styled rectangular hood, the LH-4. So the hood was an impulse buy. With the savings in shipping and the good price he gave me on both the lens and hood it would have been a waste to pass on it. He also offered some decent prices on B+W filters, but I usually shoot naked...err...my lenses without filters...so I passed on those. As previously stated, it arrived the next day via a local messenger service, well-packed with styrafoam peanuts and everything.

Box opens.

Darn. Black paint. So I should expect the finish to last all of a couple of weeks...maybe a month if I never use the aperture ring. I actually usually get my lenses in silver as there's no finish to wear down (plus some joints sell them cheaper because some suckers think that black makes them look professional and are willing to pay more for it) but this time I ordered the black hoping Cosina had gone back to using an anodized black finish. High hopes I know, but I can dream, can't I?

Oh, well.

Everything else was just as I expected a Skopar to be: compact and lightweight.

Handling

Being the owner of another Skopar lens, the 25/4, I already new what to expect here. There seems to be a general split in opinion on the usefulness of a focusing knob. I'm one of those who finds them very handy. Maybe it's because I have big hands? Regardless, I like the fact that Skopars all have focusing knobs built in. The lens is so small that I can't imagine anyone but a 3 year-old focusing it without the knob...and why would a 3 year old want a Skopar, anyway?

Teletubies are much cheaper and more colorful. The short focus throw plus the knob combine to make focusing a quick & easy.

How about we use focusing to segway into...

Ensign, Hyperfocus...Engage!

Time for a bit of honesty. Remember at some point above I mentioned that the 21/4 had RF-coupling unlike the 25/4? Remember how that was one of the excus...err..."reasons" I gave for getting this lens? Well, truth be told, in the 3+ months I've had the 21/4 Skopar I have yet to actually focus it using the rangefinder. So far I've done nothing but shoot it hyperfocal. At such a wide angle focusing is the exception rather than the rule. Okay, hold out your arm. Can you see your elbow? At f16 this thing focuses from your elbow to forever. That's closer then you can focus with your rangefinder, not to mention closer then what you can see in the viewfinder. Too slow? At f5.6 change "elbow" to "fingertip", still more then enough to get it all in. Rendering

Contrasty. Very contrasty. Much more then my taste, which is why I kept the 35/1.7 Ultron and sold the 35/2.5 Skopar. But it is a matter of tastes and everyones are different . I prefer to have more midtones in my negs to play with. On the plus side, it is extremely sharp. Assuming that you are shooting film (I've heard that there may be different results for digital), vignetting is negligeable wide open and non-existant by f5.6. Distortion? What, you think that this is an SLR lens or something? Barrelling is absolutely zero and with your film plane parallel to the subject they don't shift off to the side, either. The only distortion worth mentioning is the "stretching" inherent in all wide angle lenses.

Conclusion: the Good, the Bad, & the Ugly

Good: Inexpensive, sharp, and pocketable. Zero distortion.Bad: Contrasty. Yeah, it's a personal preference...and why can't CVs other wide angle Skopars have focusing "stops" like the 25/4?Ugly: Slow maximum aperture of f4 makes it impractical for low ambient light. And CV is still using a black paint finish. {mos_fb_discuss:8}