

*Zeiss Terra ED 8x32 & Conquest HD 8x32  
Vs Swarovski CL 8x30 Companion:  
A Review  
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22/07/2015

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## Background

Zeiss has dipped a toe into the less ambitious regions of the binoculars market in the past with the plastic-bodied Diafun 8x30 and 10x30, and the Design Selection pocket binoculars in 4x12, 6x18, 8x20 and 10x25 formats, but it wasn't until the first generation Conquests was introduced over 10 years ago that Zeiss looked like a real contender in the less-than-premium market. The first Conquests comprised 8x20 and 10x25 pockets, 8/10x30 mids, 8/10x40 standards and 12/15x45s. In more recent times Zeiss has begun to look far more serious with its line-up of three tiers comprising Terra ED, Conquest HD and Victory HT, SF and FL models. Unlike the first Conquests with their slightly undersized objectives and modest fields of view and close-focus distances, the current Conquests and Terras get 'full-sized' objectives and competitive specifications.

Swarovski's roof prism offerings have been at the premium end of the market until relatively recently when the more affordable CL range was introduced, now consisting of the 8/10x25 pockets and the 8x30 Companion.

Visiting us today we have the recently introduced Zeiss Terra ED 8x32, the 2012 Zeiss Conquest HD 8x32 and Swarovski's CL Companion 8x30 which launched in 2011. In the accompanying photograph of this test's contenders, the more eagle-eyed may notice that the Conquest looks a little second-hand. This is because I have had it for almost a year now and it has been heavily used. I thought I had spruced it up nicely but the camera lens reveals a less than perfect result.

## Price and Specifications

At the time of writing, the retail prices (not list prices) in the UK, European Union and USA pan out like this (but please don't blame me if your local prices vary from these):

|                   |                      |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| Conquest HD 8x32  | £590 / €745/ \$900   |
| Terra ED 8x32     | £319 / €379 / \$320  |
| CL Companion 8x30 | £750 / €900/ \$1,000 |

Scanning through the specifications we can see several points of interest. The Terra and CL run almost neck and neck for length and weight at 125mm / 4.9in and 510g / 18oz for the Terra, and 119mm / 4.7in and 500g / 17.6oz for the CL. The Conquest is a little longer at 132mm and significantly heavier at 630g / 22ozs which I attribute to its aluminium body, the Terra being fibreglass-reinforced plastic and the CL a mix of plastic and some aluminium. So the CL is the shortest and lightest here, the Terra is very close behind and the Conquest is definitely more grown-up in size and weight.

The CL's field of view provides a rather modest portion of the scenery despite Swarovski's promoting it as the traveller's companion:

|          |             |                   |
|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| CL       | 124m at 1km | 372ft at 1,000yds |
| Terra    | 135m at 1km | 405ft at 1,000yds |
| Conquest | 140m at 1km | 420ft at 1,000yds |

Similarly, when it comes to close-focus capability, the CL harks back to a time 10 years ago or more:

|          |              |
|----------|--------------|
| CL       | 3.0m / 9.8ft |
| Terra    | 1.5m / 4.9ft |
| Conquest | 1.5m / 4.9ft |

One line of argument could be that maximising the field of view and giving a competitive close-focus would have added size and weight, and so were out of the question if the 30mm

objective rather than a 32mm, indicates that keeping the CL compact and light was the number one priority. This reasoning is contradicted by the almost equally compact and lightweight 32mm Terra that has delivered all of these attributes, so it can be done.

### **Inter-pupillary Distance Range**

Zeiss has provided 54-76mm IPDs in the past so it is a shame to note the step backwards taken with Terra and Conquest offering only 56-74mm. In particular, while the little Terra is suitable for people of all statures, its light weight and compact size should be especially attractive to smaller people and the IPD range should have been specified to include these in my opinion. The CL also only provides 56 – 74mm. If manufacturers want to attract the broadest possible market for their products they need to make sure they will fit the broadest possible range of people.

### **Impressions in the Hand**

The CL is a most attractive instrument and in the hand feels worth every penny of the asking price, which makes its modest specifications all the more puzzling. Both Terra and Conquest benefit from the elegant new Zeiss ‘family’ appearance, and also feel built to last.

While all 3 units handle nicely, the extra weight of the Conquest is immediately noticeable, although anyone used to the roughly 800 grams / 29ozs of 42 mm bins will view its 630 grams / 22ozs with relief.

### **Eyecups, Eye-relief and Accessories**

The eyecups, rain-guard and objective covers work well on the Conquest, so for once you don't have to read a tirade of criticism from me about Zeiss accessories. Indeed I am going to lavish praise on the eyecups carried by the Terra, which although they have only two positions (fine at this price level) feel and move with a feeling of solidity and precision that puts to shame those on Zeiss's top Victory models. The CL's eyecups are the usual Swarovski fare which means excellent. There has been no specification down-grading here.

Eye-relief for the two Zeisses is published as 16mm and the CL as 15mm, and no problems were encountered with any of them.

The cases supplied with the CL and Conquest are the familiar green clam-shell for the CL and usual black case for the Conquest. Terra comes only with a soft draw-string pouch and hereby hangs a tale. I understand that the transparent plastic display case in which the Terra is shipped was designed to make the binoculars visible in those ‘pile-em high’ stores in the USA, which house mountains of cartons inside which the products are normally invisible. Unfortunately the display case has no room in it for a carrying case. One argument goes like this: every pair of binoculars should be supplied with a case whatever the price level. Another argument says: many people don't use the carrying case at all, so why not make the binoculars available at the lowest price possible and then let folks buy the case of their choice, ranging from none at all, up to a Pelican case, if that's what they want.

For those in the US, you can contact Zeiss and they will supply a case for a very nominal charge and for those in the rest of the world the Zeiss black case in 32mm size is widely available if you would like that one, and there are so many others available it's not really an issue.

### **Focus Wheels**

The CL's focus is smooth and luxurious but is so stiff that I had a hard time getting a focus on even moderately fast birds. Using it for sight-seeing this was no problem at all and it did give a feeling of precision and quality of build. It may ease with use of course but there was no sign of this happening during its stay with me.

Both Conquest and Terra have smooth focus actions and both are fast enough (the Conquest is faster) to get on butterflies and dragonflies and other similarly unpredictable beasts. Recently, the Conquest was my mainstay in the South of France where the insect fauna is huge, and combined with the many special birds present to make great demands on speed and accuracy of focus, and the Conquest was excellent in this environment.

### **Dioptr Adjuster**

The CL has a dioptr adjuster so stiff that no way could it be rotated while the instrument was held up to the eyes. It took some determination to rotate it at all, so setting it took an inordinate amount of time. Once set it didn't move, but this unit is unacceptable and needs to go back to the factory. To be fair I have met this type of defect before on several brands including Zeiss. However I checked with two Swaro dealers in two different countries and they both confirmed CL dioptr do tend to be extra stiff. This means the adjustment should be reliable of course, but do check to make sure yours is actually adjustable when held up to the eyes.

The two other instruments were easy to set and they too proved reliable over the course of the field work.

### **Optical Performance**

I visited the same site with this trio as for the SF and EL shoot-out and used the same targets to explore their optical capabilities. Geese, Swans, Coots, Grebes, ducks, Swifts and Swallows, together with the feathers they left behind, all played their part.

I started by examining the feather textures on the waterfowl and then moved on to a critical examination of the structure of the discarded feathers, the most demanding of which were the down feathers with their wispy filaments.

The Conquest rendered the fine tips of these filaments sharply, the Terra and CL less so, with the Terra actually being a little sharper than the CL. Having said that, this difference between CL and Terra was not noticeable in normal viewing so for practical purposes you can say they performed at the same level.

Given its price I was somewhat surprised that the CL was competing with the Terra and not the Conquest, so after a few days I conducted more tests, starting with the CL first so that when assessing it my eyes were fresh. The results were the same.

All three units delivered realistic colours but the Conquest's view was brighter and livelier, with noticeably better contrast than the other two. I think the Terra could be forgiven for this in view of its price, but not the Swarovski.

Chromatic aberration did not intrude with any of the three in normal viewing, but could just be seen on white swans against dark backgrounds, right at the edge of the field of view. I suspect I might have been tilting the units to see the edges and so could have been looking off-axis and exacerbating this effect.

### **Summing up**

This trio of medium-format binoculars might appear to be similar but actually various factors combine to differentiate them sufficiently for the concept of an overall winner to be not very useful. More than ever it's a case of what you want from these binoculars, the size of your budget, and your personal take on what constitutes value for money.

### **Choosing**

The CL has received some tough criticism from many quarters for its optics, something I think that has been driven by disappointment that it doesn't have EL-standard optics, but

rather over-looking the fact that it doesn't carry an EL price. In fact this attractive little instrument certainly has the build-quality to justify the price and while its accomplishments are decidedly modest, it is by no means a bad binocular.

Does this leave the attractive CL all dressed up and no place to go? Not at all. Maybe you already own a bigger Swaro and you want something smaller and lighter than an EL 8x32, and considerably cheaper at £750 / \$1,000, compared with the EL at £1440 / \$1950 (although some special offers are currently available on ELs). If so and if your new compacts must have that Swarovski *chic*, then CL will fit the bill for you. Dress up and take it to the horse racing or golf tournament and it will always look smarter than you. Take it out sight-seeing or birding and it will do a good job. Whether it is good value for money is a different question and one that can only be answered by you.

If you want the best optics of the bunch and don't mind the extra heft, then the Conquest is the one to go for. It has a great field of view and close focus, and a focusing speed fast enough to get on butterflies but not so fast that you can't get a quick and accurate focus on birds.

On the other hand your budget might be lower and maybe you want a great specification but in a lighter and more compact package, with good optics and excellent value for money, in which case you will find that the Terra ticks all the right boxes.