

## AF-S Zoom-Nikkor ED 17-35mm f/2.8D IF

*The big boy in Nikon's wide angle zoom offerings.*

### Quick Evaluation

**Highly recommended;**  
A classic top performer.

★★★★★ features  
★★★★★ performance  
★★★★★ build  
★★★★★ value

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### Limitations

The 17-35mm lens has limitations you need to be aware of:

**No Converters.** While you can mount the TC-14e and TC20e on the lens (why?), you can severely damage the lens if you do so. When you zoom out to wider focal lengths, the rear element of the lens would hit the front element of the converter. Not a big loss, though. Who uses converters on a wide angle zoom?

**AF-S Limitations.** The in-lens motor that makes this lens focus so swift and sure works only on the F4, F5, F100, N65, N70, N75, N80, N90/N90s, D40, D40x, D50, D70, D70s, D80, D100, D200, D1 series D2 series, Fujifilm S2, S3, and S5, and Kodak DCS 14n bodies. If you have an older body, such as the N60 or Fujifilm S1, AF-S is not operative.



*A solid replacement for the old 20-35mm; adds faster focusing and a wider angle of view without sacrificing anything.*

Lens Formula	13 elements in 10 groups; 2 glass mold aspherical, 1 compound aspherical, and 2 ED elements.
Other Features	Manual focus override, AF-S lens focusing motor, internal focus, 77mm filter size. Comes with HB-23 hood and CL-76 hard case. Focuses to 1' (0.28m).
Size and Weight	About 106mm long, 26.3 ounces (745g).
Price	US\$1495 (street; sometimes rebate lowers this price)

### The Basics

Nikon was one of the first to make wide angle zooms (the 25-50mm f/4 in 1979 was arguably the first of the species). Each generation seems to go a little wider, leaving us with these three autofocus zooms:

- 1 [20-35mm f/2.8D ED](#). The first truly wide angle zoom Nikon made. Long resident in a lot of pro bags, this discontinued lens is a good choice on the used market if you don't need anything wider than 20mm.
- 1 [18-35mm f/3.5-4.5D ED](#). A surprise when it appeared, this is a very sharp and capable lens at the wide end, a little less so at the long end (35mm). I consider it the bargain of the bunch, especially for scenic photographers who don't need f/2.8 or AF-S.
- 1 [17-35mm f/2.8D ED IF](#). The subject of this review.

All three of these lenses are universally regarded as being sharp, quality designs. Which one you pick should be determined by your budget and needs. Personally, I'm happy shooting with any of the three (as long as I don't need the extra "wideness" of the 17-35mm over the 20-35mm). But you probably want to know about the lens that's the subject of this review, so let's get right to the details.

This is a not a very complex lens considering it's focal length range and other parameters, with only 13 elements in 10 groups. In recent Nikon designs, that's almost spartan. Three of the elements are what are known as aspherical--they have an irregular curve in them. Unlike most aspherical elements in other lenses, only one of the three is created by using plastic--the other two are ground glass, which is probably what makes this lens so expensive. Two of the elements are ED (low dispersion glass), which helps the different wavelengths of light focus on the same point. The aperture is a 9-blade type (though see my comments about bokeh in the Performance section, below).

Overall, the new lens is larger and heavier than the one it replaces (the 20-35mm), It retains the two-ring design (near ring is for zooming, far ring is for focusing). AF-S means that the lens has a built-in motor for focusing, doesn't rotate the front element during focus, focuses very fast and reliably, and allows you to override autofocus by simply grabbing the focus ring and turning it.

Between the two rings is a focus scale (but with no depth of field or infrared markings). You know, even if the lens manufacturers don't want to give us depth of field markings, the least they could do is mark the hyperfocal point at one focal length and aperture combination. On the left side of the lens (from the back of the camera) is one button:

- 1 **Manual Focus button:** In the **M/A** position the lens works as usual (autofocus with manual override). In the **M** position, the lens focuses only manually.

The HB-23 hood supplied with the lens is the bayonet type butterfly style. It can be

reversed onto the lens for carrying, but it adds diameter to lens when you do so.

On a digital body with 1.5x magnification, this lens becomes the equivalent to a 25.5 to 52.5mm lens (one of my old favorites in the 35mm world was the 24-50mm, though it had terrible barrel distortion, so the 17-35mm feels like a big step towards the better on my D1x and D100).

## Handling

There's not much to say: everything is pretty much where you expect and works the way you want it to. The zoom ring has a smooth operation, the focus ring only slightly less so. Both rings give the full range of options through only a quarter turn; I'd have preferred slightly more turn, which gives you more subtle control, but it's fine as is. The lens doesn't extend during zoom or focus, by the way.

About the only real complaint might be that this is a lens that could use the new pinch-type lens cap (update 8/7/2005: Nikon now seems to be supplying the pinch cap with the new versions of the lens). If you have the hood on, it's a little difficult to get the lens cap on and off.

## Performance

Performance on a wide angle zoom usually boils down to three things: sharpness, light falloff, and distortion. So without making you wait for it, I'll just say this is a sharp lens with relatively low falloff and distortion.

Sharpness is strong throughout the range, with f/5.6 being the point of maximum sharpness on my sample. But even at f/2.8 in the corners this lens is an excellent performer. Frankly, at 18mm and f/2.8 this zoom beats the pants off the 18mm f/2.8D Nikkor in the corners. That's right, a zoom lens is better than a prime lens!



*One of the stranger wildlife photos I've taken recently. Wildlife photo, you say? Yes, look in the lower right corner. These deer apparently thought they were mountain goats--this is the cliff below Pt. Reyes Lighthouse. D100, 17-35mm lens at 35mm, f/13 handheld at 1/30 second. The shot below is a 100% crop that shows, yes, the eyes on the deer are sharp.*

*I've used only a bit of sharpening here to counter the anti-aliasing effect (you shouldn't see any telltale edge effects). Remember, this is handheld at 1/30 second AND you're looking at small detail that was well over a hundred feet below me. Sharp enough? I think so. I don't think the D100 is capable of capturing any smaller detail, actually.*



Light falloff is reasonably well under control throughout the range, with visible corner falloff on 35mm cameras, though not objectionable; with digital bodies, the falloff is nearly invisible, though it's still there wide open. By f/5.6 the falloff is gone pretty much throughout the zoom range.

Distortion performance is a mixed bag, but good. At 17mm there's evident barrel distortion--just enough to rule out this lens for architectural photography but not enough to make most of us worry. At 35mm, the distortion is virtually gone and straight lines at the edge of the frame look straight. I don't know of a wide angle zoom that doesn't have some barrel distortion at the wide end (some have it throughout their zoom range), and this lens I'd characterize as being one of the best performers in this regard. Still, if you need straight lines at 17mm, this isn't the lens to give it to you.

Autofocus is very fast and hunt-free. Personally, I rarely autofocus a wide angle zoom, as depth of field is more important to me than focus speed, but if I were a photojournalist, I'd be very happy with the autofocus performance.

To me the worst performance factor of this lens is the bokeh (visual quality of out of focus areas), and even that is something I'd characterize as good. Near out-of-focus areas tend to have a slight unpleasantness to them, though far out-of-focus areas seem fine. While the lens has the 9-blade aperture diaphragm that is usually associated with better bokeh on the Nikkors, I note that my sample tends to have one point that has a hard joint in it, making for a round-with-a-small-defect opening. Perhaps that's what is making the out-of-focus highlights "pop an edge" and make me like the bokeh less than usual (I've noticed this defect on other samples, by the way). In short, I'm not enamored by the bokeh of this lens and am glad that its rare that you try to isolate focus with a wide angle zoom. Most of the time I'm using hyperfocal focus or maximizing depth of field, so bokeh isn't a big issue.

Flare performance seems pretty good. Unless light is hitting directly on the front element, I've not seen any visible contrast degradation, and the supplied butterfly type hood is adequate in keeping light from hitting the front element in most situations. Shooting into the sun (or a light source) can be problematic in some, but not all, situations. Curiously, the only time I've ever questioned the flare performance of this lens is when I was shooting with an infrared filter into the sun.

## Drawbacks

- 1 **Expensive.** This lens is almost triple the price of the 18-35mm Nikkor. Is it three times a good? Not really. For the extra money you get slightly better edge performance for 35mm film, better 35mm focal length performance, and f/2.8 at all focal lengths. You also get slightly faster focusing, but that's not really an issue with a wide angle lens.
- 1 **Bokeh.** I've seen (and expect) better.
- 1 **Heavy and Big.** I've you're looking for a light lens that takes reasonable-sized filters, this ain't it.

## Positives

- 1 **Sharp.** The best of the wide angle zooms Nikon has produced, no questions asked, which is saying something. Perhaps the sharpest wide angle zoom you can buy for a Nikon body.
- 1 **Build.** The usual heavy-duty approach to build quality. Short of the very exposed front and rear elements, this lens is batter-resistant. I've bumped and dropped mine more than once in pursuit of a picture, and not only does it work as before, but there's no evidence of the abuse.