

Nikon Articles - Nikkor 45mm f2.8 P Review

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Subject: 45 f/2.8 P Nikkor: It's a Gem

I like normal focal length lenses. For years I shot with just an FM and 50 f/1.4 Nikkor, and when that's all you use, you learn to pre-visualize scenes in that perspective. Even today, when using a 35-70 f/2.8D Nikkor, I find myself shooting it around 50 mm more often than any other focal length.

But several years ago I sold my last 50 mm lens. Closed down a bit it was sharp (one photographer who shot with it and the latest \$2000 Leica-R 50 f/1.4 told me that he found the Nikkor to be sharper). But other characteristics of photos it delivers -- compromises the lens designers made to achieve that excellent sharpness at mid apertures -- displeased me: harsh, not gradual, tonal gradations; harsh out-of-focus areas, often with doubled lines I found distracting; an inability to hold detail in shadow areas. These are not important aspects of a photograph to many photographers, and for them the 50 mm Nikkors (I've used the 1.2, 1.4 and 1.8 lenses) are outstanding tools. But they caused me to move to the 35-70 f/2.8 and 35 f/1.4 Nikkors (the 60 mm Micro-Nikkor is also very good).

So I was excited to read that Nikon was releasing the 45 mm f/2.8 P Nikkor. Tessar optical designs, which this lens is, typically render the look of photos I prefer while maintaining good sharpness. Additionally, a small, light lens to carry around on the camera is something I'm always looking for. When I saw B&H had the lens available, I ordered one.

When you take the lens out of the box, the first thing apparent is how small it is. Put it on a camera body, and it extends just 5/8" from the lens mount -- about half the depth of the 50 mm f/1.8 AF Nikkor. It will easily slip into a pants pocket.

Its mechanical quality is superb, with metal construction, and all numbers and words engraved, not just printed on. The filter threads are metal (not even the super big and expensive 80-200 f/2.8 AFS Nikkor has that). Manual focus feel is perfect, and quickly makes one remember how loose the manual focus of so many AF lenses, particularly around this focal length, is. The only aperture scale is the one used for ADR (aperture direct readout); the lens isn't big enough for two scales, like other Nikkors. Aperture and focus rings are ribbed to be easily grasped, though grabbing a focus ring so close to the lens mount takes a little practice (close due to the lens' tiny size). It's a matte silver color.

The lens comes with a silver-rimmed coated protection filter, a silver outside but black inside lens hood, silver colored front and rear lens caps (the rear one is really more of a light grey), and a soft case (a pouch with a drawstring). The lens cap is specially designed, with different latches from other Nikon lens caps, so it can either be used on the lens without the hood or it can attach over the lens hood. So there's no excuse not to always use the hood with this lens. The hood is unusual in that it bows inward, like an inverted bowl. Attach the filter, the hood (with a rim only about as deep as a filter) and the lens cap, and you've added 1/2" to the of the lens, almost doubling its depth. The elements are inset deeply enough and the hood adds enough additional protection that a protection filter seems unnecessary.

The lens has the contacts to convey information to Nikon electronic cameras and flashes. Using it on an F100, the aperture numbers show up in the viewfinder. Matrix metering works fine (though per the included instruction sheet, it does not send "D" distance information). The SB-28 auto-zooms (if you have it set to auto-zoom) to 35 mm.

Using the 45 on a camera with ADR, like the FM2 or F5, is a little surprising the first time you look through the viewfinder: Instead of seeing the usual white numbers against a black background, a rectangle of black numbers against a silver background is reflected in. But put it on an FM2 and hang the combination around your neck and, especially after using an F100 with 35-70 f/2.8, and you'll barely feel anything there.



I've had a chance to shoot three rolls in the week I've had the lens, two in the field and one test roll comparing the 45 to other lenses. Photos from the field look exceptionally sharp, and hold shadow detail to an extent few other Nikkor I've tried are capable of doing. Along with that, it holds a beautiful range of tonal gradations. Out of focus areas are smooth, not harsh as with the 50 mm Nikkors and not just neutral as with the 35 f/1.4 and 35-70 f/2.8 Nikkors. As expected with a Tessar-based design, those qualities I found objectionable in photos made with 50 mm Nikkors are not even hinted at in photos made with this lens. Flare is well controlled (as it should be with just four elements). The lens focuses to 1.5 feet (as opposed to the 2.6 feet of the old 45 GN Nikkor, from which this lens is derived), making close shots possible. The close performance was excellent, with sharp in-focus portions and beautifully blurred out-of-focus backgrounds.

Indoors, I was able to shoot a test roll comparing it to a 50 mm f/1.8 AF Nikkor, a 35 mm f/1.4 AI-S Nikkor, and a 35-70 mm f/2.8 AF Nikkor. I set an F100 up in front of a bookcase full of record albums and video tapes, spines showing, with an SB-28 providing light (the SB-28 was set to Matrix TTL flash for each lens except the 35 f/1.4, for which it was set to center-weighted TTL flash). I shot each lens twice at f/2.8, f/4, f/5.6 and f/8 on Ektachrome 100 slide film. The resulting slides were examined with a 10x Schneider loupe.

Let's be clear on one point: This is not a scientific test. But it has always proved to be good enough to tell me what I want to know about the relative quality of lenses. Photos with the 45 show minimal pincushion distortion, nothing objectionable.

Comparing photos taken with the four lenses at f/2.8, the 45 was clearly the sharpest lens, resolving the greatest amount of detail over the entire frame. It surprised me that the 45 even wide open is sharper than two prime lenses closed down. Second sharpest at f/2.8 was the 35 f/1.4, third was the 50 f/1.8. The 45 and 35 are particularly good in the corners, while the 50 was somewhat worse there. Fourth, as expected with a zoom wide open, was the 35-70 f/2.8. There was a fairly noticeable gap between the sharpness delivered from one lens to the next.

At f/4, the difference between lenses narrows, though I'd still rate the sharpness from one lens to the next in the same order.

At f/5.6, the level of detail delivered by the 45 remains a step ahead of the other lenses. It was difficult to discern a difference between the sharpness levels of the 35 f/1.4 and the 50 f/1.8 here. The 35-70 f/2.8, while very good, was a step behind the prime lenses.

By f/8, there may be an advantage to the 45, but it is slight. The 45, 35 and 50 are nearly equal in terms of level of detail rendered on film. Here, proper exposure will have more impact on the detail captured than which lens is used. The 35-70 is a small step behind the primes lenses, but here, too, the difference is small.

The 45 mm is not a lens for everyone. If you need a faster normal lens, you may be better off the 35 mm or one of the 50 mm Nikkors (I'm keeping my 35 f/1.4 for those times I do need a faster lens). If you need a cheaper lens, the 50 f/1.8 is your better choice (note that by the time you add a hood and filter to the 50 f/1.4, accessories the 45 comes with, its price is comparable to the 45). If you need a lens that focuses itself, the 45 is not right for you.

But if you want a small and light lens to carry with you, which is optically and mechanically unsurpassed, the 45 f2.8 P Nikkor is a perfect choice.

Larry