

The Long March Towards Revolution: AFS 70-200 mm f/2.8 G ED IF VR Nikkor Reviewed

2. Appearance and Handling

by Bjørn Rørslett

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Constructed with 21 elements in 15 groups, the 70-200 mm f/2.8 VR is an optical cutting-edge design. No less than 5 of the elements are expensive ED glass to give the lens a tight control on the ever-present chromatic aberrations. This assures high quality on today's digital SLRs by making cleaner images less troubled with colour noise. I haven't seen drawings of the optical design so cannot tell whether aspherical elements have been used. Filter thread size follows the current 77 mm standard for pro lenses. The lenscap LF-77 is a new design (similar to the one on AFS 24-85 but bigger), which clips on the front and is about as easily lost as all other such items. The lenscap distinguishes itself by being a poor fit on other 77 mm threaded lenses. Throw it away and replace it by the earlier version while they still are produced. Even better, stockpile the older types. A scalloped lens hood, HB-29, is delivered with the lens together with a soft case and other paraphernalia. Drop the never-ready case but do put on the hood. It surely is needed (see later section on flare and ghosting).

The customary golden ring, designating an ED construction, is placed at the extreme front end, adjacent to a tiny read-out window for the distance scale. No IR focusing index or depth-of-field indication of any kind is given. A series of AF-lock buttons (the purpose and significance of which always has escaped me, but who am I to know such secrets) follows next and beyond that there is a generously-sized collar for manual focusing. The focusing collar is wider towards the front of the lens to give a very positive and easy grip. Zooming is by another collar located around the mid part of the lens barrel, and the focal lengths are engraved in white lettering making them easy to read. The lens barrel itself has a smooth finely crinkled-paint finish, which looks nice and probably withstand wear better than the earlier AFS lenses.

The operational switches are neatly grouped together in a control panel. Lettering unfortunately is not engraved and is likely to show considerable wear over time. What fraction of a Yen is saved by not engraving these numerals?

The controls themselves are sliding levers which need quite small fingers to be operated with ease. However, in practice this isn't so important because most will rarely be used. Personally, I would have superglued the M/A and Focus range limiter switches into a permanent position. By putting VR mode to "Normal", you really only need the occasional setting of VR to "Off".

The nice and broad rotating tripod collar can be seen to the right. The locking screw is on the small side and ought to be replaced with a larger unit to allow better grip and more positive locking torque.



A commendable short tripod leg juts out below the lens barrel and can easily be detached. The removable section looks a little on the lean side, but nevertheless provides a good support for the lens. It couples through a dove-tailed slot onto the lens and this design allows for easy user modification of collar if this is wanted. The improved design with its broad and sturdy rotating collar could well result from a massive criticism directed against poor tripod mounts found on some recent Nikkors. Since I have been quite outspoken on this subject, I am pleased Nikon have listened to my comments and reviews. Anyhow, that's the way I like to regard the outcome.

The lens itself belies its physical size and weight (a trifle under 1.5 kg) when I first picked it up. No doubt its narrow outline contributes to this feeling. However, you will likely reconsider the matter after having camera plus lens slung over your shoulder for some hours. There is a mandatory lens hood, HB-29, which provides some rudimentary protection against stray light and flare. For once the hood clicks positively into position and there is even a locking catch to hold it firmly onto the lens itself.

The rear of the lens has a rubber gasket to prevent ingress of moisture and water drops to the inside electronics, a clever and welcome feature (also found on new professional-class Canon lenses). The enhanced weather sealing is facilitated by the lack of a traditional aperture collar, because this allows for a much more snug fit of the gasket.

The focusing speed is thanks to the AFS technology very fast and responsive, and lives pretty well up to the "silent" designation. Hunting for focus is not commonly observed unless light levels are low, which is only to be expected from any AF system. Mounted on my F5, the 70-200 VR responds ever so slightly slower than on my D1-series models and low-light hunting was more frequent, too.

Near focus occurs at 1.4 m and 1.5 m in manual and AF focusing mode, respectively. This is sufficient for nice tight-composed portraits, that is if you haven't scared your victim away by the sheer size of the lens with its impressive hood attached. The lens is an internal-focusing (IF) design so its total length will not change with the focus setting.

The lens handles with ease as such and I found the controls quite well laid out, but see the follow paragraph. Hand-holding the VR lens is facilitated when the tripod mount is removed and it's obvious the designers catered particularly for this contingency.

I firmly oppose the idea that lens handling is improved by having to set apertures from the camera dial(s), because this entails forcing your

right hand to do all the work. I program all my cameras (supporting such a mode) to set apertures by the collar on the lens itself. Thus, I can use my left hand for aperture control, focusing and the occasional zooming while my right hand can do exposure correction or AF by the rear controls, plus operate the shutter release. This is my personal workflow which has served me well for decades of photography and it functions in an equal manner whether my camera is tripod-mounted or hand-held. Your mileage may vary based upon your personal shooting manners. Being left-handed, I found my right hand tired prematurely by the new chores heaped upon it and I did not like the situation at all. In particular I never came to grips with the operation of the sub-command dial located in front of the camera, and felt that aperture setting instead of being intuitive had become awkward. Circumventing this problem by moving aperture control to the rear command wheel would cause conflicts with the way I handle other lenses so was not an option or solution to me. Personally, I dislike "G" design more than ever and I simply don't want it for my own gear, now or in the future. However, please feel entirely free to draw an opposite conclusion.

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