

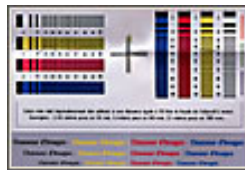
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AF-S VR Zoom-Nikkor IF-ED
70-200mm 1:2,8G

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- + very good optics
- + excellent finish
- + amazingly fast and silent AF
- + perfect tripod mount
- + VR feature



"Oh, what have we got here?" my wife reproachfully asked me when she discovered the huge golden box with the inscription AF-S VR Zoom-Nikkor 70-200 1:2.8 G IF-ED in my study. "My new workhorse with image stabilizer to reduce vibrations", I replied whereupon she disdainfully countered: "Vibrations? Are you really that bad off already?!"

Sensing that words were getting me nowhere I decided to ignore her last statement and started unpacking my new baby. Lightweight, lean and very comfortable to hold were my first impressions. The die-cast magnesium alloy feels cooler and more expensive than the plastic coating of Nikon's early AF-S lenses. On my D1X AF speed seems to have been considerably increased compared to its predecessor, the AF-S 80-200/2.8 D. This new lens also renders a wonderful bokeh in out-of-focus areas. It is easy to handle and operate, moving the rings for zoom and focus is sheer delight. The removable rotating tripod collar is Nikon's intelligent answer to growing criticism of tripod collars of earlier lenses, such as the AF VR 80-400/4.5-5.6 and the AF-S 300/4. The missing aperture ring doesn't bother me as I have learnt to control aperture via the front dial since I bought my F5.

Next stop: Optics. I was especially interested in a comparison with my trusted AF-S 80-200/2.8 D and its performance in combination with a TC-20E at 400mm. Well, whereas at 80mm my AF-S 80-200/2.8 is slightly better, at 200mm results are slightly in favour of the 70-200/2.8. Vignetting, too, is controlled a little bit better in the new lens, but this has become a minor problem anyway due to the crop factor of Nikon's D-SLRs. As a conclusion the differences between the two AF-S zooms seem to be a minor issue and do not justify an upgrade merely for optical reasons.

However, the situation changes completely if an extender is attached. Suddenly the 70-200 outperforms the 80-200 at 400mm both wide open and stopped down to f/11. Thus I was thinking of trading in even my VR 80-400 since VR works well with Nikon's extenders, but unfortunately the test results do not encourage this step. My 80-400 is still far better at 400mm than my 70-200 + TC-20E, even if the combo is stopped down to f/11. Please bear in mind that the 80-400 renders slightly better performance at 5.6 than my AF-S 400/2.8 at 2.8, so this really is a good lens! People keep asking me to deliver my personal order of 400mm lens performance, so here you are:

1. AF-S 400/2.8 at f/5.6
2. AF-S 300/2.8 + TC 1.4E at f/4
3. AF VR 80-400 at 5.6
4. AF-S VR 70-200/2.8 + TC-20E and
5. AF-S 80-200/2.8 D + TC-20E.

All results are obtained with a Nikon D1X body, but as they are very close to those I received with my F5 I assume that they can be adopted for film cameras. Yes, I know, I forgot Nikon's AF-S 300/4 + TC-1.4E, but I can hardly afford another golden Nikon box in my study...

Actually my AF-S 80-200/2.8's basic drawback was its missing VR feature, as I shoot frequently in low-light conditions such as theaters. Thus I was forced to use my monopod which was really annoying. Not just for me but also for the people sitting next to me. Try changing your lens mounted on a monopod sitting on your narrow seat literally trapped between two people and you'll understand why! Now everything is smoother and more relaxing! By the way the finder view is relaxing too: Everything looks stable as if your combo was mounted on a sturdy tripod! Actually I managed to get tack sharp result down to 1/15 sec at 200mm, just as Nikon promised. VR has also become a lot quieter when compared to my 80-400's VR. By the way D-SLRs are the best partners for VR lenses as you can immediately check if your shutter speed was correct due to these cameras' displays. Thus I gradually found out which shutter speeds I can use with whatever combination of extender. Simply great!

When mounted on a tripod you should turn VR off as Nikon recommends. I got blurred shots even at fast speeds. But on my monopod everything works nice. I then thought the new ACTIVE MODE could be used any time, just in case. Wrong! It works best when the effect of camera shake is really vigorous, for example if you shoot from a boat or car. If you yourself are not moving while photographing (which is the normal procedure) ACTIVE MODE will blur your images.

After such a bundle of pros I have difficulty in finding a real drawback of this lens. On the internet I found one review complaining about strong ghosting and flare. I thought "Oh goodness, I do a lot of photographing in difficult lighting situations like on concerts with lots of spotlights, will I be able to use this lens at all?" No problem really! My first assignment with this lens took me to the Stuttgart Schleyerhalle to shoot a big concert with what I may describe as 'worst case of lighting'. Lots of hard spotlights, powerful backlights, constant change of light sources. What can I say? The 70-200 did extremely well despite its 21 elements! Of course there were situations of flare and ghost reflections of the aperture, but they weren't more prominent than with my AF-S 80-200/2.8 nor were they difficult to control. At least in my work environment this new lens does a great job.

But I finally found the drawback, although it's a minor one: the lens hood. Smaller and lighter than its predecessor's it is fixed easily and can be locked to prevent it from coming off again. But "Ay there's the rub" as Hamlet would exclaim in his famous speech: this little locking button of the petal-shaped hood can be depressed too easily and is placed on the left-hand side of the lens. Exactly the side I and most of my colleagues put the camera down when there is a short break. It is the only position to easily seize your camera's grip again when you will have to work on. And if the place you put your camera on is not even or you touch this locking button your HB-29 will come off. So Nikon engineers did a great job but forgot to really work with this lens, although they had one year since they introduced the first pre-production model.

Anyway, as I mentioned above this is a minor issue and in my opinion this AF-S 70-200/2.8 was really worth the wait!

UPDATE 21/04/2003

In the meantime I found out that the AF-S 80-200/2.8's HB-17 provides perfect protection (no vignetting with DX) and never comes off. O.k., it doesn't look as cool as the original HB-29, but who cares?

I also found out that I can get sharp results at 1/4sec with 200mm in ACTIVE mode of VR. Fantastic!

Source: <http://www.imagepower.de/IMAGES/imgEQUIPMENT/AFS70200.htm#>

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