
Conclusion - Pros

- Excellent image quality on both DX and FX formats, especially at 200mm
- Superb build quality with dust and moisture sealing
- Excellent optical image stabilization
- Excellent autofocus with manual override

Conclusion - Cons

- Pronounced focus 'breathing', i.e. widening of the angle of view on focusing closer
- Reduced maximum magnification compared to previous version
- Somewhat susceptible to flare with direct light sources in or close to the frame
- Poorly-designed lens hood - too shallow, and with curved ends
- Slightly fiddly AF and VR switches
- AF stop buttons removed (and replaced by occasionally-confusing cosmetic grip)

Overall conclusion

Nikon's long-awaited successor to its 70-200mm F2.8 VR was always going to be held up to very close scrutiny when it finally saw the light of day. Because while the original was a superb lens on DX cameras, it suffered from some well-publicised optical defects on full-frame cameras which became all-too-clear on the release of the the D3. And the good news is that the AF-S Nikkor 70-200mm F2.8G VR II puts those complaints well and truly to bed - gone are the smeared, dark corners towards the long end, replaced by a 200mm performance that can really only be described as superb.

In fact, by almost any measure, the newcomer is either better than its predecessor, or at the very least, just as good. Optically there's not a huge amount between them on DX, although by our estimation the new version is sharper wide open at 200mm, in exchange for being a little softer at F2.8 in the middle of the range. On FX the differences become clearer, and the improvements at the telephoto end in particular become clear. The corners are much sharper, vignetting is reduced, even the distortion is measurably lower; the only penalty is a scarcely noticeable increase in chromatic aberration. The image quality at close focus distances has improved dramatically too. We're rarely as impressed by the optical performance of any zoom as we are by the new Nikon.

It's not just the optics that are excellent, though. Build and handling are near-impeccable, and the balance of the lens on the camera has improved - it no longer has such a front-heavy feel. Autofocus is fast, silent and accurate, and the image stabilization is pretty well as good as it gets. We found the revised 'VR II' system to be good for a solid three to four stops of stabilization when hand-holding, and were pleased to see that one of our quibbles with the previous version (a certain over-eagerness of the lens to switch to panning mode when it shouldn't) seems to have been fixed too. Overall this means the lens simply delivers the shot with the minimum of fuss, time after time after time - exactly what you need from a professional workhorse.

Naturally, though, all is not perfect, and there are a couple of catches. The most obvious is the marked increase in angle of view on focusing closer (otherwise known as focus breathing), which means that despite the closer minimum focus of the new lens, its maximum magnification is rather lower. This has implications for users who frequently find themselves shooting at 200mm and relatively close distances, who may need to consider carefully whether this behavior might be a deal-breaker (you won't be able to replicate the tight close-ups possible with the older lens). However we can't help but feel that for most shooters it simply won't be a problem; indeed in many cases it will be more than offset by the dramatically improved close-range image quality.

In use, we found the ribbed rubber grip towards the front of the lens, which adorns the space previously occupied by AF-stop buttons, to be slightly annoying; it's easily mistaken for the focus ring when trying to locate it by feel. This isn't a big deal (and could be simply addressed by covering it with tape), but it seems unnecessary. Probably more importantly, it occupies the space where three AF stop buttons previously lived - if you use these frequently, then their loss might be significant.

The one other flaw lies in the design of the lens hood. First and foremost, it's just too shallow, making it less effective than it should be at shading the lens from exactly the kind of slightly off-axis light that can cause serious flare problems. There seems to be no good reason for this, as the hood doesn't come anywhere close to vignetting on FX. Secondly the slightly curved profile of the front 'petals' means it's unwise to attempt to stand the lens on the hood while it's not in use, as it will fall over in a potentially very expensive fashion (admittedly this may only be a concern for a small minority of users, such as concert or events shooters who work in limited space). However we'd urge Nikon to revisit the design and produce a better hood - the lens deserves it.

Overall, though, it's impossible to conclude anything other than that the AF-S Nikkor 70-200mm F2.8 G VR II is the most accomplished lens of its type that we've tested so far, and a perfect companion to Nikon's top-end bodies such as the D3S and D3X. DX shooters may not have so much reason to upgrade from the previous model, but for FX users the improvements are clear. How long it will retain this crown is open to question, with Canon and Sigma also recently releasing new image-stabilized 70-200mm F2.8 lenses, but just for now this is as good as it gets.

Nikkor 70-200mm F2.8 VR II



Good For: Professional shooters and advanced amateurs demanding the finest optical performance available in a telephoto zoom

Not so good for: Anyone who values portability and convenience over all-out image quality

overall rating
85%

Nikon's 'Mark II' 70-200mm telezoom fixes the problems suffered by the previous version on full frame bodies, while updating to the latest and greatest VR system. It's an equally accomplished performer on both DX and FX that will satisfy the most demanding of photographers.



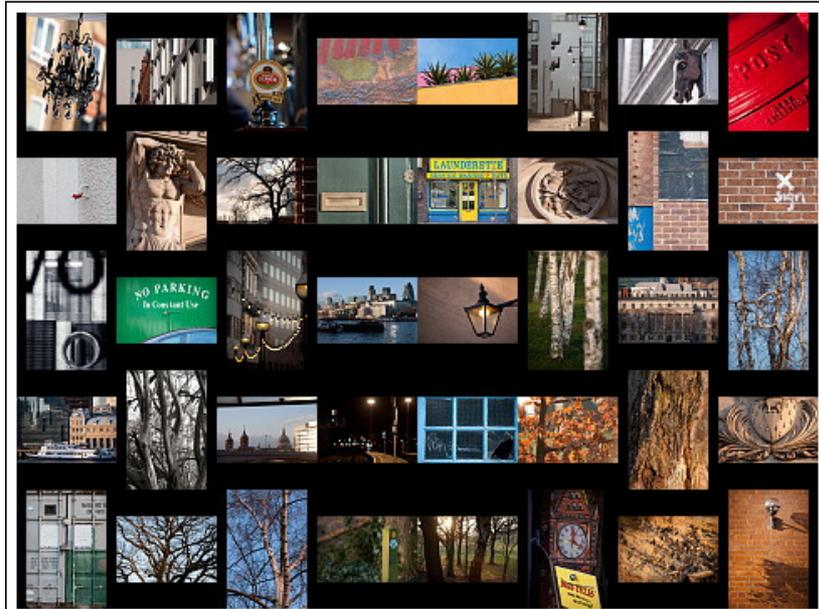
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Unless **otherwise** noted images taken with no particular settings at full resolution. **To bypass the camera's automatic chromatic aberration correction and provide a better impression of the lens itself, images are shot in RAW and converted using Adobe Camera Raw.** A reduced size image (within 1024 x 1024 bounds) is provided to be more easily viewed in your browser. As always the original untouched image is available by clicking on this reduced image.



Nikon 70-200mm F2.8 VR II Samples Gallery - Posted 25th February 2010