



The Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM has bitingly sharp fine detail contrast, and I loved the texture on the mother elephant's leg. Whipsnade, A700, 1/200 at f/8, ISO 200

TECHNICAL

Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM. Though I find that the majority of shots with the 70-300mm end up at 300mm, the zoom enables precise composition. Spanish horses and pony, at 270mm; A700, 1/320 at f/8, ISO100. The aperture is wide enough to put the background horses into softer focus, and blur an intruding foreground area



screws fixed that fully, but only after a couple of shoots where the fine textures I wanted were not precisely nailed.

The Tamron 70-300mm f/4-5.6 also uses 62mm filters, but achieves between $\frac{2}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{3}$ stop faster maximum aperture across most of its range. It's also much smaller. Sony works with Tamron (its 11-18mm and 18-250mm lenses are clearly Tamron derived) and it's hard to see why it couldn't have taken the already good budget price Tamron design and tweaked it a bit to tidy up the layer of aberrations it yields at full bore.

Maybe it's just impossible. To get this optical quality, maybe you just have to build a lens differently, and house it in a barrel where the internal walls are so far from the optical path there is barely a chance of image degrading

reflected light. Above all, it's the contrast and saturation of this lens which distinguishes the look of its images – in terms of MTF, they appear to have been shot with a 50mm fixed focal length, not a 70-300mm tele zoom.

Sony 16-105mm SAL f/3.5-5.6

A second new Sony lens, though not for the full frame, is its 16-105mm SAL f/3.5-5.6 zoom. I looked at this one because there was a rumour that the slightly flawed 16-80mm f/3.5-5.6 Carl Zeiss zoom (optical wonder, mechanical also-ran) was modified and improved to create this model.

Well, a few weeks of use confirm that the CZ is a CZ, and the Sony is a decent ordinary zoom lens which is pretty sharp. It has more distortion, though it's easily enough correct-

ed, and the true working aperture is once again restricted – you are looking at a lens which is f/5.6 all the way from 60mm to 105mm, and it's only f/3.5 from 16mm to 18mm.

The quality of the out-field corrections is different too. The Zeiss approach is to care more about sharpness for all wavelengths independently, even if they fail to yield the same sized image and produce crisply rendered chromatic fringes. The Sony lens is dead sharp centrally, but softens more to the edges, while concealing chromatic faults within a mix of other aberrations. In fact, it needs about the same CA correction to tidy up, but the result is still soft.

In the extreme corners, the 16-105mm falls down. No matter whether you stop



down to f/8 or f/11, the corners have a sudden decline into a softness which looks more like a focus blur than anything else. By way of compensation, the lens is less picky about filters than the CZ design, and rarely shows the sharp vignetting in one corner which Sony's moving-sensor SSS in body stabilisation can produce with tight image circles.

Overall, I wouldn't choose to use the 16-105mm over the 16-85mm, despite the £100 difference in street price and the extra 20mm of focal length range. As with the 100-300mm versus 70-300mm, whatever internal focusing is used manages to make sure the 16-105mm shows zero advantage in subject scale – it achieves exactly the same repro ratio at 38cm working distance and 105mm that the 16-80mm does at 35cm and 80mm

Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM. At 300mm, depth of field is so limited that f/10 was needed to keep the yacht and former military building on Inchgarvie Island sharp. A700, 1/200, ISO100.



(both minimum focus points).

It does feel rather better made than the CZ, if cosmetically similar. We also use the Sony 18-250mm, and there is almost nothing the 16-105mm can do bar that critical 2mm difference at the wide angle end, which the 18-250mm does not do better. Once you have worked with an 18-250mm, other lenses can seem limited. My daughter Ailsa did a trip down the East Coast of the USA in May, shooting with a view to Alamy stock, and borrowed Sony kit with an 18-250mm in place of her regular Canon with 18-55/70-300mm. On return, she wanted an 18-250mm with stabilisation for the Canon and was dismayed to find that no such lens exists – the closest option is Sigma's 18-200mm OS.

The state of the art with all these lenses for DX/APS-C format is now so advanced that anyone basing their opinion of such super zooms on the 28-200 and 28-300mm designs for full frame film from a few years back will be dismissing professionally viable tools. The use of lenses like the 18-250mm when travelling – bearing in mind is the equivalent of a 28-375mm in full frame terms – transforms what you can capture without being singled out for unwanted attention.

This returns me to the first lens reviewed here, the 70-300mm. During a recent week's trip which was far from a holiday (Spanish city fiestas create an 18-hour working day for coverage!) my wife Shirley used her 18-250mm Sony SAL, and I had the 16-80mm and 70-300mm. Because of the reactions to the 70-300mm, I hardly used it at all for people shots, while Shirley was freely able to capture strong close-ups or wide scenes unobserved.

Which leads me to the conclusion that, despite the superb image quality, I probably would not want the 70-300mm SAL G SSM as my only tele zoom.

Expect Canon and Nikon to follow this lens. It's a range where modest aperture and medium cost is rarely combined with top optical output. Expect them to make big lenses too. It seems to be the trend... **f2**

Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM

- SSM (super sonic wave motor).
- ED (extra-low dispersion) glass
- Four ED lenses correct chromatic aberrations
- Circular aperture - spotlight sources have a pleasing circular defocused effect
- About £700

Sony 16-105mm SAL f/3.5-5.6

- 15 elements in 11 groups, including one ED and two aspherical elements
- Seven rounded aperture blades
- Min focus distance 0.4m (max magnification ratio 1:4.3)
- 72x83mm, 470g
- Filter size 62mm (non-rotating)
- Hood petal-shaped, snap-on, supplied
- About £440

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