

Sony's Big Beasts

With the impending launch of the full-frame, 24.2MP Alpha 900 DSLR, Sony is set to challenge both Canon and Nikon in the quality professional market. Since Canon is almost unassailable in catering for the sports and news shooter, and Nikon has sewn up low light with the D3, Sony's emphasis is on exceptional optical quality and very fine image detail, says **David Kilpatrick**, as he tests Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM and 16-105mm SAL f/3.5-5.6 lenses



Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM lens fully extended, with lens hood attached

Several high-end lenses have already been launched to back up the impending launch of the full-frame, 24.2MP Alpha 900 DSLR, mainly under the Carl Zeiss branding. They include a top grade 85mm f/1.4, a 135mm f/2.8 of similar quality, and most recently a substantial chunk of a 24-70mm f/2.8. A 16-35mm f2.8 is on the way, but will be beaten to the shelves by a 70-400mm f/4.5-5.6.

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

These lenses are generally into four figures before any discounts, so it's interesting to look at something already on sale (if you can find one) not labelled CZ, but as a G design, which means it originates from the former Minolta Sakai optical works team. The Sony SAL 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 G SSM incorporates a sonic drive focusing motor, which makes it manual focus only with Minolta models prior to the Dynax 7 or converted Dynax 9.

Before using this huge £700 lens, I had been using the excellent and very small Minolta 100-300mm APO (D) f/4.5-5.6. This is so small, there are now some 50mm standard AF lenses appearing which look bigger! On the 1.5x factor digital format, it shows some limitations, and at full aperture the detail can be a little bit dirty and soft, though still much better than a typical non-apo at 300mm.

The new 70-300mm looks double the size. It weighs 70% more, and has a very deep lens hood, which covers the entire body of the lens when reversed for storage. The combination is so fat, that once inside its supplied padded pouch, there was no way of fit-

ting it in any of the positions designed for such lenses in any of my camera holdalls. It would just go in without the pouch, but pushed the walls of the dividers out so much that other lens pockets were squeezed tight.

The SAL uses 62mm filters, rather than the 55mm of the Minolta's compact design. It focuses to 1.2m instead of 1.5m, and uses internal focusing. However, the actual size of the reproduced image is no greater because of this focusing method. The old 100-300mm at 1.5m gives exactly the same 1:4 (0.25x) repro ratio as the new 70-300mm at 1.2m.

The physical mount is large, but the actual optical unit is no greater in diameter than the old design. It extends much further physically when zoomed.

Lenses like this, without constant apertures, can vary a lot in what real f-stop you get as you zoom in. I thought the SAL with its huge mount might perhaps retain f/4.5 for much further into the range, but I was to be disappointed. In fact, it loses the f/4.5 maximum the moment you zoom from 70mm to 85mm; and from 130mm all the way to 300mm it's just f/5.6. The old 100-300mm is f/4.5 from 100 to 120mm, and shifts to f/5.6 at 140mm for the rest of its range.

So the new lens is no faster in light gathering power. Or is it? In practice, the older, compact design suffers from considerable vignetting as well as some distortion. The new one is entirely free of vignetting, so the corners are as bright as the centre of the image. It has low distortion, and in addition appears to be much sharper across the entire range, with no visible sign of

chromatic fringes.

Using ACR to process Raw images, no lens correction was needed at all. Any focal length, any aperture including wide open, the image proved evenly lit and pin sharp corner to corner. Rendering of fine detail is superior to any lens of this type I've used other than fast apo tele zooms stopped down to f/5.6. Even then, comparing the lens with my 70-200mm f/2.8, I was forced to conclude that it does a better job in terms of flatness of field and close-up corrections.

The penalty paid for extremely high orders of optical correction and digital optimisation – remember this lens doesn't even carry an Apo label – is the size.

Taking the lens to Spain instead of the tiny 100-300mm, I found problems straight away. I was accosted by strangers – Brits of course – either having a laugh at the sight of this huge tub of a lens hood, or curious as to why I needed an apparently super powered tele in the streets of Alicante. I got no questions during a wildlife safari drive, but still had the biggest lens in the convoy.

For the photojournalist, the SAL 70-300mm G seems a bad choice. It's not so bad with the uber-hood removed, though it's still substantial; then again, no more so than a Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8. It is silent in operation, and very fast to focus, though with such sharpness I was able to confirm a slight back focus error on my Sony Alpha 700, suspected earlier. Some test work with a 28mm f/2, and adjustment (warranty breaking, but far more reliable than any service procedure) to three AF module setting