

Tamron 28-75 f/2.8 Di III RXD Review

by

E.J. Peiker



In May of 2018, Tamron became the first of the major third party lens manufacturers to ship a standard autofocus f/2.8 zoom lens with 100% compatibility to all functions for the Sony full frame E-mount system used in the a7 and a9 series of cameras. Up to this point, the only autofocus options other than the Sony 24-70mm f/2.8GM, Sony-Zeiss 24-70mm f/4 and budget oriented Sony 28-70mm f/3.5-5.6 lenses were to mount Canon or Sigma standard zooms via an adapter which increases size and limits functionality at least to some extent. While the Tamron lens does not cover the wide-angle end down to 24mm, opting to only go to 28mm, it does expand the long end of the zoom range to 75mm. It retains f/2.8 throughout the zoom range. A major selling point of this lens is its compactness being the size of the Sony-Zeiss f/4 variant in a true f/2.8 lens and weighing in at just 1.2lb while the Sony f/2.8 lens weighs in at 2lb. The combination of smaller size, lower weight and reported excellent optical qualities quickly shot it to a top selling position for standard zooms in the Sony full frame mirrorless eco system. To top things off, this lens can be purchased for \$800 while the Sony 24-70mm GM lens, the only other f/2.8 FE standard zoom, costs a whopping \$2200 so if this lens even performs relatively well, it could be a boon for photographers that don't want to give up the low light performance of an f/2.8 but find the cash outlay of the Sony lens prohibitive.

I had planned a Helsinki city shoot in late July which would involve walking as much as 10 miles a day for nearly a week while carrying my gear over the shoulder in a messenger bag and flying with carry-on luggage only. Due to the weight limitations that this type of travel involves, I decided to rent the Tamron 28-75mm and put it through its paces. I ordered it to arrive a couple

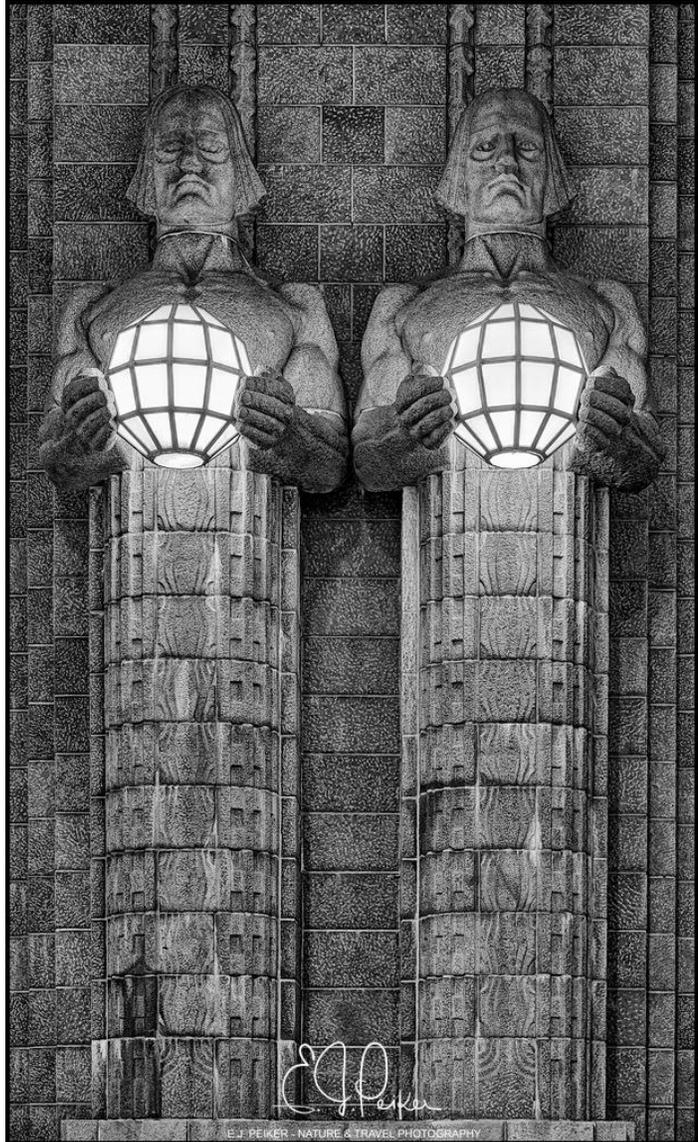
of days early so that I could do some optical tests prior to leaving and if it didn't provide adequate image quality, I still had the option to increase my packed weight and take my 24-70 f/2.8GM lens instead. When the lens arrived, despite having read many reviews, I was surprised by the small size and light weight of the lens. It truly is much closer to the 24-70 f/4 in size despite being an f/2.8 lens. It even uses the same economical 67mm filter thread, compared to the much larger and more expensive 82mm filters. A comparison of the Sony 24-70mm f/2.8GM and the Tamron 28-75mm f/2.8 mounted on the Sony a7R III is illustrated below, courtesy of www.camerasize.com. It is a significantly smaller package while not giving up the low light capability of an f/2.8 zoom



One thing that is noticeable right away in the comparison above is that Tamron has chosen to put the zoom ring out front and the focus ring in close to the camera which is opposite of all other Sony FE lenses. This is something that Nikon has recently started doing as well and have been getting lambasted for. It's just not a very natural way of working, especially when working with multiple lenses that aren't all the same. During my shoot in Helsinki, especially on the first two days, I would constantly try to zoom the lens and end up turning the focus ring. By the end of the trip it wasn't a problem but virtually every photographer I know, as well as many internet reviewers and bloggers, absolutely hate having the zoom ring in front of the focus ring. The picture also shows that there is no programmable button on the lens like there is on the Sony

lens. I find the button as a great alternate way of initiating autofocus, especially when shooting moving subjects.

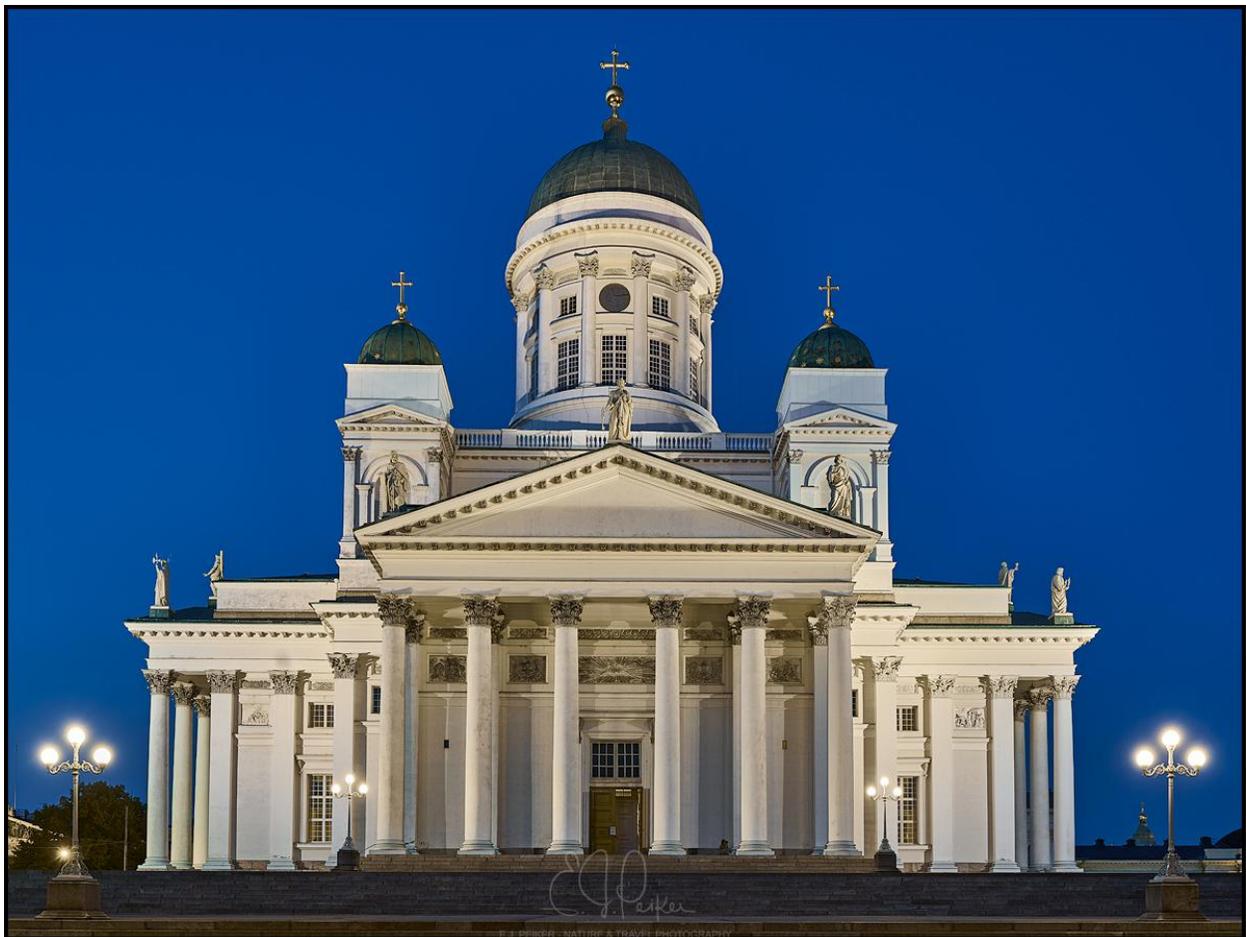
The build feels a bit "plasticity" compared to the larger heavier lenses but it is high impact polycarbonate, the same material that many very good lenses on the market are made of, including some of my Nikkor lenses. The relatively cheap plastic lens hood did not mount very smoothly initially but it does its job. As time went on, it mounted much more smoothly. In looking at the lens, I suspect that I may have been the first or one of the first to rent this lens as there weren't even any wear marks on the metal lens mount - it seemed like a brand new out of the box lens. Initially, the lens also did not mount on the camera in a silky smooth manner but after a few mountings it began to break in and by the end of the trip it was no different from a native Sony lens. The lens does have what Tamron calls a "moisture resistant" build. I had great weather on my trip and did not put this to the test but the lens does seem to be well sealed with no obvious moisture entry points. Optically, the lens has 15 elements in 12 groups including several exotic glass elements and fluorite coatings, generally not the stuff of cheap lenses.



My testing of the lens before the trip was a pleasant surprise in most categories. At 28mm, the lens produces sharp images throughout the frame, even into the deep corners from $f/5.6$ on with a slight amount of sharpness fall-off in the corners at $f/4$ and a moderate amount of sharpness loss at $f/2.8$. The three times as expensive Sony 24-70 is better in the corners at $f/2.8$ but 28mm is also not at the extreme end of its zoom range. By $f/5.6$, the lenses were indistinguishable from a resolution standpoint. In the middle of the zoom range, at 50mm, both lenses produced similar results from a resolution standpoint and at 70mm, again, the Sony GM lens was better wide open in the corners but this difference disappeared by $f/5.6$. Chromatic aberration was a major surprise; the lens exhibited essentially none at any focal length. Where the lens disappointed the most in optical tests was in rectilinear distortion. The lens has a significant amount of barrel distortion at all focal lengths. Since my RAW converter of choice, Capture One Pro, does not yet have automatic lens corrections for this lens yet, any photo that requires straight horizontal and vertical lines requires a manual correction of this. While that

isn't a major problem, it is an extra step in the workflow. Vignetting or darkening of the corners is also significant throughout the zoom range and is noticeable to f/8. This is likely a function of the very compact design that only has a 67mm front diameter. Both vignetting and barrel distortion are correctable but just barely, the sliders have to be extended to their extreme end to nullify them.

Having done the optical tests at home and determining that the lens was capable of professional level results but with an extra step or two in the post-processing flow due to not having automatic lens corrections in my RAW converter, I decided that this would be my primary standard lens for the trip to Helsinki, along with a relatively light 70-200mm f/4 and the best zoom lens I own, the Sony 16-35mm f/2.8 GM. I thought I would miss being able to zoom out to 24mm but that never really became an issue since I usually prefer the 16-35mm lens when going wide, even when I have my 24-70 GM lens with me. It's just a better lens than anything else on the market in a wide angle zoom lens. I did find the extra 5mm on the long end useful at times as it saved a couple of lens changes to the 70-200mm. My biggest "in the field" complaint about the Tamron lens was having the zoom ring in the "wrong" place - at least compared to every other zoom I own. I am pleased with the images that the lens provided including excellent resolution, microcontrast, no noticeable color cast or any other uncorrectable problem with the images.



In real world use, one thing that became immediately apparent was that the auto-focus capability of this lens is nowhere near what even a slower aperture Sony brand lens is capable of. The lens does not just instantly snap into focus like Sony lenses do on the Sony a7R III camera. It's a bit slower to drive focus and then there is a somewhat more back and forth hunting before settling on final focus confirmation. It's probably a fraction of a second, maybe a half second, but it is very noticeable, even in bright light. It is necessary to move the AF point to a relatively high contrast part of the scene to minimize focus hunting much more often than with any Sony lens. Tracking a moving subject is also nowhere near as good as with a Sony brand lens. I would not use this lens for any kind of action photography. But for still photography, landscapes, or cityscape photography it really is no problem. In low light, the lens focuses just as accurately as a Sony native lens but again it is significantly slower and often requires a higher contrast point for accurate focus acquisition.

In summary, the Tamron 28-75mm f/2.8 is a large aperture standard zoom capable of excellent image quality in a lightweight, compact and affordable package. While it is not as good for image quality when shooting wide open and it does not focus or track as quickly, given that it costs nearly 1/3 of the only other native f/2.8 Sony full-frame E mount lens, it is a great value and an excellent travel lens. The savings don't just stop with the lens since 67mm filters are much less expensive than 82mm filters. I certainly would not sell my Sony 24-70mm f/2.8GM and replace it with this lens but for just a \$50 rental for a week, when I need to go ultra light, I would not hesitate renting this lens again. If I needed an f/2.8 standard zoom but couldn't afford the very expensive Sony lens, again, this lens would find its way into my bag.



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