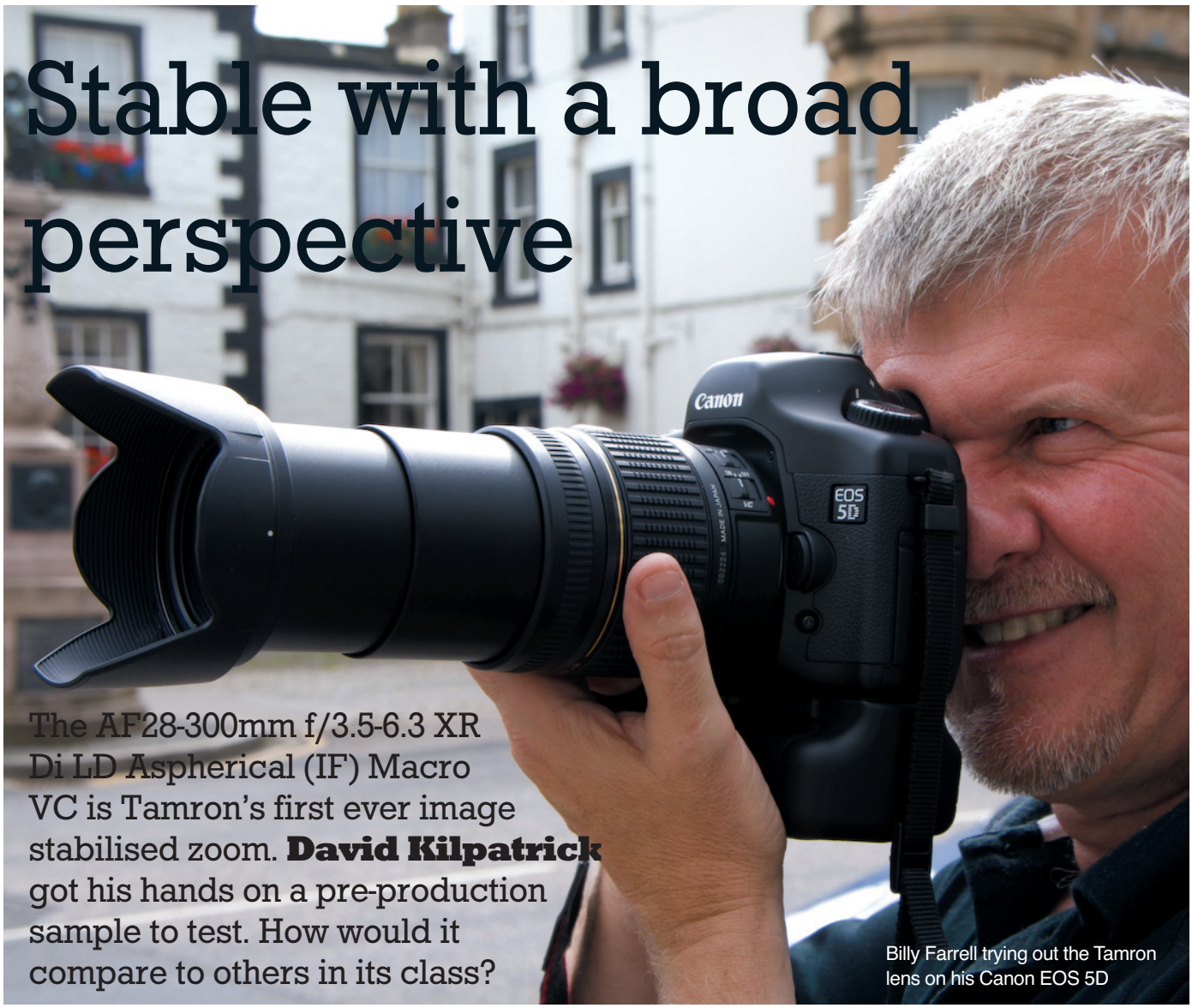
Stable with a broad perspective



Billy Farrell trying out the Tamron lens on his Canon EOS 5D

The AF28-300mm f/3.5-6.3 XR Di LD Aspherical (IF) Macro VC is Tamron's first ever image stabilised zoom. **David Kilpatrick** got his hands on a pre-production sample to test. How would it compare to others in its class?

Adding two initials to the name of the lens is an understated way for Tamron to introduce its first ever image stabilised zoom. The packaging just has a small VC logo, with little else to indicate that the AF28-300mm f/3.5-6.3 XR Di LD Aspherical (IF) Macro VC lens competes with Nikon VR and Canon IS models.

The question must be: why on earth the 28-300mm? The potential sales for an 18-200mm equivalent, fitting cameras like the Canon EOS 400D and 40D, must far exceed those for a full-frame superzoom with its origins in the film era. One reason may be that Tamron sees a market among the millions of Canon and Nikon film SLR owners who would like an affordable stabilised walkabout lens.

In the digital market, the appeal of a 28-300mm lens of enthusiast quality to owners of full frame Canon or Nikon DSLRs is doubtful. It costs around £500, and at heart it is a digitally optimised 28-300mm - much like the regular XR, which has a street price of around £200 – so you're paying a premium of well over £200 for image stabilisation.

The VC system has been some time coming from Tamron. It uses three sensors inside the lens, and has no external control options. You cannot switch it to operate differently for panning or static shots, or to have choices of VC behaviour. It has a Risc processor - a small computer in the lens that does everything automatically.

Tamron warns that it should be turned off for tripod shots, and may not function properly with panning or shots from moving vehicles. They think it's fine for following subject movement, by which we have to assume not panned movement.

When you fit the lens, VC is inactive until the shutter is pressed. It then takes one-sec to react and lock into a stable image mode. When you take first pressure off the shutter, the VC is turned off again after a two-sec parking sequence. For those who have bought full frame pro cameras for their lightning-speed reactions, this is not desirable.

Visually, the Tamron VC system is one of the best stabilisation methods I've encountered. The VC image is rock solid, without any of the wandering or wavering associated with stabilised views at 300mm. It almost stops you recomposing a shot! It does not float or swim when you move the camera to change composition, but makes a single rapid adjustment.

Test shots

I met up with Billy Farrell, a keen Canon full-frame user who enjoys covering mountain bike trials, as well as taking landscapes and people shots. Farrell provided his Canon EOS 5D and 1D MkIII for a couple of hours, and his wife Lynn acted as a moving focus tracking target in a busy high street. We took some tests in Peebles, and tried for a few difficult low-light ISO 3200 action situations with bikes in Glentress Forest nearby.

The results were not as expected. The one-sec delay didn't accord with Farrell's shooting style – he's used to lifting the camera, getting the shot framed and firing fast.

For many test shots of static subjects, we got a double image. The lens was obviously jumping into VC mode when the shot was fired. For sequences, the VC was totally reliable, and a wide range of moving targets, including continuous focus tracking trials, proved successful.

When timing problems didn't ruin the result, the VC was able to produce sharp 300mm shots at speeds as slow as 1/30. This is about as good as stabilisation is expected to get - a little over three stops of benefit. Results at 1/20 and 1/10 were more than acceptable on the EOS 5D.

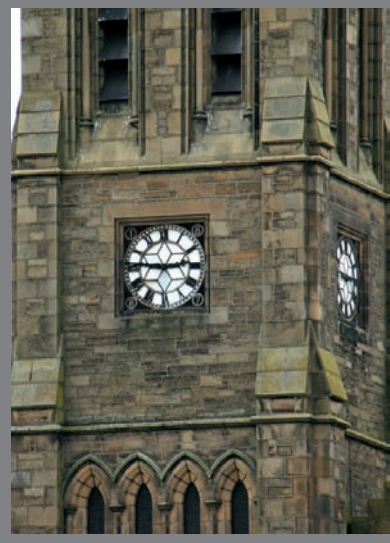
A rider coming down the trail in Glentress Forest. Manual exposure was set to 1/500 at full f/6.3 aperture, using the fast drive sequence of the Canon EOS 1D MkIII and its excellent ISO 3200 quality. Farrell zoomed while framing the approaching rider in very adverse light and difficult conditions. The Tamron held tracked focus more than acceptably.

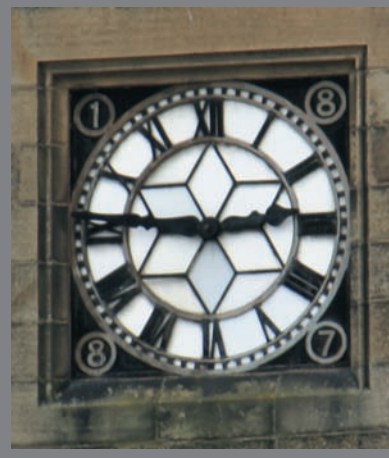
In the dark woods of Glentress, despite its f/6.3 aperture (smaller than the Canon AF systems likes to deal with) as long as the first frame was correctly focused, the Tamron succeeded in focus-tracking cyclists descending a trail towards us. Both the 5D and 1D MkIII, at 3fps and 10fps maximum shooting speeds respectively, could hold focus with this fairly slow, non-USM drive lens. However, a missed first frame meant the lens never caught up with the subject.

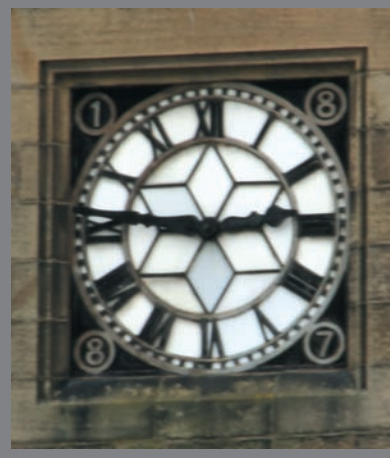
Farrell's main comment about the lens was that the zoom ring went the opposite way to all his Canon lenses. He lost one sequence by turning it the wrong way out of habit, and had to concentrate every time. It is of course arranged to suit Nikon users!

Generally, at 10fps, 1D MkIII was less successful than the slower 5D. A hint of back focus on sequences put details like riders' faces just a bit out, while the back wheel of the bike was sharp. In comparison, Farrell shot a couple of sets using his Canon 70-200mm f/2.8 L IS lens, which held focus much better, but still preferred chest detail to face detail with such limited depth of field.

The Tamron VC cannot really be recommended for anything faster than 5fps action sequence shooting, unless you are in very good light, shooting something not heading directly toward you or panning fast across the frame. Farrell's sequences of Lynn walking towards the camera were successful, with only a couple of slightly misfocused frames in

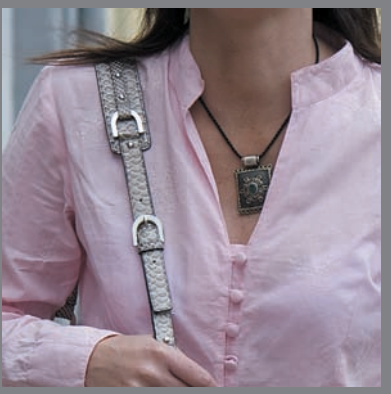






Top: Clock tower at 300mm, and results at f/16 and 1/20 (upper) and f/22 at 1/10 (lower). While a little soft, 1/10 is almost five stops of vibration correction.

The 28-300mm has very good close focusing. This is shot hand-held at 300mm, 1/60 at f/16, using ISO 400 to balance quality against depth of field. Normally a shutter speed of 1/250 or faster would be needed for a close-up like this to avoid camera shake.



Lynn walking toward the camera, 1/80 at f/8, 109mm focal length. Focus tracking held well, as the detail enlargement shows. All photos © Billy Farrell Photography.

a couple of dozen.

To check the VC performance further, I switched to using our own APS-C format Canon 400D, giving the 28-300mm a focal equivalent of 45-480mm. I was also shooting with another body fitted with a 100-300mm. Very quickly, I understood why the 28-300mm is a good lens for APS-C format. This range of standard to extreme tele is much more friendly than any pure tele zoom. Most of the time, it can stay on the camera, while I was constantly changing the 100-300mm for something shorter.

The VC lens was not as user-friendly as the Canon IS. I tend to refocus, or lock focus, by taking pressure off the shutter release briefly. Because the VC lens is controlled by first pressure on the shutter and has its start-up and shut down delays, it was necessary to pay attention to what was happening.

Since every missed, unsharp or non-stabilised result was caused by this, I would have to recommend to Tamron that the VC lens needs an option to allow full-time stabilisation, not dependent on the shutter release state. The only way we could get this was using continuous drive and AI-Servo AF, and under these conditions the VC worked perfectly.

The general sharpness of the lens is good, and follows up the excellent performance of the recent Tamron 18-250mm. There is some purple fringing into extreme backlight, with tree branches at the very edge of the 28mm view on full frame. There is visible green-red chromatic fringing at the longer end of the range, which is fairly crisp and easily removed.

Overall, the quality is best at short and middle focal length, and suffers a little at the long end. Along with the limited f/6.3 maximum aperture at 300mm, this reinforces that the lens is a travel or everyday zoom for film or digital. It's not going to compete with telephoto zooms.

It is much smaller than a Canon 75-300mm IS, though pretty chunky in barrel diameter, and will halve the bulk of any travel kit covering the 28-300mm range. The main negative point about the VC lens was the relatively long delay before VC kicked in, increasing the start-up time, from switching on the camera to getting the first shot, to well over one second.

Can it be recommended? Yes, at the price it's unique, and for certain types of shooting, such as landscapes, travel and architecture, safaris, or wildlife at a feeding point, it performs well. For action sports, candids, weddings, and any 'lift the camera to the eye and shoot' situations, it is not so well adapted. **f2**