



Model: Harriadrie Beau (@harriadriebeau.com)

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Creative flash effects on location



Want to get a little more adventurous with your location portraits? Then try this eye-catching technique that mixes studio-style lighting with simple exposure tricks to produce high-contrast, dramatic results...

When you're working outdoors with flash there's really no limit to the range and style of effects that you can create, and one of the most striking is to flash light your subject while underexposing the rest of the ambient-lit scene. This gives a distinctive, dramatic and very contemporary look, which is suitable for a huge variety of subjects, from gritty character studies to fashion, product shots and beyond.

Done right, results look great with an instantly professional sheen, so your portfolio will certainly benefit. Shooting this way also adds versatility to your approach, because with the flash firing you're

not over-reliant on the natural light being spot on, opening up the possibility of portrait shoots on dull or overcast days which you might otherwise cancel.

Armed with the ability to control both the flash power and how the camera exposes for the natural light, you'll be able to shoot at any time of day, making a feature of the ambient conditions, or biasing your lighting towards the artificial, and anywhere in between, adding excitement to everyday locations. In our example shots, we had a bright, clear day and were able to use the high sun as a hair light so, while only one flash is necessary to get the basic look, this meant the second head of



SET-UP With one softbox-fitted flash firing on our model, Harriadrie, and another undiffused and directed on the motorbike we underexposed the scene by two stops and used the sun to add a hairlight effect and a touch of separation from the dark backdrop.

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exposure meter is matching your settings is a good idea to make sure power is at the right level.

As mentioned, you can also underexpose the ambient light via the shutter speed, which means that flash power doesn't need to increase and you won't increase depth-of-field. This is useful if using less powerful flashes like speedlites, or if you've reached 1/1 (full power) on your flash and can't move it closer to gain more illumination. However, if you're in bright light – as we were – your shutter speed will be restricted by the maximum sync speed of your set-up, beyond which the flash will not be exposed correctly. At 1/125sec we only had a stop to play with, so went for the aperture route. If your camera/trigger/flash combination has a high-speed sync setting you can push the shutter speed higher, but again more flash power is needed.

Modifying the look

Our settings, which underexposed the scene by two stops, gave us the combination we wanted, but you can go further if you want the background to be even darker, or use settings closer to the 'correct' metering for a more subtle effect. However, with the first flash set-up using a simple spill-kill reflector,

we found the lighting a little too crisp on the subject and the shadows too strong. Swapping the spill kill for an 85cm Octa Softbox diffused the light and softened the look which was much more successful, but a change in modifier also means you'll need to check your flash power. A quick look at the meter saw us increasing the power from 1/4 to 1/2 to compensate, the material of the softbox stealing light via its diffusing properties. Given the outdoor setting, we also opted to keep the flash slightly higher than the subject's eyeline, which gets the look closer to natural light. We still wanted some contrast however, so the flash was used in roughly the four o'clock position, rather than close to the camera which would have looked too flat.

The second light

To create a more interesting backdrop we lastly added a second light fitted with a spill-kill reflector and angled it low onto a motorbike. On this subject, the lack of diffusion helped pick out the mechanical details, but we also kept its strength lower than the main light (at 1/16 power) and positioned it further back so that the two elements weren't competing for attention in the composition. *

SECOND LIGHT Adding another flash, this time to light the motorbike behind Harriadrie, really helped to improve the composition. However, we were careful to keep the power lower on this second light, so it didn't compete for attention.

“YOU CAN UNDEREXPOSE THE AMBIENT LIGHT VIA THE SHUTTER SPEED, WHICH MEANS FLASH POWER DOESN'T HAVE TO INCREASE”

NEXT MONTH IN LIGHTING ACADEMY

With the right technique in your arsenal, it's time to



f/8 NO FLASH



f/8 WITH FLASH



f/16 NO FLASH



f/16 WITH FLASH

FLASH POWER & AMBIENT EXPOSURE

Combining flash with ambient light is simple enough, but the changes you make have an enormous effect on the image, as you'll see in the example pics above. At the metered exposure (1/125sec at f/8, ISO 100) and without flash, the shot is a bit lifeless and the subject is shadowed by the lack of fill light. By adding the flash, this is cured, but we can get even more creative. Underexposed by two stops (1/125sec at f/16, ISO 100) and without flash, the whole shot darkens, but with the correct amount of flash added it's a winner. Three stops underexposed (1/125sec at f/22, ISO 100) makes it even more dramatic.



SPILL-KILL REFLECTOR



SOFTBOX

SOFTENING THE LIGHT

Modifying your flash is just as important when shooting outside as in, and can easily change the whole look of a shot. As is often the case, we found a softbox gave a more flattering light and softer shadows on our model, Harriadrie, but if you want a harder look, keep the flash more focused with a spill-kill reflector, grid or honeycomb. The more diffused light also reflected less from the background. It's worth remembering that large modifiers, like umbrellas and softboxes, will catch the wind easily, so make sure you weigh them down if it's getting gusty.

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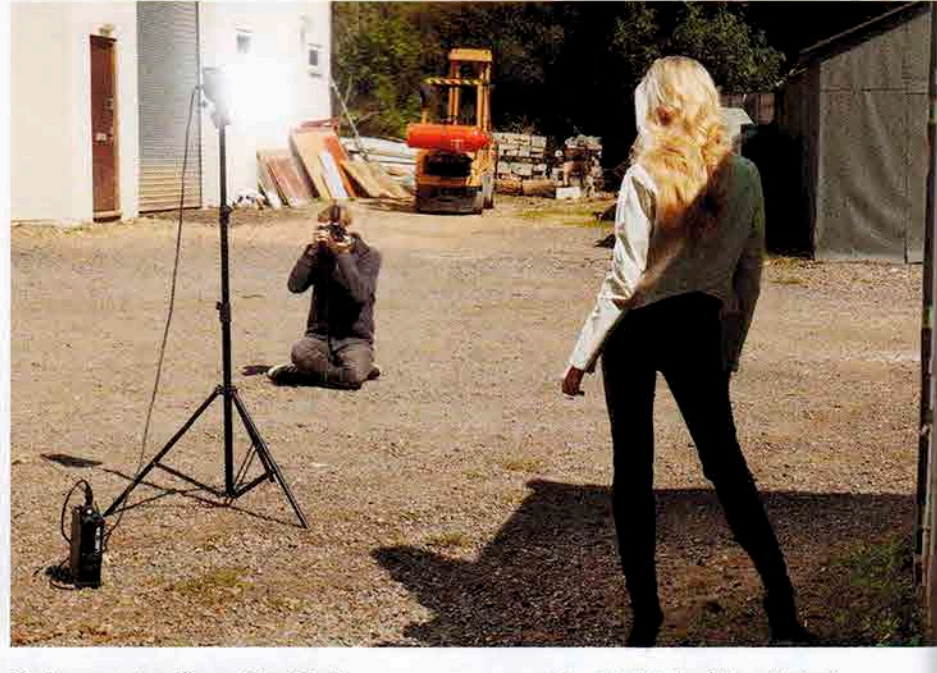
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our Lencarta Safari 2 Twin Head Kit could be used to light the background more creatively. Of course, on a dull day you could use a second head to throw more light on the subject, either used as a fill light, or as a backlight.

Getting the shot

If you read last month's Lighting Academy you should be familiar with the basics of firing your flash off camera and balancing it with the ambient lighting to create a fill light effect. Here, we'll get a little more creative, making sure that the lighting of the subject is correct, but then underexposing the rest of the scene, so that they stand out in a more dramatic way. Just as with any portrait, when shooting in this style, it's the lighting on the subject that's most important, so good positioning and metering is vital. Though we were deliberately shooting in daylight here, we didn't have any direct, undiffused light falling on the subject's face as this would have created harsh shadows. If you do want a more contrasty look to the features you can ignore this, but broadly it's better to use just the flash to light the subject, whatever style you're looking to create, as it's far more controllable than the sun.

With our subject positioned mostly in the shade thrown by the crates in the background and turned directly away from the sun we framed up and metered the ambient light. In Manual mode and with the camera's metering set to multi-zone, the exposure bar guided us to a setting of 1/125sec at f/8, ISO 100 for the scene as a whole. We then used a Gossen Digipro F2 exposure meter to assess the flash power required to balance the natural light and cover the subject evenly. With the meter reading f/8 and ISO 100, using a flash power of 1/16th, our test shot confirmed that the lighting was balanced.



Underexposing the ambient light

From here, your exposure needs to be adjusted to underexpose the background by either increasing the shutter speed, or by stopping down the aperture. As we were happy to increase the depth-of-field, we went from f/8 to f/16 – a loss of two stops of light. Closing the aperture in this way means the effect of the flash is diminished along with the natural light, so its power needs to be increased accordingly. Fortunately knowing how much is a simple case of mental arithmetic: losing two stops of light via the aperture means flash power needs to be increased by the equivalent amount – two stops – from 1/16 to 1/4. Even so, a quick test fire and a check that the

CONTROL Carefully positioning the subject in the shadow and turned away from the sun means that the light on their face is completely controlled by you. With the model's back facing the sun, there's also a pleasing hairlight effect.

THE KIT YOU NEED

In principle, this creative technique works the same using any type of flash – be it your camera's pop-up, an accessory flash or a more advanced studio style head – but when shooting with flash on-location power is also important, so picking the right kit and making sure you're fully juiced up goes a long way towards a more successful shoot. The more power available to you, the more flexibility you'll have, allowing you to throw more light on the subject, use larger apertures, larger modifiers, and illuminate bigger subjects. You can also fire the flash faster and from further away. At £1299.99, a portable flash set-up like the Lencarta Safari

2 Twin Head Kit is certainly a significant outlay, but it also adds serious power and versatility to your shooting. The kit includes two separate flash heads and battery packs, so you can use them almost anywhere and, at 600W/s, the power output of each is easily comparable to a mains-powered system. The Safari 2's batteries offer up to 400 flashes at full power from a single charge (increasing to well over 12,000 at the lowest setting), so you won't be recharging in shooting time, either. You also get triggers, diffusers and reflectors as part of the package and it all packs into two neat metal cases for easy transportation – check it out at lencarta.com.

SAFARI 2 This kit from Lencarta, which is powered by a portable battery packs allows studio style lighting effects on location.

