

GROUP TEST

Home studio lighting kits

STUDIO LIGHTING KITS ARE TAKING THE PHOTOGRAPHY MARKET BY STORM, BUT WHICH ONE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Words: Josie Reavely

Light is essential in photography and can have a profound effect on images. The photographic studio provides a controlled environment in which to experiment with light, manipulate it to match your requirements and achieve the precise look you want.

Studio flash kits are the most versatile kind, allowing the photographer complete control over light intensity and positioning, as well as producing a neutral coloured light that saves the hassle of correcting the colour casts that are introduced by other types of lighting. These kits are also compatible with a range of accessories that help to control the direction and intensity of the light: from snoots and softboxes to gobos and honeycomb grids. It's important to check the sync voltage – sometimes called the 'trigger' voltage – as anything over 6v may damage your camera. Flash recycle time is also a key factor to take into account when purchasing a lighting kit, particularly if you plan to put it to professional use.

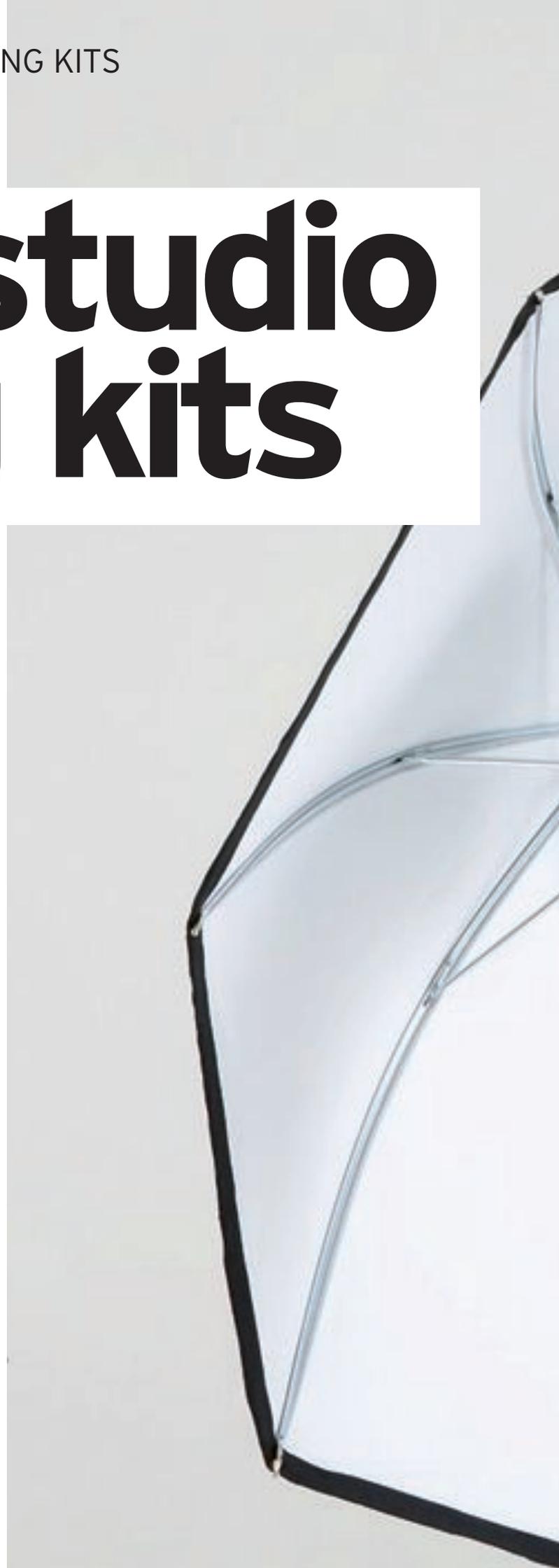
It's often best to keep things simple when it comes to lighting: a lot of professionals will advocate working with just a couple of lights. The range of different effects you can achieve with a two-light setup is plentiful, making the four kits in this round-up ideal for most projects. All four units are lightweight and portable, making them perfect for photographers who have to travel around with their gear.

Studio kits come in all manner of shapes and sizes, bundled with a range of different accessories. Some are better suited to certain forms of photography than others. Those with a shorter flash duration for example, will be better for action studio photography, while other models that may not be as speedy, might be lighter and easier to transport.

Our group test features four of the top kits on the market, tested for their ease of use, quality of results and consistency, as well as portability and value for money. Featuring a variety of specifications and price tags, you'll hopefully find one to suit.

THE CONTENDERS

ELINCHROM D-LITE 2	£488	
The featherweight entrant in terms of size, but don't be fooled, we reckon it has still got the weight to pack a good punch		
BOWENS STUDIO IN A BOX	£429	
Bowens is a brand that should instill confidence, can this ultra-portable kit live up to its name?		
LASTOLITE LUMEN8 F400 PRO FLASH KIT	£720	
This certainly looks like the professional kit it claims to be, but does its performance warrant its price tag?		
INTERFIT HOME STUDIO EXD200	£370	
At the low end of the price range, should that put you off? Or does it simply offer superb value for money?		



“Studio flash kits are the most versatile, allowing the photographer complete control over light intensity”



GROUP TEST | HOME STUDIO LIGHTING KITS

ELINCHROM D-LITE 2 £488

THE ENTRY-LEVEL KIT THAT DELIVERS A PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

website: www.theflashcentre.com | contact: 0207 837 5649



The first thing we noticed when handling the D-Lite 2 heads is just how light they are! The whole kit weighs just 1.1kg: an impressive measurement that highlights the kit's suitability for photographers who need to travel with their equipment. Equally handy, the whole kit folds down into two shoulder bags.

The lightweight nature of the kit does make it feel a little less 'professional' than its competitors, but this is by no means reflected in its performance. The D-Lite 2 heads are stabilised to plus or minus 1.5 per cent so you know what you're going to get each time you fire the flash – as indicated by the consistent results we achieved during our tests.

As with the other contenders in this test, the D-Lite 2 heads support the popular S-type bayonet reflector mount, so they're compatible with a wide range of accessories across the Elinchrom range. As with the Bowens kit, the plug-in flash tube is user-changeable, which is one benefit of buying an entry-level kit over a pro version that would need to be replaced by experts – scoring it a few extra points for convenience.

The control panel incorporates a digital display and buttons that are simple to operate and they allow for very precise settings to be dialled in, ensuring consistent results. One other addition to the Elinchrom

offering is an instructional DVD that's included in the price, an invaluable source of information about the kit itself and studio work in general.

The kit performs very well indeed: quick to set up, the flash heads deliver colour-cast-free results. The recycle time of just 0.7 seconds is very impressive, although note that these heads deliver a flash duration of 1/1200s, rather than the 1/1700s offered by the Bowens and Lastolite contenders. Nonetheless, this is all you really need for static photography.

What we like

- ▲ Very lightweight and portable
- ▲ Accurate digital controls
- ▲ You get two softboxes – great for portraits

What we don't like

- ▼ The flash duration isn't fast enough to freeze action
- ▼ It could do with a few more accessories really
- ▼ There are no reflectors included in the kit

BOWENS STUDIO IN A BOX £429

EVERY PHOTOGRAPHER SHOULD FIND SOMETHING TO SUIT HERE

website: www.bowens.co.uk | contact: 01255 422 807



Aimed at amateurs and professionals alike, the Studio In A Box from Bowens seeks to provide everything you need to supplement your first studio. The modest price tag is not indicative of the quality or performance of this lighting system, which incorporates Bowen's renowned Esprit Gemini monobloc.

These flash heads are compatible with the Bowens range of portable power packs, making them a great choice for location photography too.

You get a fair amount of kit for the price, with every piece designed to be petite for maximum portability, but still powerful enough for most portrait or tabletop lighting situations. Inside the box you'll find two Esprit Gemini 200 flash heads, two 'Handy Stands', two mains leads, two modelling lamps, a sync lead, two 900mm silver/white umbrellas and two 120-degree Wide Angle Umbrella Reflectors. It's just a shame there's no carry-case included, which would reinforce the kit's portability. If this is an issue however, you can purchase one from the range on the Bowens website. You also don't get a softbox, but Bowens makes up for this with the extra umbrella.

The controls on the flash heads are pretty simple, with a side-mounted dial to control the power, a Test button and a Ready light. On the rear of the unit

you'll find the modelling lamp control, which can be switched to Full, Half or Off, as well as the switch to turn the audible recharge confirmation and slave cell on or off. These compact units pack plenty of power and aren't fan-cooled, so you have to go easy on the rate at which you shoot. In that sense, the comparatively slow recycle time of 1.3 seconds should help to keep the unit from overheating, but it will automatically cut out and allow itself to cool should you start to overcook it.

All in all, the Bowens Studio In A Box is a fantastic, low-cost kit that serves as the perfect introduction to home-studio photography.

What we like

- ▲ Excellent build quality
- ▲ Two brollies and two reflectors included
- ▲ Low price

What we don't like

- ▼ No carry-case included in the kit
- ▼ No softbox
- ▼ Control dials aren't labelled very accurately

LASTOLITE LUMEN8 F400 PRO FLASH KIT **£720**

A SLICK KIT DESIGNED FOR THE PROS

website: www.lastolite.com | **contact:** 01530 813 381

The Lastolite Lumen8 F400 Professional Flash Kit certainly appears to live up to its pro credentials. The whole lot comes in a hardwearing, large black fabric case with a convenient extendable handle and wheels for easy transportation.

With it comes two 400w/s flash heads, two 185mm reflectors, one PVC 800mm umbrella, two light stands, one 600 x 600mm Ezybox softbox, two mains leads, two sync cables and the sturdy carry-case. Each flash head incorporates a flash tube and modelling lamp that can be adjusted to proportional or full power. The Remote setting means that the heads will automatically detect when the synced master head fires, to ensure simultaneous firing from all units.

The heads contain air vents to keep the unit's components cool, plus thermal cutoff is also included should things get too hot. The layout of the controls on the back of the heads is very easy to interpret. If you do need extra guidance, there's a brief user manual included in the kit, which includes colour pictures, is easy to follow and gets straight to the point. It details how to set up and operate the kit, as well as tasks

such as changing the modelling lamp and fuse. The units are easy to operate, with a clearly labelled dial to control the flash power, as well as the modelling lamp when it's in Proportional mode. A Test button allows you to fire the flash, check your setup or take a meter reading. And the range of accessories supplied with the kit means that you have everything you need to get started, with the option to expand your horizons with more accessories available separately from Lastolite.

What we like

- ▲ Great range of accessories
- ▲ Excellent wheeled carry-case
- ▲ High-quality professional kit

What we don't like

- ▼ It's expensive
- ▼ Only one umbrella – a second would be useful
- ▼ Flash tube can't be replaced by the user



INTERFIT HOME STUDIO EXD200 **£370**

PROFESSIONAL GOOD-LOOKS FOR A BUDGET PRICE

website: www.interfitphotographic.com | **contact:** sales@interfitphotographic.com

Clearly designed for both portability and user-friendliness, the Interfit Home Studio EXD200 has impressive specifications for such a low price tag.

The kit comes with two EXD200 flash heads, two air-damped stands, one 600 x 600mm softbox, one translucent umbrella, two power leads and a soft carry-case to pack it all into. The kit also includes two sync cables, so you can plug a flash meter into one and connect the other to your camera.

The controls on the back of the flash head are intuitive and a digital display allows you to monitor power levels, while dedicated buttons let you adjust the flash and modelling lamp power independently. Another button controls the audible recharge confirmation, which can be switched off if desired. There's also a button that controls the four different slave cell modes, designed to eliminate problems caused by cameras that fire pre-flash, AF-assist or red-eye reduction beams. You can turn the Sync function off, or operate in Standard Sync mode: allowing you to wirelessly sync multiple flash heads. It all gets a bit clever when the second or third lights are on. The flash

head will fire on the second or third flash detected by the flash receptor, simply ignoring the first or first and second flashes it 'sees', instead firing on the second or third – depending on which mode it's in.

The softbox and shoot-through umbrella are quick to set up, providing two even lighting sources, or the reflectors can be used to achieve dramatic lighting.

What we like

- ▲ The broly is a welcome accessory
- ▲ The kit includes two reflectors
- ▲ Slave cell modes eliminated pre-flash problems

What we don't like

- ▼ The accessories don't fit snugly on the flash head
- ▼ A beep is omitted every time you press a button – you can't turn it off
- ▼ The stands aren't as sturdy as other kits



RESULTS

ELINCHROM D-LITE 2	BOWENS STUDIO IN A BOX	LASTOLITE LUMEN8 F400 PRO FLASH KIT	INTERFIT HOME STUDIO EXD200
			
PRICE £488	PRICE £429	PRICE £720	PRICE £370
RECYCLE TIME 0.7 seconds	RECYCLE TIME 1.3 second	RECYCLE TIME 0.4-1.6 seconds	RECYCLE TIME 1.5 seconds
AUDIBLE RECYCLE CONFIRMATION Yes	AUDIBLE RECYCLE CONFIRMATION Yes	AUDIBLE RECYCLE CONFIRMATION Yes	AUDIBLE RECYCLE CONFIRMATION Yes
FLASH DURATION 1/1200s	FLASH DURATION 1/1700s	FLASH DURATION 1/700-1/1700s	FLASH DURATION 1/100-1/300s
SLAVE CELL Yes	SLAVE CELL Yes	SLAVE CELL Yes	SLAVE CELL Yes
TRIGGER VOLTAGE 5v	TRIGGER VOLTAGE 5v	TRIGGER VOLTAGE 4v	TRIGGER VOLTAGE 5v
DIMENSIONS 160 x 200 x 110mm	DIMENSIONS 145 x 310 x 130mm	DIMENSIONS 410 x 182 x 210mm	DIMENSIONS 155 x 145 x 145mm
WEIGHT 1.1kg	WEIGHT 2.2kg	WEIGHT 1.2kg	WEIGHT 1.2kg
WEBSITE www.elinchrom.com	WEBSITE www.bowens.co.uk	WEBSITE www.lastolite.com	WEBSITE www.interfitphotographic.com
CONTACT 0207 837 5649	CONTACT 01255 422 807	CONTACT 01530 813 381	CONTACT sales@interfitphotographic.com
<p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p> <p>QUALITY OF RESULTS ★★★★★</p> <p>HANDLING ★★★★★</p> <p>EASE OF USE ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>A top kit for the price: perfect for those looking for an uncomplicated entry-level kit to get themselves started</p> <p>Overall score ★★★★★</p>	<p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p> <p>QUALITY OF RESULTS ★★★★★</p> <p>HANDLING ★★★★★</p> <p>EASE OF USE ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>An inexpensive way to get started in studio photography, or a lightweight setup that's ideal for location work</p> <p>Overall score ★★★★★</p>	<p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p> <p>QUALITY OF RESULTS ★★★★★</p> <p>HANDLING ★★★★★</p> <p>EASE OF USE ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>It's pricy but the quality and accessories make it worth it. If you're looking to make an investment – this is it</p> <p>Overall score ★★★★★</p>	<p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p> <p>QUALITY OF RESULTS ★★★★★</p> <p>HANDLING ★★★★★</p> <p>EASE OF USE ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>An excellent entry-level kit that doesn't compromise on quality: a great buy for those just starting out</p> <p>Overall score ★★★★★</p>

AND THE WINNER IS...

If you're on a budget, the three entry-level kits are all very worthy contenders. The D-Lite 2 kit sports a faster recycle time and more modelling-lamp power options, whereas the Bowens kit doesn't include a softbox or a carry-case, but does feature two reflectors and two umbrellas.

The low-priced Interfit and professional Lastolite kits offer the best of both worlds, each containing an umbrella, two reflectors and a softbox.

Having some of the controls on the side on the Bowens Esprit Gemini 200 heads is necessary, as there isn't enough space to have them all on the back. But, we found it a bit annoying that they weren't all together. The dials on these heads also have rather cryptic pictures, which made it difficult to gauge exactly what power settings we were using. The Lastolite Lumen8 dials are

much clearer, with more meaningful markings, however overall we prefer the digital display on the Elinchrom and Interfit heads.

The Bowens heads have half the amount of power as the professional Lastolite heads, while the recycle time, is much longer, highlighting the fact that extra cash does buy added functionality. It also emphasises just how much value for money these entry-level kits represent: for £200-300 less than the professional kit you get a head with a recycle time that's only 0.3 seconds slower (D-Lite 2) or a kit with the same flash duration and comparable build quality (Esprit Gemini 200).

If you're just starting out, the entry-level kits are brilliant even after you've weighed up all the pros and cons. But if you want a kit that has everything and you have the cash available, the Lastolite kit is definitely worth the extra cost.

