

GROUP
TEST
STUDIO
LIGHTING
KITS

■ [Main] Creative lighting effects can be achieved with the simplest of setups, meaning that you can get professional shots on the go

Studio lighting kits

Studio lighting kits are taking the photography market by storm, but which one is right for you?



This issue we take a look at three lighting kits, and put them head to head to find out which one will best suit the discerning photographer. Light is the essential element that makes all photography possible in the first place, and can have a profound effect upon the success of your images.

It's difficult to achieve consistent, predictable lighting conditions using natural light alone: the sun moves across the sky, altering the length, intensity and direction of shadows, while clouds move across the sky, acting as giant diffusers and sometimes blocking out sunlight altogether. You can use tools like reflectors and diffusers to try and direct the light to where it's needed, but this isn't always appropriate for your subject.

The photographic studio provides a controlled environment in which to experiment with light, manipulating it to match your requirements exactly and achieve precisely the look that you want. There are different types of studio lighting available, of which studio flash is the most versatile, allowing the photographer to have 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. As long as you invest in good-quality equipment, the light source will emit a stable output, so you'll have a reliable, predictable setup that produces repeatable results. Studio flash is also compatible with a plethora of accessories that help to control the direction and intensity of the light, from snoots and softboxes, to gobos and honeycomb grids.

Power output is measured in watt-seconds (W/s or joules) and varies according to different models. It's also important to check the sync voltage – sometimes referred to as the 'trigger' voltage – as anything over 6V may damage your camera. Flash recycle time is also an important factor to take into account when purchasing a lighting kit, particularly if you plan to put it to professional use.

When it comes to lighting, it's often best to keep things simple. The range of different effects you can achieve with a two-light setup is plentiful, making the three kits in this group test ideal for most projects. All three units are also lightweight and portable: perfect for photographers who have to travel with their gear.

Since flash heads deliver short bursts of light, it can be tricky to gauge the effect of the light on your subject. For this reason, most studio flash heads incorporate a modelling light to help with envisaging where the shadows and highlights will fall.

Power is nothing without control, so remember to check out the options that a flash head provides before purchasing. Basic units usually at least offer an 'On/Half/Full' power switch, while more expensive heads will offer greater control. Compact heads have electronics built into them, dispensing with the need for power packs, and are more than adequate for most amateur and professional purposes. The advantage of using a setup with a power pack is that the electronics aren't in the head itself, reducing the risk of components becoming overheated during longer shoots with power-hungry units. Some modern compact heads now incorporate fan cooling systems, however, negating the advantages of using a power pack. »

The contenders



Lastolite Lumen8 F400 Pro Flash Kit SRP: £720



Bowens Studio-In-A-Box 200 SRP: £429



Elinchrom D-Lite 2 kit SRP: £488

Lastolite Lumen8 F400 Professional Flash Kit

SRP: £720 This slick kit designed for professionals is the most expensive on test, but is it worth the extra cost?

The Lastolite Lumen8 F400 Professional Flash Kit certainly looks like it lives up to its pro credentials: the whole lot comes in a hard-wearing, large black fabric case with a convenient extendable handle and wheels for easy transportation. Inside, the customisable interior features padded dividers that are held in place with Velcro and protect the contents from damage.

For your money you get 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 aforementioned sturdy carry case. Each flash head incorporates a flash tube and modelling lamp that can be adjusted to proportional or full power, and 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 are also mains powered, so you don't need a power pack to plug all your heads into, which means less cables and a safer, less-cluttered working environment.

The whole kit is very fast to get set up, taking a matter of minutes. The heads connect to the stands via standard 16mm male spigots, using the Lighting Stand Clamp located on the bottom of each head. These clamps feature a tilt handle that makes it easy to tighten and loosen them, for easy set up, removal and angle adjustment during use.

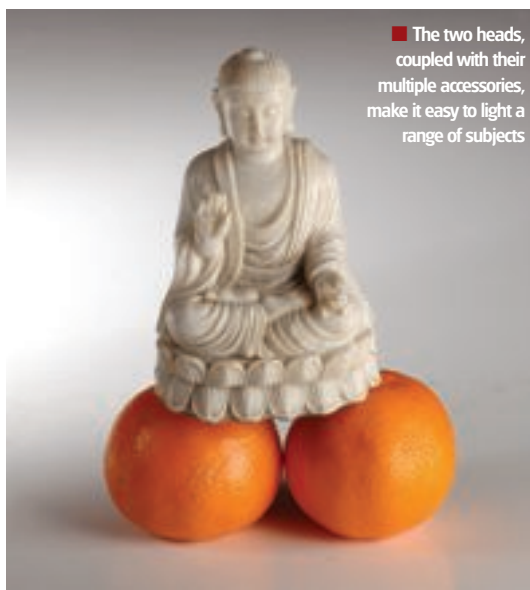
The design of the head, with vents to allow for airflow, keeps the components inside the unit cool, however thermal cut-off is an included safety feature should the temperature get too high. The heads, in addition to a 'ready' light, have audible recharge confirmation, which can be switched off if you prefer.

The layout of the controls on the back of the heads is very simple indeed, with everything clearly labelled and easy to interpret. If you do feel you need a little extra guidance, there is a brief user manual included in the kit, which has 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.

Once set up, the units are really 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 to 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 thanks to more accessories available separately from Lastolite.

"The layout of the controls on the back of the heads is very simple indeed, with everything clearly labelled and easy to interpret"

■ The kit includes everything you need to get started, but at this price, so it should!



■ The two heads, coupled with their multiple accessories, make it easy to light a range of subjects

Technical data

Manufacturer	Lastolite
Model	Lumen8 F400 Professional Flash Kit
Price	£720
Web	www.lastolite.com
Phone	01782 753304 (IP Distribution)
Flash head model	Lumen8 Flash Head 500
Stored energy	400W/s
Guide number	60
Recycle time to full power (240V)	0.4-1.6secs
Flash duration	1/700-1/1,700sec
Flash power variation	Full to 1/32
Model lamp variability	Full, Prop and Off
Audible recharge conformation	Yes
Reflector mount	S-Type bayonet
Operating voltage	170-240V / 50-60Hz
Sync voltage	4V DC
Built-in slave cell	Yes
Dimensions	182 x 410 x 210mm
Weight	25kg

Verdict

Features **9/10**

■ A great choice for photographers on the move. The carry case with wheels is a nice touch, which makes this offering the winner in terms of portability. It also has all the kit that most photographers will ever use, with further accessories available as needed

Ease of use **9/10**

■ The user interface is very simple, with a few clearly labelled switches and a Power Control dial. Quick to set up, even first-time users should have no trouble

Quality of results **9/10**

■ With a fast recycle time, easily controlled output and daylight-balanced lighting, results are excellent. All our test shots were pleasing and it works in every situation

Value for money **8/10**

■ The great range of included accessories and a professional carry case sweetens the deal. It's a pricey kit, but the quality and included accessories speak for themselves as the ultimate portable lighting system for pros

Total

88%

Technical data

Manufacturer	Bowens
Model	Studio-In-A-Box 200
Price	£429
Web	www.bowens.co.uk
Phone	01255 422807
Flash head model	Esprit Gemini 200
Stored energy	200W/s
Guide number	50
Recycle time to full power (240V)	1.3secs
Flash duration	1/1,700sec
Flash power variation	Full to 1/4
Model lamp variability	Full, Half and Off
Audible recharge confirmation	Yes
Reflector mount	S-Type bayonet
Operating voltage	190-2,550V / 50Hz (230V) or 95-130V / 60Hz (117V)
Sync voltage	5V DC
Built-in slave cell	Yes
Dimensions	170 x 310 x 130mm
Weight	2.3kg

Verdict

Features **8/10**

There are some great accessories in the box to get you started, although a softbox and a carry case would make the kit feel more complete, though this is the cheapest system on offer here

Ease of use **8/10**

The stands are stable and quick to set up, with decent, strong locking mechanisms. The heads are easy to attach and the S-Type bayonet fitting makes them compatible with a wide range of accessories. It is easy enough for beginners and pros alike

Quality of results **8/10**

Results are consistent and clean, with no evidence of colour casts. We tested the kit on a range of subjects, and found that the light was easily controlled and even

Value for money **9/10**

This kit may be cheaper than the other contenders, but the quality prevails. It's worth every penny. Factor in the cost of any additional accessories or a case

Total

83%

Bowens Studio-In-A-Box 200

SRP: £429 Contenders as advertised, this really is a full studio setup inside one box, but is it good enough?



■ The Studio-In-A-Box lives up to its name

The Studio-In-A-Box 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 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.

For the diminutive price, you get a fair amount of kit, every piece of which is 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° Wide Angle Umbrella Reflectors. Sadly, there's no carry case to reinforce the kit's portability, but you can purchase one separately from the range on the Bowens website. You also don't get a softbox, but Bowens makes up for this with the extra umbrella and, again, you can purchase more accessories, including softboxes, which you can browse through on the Bowens site.



■ The powerful Esprit Gemini 200 flash heads are perfect for tabletop macro shots

The heads are quick to attach to the Handy Stands, using the same mechanism as the Lastolite kit, and the reflectors are attached using the same S-Type bayonet fitting as the other two contenders. The L-shaped bracket that's attached to each of the heads allows them to be mounted with the unit pointing forward or straight down, increasing the versatility of the unit.

The umbrellas included in the kit attach to the reflectors via a holder on the side, with a clamp to hold them firmly in place. Once that's done, simply plug in the mains leads and sync cable and you're ready to shoot.

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 1.3secs 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.

Overall, a relatively inexpensive way to get started in studio photography, or a lightweight setup that's ideal for location work. Our only quibble is the lack of a carry case, which makes it a little less portable than the other contenders. »

“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”

Elinchrom D-Lite 2 kit

SRP: £488 The entry-level kit that delivers a professional performance at a budget price for a first-time studio

The first thing we noticed when handling the D-Lite 2 heads for the first time is just how light they are! The whole kit weighs just 1.1kg: an impressively diminutive measurement that highlights the kit's suitability for roaming photographers who need to travel with their equipment. 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 +/- 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 user-changeable plug-in flash tube emphasises the benefits of buying an entry-level kit over a pro version that needs to be replaced by experts, scoring a few extra points for convenience. The control

buttons in place of dials and switches. These buttons are simple to operate and allow for very precise settings to be dialled in, ensuring consistent results every time. One other addition to the Elinchrom offering is that instructional DVD that's included in the price: an invaluable source of information about the kit itself and studio work in general.

The D-Lite 2 heads feature a modelling light that can be set to Full, Half, Proportional or Off, giving them a slight edge over the Bowens Esprit Gemini. It's worth mentioning, however, that the modelling lamp stays on, even when the flash fires, but this shouldn't present a problem, particularly if you get into the habit of using a flash meter to determine your exposure. These heads also feature switchable slave cells, dispensing with the need for cables trailing everywhere and there's the option of having audible recharge confirmation.

In practice, the kit performs very well indeed: quick to set up, the flash heads deliver consistent, colour-cast-free results. The recycle time of just 0.7sec is very impressive indeed, although it should be noted that these heads deliver a flash duration of 1/1,200sec, rather than the 1/1,700sec offered by the other two contenders. Nonetheless, this is all you really need for static, still- or portrait photography.

The control panel is entirely different to the other two contenders, with a digital display and buttons in place of dials and switches"

■ The two softboxes included in the kit are a big plus



■ The D-Lite 2 kit is fantastic for portraits of models of all shapes, sizes and species

Technical data

Manufacturer	Elinchrom
Model	D-Lite 2
Price	£488
Web	www.theflashcentre.co.uk
Phone	0207 837 5649
Flash head model	D-Lite 2
Stored energy	12-200W/s
Guide number	453
Recycle time to full power (240V)	0.7secs
Flash duration	1/1,200sec
Flash power variation	All 1/10
Model lamp	Full, Prop, Half and Off
variability	
Audible recharge confirmation	Yes
Reflector mount	S-Type bayonet
Operating voltage	90V-260V
Sync voltage	5V DC
Build in slave cell	Yes
Dimensions	160 x 200 x 110mm
Weight	1.1kg

Verdict

Features 8/10

■ The digital display and simple six-button user interface is excellent. The inclusion of two softboxes is ideal for getting started with studio portraiture, but the build quality isn't quite up to that of the other contenders. The instructional DVD is an added boon

Ease of use 9/10

■ Incredibly simple, thanks to the amount of instruction included. The controls are easy to operate and perfect for making precise adjustments to the flash output. Quick to set up, the D-Lite 2 kit is perfect for beginners

Quality of results 8/10

■ The images we produced are perfectly exposed every time and at a consistent colour temperature

Value for money 8/10

■ We love the included softboxes, but would have still liked a reflector or two for added versatility. Nonetheless, your cash will get you an excellent, easy-to-use entry-level kit, with money left over for extra accessories

Total

83%

Studio essentials

GOSSEN DIGIPRO F

Model: 01628 799901 **Price:** £190
Web: www.intro2020.co.uk

Although some photographers simply use their experience, coupled with a bit of guesswork and scrutiny of their camera's histogram, a flash meter is an invaluable tool when ascertaining accurate exposure settings. This simple device measures the output of your flash head. Flash meters like the Gossen DigiPro F allow you to either plug the sync lead into it to directly measure output, or you can take an incident or reflected light reading. All you need to do is set your ISO, fire the flash and the meter will tell you the correct aperture you'll need at those settings.



LASTOLITE SUNFIRE/SILVER TRIGRIP 75CM

Model: 01782 753304 (IP Distribution)
Price: £60 **Web:** www.lastolite.com

When you have a limited number of flash heads at your disposal, it's a good idea to have the means to direct light to hand. The Lastolite TriGrip reflector comes in a range of shapes and sizes and is collapsible for convenience. It's also reversible, with a choice of two colours to bounce light back at your subject and fill in problem shadow areas without having to introduce another light source. The TriGrip features a moulded



handle with securing strap to make it easier to accurately position the reflector one-handed and is available in a new 'mini' size (450mm/18").

LASTOLITE STUDIO CUBELITE

Model: 01782 753304 (IP Distribution)
Price: From £190 **Web:** www.lastolite.com

When photographing smaller subjects, you need maximum control over your lighting. The Lastolite Studio Cubelite affords photographers maximum flexibility and control over their lighting, allowing them to light objects from above, below or through the tensioned fabric sides. The fabric itself acts as a diffuser, reducing reflections and the front opening of the Cubelite can also be closed to avoid reflections of the photographer. The whole structure is collapsible and comes with an acrylic top surface to support items up to 8kg. Available in two sizes – 700 x 700 x 1,550 mm and 1,000 x 1,000 x 1,850mm – the Cubelite is ideal for product photographers.



GROUP TEST
AND THE
WINNER IS...



Lastolite Lumen8 F400 Professional Flash Kit

If you're on a budget, both the Bowens and Elinchrom kits are very worthy contenders. Not only does the D-Lite 2 kit sport a faster recycle time and more modelling lamp power options, it also comes with individual carry cases for everything and two softboxes. The Bowens kit doesn't include a softbox or a carry case, but it does come with two reflectors and two umbrellas.

However, our winner is the Lastolite kit, which offers the best of both worlds, with an umbrella and softbox, as well as the two reflectors and an excellent case complete with handle and wheels.

The Bowens Esprit Gemini heads are very compact, but in terms of portability the D-Lite 2 kit is king, weighing just 1.1kg: less than half the weight of the other contenders. The Bowens heads do have a sturdier, more professional feel more than the D-Lite heads, however, making them more suitable for heavy-duty use.

Having some of the controls on the side on the Bowens Esprit Gemini 200 heads is necessary, due to their small stature, however we found it was less

convenient than having everything on the back. The dials on these heads also have rather cryptic demarcations, 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 we prefer the digital display on the D-Lite heads.

The Bowens Esprit Gemini 200 heads have half the amount of power as the professional Lastolite heads, however the recycle time is longer by over a second, highlighting the fact that extra cash does buy added functionality. It simultaneously 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 0.3sec slower (D-Lite 2) or a kit with the same flash duration and comparable build quality (Esprit Gemini 200).

Overall, if you're just starting out, the Bowens and Elinchrom kits are about even once you've weighed up all the pros and cons of each, but if you want a kit that really does have everything and you have the cash available, the Lastolite kit is definitely worth the extra cost.

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