



Flashgun modifiers

Flash is essential for some photo situations – indoors and out – but sometimes it can look too harsh and obvious. Here we've tested the accessories designed to help.

If you shoot a lot of portraits you'll need to use flash at some point – especially if you shoot weddings. The trouble is that flash can look terrible when it isn't used properly and even then, direct flash never looks ideal. So, if you already have a flashgun and use it a lot for people pictures, then you need to invest in a good quality flash modifier. Here we've put together four of the best-selling flashgun accessories that will provide you with the best possible lighting. Find out which one is best for you...

ABOUT THIS TEST

For the purposes of this test, we used these gadgets on a Nikon SB-800 flashgun. As each product is an accessory, you'll need to buy a flashgun first. We recommend the Nikon SB-800 (£249) and Canon 580EX (£248) flashguns – most accessories are designed for these two units in particular.

Practical Photography
BEST BUY



STREET PRICE:
£35

Gary Fong Lightsphere II

Compatible with:

most flashguns

Website:

www.bbjiimports.co.uk

If you like simple products that produce great results then you're onto a winner here. The main part of the Gary Fong Lightsphere II is made from clear vinyl and is flexible so it won't crack or break when subjected to the inevitable bashing it will get in the field.

The Lightsphere II just slides onto the top of your flashgun where it's held in place with a rubber grip. It's fairly hard to pull off and the attachment system is much more effective than all the straps, strips and bands that the other modifiers need. After all, less is more when it comes to ease and speed of use.

The Lightsphere II also differs in the way it works, too. Rather than simply diffuse the direct flash hitting your subject, it also spreads the light all over the place, lighting up a whole room. We found this especially useful when shooting interiors and large group scenes, when you need to make the most of a powerful flashgun.

Perhaps best of all it's cheap, simple to use and produces great results (see portraits, overleaf).

The Lightsphere II is certainly a product our tester will be adding to his own kit bag, so hopefully that's a good enough recommendation for you.

VERDICT



STREET PRICE:
£49

Viewfinder Diffuser Dome

Compatible with:

most flashguns

Website:

www.viewfinderphotography.co.uk

Considering this product looks just like one of the eggs from the *Alien* movies, it's actually remarkably clever. It attaches to the flashgun with a Velcro strap, but also requires a thick rubber band placed around the flash first. Once attached to your flash, it stands tall at around 20cm high and can be fairly cumbersome to wield.

Made from hard plastic, you get the impression it might break if dropped. Size is a slight problem too in that you can't just sling it in your kit bag so you'll need to find a safer way to

transport it. This is a considerable worry for many photographers as you need kit that can be bounced about easily rather than handled with kid gloves. But once you get it safely to your shoot the results it gives are stunning. In fact they're so soft that it doesn't even look as though flash has been used. The light is so even it illuminates everything and leaves soft shadows on faces just like daylight. It's great for subtle results but can leave soft shadows on facial features, so it needs to be used in the right situation. It produced the most natural lighting in this test.

VERDICT





STREET PRICE: **£59**



TESTER'S CHOICE

STREET PRICE: **£150**

Gary Fong Whale Tail Reporter

Compatible with:

most flashguns

Website:

www.bbjimports.co.uk

The name alone is enough to make you look twice at this product, and the design is more than a little outlandish too. The Whale Tail Reporter was designed by US photographer Gary Fong and is perhaps the strangest-looking modifier on test here. It's also the most confusing. Fortunately there are quite a few tuition videos on Gary Fong's website.

Build quality is a little lower than the price may suggest - there are flaps of plastic around some of the edges left over from the moulding process and the top flap doesn't quite cover the

hole... but it's unlikely to break in the field. The Reporter works best indoors and is great for when you want to bounce light around to fill plenty of shadows.

It's a flexible bit of kit and while there are lots of positions to get used to, a bit of practice will quickly help you find the ones that work for you. The Reporter has interchangeable amber and chrome flaps for colour temperature compensation and a gel kit for slipping into the built-in filter tray to create colour lighting.

The price is about right for what you get and is a worthwhile purchase.

VERDICT



Ray Flash Ringflash Adapter

Compatible with:

Nikon SB-800, Canon 580EX only

Website:

www.flaghead.co.uk

For years, getting hold of a ringflash would cost you a lot of money. That was until this handy ringflash adapter was released last year. The idea is that you attach the adapter to the front of your flashgun, while the business end goes round your lens.

It's big enough to fit around most lenses, even up to the larger f/2.8 professional optics. The catch light you'll get isn't as perfectly circular as a true ringflash would produce, but it's close enough and is better than most of the macro flash units available on the market. (These units have two lights either side

of the lens and produce two square catchlights, rather than the circular ones produced by true ringflashes.)

You'll need to turn up the power on your flashgun to at least +1EV to get great results, which obviously has an impact on recycling time.

It's a lot of money for a flash modifier but if you already have a flashgun and would like to experiment with ringflash, this is pretty much the cheapest option out there and it's great for fashion and macro. If you want to create lighting that's subtle, crisp and even, this is the best option for you.

VERDICT



» Results comparison

DIRECT FLASH



This shot was taken with the flashgun pointing directly towards our model with no form of diffusion. The heavy shadow on the backdrop looks terrible and the harsh light really isn't flattering for portraiture.

DIRECT FLASH WITH DIFFUSER



The Nikon SB-800 comes with a diffuser dome as standard and it's easy to see that it makes a big difference to the quality of the light. It's still not great but it's better. If your flash doesn't come with a diffuser, consider the Stofen range (around £15).

GARY FONG LIGHTSPHERE II



Using this device on top of the flash has reduced the ugly shadow to a soft outline. The light on the face is also extremely flattering compared to the direct flash. The Lightsphere II diffuser works by spreading light $\frac{1}{2}$ all over the place.

VIEWFINDER DIFFUSER DOME



The crazy egg-shaped accessory has almost lost the shadow completely and the light is so soft, it's hard to tell that it came from on-camera flash. In fact the light's so soft it's lost the crisp look and has created a larger shadow under the chin and chest.

WHALE TAIL REPORTER



There's still a clear shadow when using the Reporter but it's a big improvement on the standard diffuser on the Nikon SB-800. The light is still harsh enough to create nice shadows in the right places and gives the image a sharper quality.

RINGFLASH ADAPTER



There are no prizes for spotting how much of a difference using ringflash makes here. We had to dial in +1EV to the flash power as the device has a large surface area. The model's skin has a glowing, radiant quality; flash fall-off creates a nice shadow halo.

VERDICT

All the products on test do their job well and will help you get better results in the field but there are a couple of modifiers that really shine. The **Lightsphere II** is cheap, unbreakable and produces a superb quality of light that photographers will love and it's a clear winner of PP's **Best Buy award** here. The Viewfinder

Diffuser Dome produces so subtle a form of light that it may not be suitable for some tasks. It's perfect for lighting a scene so you can't tell it's been lit – a problem that usually only the best lighting experts can solve.

But if you want to create images that are totally unique and far beyond what most other enthusiasts can

produce, you need to invest in the **Ray Flash Ringflash Adapter**. Okay, so it costs as much as a budget flashgun, but the light is truly stunning and will give your portraits an edge (although it's great for macro shots too). If you can spare the extra cash, buy one – it's our **Tester's Choice** in this review.