

# The Beauty Of **AVAILABLE LIGHT**

LOCATION, TIMING AND  
CREATIVITY ARE THE  
KEYS TO OUT-OF-  
THE-STUDIO PORTRAITS  
TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
J. DENNIS THOMAS

**W**hen many people think of a professional portrait photographer, this often conjures up images of someone like Richard Avedon, darting around frantically with a light meter, taking readings from all different angles in a high-paced and frenetic setting at a large industrial space surrounded by a myriad of assistants, different types of strobes, hot lights, softboxes, umbrellas, reflectors and stands. This is definitely a scene you can come across in a busy high-end portrait studio, but this isn't necessarily the norm, nor is it the only way a professional portrait photographer can operate.

While high-fashion and glamour photography often rely on sophisticated, precise lighting patterns and techniques to highlight the perfectly sculpted features of models, in the real world, elaborate lighting setups are overkill for many of our clients, so it's not exactly necessary to invest thousands of dollars in lighting equipment in order to be successful as a portrait photographer.

Truth is, the simplest lighting can be very attractive, and by learning a few tricks and techniques, you can become a highly successful photographer, creating beautiful portraits for your clients using minimal equipment and available light.

## **EQUIPMENT**

Although shooting professional portraits doesn't require a lot of costly equipment, there are a few things every mobile portrait photographer should carry with them, because when shooting outside of a studio setting, the light can be relatively unpredictable. At times, the light can be too harsh and directional, or it can be too soft and flat. It's a rare occasion where the light is absolutely perfect, so having these



Amber is a model with very fair skin, and in some lighting situations, it's hard to capture a good skin tone. I had a gold reflector placed at camera-right, which gave her skin a nice warm glow and added some highlight to the side of her face.

items on hand will allow you to take unpredictable light and shape it to your needs, which is a key skill for any natural-light photographer to have.

Probably the most important piece of gear that you can carry with you (aside from your camera and lens) is a reflector. I recommend getting what's referred to as a 5-in-1 reflector. This is a disk that has a number of different surfaces with which you can control lights in specific ways. The surfaces of

a 5-in-1 and their uses are as follows:

**Silver.** This surface is used to reflect light back onto the subject with a bit of contrast. It can add some bright, defining highlights to your subject while filling in shadows. It's also great for adding a catchlight to your subject's eye, which can sometimes be lacking in available-light portraits.

**White.** The white surface is used to add a neutral, gentle fill light to bring out the detail in shadowy areas. The





situation, break out the 5-in-1 reflector and use the translucent surface as a diffusion panel by placing it directly between the sun and the person you're photographing. The closer the diffusion panel is to the person, the more diffused the light is; placing it farther away gives the light a harder, more directional quality. If the lighting is only moderately harsh, use the silver or white to bounce light

Here, I took Earl and Courtney, a married couple as well as a musical duo, to a nice rustic bar with beautiful wood paneling and large overhead doors that allowed the late-afternoon light to stream in. The venue was very laid-back and allowed us to relax and chat over a few cocktails, as well as casually shoot these portraits.

white surface keeps the fill light a consistent color and helps to reduce contrast.

**Gold.** The gold surface is used to add warmth to your subjects. If your model is pale, this can make for golden skin tones. The gold can also be used to approximate the early-morning or late-afternoon time that photographers sometimes refer to as the "Golden Hour."

**Translucent.** This surface is thin white material that lets light pass through it. This is used to diffuse harsh light. Sometimes, you have no choice but to schedule a shoot at a time when the sun is high and bright. Placing the diffuser between the sun and your subject automatically softens it, making it eminently more useful and pleasant.

**Black.** Sometimes, the light can be too bright for the subject, but reducing the exposure may not be an option. You can use the black surface to subtract a little light from the subject's skin tones, making them more dimensional. This technique is often called "negative fill."

Unless you always have an assistant on hand for every shoot, a few other things that are handy to have with a reflector are a reflector holder, a stand and a sandbag to keep the reflector from tipping over or blowing away.

If you find yourself in a harsh lighting

I placed Cassidy next to a large window, which created the perfect combination of soft, yet contrasted light. This is another example of how you can achieve amazing light with virtually no setup at all. Many studio photographers set up fake window panes with flashes and softboxes to replicate light that's easily found just about anywhere.







Here, I was photographing Toni on a balcony during the Golden Hour. I placed her right at the precipice to allow the golden sun to light up her hair and create a strong rim light to make her face pop from the background. There's really no perfect replacement for actual golden hour sunlight.

on the subject to fill in the dark shadows.

Another important piece of equipment is a shoe-mount flash. These are useful not only for providing the main light, but as a fill light in high-contrast lighting situations or to add a small amount of light to augment the ambient light in darker scenes. The key to using a flash when shooting portraits like this is that less is more; you don't want the flash to be apparent. All the flash is for is to give the shadows a little more light to even out the exposure.

Most camera systems have a fill-flash

setting, and I'll typically use this setting and dial down the flash exposure about 1.3 to 2 additional stops. I also try to keep the subject away from close backgrounds to avoid "flash shadows," which appear as a dark outline behind the subject. If the subject is near a wall, I generally bounce the flash off the nearest wall or ceiling to diffuse it.

### TIMING

When photographing with natural light, timing is often the key to getting great light for your images. Generally,



Not far from my house is Bouldin Creek, which is lined with lots of vegetation. I like to use these saw palmettos as a background. When the model is placed right, the palmetto leaves appear to radiate from behind the head. The shade was provided by an overhead tree, which allowed enough light to create interesting contrast.

most natural-light photographers prefer to shoot during the Golden Hour, which happens twice a day, in the morning as the sun is rising and in the evening as the sun is setting. To put it simply, the best time to photograph outdoors is when the sun is low in the sky. When the sun is low in the sky, the light is more diffused and warmer because it's being filtered through more layers of the atmosphere. This effect is caused by a phenomenon called Rayleigh scattering.

Golden Hour isn't a technical term, by any means, and it may last longer than an hour in the winter and less than an hour in the summer. It's a good idea to show up at the location before the Golden Hour starts to take full advantage of it because the time is fleeting.

### LOCATION

Shooting portraits without a studio actually gives you more freedom to get creative with your backgrounds. High-fashion photography and studio portraits typically have simple backgrounds and often well-placed props. Eschewing a studio setting allows you to create portraits that are more organic. The right location sets the tone for a portrait and often enables you to more elegantly capture the spirit of the person you're photographing.

When you photograph your subjects



in environments they're familiar with and comfortable in, they will be more relaxed and easy to work with. It's a good idea to sit down with your clients and talk with them about possible locations. More often than not, they will have at least one place in mind. Walk around your own neighborhood and scope out different settings that may be ideal for a portrait session.

As you go about your daily routines and errands, keep an eye out for places

with interesting decor and areas where diffused light may come streaming in. If you're someplace at a certain time and the light is just right, take a photo with your phone's camera and make a note of the location and the exact time.

Look for vegetation or structures that have interesting shapes, patterns or textures that will add character to the background of the portrait. Another thing to look for are plain walls, either white or dark or with interesting colors. These

can act just like a studio photographer's seamless background for a more simplistic portrait, like a headshot.

I talked about the Golden Hour earlier and how that's typically the best time to shoot a portrait. Sometimes, however, the Golden Hour doesn't fit in with your client's schedule. In that situation, you have to take other measures to get the kind of light that's flattering for portraits. This means finding suitable locations. Shooting portraits in the sun at high noon isn't going to make a flattering photo.

The best thing to do is get out of the sun. Simple enough. But where to go? Step inside and look for the nearest window. Window light is the available-light photographer's go-to lighting technique. All types of photographers use window light, from fashion photographers to photojournalists. Window light is soft, yet directional, and is pretty much one of the best ways to light a portrait, in my opinion.

If you're outdoors with no windows available, the best option is to find an area of shade, like a building overhang, a patio or balcony, or under a tree (although watch for sunlight spilling through in between the leaves, which can cause overexposed hot spots). The key here is to get out of the direct sunlight, but stay close enough to the edge to allow the light to have a direction. If you're too far into the shade, your light ends up flat and boring. Always try to give the light an appearance of direction. This is what adds contour to your subject's face and highlights their features, making for an image that looks three-dimensional.

With a few simple and relatively inexpensive pieces of equipment, a good location and a well-placed subject, you can make professional-looking portraits without the need for dedicated studio space. All it takes is a little know-how and some practice!

DP



For this quick and easy portrait, I grabbed local hair stylist Melissa for about five minutes and photographed her beneath an overhang and against the wall of the building her salon is in. The rose-pink wall complemented her clothing and skin tone perfectly. You don't need to spend a lot of time to get a great professional portrait.

*J. Dennis Thomas is a freelance photographer and an author based in Austin, Texas. He's the author of Wiley Publishing's Nikon Digital Field Guide Series, as well as Concert and Live Music Photography and Urban and Rural Decay Photography published by Focal Press. Find him at [www.NikonDFG.com](http://www.NikonDFG.com) and @JDennisThomas on Twitter.*