

How To Photograph Cars

A checklist for new car
Photographers



Introduction & Copyright Information



Photographing cars involves the same basic camera knowledge, understanding of exposure and light that most any other subject does. But there are several specialized things to consider when photographing cars and I present them here for your consideration.

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Gear

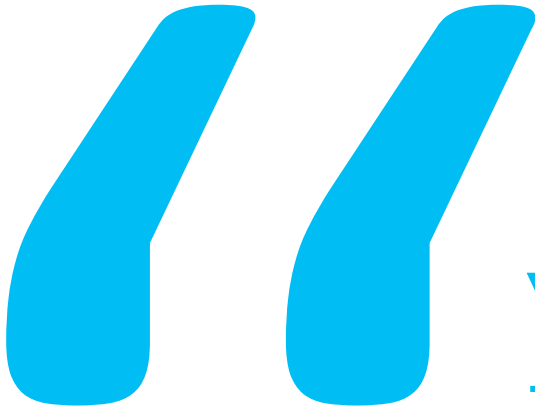
What You Need



Generally, any camera you have will work but there are other considerations when photographing racing. I cover both in the next section.

Proper gear starts with proper attire. Dress appropriately - no open toe shoes - no shorts - light fitting clothes that you don't mind getting dirty since you may need to get down on the ground. If you're shooting on a race track safety materials such as a SNELL approved helmet or even Nomex clothing may be required.





“A variety of lenses from macro, to fisheye...will work fine.”

Just about any camera will work but cameras with interchangeable lenses are preferred. A variety of lenses from macro, to fisheye to 35mm up to 150mm will usually work fine for this type of work. A solid tripod and tripod head are also preferred as is a solid ladder. You may want to bring a camera flash just in case you need it for interior shots or if you're working outdoors and want to use it for fill in dark areas of the engine compartment or undercarriage. A good polarizer is usually helpful to control specular highlights and rogue reflections.



Bring lots of memory cards. If the client says, "Would you like to photograph my 1941 Chrysler Thunderbolt?" you don't want to be short of memory cards. Take the Boy Scouts' advice and be prepared.

Have at least two inexpensive two-way radios or "walkie-talkies" (with spare batteries) on hand so that you can communicate with a driver or assistant.



Camera Setup

Get Your Camera Ready



Unless you're shooting motorsports, photograph in RAW. But better yet, choose RAW+JPEG and that way you can use the JPEGs as on-line proofs to show the client. On a vintage car, you might shoot some older classics in Monochrome JPEGs and you'll still have the RAW files in color.

If you're shooting motorsports, you might be better off using JPG mode.



Also set your ISO, White balance and shooting mode **BEFORE** you start the shoot. That way you won't miss any action.

Use the lowest ISO you can for your lighting conditions to assure the best overall image quality.

Turn off VR, IS or OS unless you're shooting movement in low light.



Photographing The Car

Strategy



Start by getting to know everything you can about the car(s) you're going to photograph.

Knowing more about the car means better photos every time - guaranteed. Even better, get to know the owners. The more interesting the car, the more interesting story it will have connected with it and, usually, the owner is more than happy to tell it to you. This may give you some insight into how to photograph the car.

- ✓ Download a brochure or even owner's manual for it the day before the shoot.
- ✓ Become familiar with the car's most important features.
- ✓ When appropriate, make use of formatting, like bold, italics, and font size changes, to draw people's eyes to your most important content.
- ✓ If possible test-drive a car like the model you'll



Find good locations. Scratch that. Find GREAT locations!

- ✓ Look for open shade for interior shots - look for low, direct sunlight with good backgrounds for exterior shots
- ✓ Make sure the scene fits the car. For instance, an SUV that is designed for serious off road work won't seem right when photographed on a swooping country club driveway. (The possible exception would be if it's a new Land Rover Evoque.) There are no concrete rules here, just use common sense.
- ✓ Remember the background is as important as the car! Don't photograph your car on striped pavement. Don't park half in the sun and half in the shade. Don't shoot in mottled light. Find clean, pleasing backgrounds. Make sure there are no background distractions like power polls, power lines, etc. .





“If you’re tempted to believe you can fix a dirty car in post - think again.”

Photograph a clean car. Make sure the car is fully cleaned, inside and out. Professional detailing and waxing is even better. Professionally-waxed cars have a sheen that is hard to beat. And don't forget the polish. Polish (not wax) is one of the most important things that you can do to make sure the car looks its best.

If you're tempted to believe you can fix a dirty car in post - think again. While you can remove dust, dirt and scratches in post it's just that much easier if the car is clean to begin with.



Either roll windows all the way up or all the way down. Usually car windows should be up in most photos. There should be nothing inside the car other than a driver (when appropriate.+) No purses, props, etc. unless specifically called for by the client.



Schedule the shoot for the right time of day. Noon is usually the wrong time of day. Early in the morning or late in the afternoon will give you a lower sun angle and more flattering, dramatic light. Schedule shoots for dusk if you want to get great shots of the car with the lights on.



Interior Shots

Details Matter



These are just general guidelines, but typically will work in any car interior.

- ✓ When possible or practical turn the camera so you make each photograph as a horizontal AND a vertical.
- ✓ Shoot the trunk. Frame edge to edge. Make sure the camera is level. There should be nothing in the trunk other than those items (if any) provided by the manufacturer.
- ✓ Shoot the dashboard from the back seat. Put the front seat down. Make sure the camera is level. Keep everything centered. Shoot the dash with the car turned on and off. When on, try to capture any interior ambient lighting effects.
- ✓ Shoot the instrument gauges - shoot them with the car on and off - shut doors - control ambient light from outside the car. Make sure the camera is level.



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- ✓ Shoot all interior details - special features, such as the analog clock found in the 2011 Jaguar XJL or illuminated door sills in a Mustang.
- ✓ Shoot door panels containing buttons, switches or special logos or insignia.
- ✓ Shoot a 3/4 view of front and back seating area from both sides of the car. Shoot 90 degree angle front and back seating area from both sides of the car.
- ✓ Shoot the engine. Use a small ladder or footstool to get above the engine. Frame edge to edge. Use flash if you need to bring out details in the shadows. Sometimes even the small pop-up speedlight on DSLR do a good job for this depending on the ISO you have selected. You may also experiment with placing lights underneath the engine and shoot it backlit.



Exterior Shots

Work The Angles



These are just general guidelines, but typically will work in any car exterior.

- ✓ Put the car against a clean background. Remove the license plate with the owner's permission. In case the image is salable, you don't want it circulated in such a way that can put the owner's privacy at risk. License plates can also date the shot. With older cars, see if the owner has year of manufacture plates and put them on. That adds a nice vintage touch. Some photographers who shoot cars regularly have their own collection of plates to use. Look for old plates at estate sales, garage sales and auctions.
- ✓ Put the car on sun angle and shoot on sun angle. Try to minimize any shadow cast by the side mirrors on the car body. This is very important since the shadows are distracting.
- ✓ Start with side shot left side and right side. Shoot with the camera at four different heights. Shoot one shot from a high angle, one shot at eye level, one shot at belt level, one shot at ground level. Note ground level



- ✓ Shoot a 3/4 view of the car left and right side. Shoot three heights, eye level, belt level and ground level and then shoot tilt shots up and down. **IMPORTANT:** Be sure to turn the front wheels in - i.e. make sure the rims face the camera.
- ✓ Shoot details. Capture that Spirit of Ecstasy on a vintage Rolls Royce or the lighted Indian head on an old Pontiac. Don't be afraid to get close but don't touch the car. The same rule of not touching female models apply to car models as well, and some owners think of their cars as "she."
- ✓ When in doubt, start photographing the car from 90 degree angles, walking all the way around the car, making sure that you have every possible view.
- ✓ Keep your lens perpendicular to the car when possible.



Movement

Go With The Flow



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Since cars aren't designed to stay parked, it's important to capture the cars on the road, under power. Try to capture the car in both freeze-frame (static) position using a fast shutter speed, and then do the opposite and shoot with a slow shutter speed panning with the car as it goes by. Shoot the car from a "chase" car that is driving both ahead of and then behind the car while it's driving. Just hang out the window and shoot! You don't have to drive fast; just keep it at 30MPH but use a slow shutter speed to add real motion blur so the car looks like it is tearing up the road. Always be aware of local laws, drive safely and legally. Work in an area with few people and avoid traffic.



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If you shoot cars under power do not have the driver look at the camera. Instruct the driver to look straight ahead and not at you.

If you're shooting motor sports, mix it up so you have a combination of blurred tires and frozen shots. Showing cars in staggered formation as appears below denotes movement even though the cars themselves aren't really blurred.



Miscellaneous

Think first - shoot second



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- ✓ Always think about the camera being level except on deliberately tilted shots.
- ✓ When using wide angle lenses watch out for distortion. Super wide lenses can distort the wheels so they don't look round.
- ✓ For picky clients or situations that require precision you'll need a tilt-shift (perspective correction) lens to make round objects perfectly round.
- ✓ Always look for details. Decals, name plates, badges, ornaments,
- ✓ Line everything up properly. Try to line up steering wheels so they are centered. Align all switches, vents, etc. Try to line up manufacture logos on wheels and tires so they are properly oriented.





Having a driver/assistant talking to you on a two-way radio makes this easier than the trial and error involved in driving the car, parking it, getting out to check the orientation and then repositioning until it's right.

Aggressive angles are more acceptable in car photography than in most other photographic genres. Use them.

If you're shooting at dawn or dusk, make sure to get some shots with the headlights on.



- ✓ Be sure you have permission to use locations for your shoots. If you are shooting somewhere you shouldn't and you get asked or told to move, apologize and move on. Period. You can't win this argument and you're better off not trying. When at all possible ask for permission and when on private property ask for property releases if you want to sell the images.
- ✓ If shooting at a private collection, museum, or racetrack ask where you should park when you arrive for the shoot. Nothing is more exasperating then setting up a shot on a vintage Rolls and then being interrupted to "move your car."
- ✓ If the car owners is available and interested, don't forget to photograph the owner with the car. Usually seated in the car, standing next to the front of the car and/or behind an open door.



When parking cars on steep inclines always set the parking break. This is not the time to shoot the back of the car as it rolls away from you.

Use the lowest ISO you can for your lighting conditions to assure the best overall image quality.

Turn off VR, IS or OS unless you're shooting movement in low light.



Indy Car Driver Buddy Rice



About the Author

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Scott Bourne, ASINWP, is an Olympus Visionary and a professional wildlife photographer, author and lecturer who specializes in birds.

Scott got his start as a motorsports photographer and grew up just a few miles from the famed Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

His work has been featured in more than 200 national and international publications, in books, magazines, on websites and in various nature-related television shows.

Scott was one of the first photographers ever to receive the designation Apple Certified Professional Trainer (T3) for Apple's Aperture. He also previously held the designation Certified Adobe Photoshop Instructor and Professional Photographers of America's Certified Professional Photographer designation.

Scott was awarded the designation Signed Master with the Studio Of Masters in China and recently, having satisfied the qualifying requirement prescribed by the The Society of International Nature and Wildlife Photographers board of examiners, was awarded Associateship in Photography (ASINWP.)

On Nov 2, 1998, Scott founded one of the first dedicated, online photography sites - Photofocus.com. He also co-founded the first photography related podcast, This Week In Photography (TWIP), and has gone on to create several other photography-related media properties.

Scott makes his home on the Kitsap Peninsula where he has a lovely view of Mt. Jupiter in Olympic National Park.