

How to photograph your car

The coupé is a beautiful car, but a lot of pictures on the forum and elsewhere don't do it justice – which is especially important when you're trying to sell. Taking decent photographs rather than snapshots isn't difficult. The following tips come from 'How to Photograph Cars', by James Mann, MBI Publishing, 2002, and from <http://www.cobracountry.com/fototips/>.

To be David Bailey you will need:

A camera.

- 1/ A camera phone - better than nothing
- 2/ A compact camera - very much better than nothing
- 3/ A SLR with wide angle mid range and telephoto lens, or zooms and flash.

Ten top tips:

1. Shoot in daylight so people can see your car properly - especially if you're trying to sell it. Some snaps are obviously shot in the dark with inadequate flash so all you can see is a gleam of metal and half a panel. This isn't especially helpful if you're in Southampton and trying to work out whether it's worth going to Dundee to view a car. But don't shoot in the midday sun if you can help it, the light is very harsh and flat. Cloudy conditions may offer more wrap round, softer light. This is especially important with yellow cars: if you want to avoid weird colour shades and 'white-outs', shoot in shade or early or late in the day. In fact, the best light for all car shots is at dawn and dusk. Just after or before sunset/rise, especially in summer, you get a soft glowing light that'll make the worst dog look so good you won't want to part with it.

2. If shooting in daylight, by all means use 'fill in' flash to poke some light into dark shadow areas, but overdone flash can look harsh and glaring so take care. If used it should complement and improve natural light, not replace or overwhelm it. The simple solution is try both approaches - natural light and flash, and combinations of both - and see which YOU prefer.

3. Wash, vacuum and polish the car first. Then do it again, especially if you're going for close ups.

4. Get down and dirty. Almost everyone snaps their cars from standing height. This doesn't do the lines of a car any favours. If you kneel down, or squat, to take the shot the image will be a million times better. Look at professional car shots: they are nearly all taken from headlight level or lower. One of the hunkiest shots of a sports car is a shot taken from the car's left or right front quarter - that is, from around 10 or two o'clock if the nose of the car is noon on the clock - with a lens of 200mm or more, aperture close to wide open to blur the background, and from a really low viewpoint just a foot or so off the ground.

5. Don't shoot a sports coupe sitting on grass it'll look like it's been abandoned. Choose a distraction free background/ base of clean concrete or tarmac without puddles, markings,

gratings or weeds. Wet (darkened) concrete or tar can look good with darker shades of car paint. Dry concrete looks good with yellow.

6. Use a tripod for a steady shot in low light.

7. Take photos from all angles: head on, front quarter, side, rear quarter, rear.

8. If you've got a telephoto use it long and as wide aperture as possible (f2.8-4). The idea is to focus the viewer on the car and blur the background. Be sparing with wide angle shots, they don't always flatter the car.

9. Interiors. According to Mann, interiors are best shot using natural light, camera on tripod and a long exposure – although a delicate injection of fill-in flash may help keep things looking smart and bright if you've got a sophisticated flash and camera so you can control such things. A useful interior shot, and one which most people adopt, is through the half-open door, using it to frame the shot. If the interior is black, bracket exposures to make sure you get the shot.

Checks to make the interior look good:

- steering wheel straight
- nothing odd in rear view mirror
- key out of ignition
- remove floor mats
- dust/ white marks, fluff etc
- windows up.

You can get a little action into interiors with minimum effort. For example, have someone drive your car, sit in the back and try for a wide angle shot of the cockpit and forward road view, metering for the road and using fill in flash to capture in-cockpit detail. This is best done with an SLR but a high end compact should be able to work out how to do this on its own. You don't need to go more than walking speed, or could even be stationary.

Exteriors:

- engine bays: get in close, clean up any drips or marks (if possible), use natural light and a long exposure if you can; although flash is okay it's a bit harsh and will leave shadows.
- take close ups of interesting or relevant detail. Check the object isn't marked or rusty – it is amazing how the eye filters such defects out. Once again, don't be afraid of taking shots from different angles. The rear light clusters might look better shot from below, looking up, for example.

10. Most people shoot some sort of JPEG. That's okay, but you're a little limited sometimes in what you can change in the shot afterwards. If your camera offers the option, shoot RAW (Nikon call it NEF) instead. It requires a little more post processing and may mean you buying into more software (depending on what you've already got), but shooting RAW effectively means you can change almost everything about the shot after you've taken it. Some things are obviously immutable - you can't turn your dog eared 16v NA into a mint W-registration 20v Plus or a DB9, at least for now - but because the RAW shot records all the raw data of the shot, things like exposure, fill light, colour balance and so on can be fully adjusted on your PC after you've pressed the shutter, which can be very handy.