We all have a wish list, I'm sure, and I'm no exception. So, when Adam Scorey called and asked if there was anything on my 'to buy' list, my answer was immediate. However, Adam's influence as Editor of *Professional Photographer* didn't stretch as far as Keira Knightley... it didn't even stretch to weekly or monthly, so I came up with another idea – the Lencarta Safari Classic Ringflash kit.

I have used many types of lighting during my career, from huge parabolic reflectors to simple honeycomb grids, and one thing I love about my work is experimenting with the myriad effects they all give. Ringflash was the one thing that had eluded me, partly due to the cost and also because the options were limited – unless I had a power pack system. For the uninitiated, ringflash is like no other flash system; effectively it is a 'Polo' of light where you shoot through the hole. I know that many photographers do not like the effect it produces – bright, vibrant colours and a halo of shadow being its most noticeable features – but I am keen to give it a go and, in the process, brighten up my work, which is often described as dark.

IN THE BOX

On the morning of my planned shoot, a huge box arrived at my door. It was mainly packaging and padding inside, plus a further two boxes, one of which was home to the ringflash unit, while the other yielded a protective hard case containing the battery and cables. There was even a sync lead supplied, which is a nice touch as I hate being unable to use a piece of kit because some stupid extra has not been included.

I tend to use mains-powered Elinchrom monobloc's for my day-to-day work as I do not have a huge budget for gear, which is precisely what attracted me to the Lencarta system in the first place. Like other portable systems, it runs off a relatively small mains-chargeable, portable battery pack.

Lencarta's website claims 1,150 flashes per charge, which did raise my eyebrows, but any worries proved unfounded; I have used the system on three relatively intensive shoots with no sign of the battery pack dying on me.

I am one of those photographers who tends to move around a lot when shooting, rarely using a tripod except at the lowest of light levels. So, as a 'mobile' shooter I was keen to see if using the Lencarta would slow down my workflow. It didn't. In fact it actually sped things up as I no longer had to worry about the angles of shadows on the background or on the face of the model. The battery pack comes with a shoulder strap, so even when shooting with a sync lead you are not technically tethered to anything.

As I have mentioned before, I am not a fan of instructions; I like things to be simple – which this is. The flash is operated from controls on the battery pack, where you can set the flash power steplessly from 1/8th to full power. There is also a test button to fire the flash and a charge indicator, as well as a 'ready' light.

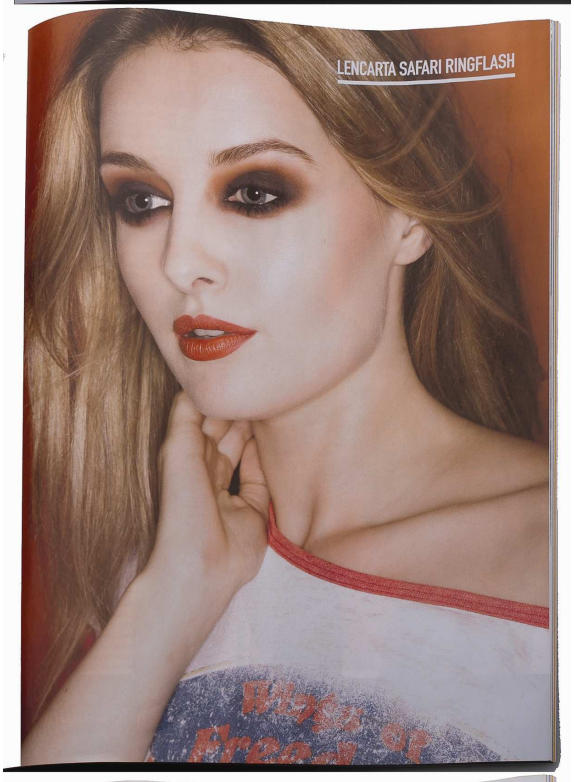
You have two charging options: either via the battery pack or directly into the NiMH battery itself, meaning that if you have two batteries you can charge one while still using the battery pack. There are two flashhead sockets where you connect the flash to the battery, with a good, solid plug system that then locks down via a plastic locking nut – again a nice touch; so far I am finding it hard to find fault with the Safari Classic kit.

Attaching the flashhead to the camera comes courtesy of a bracket coupled to the camera's tripod bush. This bracket allows you to set (at) the distance of the flash unit from your camera and (to) the height of the flash, meaning you can use the ringflash with or without your camera's power grip attached. For the test I used my Canon EOS 5D Mark II with the 24-105mm f/4L series lens attached. It can be a physically long lens for a standard zoom, so I removed the lens hood and the Safari Classic then fit perfectly. Initially, everything did feel cumbersome, despite the flashhead's low weight, but I soon got a feeling for it – even with my discombobulated, sausage-like fingers.

IN THE STUDIO

So far, so good, but it is about time I actually put the Lencarta to the use for which it is intended. I have borrowed my good friend and model, Leanne, for the day. I get her into make-up and explain to the make-up artist just how unforgiving ringflash can be on the skin and tell her not to be afraid to use colour and a good foundation. I am also utilising an orange background, which I procured for a good price due to its... orange nature. My gut feeling is that we need bold, strong colours for the shoot and I'm not wrong as I reel off the first set of images. Leanne comments on how bright the output is, mentioning that she can now only see purple rings. She does talk a lot; though, and I carry on!

One issue that quickly becomes apparent is the red-eye, caused, I suspect, by the lack of a modelling light. There are ways around this; mine is to set up a monobloc behind me with just the modelling



...ut alleviates the effect but adds messy catchlights in the ...ough these can quickly be removed in Photoshop.

...y when I get the images up on the screen that I realise ...ingflash is – nothing falls into shadow. Fillings in ...ed and every stroke of the make-up artist's ...y be seen. The halo of shadow behind the model is ...when you get your subject really close to ...ront and it becomes a murky outline. ...far in front and I used this flash system outdoors where the ...of little consequence. This, for me, is where the ...comes into its own, giving images ...effect. Also, its 600 watts of power is enough ...what little sun we have.

ANOTHER OPTION

..., when I have wanted to emulate the light of ringflash, ...ed a neat technique with a softbox. Basically you need ...front and any internal diffusing screens, and point ...directly at your subject. Position your lens under the ...and squeeze yourself up so you're virtually shooting from ...softbox without blocking too much of the light. I now ...although this creates a high-contrast effect, it doesn't ...the same beautiful coverage as a ringflash. The picture, ...shows this technique, with the finished result, right.

A CONCLUSION

...this to sound too one-sided but, having used the Safari ...kit on three separate shoots, I'm struggling to find ...negative to say about it. At just under £700 it is still ...to make a significant dent in anyone's finances, but that is ...for what you get and the options it opens up. ...ringflash systems cost well into the thousands, although ...do make an innovative 'reflector' that connects directly to ...monobloc head; it does give a similar effect, although I don't ...it is anywhere near as portable – or usable – as the Safari ...however, at half the price of the Safari Classic it may be worth ...if you already own a Bowens system.

...had one improvement to suggest it would probably be a strip ...LEDs around the head to provide a little bit of modelling light ...eliminate the red-eye issue. Overall, though, it is an excellent ...piece of equipment and although the test was comparatively short, ...performed exceptionally well throughout. I know Lencarta ...expecting the Safari Classic back but, unfortunately, err, the ...dog ate it – sorry! I can send you the dog if you like... ■

www.craig-fleming.com

THANKS TO: Model: Leanne – www.facemodelmanagement.com
Make-up artist: Fiona Simons – fi_23@hotmail.co.uk

SPEC

Lencarta Safari Classic Ringflash kit £699, www.lencarta.com
Max output: 600W/s
Flashes/charge: Up to 1,150
Recycle speed: 2-3.5 seconds
Trigger: Radio and sync
Output consistency: +/- 0.1 EV
Colour temp varience: Up to 114K
Sync voltage: >5 volts
Weight: 4.7kg