

Motorcar Photography Tips *step-by-step*

condensed "pdf" version for 1-page printout; to view examples of GREAT Cobra and GT40 photos using these tips, visit: www.CobraCountry.com/great-photos.html

Curt's Golden Rule of Motorcar Photography: it's all about **low-angle, evenly-distributed illumination**. Low-angle rays (e.g., rising/setting sun, obliquely reflected light, your electronic flash) is ALL GOOD. **Bright high-angle sunlight is ALL BAD**—it *relentlessly* bleaches out the top surfaces of your car, you get blinding glare and murky, colorless shadows... and lots more bad stuff. **If you shoot your car in bright OH sunlight, all you'll get is really cheesy snapshots.**

Your digital camera: you must use a decent digital camera with flash AND a zoom lens; set it for both **best quality** (i.e., 'Best' or 'Super Fine' or 'SHQ') JPEG, AND **HIGHEST resolution**. Set the main control dial on **Aperture Priority mode ('A' for aperture)**—NOT on 'Auto.' Then set your lens' f-stop somewhere between f7 and f11. **And TURN OFF the date/time stamp! Now you're set!** If you possess a tripod or monopod, bring it along. And a broom (to sweep the pavement).

Your flash: when I implore you (about 25 times) to use your flash, I mean **in concert with sunlight—your primary light source must be low-angle direct sunlight or smooth daytime shade**. But—to **infuse your outdoor photos with richer, brighter colors, brightened shadow areas & reduced glare**—you should *routinely* use your camera's terrific 'forced flash' (not 'automatic flash') to 'smooth out the illumination' in your outdoor photography. **Use your flash.**

Your car: sparkling clean, your tires (tyres) *Armored*. Your hood & trunk lid (bonnet & boot) are CLOSED, your (roadster) visors turned down to near-horizontal. **Shoot ALL of your motorcar photos OUTDOORS.** **Expert Tips 1–6 below are directed expressly and exclusively to your full-car shots:**

1. THE BEST DAYTIME SUNLIGHT: start shooting just after sunrise or an hour or so before sunset—when the (low, unobstructed) sun is near ground level, its rays *bathing your car with low-angle illumination*. This is good light.

2. THE SURFACE BENEATH YOUR CAR: unstriped, swept clean, preferably level pavement. White concrete is GREAT—it works like a reflector panel to glance low-angle sunlight (and your flash) up into those pesky shadow areas. Cobblestone or patterned pavement can add a *distinctive* touch. Dark asphalt? Wet it down for a glistening, reflective, *mirror effect*. **Do not park your car on grass or loose gravel—each introduces its own medley of image mischief.**

3. THE SETTING: just make sure the background is tidy and friendly and not distracting: no *dead-of-winter* foliage, no *Andy Gump* porta-potty, no marching penguins, no tree growing out of your windshield, no nude beach volleyball game, etc. If you're shooting in your driveway, *close your garage door!*

4. FRAMING YOUR SHOTS:

a) **Make like a groundhog:** squat down and shoot from low-angle/±waist level—DON'T stand up and "shoot down" on your car. **Use your flash.**

b) **Shoot a variety of "3/4-side-view" shots:** rotate your car so that *both the side and the front* are bathed in those low-angle rays of sunlight. Position yourself so that your shots are **mostly sideview** but with the front of your car visible—the sun at your back. So



long as the sun is warmin' your backside as you shoot, you're doin' good. **Don't waste your time** taking rearview shots or 3/4 rear shots—a Cobra does not customarily fare well photographed from the rear.

c) **You must "fill your frame" with motorcar:** you want as many of those

precious pixels as possible to represent motorcar, *not* real estate. But you must also avoid "fisheye" curvilinear distortion (caused by your stepping up too close to your car)... instead, you should back up a few paces and fill your frame with motorcar by zooming-in with your zoom lens. As your daylight begins to subside, turn off your flash and try a few shots with your running lights turned on—in this case, it's best to use your tripod.

d) **Beware of chaotic tree & cloud reflections on your paint job—** especially if your car is dark-colored or red. **Avoid trees and tree shade.**

5. MAKE NO MISTAKE: you **must** use your flash—and the higher/brighter the sun is, **the more a good flash will improve your photos**. For outdoor daytime photography, you **must** use **forced flash** (aka **flash on** aka **fill flash**, aka **outdoor flash**) option, **not** "automatic flash." **"Automatic flash" does not work in bright daytime shade or in the sunlight—where your modern, electronically-metered fill flash will improve your photos most dramatically.**

On your camera 'flash on/outdoor flash' is probably indicated by a jagged arrow/lightning-bolt icon. Step outside and test it—if it doesn't flash, it's likely your camera is set on 'Auto' [instead of 'A'—for 'aperture-preferred' or 'P'—for 'programmed'] operation, or perhaps it's set for 'automatic flash.' **Put simply: 'outdoor flash' provides that essential infusion of low-angle illumination you must have** for your paint job to *spring to life*. **If you (wisely) have an external flash mounted atop your camera, try this:** turn your camera upside-down so that the flash reaches wayyyy down low, bounces off the concrete, and *really* brightens up those lower regions. *Voilà!* **Make sure your flash works with every click of your shutter—no exceptions. Are we clear on that?**

6. IF YOUR CAR IS PAINTED YELLOW (or light blue or any pastel hue): take most of your full-car shots: a) parked on light concrete, b) in smooth, bright outdoor shade (*not* tree shade), with the daytime sky over your car. **Blending your flash with the soft light of sky-illuminated bright daytime shade is good.**

COCKPIT & ENGINE shots: bright shade + your flash = perfect illumination

You must (repeat: MUST!) make full use of two light sources:

a. **BRIGHT OUTDOOR SHADE.** Park your car **outdoors but entirely out of direct sunlight**, in "clean" shade (*anything but* chaotic tree shade). OH sunlight bleaches/discolors your cockpit and your engine, and produces ugly shadows. **BUT DO NOT move your car into your garage—keep it outdoors, in "sky-illuminated" bright daytime shade.** You got that? And you **must** add:

b. **YOUR FLASH.** Here's the deal: the ambient soft light of bright daylight shade blended with your flash gives you *sublime*—near *studio-quality*—illumination. **You must employ these twin sources of light for each and every cockpit & engine shot.**

Caution: Since you're using your flash, shoot from several angles to hedge against reflection 'flashbacks.' **Another tip:** a light surface beneath your engine brightens up those murky lower regions of your engine bay—so park on clean concrete, or (better yet) position a white sheet or white poster board beneath your engine.



Once more: for *superb* cockpit & engine shots, your car **MUST: 1)** be outdoors, **2)** be *entirely within* bright daytime shade (with unobstructed sky overhead) **AND 3)** you **MUST** use your flash.

Sending us your images to sell your car: Select your very best, hi-quality, hi-rez JPEG photos [±3 images each of] your 1) full car, 2) cockpit, 3) engine compartment, and perhaps 3 or 4 other shots of your choice, but no more than 15 total; **email them to us just as they came out of your digital camera.** If your favorite photo has a minor flaw, or if it's slightly overexposed, send it anyway—with a little tweaking in Photoshop it may turn out *spectacular!* JPEG images only—DO NOT email huge "TIF" or "RAW" images, **DO NOT EDIT OR CROP OR RE-SAVE YOUR IMAGES**, and make sure you send them at FULL SIZE/FULL RESOLUTION, not "email resolution."



Remember: Use your FORCED FLASH—commonly indicated with a "lightning bolt" icon. It's a no-brainer, it's the most valuable feature on your modern camera and—*especially if you have a powerful flash*—it will vastly improve your outdoor photography. *But only if you use it!*

If you want fine, richly-colored, *inspiring* motorcar photos instead of dull, murky, *snore-inducing* snapshots, **use your flash, dammit, use your flash.**

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