



Gear Help Me Buy a... Flash diffuser

Help me buy a... Flash diffuser

You don't need full-blown studio light set-up to get beautifully-lit portraits. A low-cost solution is to equip your flashgun with a diffuser. We help a *PhotoPlus* reader go shopping...

Your Canon D-SLR's on-camera flash is a useful tool. But an even better option is to use a bigger flashgun attached to your camera's hotshoe, because it gives you more power and control of your lighting. However, both produce a small, narrow and direct light source that can cast harsh, unflattering shadows over your subjects.

One easy and relatively inexpensive fix is to use a small diffuser or softbox attached to your hotshoe flashgun. With a diffuser attached, your flashgun will be able to create a bigger, broader light source that produces less harsh shadows. This softer, even spread of light is a vast improvement over the direct, straight-on frontal lighting of a flashgun on its own and it'll result in more flattering portraits. By using a diffuser, you can soften character lines and shadows around the eyes, which can make people look tired and haggard. The non-direct light also reduces reflections and that 'shiny face' look you can get with direct flash light.

Small and portable

As well as being affordable (expect to pay between £17 and £80), another added benefit of these flash modifiers is that they're compact and portable. Even the relatively large flashgun softboxes are foldable or collapsible, so you can stash them away in your kit bag, ready wherever you are and whenever you need them. They're a better option than shelling out for and lugging heavy lighting heads around with you.

There's a variety of different flash diffusers and modifiers to choose from, so we've collated a selection of different shapes and sizes from five different brands for *PhotoPlus* reader Margarita Lazarova to try out. Margarita's a keen Canon user and enjoys taking portraits and still-life photos, but wanted a quick and cheap way of improving her flash lighting.

We went to Margarita's flat with our model, Suzannah, and tried the modifiers, testing each one in turn to see how portable and easy to use they were compared with how much they improved the lighting of our portrait shots. Read on to see how we got on. ▶

Location shots: Jesse Wild (Future)

FLASH MODIFIERS ON TEST

THE EXPERT

Name: **Peter Travers**

Camera: **Canon EOS 40D**

PhotoPlus deputy editor Peter is keen on his portrait photography. He enjoys using his Canon 430EX II flashgun off-camera and with a variety of diffusers for capturing softly-lit portraits with smoother shadows.

DIRECT FLASH



DIFFUSED FLASH



THE READER

Name: **Margarita Lazarova**

Camera: **Canon EOS 450D**

Born in Bulgaria, 27-year-old Margarita now lives in England and is studying for a Masters in economics at the University of Bath. She's a keen amateur photographer looking to improve her portrait skills and lighting equipment by buying a flash modifier for her Canon Speedlite 430EX.



Sto-Fen Omni-Bounce

Web: www.newprouk.co.uk **Price:** £17.35

Peter says "A simple, affordable yet effective design, the classic Sto-Fen Omni-Bounce slips over the end of your flashgun to spread and soften the light and to soften shadows. It also helps to eliminate red-eye, as well as reflections off windows or glasses, should your subject be wearing them. It's a wedding photographer's favourite, as you don't need a ceiling to bounce the light for softer shadows. Simply point your flashgun up at a 45-degree angle (or straight up in the air) and shoot away. It diffuses the light by spreading the flash light source to cover a wider angle."

Margarita says "I've seen other photographers using Sto-Fen diffusers, but I didn't actually think the little translucent device would make much of a difference. However, I was amazed by how well it diffused and spread the light. I also thought I'd still need a white ceiling, but the Sto-Fen worked fine just sticking up in the air – it still created a good, even spread of light. Peter told me that Sto-Fens are also available in a green and gold, the former for fluorescent light and the latter for warming up the scene or the skin tones of your subjects."



PhotoPlus Verdict 75%

- ✓ Small, simple to use, functional, good price, don't need ceilings to bounce light
- ✗ Doesn't increase the spread of light as much as other diffusers



LumiQuest Softboxes

Web: www.newprouk.co.uk **Price:** £25-£45

Peter says "LumiQuest offers translucent softbox attachments for flashguns in various sizes, including the Mini Softbox (3.25x4.5-in), Softbox (5x7-in), Softbox II (6.25x7.75-in) and Softbox III (8x9-in). They enlarged and softened the flashgun's spread of light and softened the shadows well – and were great for bouncing light off walls for a nice sidelight on our model. The downside with the larger Softboxes II and III is that the size of the softbox means they block your flashgun's red AF Assist lamps, which your camera may use to focus in low light."

Margarita says "Using the rubber-backed Velcro Cinch Strap, these softboxes were easy to attach to my flashgun – although they did slip off occasionally. Even the Mini Softbox was two to three times bigger than my flashgun and they all increased the size of the light source to produce a nice, softer light. We found pointing them up at a 45-degree angle produced the brightest results. It's a shame the bigger Softbox III blocked my flashgun's AF Assist, but I like the way they fold flat, making them easy to stow in my camera bag."



PhotoPlus Verdict 78%

- ✓ Enlarges light source and bounces light effectively, folds flat for ease of carrying
- ✗ Needs walls and ceilings to bounce light, bigger sizes block your flashgun's AF Assist



Lastolite Micro Apollo 45

Web: www.johnsons-photopia.co.uk Price: £24

Peter says "From the reputable house of Lastolite comes the Micro Apollo 45, a 12x13cm softbox that (a little awkwardly) attaches to your flashgun via Velcro fasteners. It's very light material, but that also makes it a bit flimsy and I'd wonder how long it would last after repeated use. It's attached so your flashgun is towards the bottom-middle of the softbox – although that didn't seem to affect its lighting spread, which was soft and even, creating soft shadows. It folds flat for easier storage and also comes in a handy black carry case."

Margarita says "I've heard of Lastolite lights, softboxes and reflectors, so I was keen to see what its flashgun softbox would be like. It felt quite fragile to handle and was quite fiddly to fit, with the plastic bits and Velcro inside, but once attached to my flashgun it enlarged and softened the light source nicely to produce some good portraits. I noticed that its insides are silver, which helped to enlarge and project the flash light source."



PhotoPlus Verdict 70%

- ✓ Lastolite branding, very light and weatherproof, good spread of soft light
- ✗ Cheap-and-cheerful design that could shorten its lifespan, a little awkward to fit

Gary Fong Lightsphere Collapsible

Web: www.bbjimports.com Price: £55

Peter says "A portrait photographer's favourite, you simply stick the 'soft vinyl' diffuser onto your flashgun via the ribbed rubber end and point your flash up in the air. It's big, which makes it very effective, and you don't need ceilings to bounce the light off either, because it effectively bounces light off itself. We captured good results, with nicely diffused light and soft shadows. With the white dome (other colours are available) attached on top it brightened the shots further by bouncing more light on our model. This new version is also collapsible and squishes down to a ring that's 1.5-in thick."

Margarita says "I found this diffuser a little tricky to attach to my flashgun at first – until Peter showed me to put my hand inside to help fit it in place. Once installed, it was a joy to use and efficiently spread the light and softened the shadows very well. It's quite a big add-on to a flashgun, but its size is what dramatically increased the size of my light source. I could tell it would work well just watching my flashgun fire inside the Lightsphere – it was like a lighthouse!" ▶



PhotoPlus Verdict 88%

- ✓ Good spread of light, don't need ceilings to bounce it off, collapsible
- ✗ Relatively pricey and quite bulky compared to competition



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Interfit Strobies EFX Kit

Web: www.interfitphotographic.com Price: £81



Peter says "The EFX Kit consists of two honeycomb grids, a snoot with two smaller honeycomb grids, a bounce card set and honeycomb bounce tube. The honeycomb grids produced a soft, uniform light when attached to the flashgun via the Flex Mount (sold separately for £6.99), ideal as a sidelight or backlight for portraits when also using a main light. The snoot and bounce tube produced a spotlight effect, so you can highlight subjects or objects from their darker surroundings."



Margarita says "Fitting the Flex Mount to my flashgun was a bit tricky – it's a tight fit – but it was easy to clip on the honeycomb grids and snoot. Although the snoot made my camera look a bit sci-fi, it was fun to use and I was quickly able to capture some dramatic portraits by highlighting the model from a dark background. Peter said I'd need two flashguns to make full use of the honeycombs and snoot, by using them as a secondary sidelight source."



PhotoPlus Verdict 81%

- ✓ Great value, good for getting more creative with your flash photography
- ✗ Quite specialist. Interfit Flex Mounts sold separately, no softboxes in this kit.

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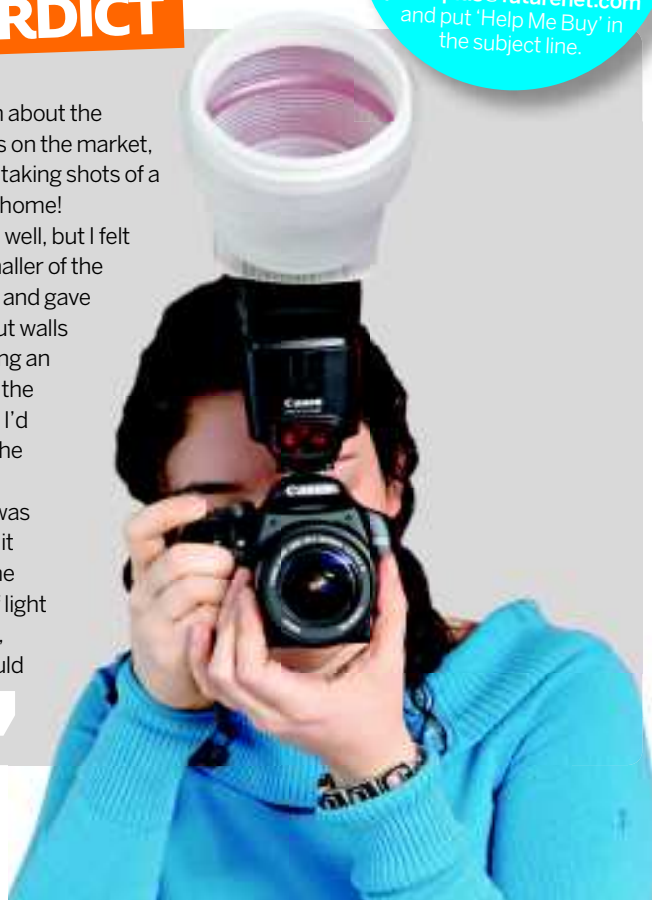
Want one-to-one advice on choosing a piece of kit? Email the details of what you're looking for, along with your address and phone number, to photoplus@futurenet.com and put 'Help Me Buy' in the subject line.

MARGARITA'S VERDICT

“ It was a brilliant day and I learned so much about the variety of flashgun diffusers and modifiers on the market, made all the better by being able to test them by taking shots of a professional model, all in the comfort of my own home!

The Lastolite Micro Apollo 45 softbox worked well, but I felt it was too fiddly and fragile. I also thought the smaller of the two LumiQuest softboxes were great, well made and gave good results, but they weren't so effective without walls or ceilings to bounce the light. And despite offering an impressive selection of modifiers for the money, the Interfit Strobies EFX Kit was a bit too specialist – I'd need another flashgun to take full advantage of the Honeycomb diffusers.

I also enjoyed using the little Sto-Fen, and if I was on a tight budget that would be my choice, since it produced great results. However, my choice is the Gary Fong Lightsphere. It enlarged the spread of light the most to create the softest light and shadows, and it was also the most adaptable because I could still use it outdoors or in buildings with high ceilings. It also collapsed down neatly. ”



FLASH DIFFUSER TIPS & TRICKS

Choices, choices

Choose your flash modifier according to your needs. If you're mostly taking indoor portraits of friends and family, an attachable softbox will probably do the trick. If you're likely to be taking portraits or still-life shots outdoors or in buildings with high ceilings, consider a diffuser that does the 'bounce light' on its own.

Reduced power

Bear in mind that any flash diffusers will reduce the power of your flash, reducing the distance by up to two and a half times. The same goes when bouncing flash off walls or ceilings. You can counter this by using the Flash Exposure Compensation on your flashgun – increase it by +1 to +2 stops, depending on manufacturer's recommendations.

Short on cash?

Make your own flash diffuser by cutting one out of a plastic milk bottle. The one-pint bottles are best; make it the same size as the Sto-Fen Omni-Bounce or a bit bigger. You'll need to keep it together and attached to your flashgun with tape and/or clear cable ties.

Bounce light

When bouncing your flash, bear in mind the colour of the surface you're bouncing off. If the wall is red, for instance, the bounce light will also be red.