

Ranger Quadra RX

Richard Kilpatrick checks out the latest upgrade to Elinchrom's Ranger Quadra system of portable flash - the RX - and finds that the additional weight and bulk of traditional packs is becoming harder to justify



It's been three years since Elinchrom launched the compact Ranger Quadra system, and in that time the innovative little pack has not stood still. The initial launch was a surprising departure from the signature monoblocs and packs that made up the Elinchrom range, and offered some new technologies, such as LED modelling lights, as part of a clean-sheet approach to lighting design, and the system rapidly became an essential bit of kit for location photographers.

Every year since launch has seen the initial

set expanded and improved upon. Initially consisting of the Asymmetric Ranger Quadra generator, a lead-acid gel battery and a choice of A(action) or S(standard) lightweight heads, the most recent addition to the system, previewed at Focus, is the Lithium-Ion battery pack option - a lighter alternative to the original packs.

The current Quadra system is the RX. This revision introduced the EL-Skyport Speed radio triggering and control system, brighter display LEDs for easier daylight use, and internal changes allowing some updates to be applied without hardware changes, via

Elinchrom's Mac/Windows based software and the Skyport USB adaptor. All of these changes were as a result of customer feedback, something Elinchrom has always been quick to take on board, as demonstrated with its adoption of thermostatic cooling fans in the D-Lite, when it was clear users were expecting the budget system to work hard in professional studios as well.

The Quadra system is defined by its compact heads. Weighing under 300g, these feature a large LED 5900K modelling light and a conventional flash tube. The heads have the



usual socket for stands built in, and an umbrella shaft mount, but use a simplified bayonet system for their own attachments.

Most users will be happy with the S-heads; the A-head offers a $1/6000$ sec duration at minimum power, with fast recycling, keeping up with a 4-5fps rate happily. To get faster durations or recycling, you end up with very different costs and compromises. At full power, the Quadra RX will typically produce 110-150 flashes (in tests, mine's exceeded that every time - and I'm still on my original three year old batteries); mini-

um power is closer to 1500 flashes.

As standard, the Quadra heads come with metal 13.5cm reflectors, and a clip-on diffuser panel, which also serves to protect the tubes when packed. The diffuser is also available as an accessory for owners of the original system. Elinchrom has expanded the range of dedicated modifiers - a Portalite 40cm softbox (£84 inc VAT) is included in most sets, and a 56cm Octa is now available for around £118 inc VAT - but most users wishing to integrate with the full-size accessories will want the EL adaptor ring, which

carries a stand mount and can support heavier modifiers.

For video work, the LED modelling lights are an ideal silent light source. For typical focus/composition use, the light will stay on for a short duration, conserving battery power, but it's possible to override it and use it as a continuous light, flicker free and daylight balanced, for very long durations, around two hours. The LEDs are robust, run cool, and have a long lifespan.

Crucially, the 400Ws system is more than capable of handling studio requirements. As modern cameras push for higher base and useable ISOs (the Quadra launched into the high-point of Nikon's D3, which offered a ISO200 minimum) absolute power is frequently wasted. If you're looking to get both studio and location systems in one pack, the Quadra's versatility allows some flexible setups. One quick configuration that allows one pack to serve both is to have full-size modifiers on the adaptor rings in the studio, and just unclip the heads from them to use outdoors.

There's enough output available for many location photographers to have adopted the Quadra as a daylight-beating fill system, working with ND filters to create the dramatic skies and subjects that define many modern environmental portrait techniques. Using the Skyport wireless trigger, it's possible to quickly adjust the power without line of sight, as well as triggering multiple units.

For more complex setups, there are several routes to control, including the new Skyport WiFi system controlled by Apple's iPhone. Playing into that location role, the Quadra RX weighs only 3kg with a single battery. Having worked with the system since launch, I've found it entirely useable as an on-camera flash, with one head and diffuser or softbox supported on a Manfrotto 233B, carrying the pack on the shoulder strap. For more crowded environments, there's a snap-around case, which adds a little protection and supports pack and battery together, rather than relying on the battery clips alone to keep the two joined.

Last year's innovation was the RQ Ringflash Eco, something I'd been requesting since launch, no doubt one of many users wanting a true ringflash for the system. Costing £360 inc VAT, the two-pole, light-



weight unit comes with a camera support bracket and white diffuser, and offers durations of 1/1000sec on the 100% A-channel, and 1/2500sec on the 33% B channel.

For more specialised shoots, the original Ranger Ringflash has also been made compatible with the Quadra. A faster duration, slightly larger head, and a fixed handle with captive lead not only increase the bulk, but also the price. At £1099, you need to have a good reason to choose the Pro over the Eco model. The Eco is sufficiently large to fit most medium format bodies and lenses, and when used on camera does exactly what you expect it to do - mimicking the results more closely associated with a £5K+ system by being essentially the same sort of setup, but smaller, lighter and more efficiently targeted at modern digital cameras.

Overall, the Quadra's pricing competes well with enthusiast 'strobist' setups of on-camera flash, third party triggers, batteries and even fairly crude modifiers. A typical two-head kit is around £1500 inc VAT, consisting of a single Quadra RX pack, with two batteries, two A or S heads (the price differential between the heads is minimal), Skyport Speed transmitter, charger, strap and fitted case.

Batteries are key to any comparisons. While on-camera strobes offer a lot of versatility, the Quantum-type batteries needed to get the recycling and lifespan from them increase costs dramatically, and you're still limited to the roughly 100Ws output a typical on-camera flash can muster, even before considering the inability to access the bare bulb.

While there's no TTL support, the Skyport Speed does offer 1/250sec sync, and 1/10 stop +/- controls. If you like to get it right first time, flash meters are still an essential and often overlooked accessory. Gossen's Digisky even offers wireless triggering of Elinchrom units.

For truly sophisticated setups, Skyport WiFi allows group and channel control of multiple flash systems - not just Quadra, but any Skyport equipped system. The £175 module runs for roughly five hours on a charge, and creates a wireless network that the iOS device (iPhone or iPod touch for the most sensible remotes, though the iPad is supported too) can join. All units are shown with graphic controls for power (proportional changes to groups are also possible, allowing easy preservation of relative outputs) and all available settings.

In some cases, the iOS application is bet-

ter than having access to the flash itself - the Quadra RX's group, sync and power settings are directly adjustable, similarly instant choice of proportional or manual modelling light control is offered for RX monoblocs and packs.

The new Li-Ion pack, announced at Focus, reduces the weight of the pack and battery by 1 kilo, more than doubles the number of flashes, and reduces the volume of the combined pack and battery by 28%. It also recharges 30 minutes faster.

If you run a two-battery kit, the reduction in weight on the system is considerable, while allowing just shy of 10,000 minimum-power flashes before recharging. The batteries will cost £300, and are compatible with all Quadra models. New kits will undoubtedly be available with the battery included, and for comparison the Lead-Acid gel battery costs £102 inc VAT.

With a complete kit weighing under 10kg, as a reliable, robust location setup, I have yet to encounter anything like it - and the additional weight and bulk of traditional packs becomes harder to justify for an increasing range of projects. **f2**

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