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From the Archives

Kodak Professional Portra 800

Text and Photos by Jack and Sue Drafafl, October, 2000



Great speed and great image quality.

If we had a wish list for characteristics we'd love to see in a color negative film, the top of the list would include high speed, fine grain, and extreme exposure latitude. That seems like a pretty tall order, but today the name of the game is technology and changes to the photographic world are happening faster than we can write this article. As if they were reading our minds, Kodak offers a new film solution called Professional Portra 800. This new emulsion boasts high speed, very fine grain, and a spectacular ability to capture extreme lighting conditions.



Portra 800 is a great action film, combining excellent image quality with plenty of speed. These rodeo shots were made in outdoor conditions ranging from harsh sun to cloudy skies, using hand-held long lenses. Portra's ISO 800 speed provided action-stopping shutter speeds despite the lenses' relatively slow apertures. But any fast film can do that. What Portra 800 also did was produce superb image quality.

This new sibling film joins five other members of the Portra film family. We already have 160NC and 400NC for situations requiring natural color renditions with normal color saturation. For more vivid colors and increased color saturation Kodak offers 160VC and 400VC. The 100T reserves itself for photo situations under tungsten lighting. When light levels get low, apertures get smaller, or the lenses get longer, Portra 800 is designed to take up the slack.



Don't let the word Portra fool you into thinking that only portrait photographers should be using this film. Taking pictures of people under various lighting conditions creates some of the most difficult situations for obtaining good images. Kodak decided that if they could create a film that produced great portraits in all kinds of lighting, the film would handle just about every other difficult lighting challenge photographers could encounter.

In order to satisfy those readers who want to know just how it was done, this new emulsion uses Kodak's patented

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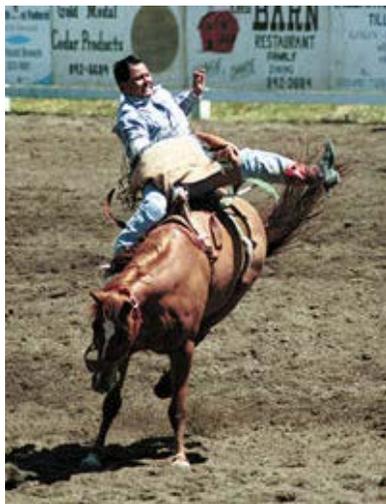
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Company Info

Kodak
800/242-2424
[Web Site](#)

Digital Camera HQ: See [prices and reviews of digital cameras.](#)





T-Grain technology to provide a film that captures fine detail in low light conditions. The Advanced Development Accelerator assures fine grain, enabling you to produce bigger enlargements and scans. The improved DIR dye couplers provide superior color saturation and excellent skin tones. This film is designed to have the same color balancing characteristics as the other five Portra family members, allowing photo labs to print using a single channel. This means that you can get prints from any Portra emulsion, and the results will look like they were shot on one roll of film.

So why an ISO 800 film? When analyzing a variety of exposure situations, ISO 800 is the film speed that can be exposed both in bright sunlight and under very low light situations without special filters or adding a flash. But, will it be able to maintain good color saturation and fine grain? That's what this test is all about, so let's find out if it really works.

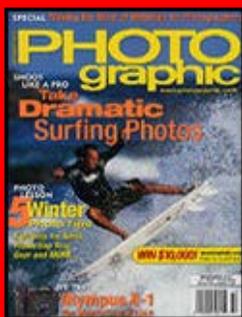
You might think that after testing films for more than 20 years, we would get bored testing emulsions. Well, that's not so, because when we think we have seen it all, a new film comes along like Portra 800 that pushes the envelope just a little further.

We don't ever get tired of testing new films because we get to drive, fly or go wherever the camera and film take us. We knew that this film required people, tough lighting conditions, long lenses and fast action, so we found a small-town parade and rodeo that would fill the bill.

There were plenty of fast-moving people, requiring long lenses and high shutter speeds. The sun kept popping in and out, providing a constant mixture of sunlight and shade. It seemed like the perfect lighting challenge for an 800-speed film that

boasts it could do it all. We left our flash at home, deciding that if it really had the exposure range it touted, then we'd let the film do all the work.

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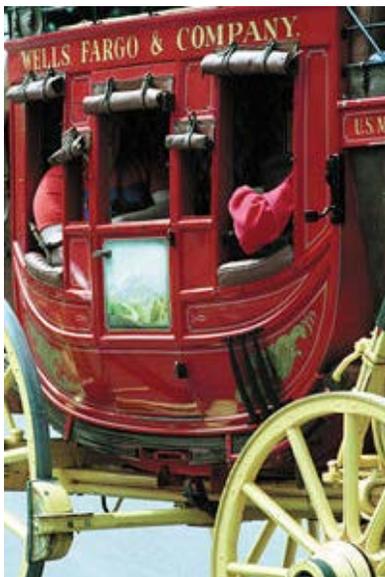
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From the Archives



While the name Portra implies that this new Kodak film is great for portrait photography, Portra 800 is actually an excellent film for any shooting situation that benefits from high film speed, including existing-light photography, action work, and hand-holding long or slow lenses. Color reproduction is accurate, grain is amazingly fine for an ISO 800 film speed, and sharpness is excellent. If you've shied away from using really fast films because you were worried about large grain, subdued colors and little exposure latitude, you're in for a most pleasant surprise when you try new Portra 800.



Arriving a little late to the rodeo, we found all the good seats were taken. Now we would have to use long lenses in the 300-500mm range, hand-held. This was really going to be tough as the riders were constantly on the move darting from sun to shade. We were limited on film, so we didn't bracket exposures for any of the testing. We crossed our fingers and hoped that the exposure range would cover these extreme lighting situations. Let the film processing begin!

Looking at the wet C-41 negatives hanging in the dryer, we could see that exposure was not going to be a problem. Every negative looked well within the printing range. The intense lightbox scrutiny was just minutes away, and the suspense was killing us. Using a loupe on the dry negatives, we found the grain pattern to be even better than we had expected. The exposure range looked incredible, so we quickly made a couple of prints from the parade images. Our 8x10 enlargements portrayed all the best parts of an ideal photographic image: sharp detail, fine grain, excellent color balance including flesh tones, and an unbelievable exposure range. All this without the aid of an electronic flash.

The rodeo images would really tell the tale as we had pushed the film's limit using long lenses, hand-held in very contrasty lighting. Stopping the action was not a problem with 800-speed film as we had shutter speeds in the 1/2000 to 1/4000 range for most shots. Although the sun wrapped around the riders' faces in most shots, the film still held detail in both sunlight and the shadows. Wow, what a film!

As photography evolves, film is being treated more as a chemical data-storage device. We are even seeing more information now included on the

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film's tech sheets suggesting the best methods for digitally scanning negatives. Consequently, we now include a variety of digital tests when testing films.

We scanned in several Portra 800 images at the highest resolution possible on our Nikon LS-2000 film scanner. Using Adobe's color management profile we zoomed in on our first image and discovered the grain in the out-of-focus areas was extremely very fine. This is very unusual, as this is the first place most high-speed films fall apart. Color balancing was easy, and the resulting images looked as good as the ISO 200 images we recently scanned.

If this higher-speed, fabulous-quality film is the new direction technology is heading, then photographers are in for a real treat. They can now concentrate on the creative aspects of achieving an image and less on the mechanics. Don't miss trying this new Portra film family member, because it's a winner!

For more information: Eastman Kodak Co., 800/242-2424; on the Internet, www.kodak.com/go/PORTRA



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