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First Exposure: Kodak Portra 800 by Jack & Sue Drafahl

During our years as professional photographers, we have tried our hands at almost every type of photography. We have conducted medical photography during open heart surgery and have recorded pictures deep in the ocean. But there is one area of photography of which we want no part-wedding photography. Not that we think ill of wedding photographers, quite the opposite. We have always had the greatest respect and admiration for wedding photographers-those who have the arduous task of capturing the most special day in two peoples' lives. The day when pressures are intense, emotional tension runs high and there's no room for photographic error.

If we were to take the risk and photograph a wedding, we would want to use a film designed to make us look good. The film should accurately record flesh tones, but have a wide enough exposure latitude to capture the wedding dress whites and the tuxedo blacks. We would like the film to have a speed capable of capturing a broad range of lighting, enabling us to photograph without the aid of electronic flash. Probably an ISO 800 would be an ideal film speed, but for a wedding?

Kodak must have thought so, because they recently introduced Portra 800 as the newest member in the Portra film family. This new emulsion is designed for professional portraiture and situations where the lighting drastically changes. The high speed allows you to capture fast action and use long lenses. Unlike other ISO 800 films, this emulsion's wide exposure latitude makes it possible to capture the extensive scene brightness range often found at weddings.

The Kodak Portra film family already includes 160NC and 400NC for natural looking color, 160VC and 400VC for vivid color, and 100T for images taken under tungsten light. Portra 800 is a true ISO 800 film requiring no push-processing to achieve accurate exposures at this setting. All this is possible with Kodak's new High-Efficiency T-Grain technology, and Kodak's Advanced Development Accelerator technology. This new high tech emulsion also has improved DIR, Universal DIR, and DIAR chemistries to give excellent color saturation and accurate skin tones. It has the same printing characteristics as the other five Porta family members, so prints from any of the films can be intermixed without hesitation.

When it came time to run the field tests on Portra 800, we got lucky. A friend of our daughter was scheduled to be married, so we decided to run the entire film test during the wedding ceremony. We talked to the happy couple and arranged to meet the photographer they had hired. Peter Paul Rubens, of Portland, Oregon, informed us that he was going to use the 120 version of Portra 400 for the wedding. We didn't tell him which film we were testing, only that we wanted to photograph the wedding and him in action. Since he was using a cordless slave flash, held by his assistant, we would not use any flash photography for our test. We followed him around as he did his job, grabbing similar shots and trying to stay out of his way.

The wedding was outdoors in a beautiful setting and the day was gorgeous with bright sun. Perfect weather for the wedding, but it offered a real challenge for the photographer. Photos would be taken in the sun, others in deep shade, and some with a mixture of both. We were using a couple of Nikon F5s, a 28-200mm and a 75-300mm zoom lenses. As we stated-we are not portrait people-and after an hour of shooting alongside this wedding photographer, we had a better appreciation of the hard work necessary to obtain good wedding images. Not only did we have to watch lighting, backgrounds and expressions, we also had to make sure the dress was fluffed properly and the bow ties were straight.

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Wow, this was really hard work. No wonder we don't enjoy doing weddings!

As we followed our Portra photographer, he constantly moved from full sun to a mixture of sun and shade and eventually to full shade. As he worked through his required shot list, we tried to keep up, putting our Portra 800 through the paces.

It wasn't long before the official ceremony was over and the new Mr. and Mrs. Cotton walked down the aisle. The groom gave a mischievous smile and did a quick Irish jig. As luck would have it, or skill as we call it, we were able to capture his midair action on film. The high speed of this Portra film allowed us to capture the action of this exciting moment without the luxury of a flash.

We still had a couple of rolls left, so we headed off to the reception. As the bride and groom enjoyed their first dance, we let the motor drive whir as the couple spun and twirled, oblivious to the crowd. The lighting was soft, the moment relaxed and we sadly ran out of film.

The processed film was scanned into our computer system for analysis. We enlarged several sections and found the images to be sharp and possess a very fine grain structure. In fact, it looked more like an ISO 200 emulsion than an 800-speed film. Many images had shallow depth-of-field, so the backgrounds were very soft and out-of-focus.

Generally, this is the first place that grain shows itself with high speed films. With Portra 800, the grain remained very fine, even in these out-of-focus backgrounds. We did notice that when the film was underexposed, the grain structure in the deep shadows was more pronounced, but still printed well. Skin tone was very accurate and the color reproduction great. The images taken in full sun pushed this film to its limit because of the aforementioned white wedding dress and black tuxedo. Luckily, we had detail in both areas, but realized the exposure range could have been even better if we had used flash.

You can even retouch Portra 800 in several different ways. The 120 size can be retouched on both sides using traditional methods, while the 135 size can be retouched only on the emulsion side. If you digitize your negatives via scanner, then you can easily retouch the images using photo editing software.

Kodak designed this film to work well in all lighting situations, not just weddings. Portra 800 will be a great film choice for architectural and commercial photographers needing to tackle the more difficult lighting situations. The higher film speed will allow you to use longer lenses and keep the movement sharp when the action heats up. The film's fine grain and excellent color reproduction make this an ideal film for any situation requiring accurate color under less than ideal lighting conditions.

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