

30 MINUTES AND COUNTING

The London Eye takes half an hour to complete a rotation. That's how long Uzair Kharawala gave himself to light and shoot a beauty set-up inside one of its passenger pods

The London Eye, towering 135m over the south bank of the Thames, was originally intended as a temporary attraction for the millennium year. But with demand for its 30-minute 'flight' over the UK capital hardly wavering in six years, British Airways' enormous spinning observatory has become a permanent fixture.

With today's super-fast Nikon gear, would it be possible to light and shoot a beauty commission within a single rotation? Uzair Kharawala thought so. Armed with a pre-production D3, a bagful of Creative Lighting System gear, a model, a stylist, an assistant and a timekeeper, he booked a pod for 16:00hrs one sunny November afternoon.

Having spent a couple of hours on hair, make-up and a quick rehearsal of poses with the model, the team was ready to disembark. 'It was crucial that there was a good understanding between me and the model,' says Kharawala, 'because there would be no time

to explain.' The target was 60 images, comprising 12 good frames from each of the five poses.

'The capsule looks a bit like a tunnel,' he says. 'I wanted dynamic poses, and I wanted to shoot most of the images at the highest point.' That meant cramming most of the shoot into five minutes.

At 16:00, an hour or so before sunset, the team escaped the winter gales and boarded the Eye. Once inside, the hair stylist set to repairing the damage done by the wind while Kharawala's assistant set up the flashes. The pair had been practising and recording the time it took to set up two SB-800s with battery packs on stands and an umbrella, and had it down to below two minutes. The timekeeper started the stopwatch and prepared to shout out as each five minutes passed.

'I wanted to capture the rich colours of the winter dusk,' says Kharawala, 'so I selected a manual exposure that would underexpose the sky and checked it on the back of the camera – ending up with

about 1/1000sec at f/4.5 on ISO 320. I then set the flash to expose the model at about 1/16.

'We were up and running in 3 minutes, 40 seconds,' he says. 'This is the beauty of the system – the set-up speed is amazing.'

'I used two flashguns pointing into the umbrella to spread the light and help with the recycling time – using two flashes with the battery back at a lower power would recycle quicker than just using one. It worked very well throughout the shoot and the flashes fired every time. Both flashes were part of the same group, which I controlled through the Commander Unit in the hotshoe.'

'Of course, I did have to adjust exposure as the capsule and the sun moved, but the equipment worked absolutely brilliantly. The D3 can synch flash at any speed – without that feature I couldn't have exposed for the sunset.'

At 17 minutes, with 117 good frames on the card and another 13 minutes left of the flight, Kharawala was finished. 'It was such an exciting shoot,' he says. 'All of us were buzzing.' And they even had time to enjoy the view.

'Working with the D3 was an absolute joy. Just really, really good. Because it was a pre-production model, I didn't even have a manual, but I could just pick it up and shoot. And the flash system works brilliantly – so quick and easy.'

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SUBJECTS social photography
CLIENTS members of the public, corporations for social events
WHAT'S IN THE BAG? D3, 14-24, 4xSB-800, SU-800, VR 105 f/2, 10.5 Fisheye for group shots.
D2xs as a back-up in the bag, all the SD8a battery packs
WHY NIKON? When the D100 came out, the whole event photography business started to take off, because the file sizes of the D100 were large enough to print, but small enough to handle by laptops on site and it was affordable. This was when we bought a couple of D100 and have stayed with Nikon every since.

