

Full circle

Gerard Maas has been trying out an accessory which turns your Speedlite into a ring flash for portraits and macro images.



Open wide

Ring flash was invented in the early 1950s to aid dental photography. Lester Dine was looking for a method of taking photographs of the insides of mouths. Conventional flash units could not get close enough to the lens to flood the whole area with light – too much was left in shadow. He came up with the idea of an electronic flash tube shaped to fit around the front of a lens. This floods the subject with shadowless lighting – ideal when you want to capture as much detail as possible.

Canon's Macro Ring Lite MR-14EX Speedlite is dedicated to macro flash photography. Its close distance to the lens axis and compact form makes it particularly suitable when photographing insects and other small subjects. The 'surround-light' eliminates shadows while still providing some 3D modelling to the subject.

Although the concept of the ring flash comes from the medical sector, the world of fashion has developed a taste for this special light – portraits taken using ring flash have become an iconic look in the industry.

Unfortunately, the small size and low power of the MR-14EX quickly becomes an issue as the flash-to-subject distance increases. For people photography, there's an additional problem – the close distance between the flash source and the lens axis often produces a strong red-eye effect.

The Ray Flash Adapter combines with Speedlite to offer a useful alternative. Based on the fibre optics principle, the adapter features acrylic light 'pipes' that evenly distribute the light from the flash unit into a ring shape around the lens.

The ring is larger than that of the Canon Macro Ring Lite, making it more suited to portrait, fashion, beauty and wedding photography – both as a main light or as fill-in illumination. Flash sensors are located inside EOS camera bodies, so fully automatic flash exposure is retained.

There is an effective light loss of about one stop when using the Ray Flash Adapter – not really a problem with the powerful Speedlite 580EX and 580EX II models.

Below The Ray Flash Adapter clips to a Speedlite to provide soft ring lighting.

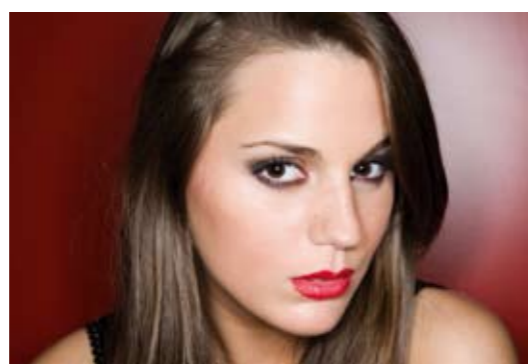


Below The Canon Macro Ring Lite ML-3 is smaller and more suited to close-up work, though it can also be used for portraits within a distance of two or three metres of the lens.



Far left A Speedlite aimed directly at the subject gives harsh lighting with strong shadows.

Left Adding the Ray Flash Adapter provides much softer illumination.



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERARD MAAS



The Ray Flash Adapter provides a nice even light for this portrait, taken in the tight staircase of a medieval castle. It would have been difficult to use reflectors or softboxes in such a small space.

Ring flash portraits



Top Small and light, the Ray Flash Adapter is perfect for portraits.

Above left This view of the subject through the back of the ring flash shows how the light is evenly distributed.

Above right This portrait displays the 'wrap' shadow which is characteristic of ring flash pictures. The light is coming from all around the lens, so the shadows are thrown in all directions as well. Photographs usually only have one light source – the sun – so we are accustomed to seeing a shadow on one side of the subject only. Here, the shadow is on both sides and above. If you want to avoid this, shoot ring flash pictures well away from any background, or use a black background to hide the shadows.

Left Ring flash portraits are often taken with the subject looking straight at the camera. This flat lighting effect retains some modelling in the face and is very flattering.

Using the Ray Flash Adapter

Push the Speedlite into the back of the Ray Flash Adapter, twist the tightening knob, slip the ring over the lens and slide the Speedlite base into the accessory shoe. Then use the camera and flash as normal. Fully automatic E-TTL II flash metering is retained, along with all the other functions of the Speedlite. EOS cameras come in different sizes, so different Ray Flash

Adapters are available to ensure that the ring flash is centred over the lens. Ray Flash Adapters are compatible with the Speedlite 580EX Mark II and there is a custom accessory which also allows the units to be used with the Speedlite 580EX. For details, see EOS Collection catalogue (Issue Three) or follow the Shop links at www.eos-magazine.com



Close-up photography

Although the Ray Flash Adapter is designed for portrait and fashion photography it is also suitable for close-up work. We compare close-up images taken with the Speedlite 580EX on its own, using the Macro Ring Lite MR-14EX, and with the Ray Flash Adapter attached.

Using direct light from a Speedlite is not recommended for close-up photography, especially if the Speedlite is sitting in the camera accessory shoe. If you are very close to the subject much of the illumination will pass over the top, or to the side of the subject; if you are further away, the light will be harsh, with strong shadows. However, the results can be acceptable if you have nothing else. You can improve the pictures by using the Speedlite with a Canon Off Camera Shoe Cord and aiming the light at the subject. The harsh illumination can be overcome by adding a white reflector to bounce light back into the shadows.

The perfect accessory for close-up photography is the Canon Macro Ring Lite MR-14EX. This compact unit attaches to the front of the lens. There are two half rings

in the MR-14EX, each switchable, so you can direct the light from one side or the other, or use both together for shadowless light. At £399.99, this is an accessory for the close-up enthusiast.

The Ray Flash Adapter, at £187, is a less expensive option, but only if you already have a Speedlite 580EX or 580EX Mark II (it is only compatible with these Speedlites). It won't give you the extreme close-ups possible with the MR-14EX, but if you have bought the Adapter for its portrait potential, then it is certainly worth trying out the close-up capabilities.

We have not included the Canon Macro Twin Lite MT-24EX in these tests as, although very versatile, it is not a true ring flash.

Canon Speedlite 580EX



Canon Macro Ring Lite MR-14EX



Canon Speedlite 580EX with Ray Flash Adapter

