

# Motorcar Photography Tips *step-by-step*

condensed 'pdf' version for 1-page printout; to view examples of GREAT Cobra and GT40 photos using these tips, visit: [www.CobraCountry.com/great-photos.html](http://www.CobraCountry.com/great-photos.html)

**Curt's Golden Rule of Motorcar Photography:** it's all about *low-angle, evenly-distributed* illumination. Low-angle rays (e.g., rising/setting sun, obliquely reflected light, your electronic flash) is **ALL GOOD**. Bright high-angle sunlight is **ALL BAD**—it *relentlessly* bleaches out the top surfaces of your car, you get blinding glare and murky, colorless shadows... *and lots more bad stuff*. If you shoot your car in bright OH sunlight, all you'll get is **really cheesy** snapshots.

**Your equipment:** a decent digital camera with flash AND a zoom lens; set it for both **best quality** (e.g., **Best** or **Fine** or **SHQ**) JPEG, AND high (4–5 megapixel) resolution. Set the main control dial on **Aperture Priority mode** ('A' for aperture)—**NOT** on 'Auto.' Set your lens' f-stop at f9 or f11. **TURN OFF** the date/time stamp! **Other stuff:** a broom (to sweep the pavement); a stepladder; a white shower curtain (€6 at Wal-Mart), perhaps a tripod.

**Your flash:** when I implore you (about 25 times) to use your flash, I mean *in concert with sunlight—your primary light source must be low-angle direct sunlight or smooth daytime shade*. But—to infuse your outdoor photos with richer, brighter colors, brightened shadow areas & reduced glare—you should *routinely* use your camera's terrific 'forced flash' (not 'automatic flash') to 'smooth out the illumination' in your outdoor photography. **Use your flash.**

**Your car:** sparkling clean, your tires (tyres) *Armored*. Hood & trunk lid (bonnet & boot) are CLOSED, your (roadster) visors turned down to near-horizontal. Shoot **ALL** of your motorcar photos **OUTDOORS**. **Expert Tips 1–6 below** are directed *expressly and exclusively* to your **full-car** shots:

**1. THE BEST DAYTIME SUNLIGHT:** start shooting just after sunrise or an hour or so before sunset—when the (low, unobstructed) sun is near ground level, its rays *bathing your car with low-angle illumination*. This is perfect light.

**2. THE SURFACE BENEATH YOUR CAR:** unstriped, swept clean, preferably level pavement. Concrete is **BEST OF ALL**—it works like a reflector panel to bounce low-angle sunlight (and your flash) up into those pesky shadow areas. Cobblestone or patterned pavement can add a *distinctive* touch. Dark asphalt? Wet it down for a glistening, reflective, mirror effect. **Do not park your car on grass or loose gravel**—each introduces its own medley of image mischief.

**3. THE SETTING:** just make sure the background is tidy and friendly and not distracting: no *dead-of-winter* foliage, no *Andy Gump* porta-potty, no marching penguins, no tree growing out of your windshield, no nude beach volleyball game, *etc*. If you're shooting in your driveway, **close your garage door!**

#### 4. FRAMING YOUR SHOTS:

a) **This is CRITICAL!** When you're positioning your car to shoot your "paint job" shots (i.e., broadside, 3/4-view and frontal shots), make sure, as you're parking, that the (low, rising or setting) sun is coming from your (roughly) 10-o'clock position—as illustrated below.

b) **You must fill your frame** with motorcar: you want as many as possible of those all-important pixels to represent motorcar, *not* real estate. But, except for your head-on/frontal shots, you must avoid 'fisheye' curvilinear distortion (caused *entirely* by your being too close to your car with your camera); instead, with your rear side against your driver door, pace off 11 paces from your car [that's about 26 ft./8 meters], then set up your ladder, step up to the 2nd step and **fill your frame with motorcar by zooming-in with your zoom lens**. Now shoot-by-the numbers: **1)**



shoot a 90° broadside shot; **2)** now step down and move one full side-ways stride to your left and shoot from 3 camera heights (waist-level, standing, then from the 2nd step of your ladder), then another stride to your left and again 3 more shots, repeating the process as your broadside shots gradually morph into 3/4-view shots. **Carefully heed my advice on that critical sequence of shots;** and **3)** you should definitely shoot some head-on/frontal shots as well; for tips on how to take *really awesome* frontal-shots, see the sample photos on the 'frontal shots' page. **Remember to adjust your zoom lens for each shot you take.**

c) **Beware of chaotic tree & cloud reflections** on your paint job—especially if your car is dark-colored or red. **Avoid trees and tree shade.**

**5. MAKE NO MISTAKE:** you **MUST** use your flash. For outdoor daytime photography, you must use **forced flash** (aka **flash on** aka **fill flash**, aka **outdoor flash**) option, **NOT** 'automatic flash.' 'Automatic flash' **does not work** in bright daytime shade or in the sunlight—*where your modern, electronically-metered fill flash will improve your photos most dramatically*. On your camera 'flash on/outdoor flash' is typically indicated by a jagged arrow/lightning-bolt icon. Step outside and test it—if it doesn't flash, it's likely your camera is set on **Auto** [instead of 'A'—for 'aperture-preferred' or 'P'—for 'programmed'] operation, or perhaps it's set for 'automatic flash.' **Put simply: 'outdoor flash' provides that essential infusion of low-angle illumination you must have for your paint job to spring to life. If you (wisely) have a flash mounted on your camera, try this:** turn your camera upside-down so that the flash reaches wayyyy down low, bounces off the concrete, and *really* brightens up those lower regions. **Make sure your flash works with every click of your shutter—no exceptions. Are we clear on that?**

**6. IF YOUR CAR IS PAINTED YELLOW** (or light blue or any pastel hue): take most of your full-car shots: a) parked on light concrete, b) in smooth, bright outdoor shade (not tree shade), with open sky over your car. **Blending your flash with the soft light of sky-illuminated bright daytime shade is good.**

## COCKPIT & ENGINE shots: bright shade + your flash = perfect illumination

**You must (repeat: MUST!) make full use of two light sources:**

a. **BRIGHT OUTDOOR SHADE.** Park your car **outdoors, entirely within the shade of a building** (not *chaotic* tree shade). OH sunlight bleaches/discolors your cockpit and your engine, and produces ugly shadows. **BUT DO NOT** move your car into your garage—keep it *outdoors*, in bright daytime shade, with open sky overhead. You got that? And you **must** add:

b. **YOUR FLASH.** Here's the deal: the ambient soft light of bright daylight shade blended with your flash gives you *sublime*—near *studio-quality*—illumination. You **must** employ this symbiotic blend of light (i.e., bright daytime shade + your flash) for **each and every cockpit & engine shot**.

**Your engine shots:** step up onto a ladder, and move your camera around and shoot from several angles to hedge against reflection 'flashbacks.' **A BIG tip:** a bright white surface under your engine really brightens up those murky lower regions of your engine bay—so purchase a white shower curtain at Wal-Mart (about €6) and position your engine bay over it.

**Cockpit tips:** **1)** interior tidy & clean, seats freshly leather-oiled; **2)** keys removed from ignition; **3)** steering wheel STRAIGHT. Place a stepladder parallel to your passenger door (5 ft. away, the second step aligned with your seatbacks), then step up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> step, aim *directly toward the driver side* and take 2 or 3 shots, and remember: capture **the entire perimeter** of your cockpit with each shot—see how nicely that perimeter 'frames' the cockpit below!



**Once more:** for *superb* cockpit & engine shots, your car **MUST:** **1)** be outdoors, **2)** be *entirely within* bright daytime shade (with unobstructed sky overhead) AND **3)** you **MUST** use your flash.

**Sending us your images to sell your car:** Select your very best, hi-quality, hi-rez [4 or 5 megapixel] JPEG photos [3 or 4 images each of] your **1)** full car shots, **2)** frontal shots, **3)** engine bay shots, **4)** cockpit shots, and perhaps 3 or 4 other shots of your choice, but no more than 20 total); email them to us just as they came out of your camera—**DO NOT** crop or edit your photos! If your favorite photo has a flaw, or if it's slightly overexposed, send it anyway—with a little tweaking in *Adobe Photoshop* it may turn out *spectacular!* JPEG images only—**DO NOT** email huge 'TIF' or 'RAW' images, and make sure you send them at **full size/full resolution**, not 'email resolution.'

**Remember: Use your FORCED FLASH**—commonly indicated with a 'lightning bolt' icon. It's a no-brainer, it's the most valuable feature on your modern camera and—especially if you have a powerful flash—it will vastly improve your outdoor photography. *But only if you use it!*

If you want fine, richly-colored, *inspiring* motorcar photos instead of dull, murky, *snore-inducing* snapshots, use your flash, **dammit**, use your flash.

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