

Photography on a Budget – by Steve West

We all know how expensive a hobby photography can be. Equipment, especially good equipment, and specialist lenses and accessories can be pricey, and if you want to dip your toe in the water and try out something new, like wildlife, sports, landscape, macro or studio work for example, you can find the cost of these extra bits of kit somewhat daunting. But it doesn't have to cost the earth, there are options.

1. Pre-loved.

While the world of used, second-hand or 'pre-loved' equipment can seem risky, and not everyone may feel comfortable buying items on eBay or Shpock, there are some bargains to be had. While my Nikon D5500 body was bought new (more on that later) ALL of my lenses were bought from eBay, and every single one arrived mint-in-box like brand new. Often, people buy a lens brand-new, then find they hardly use it so decide to sell it, usually for considerably less, often half the price it would cost new.

When buying used kit on auction or 'boot sale' sites or apps, look at the seller's feedback score. Lots of negative feedback is a red flag, but lots of positive feedback can only be good. Look at their returns policy, just in case it ends up being faulty or unsuitable. Above all, read the description to see if there are any issues, such as faults, damage, or in the case of lenses, fungus or scratches. Also, check the equipment is compatible with yours. Do independent research on other sites to check this and get reviews of the equipment. If they offer recorded/insured delivery, consider paying extra for this, so that if it gets damaged in transit, the seller can refund you and claim the cost back.

Another good place to look is places like Freecycle.org. This is where people offer unwanted items before taking them to the tip. Occasionally, something nice turns up, and items are free if you are willing to collect. Free stuff is also often offered on Shpock for the same reason.

2. Analogue/Retro

Those of us old enough to remember the days of film will remember what life was like before auto-exposure and auto-focus. As photographers, we should be able to do these basic things, and a lot of older kit (lenses, tripods, flashguns, bags etc, can be bought for a few pounds, or even for free on Freecycle or Shpock. While older lenses may not offer autofocus or auto-exposure functionality with our DSLR or mirrorless cameras (you will probably have to work in manual (M) mode), the lens quality can be just as good, especially with prime lenses, but beware, this practice is becoming popular, with some high quality 35mm film lenses commanding high prices. Also, should you have a full-frame camera, old 35mm lenses will give you full coverage of the frame, and will work equally well on crop sensors. Again, just watch for fungus, scratches. That being said, if you are good with your hands, there are online guides and low cost tools available if you feel brave enough to strip and clean the lens elements yourself.

If you want to use old glass on a modern camera, you may need to purchase an adapter. Many are available to fit old Nikon F Mount, Canon Mounts, Pentax K and Screw, plus other screw and bayonet mounts onto modern cameras, even the latest mirrorless models. Good news for Nikon owners, the F Mount on all Nikon DSLR's is basically the same as the F Mount on Nikon Film cameras going back to 1959, so lenses built from then onwards will fit. Even early AF lenses from 35mm Nikons may still autofocus on modern bodies, provided the body has a built in focus motor (sorry D3000 & D5000 series owners), but again, CHECK!

A cautionary note on old flashguns. These will work with DSLR's as they worked with 35mm cameras, but the trigger voltage can be different, so don't sync them using a PC cord or the camera's hot shoe directly, as it can fry the camera's delicate circuitry. Instead, fire them using a wireless trigger (perhaps

on an angle bracket). Wireless triggers are often built for higher voltages, and the part that fits on your camera is designed for modern cameras.

Also, don't forget that many reputable photographic retailers, like Jessops, Wex Photographic and MPB, offer a range of used equipment. While higher priced than privately sold equipment, they usually offer a warranty and quibble-free returns, plus the equipment is usually inspected prior to sale.

Finally, with cameras, watch for the shutter count. Most cameras have a 'shutter life' of a certain number of activations. If the seller has this info (retailers usually do), then make sure that there is plenty of life in the shutter for your needs.

3. Cheap/Cheerful & Third Party

While we all like to buy the proper branded accessories to go with our camera/lenses, there are a myriad of third party alternatives available, and while we are used to trusting brands like Sigma, Tamron, Tokina etc. for lenses, and names like Metz and Nissin for flashguns, it can be hard to trust brands we have never heard of, but there are a lot of new names from the China that are proving to be viable options. Brands like Neewer, Meike, Yongnuo and Andoer offer some very useful and reasonably priced accessories and alternatives to branded products. Some of these are outright copies of the more expensive branded models, while some are unique alternatives to more pricey ones. In fact some respected third party brands like Godox and Samyang started out as budget brands. Amazon also offer some low priced accessories in their 'Basics' range worth looking at.

For example, the Neewer NW910 and Meike MK900 flashguns are strikingly similar to the genuine Nikon SB910 model, and while they only have about 80% of the functionality of the Nikon original, the Neewer and Meike models cost around £75, compared to £325 for the Nikon original. If you just need a basic flash without iTTL, perhaps for off-camera use, Neewer offer the TT560 for about £27. They also offer dedicated models for Canon and Sony.

Similarly, Neewer's FC-16 flash trigger can be bought for £16 as a single flash wireless trigger kit, with extra receivers available for £10 as required. If you're looking to start out with flash, they offer a simple kit with 2 flashguns, triggers and transmitter unit for £68. As a bonus, it also comes with a cable to allow it to function as a remote shutter release for your camera.

If you want to try out with macro, a set of extension tubes can be bought for as little as £16, an LED ring light for £23 and a focus rack for £15.

There are many more items available, such a wired and infra-red shutter releases, timers, filters and holders, and if you want to try something out or it's something you won't use very often, a budget alternative is worth trying. Replacement parts like lens hoods, caps and eyepiece caps can also be found cheaper.

Before buying anything, especially on Amazon, check the reviews and star ratings. Star ratings are a guide only, so check the number of reviews, as a product can get 5 stars based on a single good review only. Read a few of the reviews. Sometimes people write 1 star reviews simply because delivery was a day late, or it wasn't what they expected or didn't fit (read the specification to ensure it is the right item for your needs). If a product has a common fault, this will show up as a recurring thread in the reviews, but an occasional faulty item is to be expected, in which case check how this was resolved. Reviews can also reveal how the seller responds to problems and whether they are good on refunding and replacing. Items can often be bought cheaper from mainland China or Japan, if you don't mind waiting a few weeks. Also, try to stick with Amazon itself rather than Amazon Marketplace sellers, as the return/refund policies with Amazon are far safer, plus if you have Prime membership, delivery is

often faster and free. Marketplace is okay as long as you check the reviews and return/refund policies. Even if you have problems, Amazon (and eBay) will often intervene on your behalf.

4. Older Model Cameras

While we all like to own the latest model of camera, significant savings can be made by going for a slightly older model. When retailers have the latest model fresh on the shelves, they often want to clear their stock of the previous model, and often the specification difference between the two is quite small, while last year's model can still be a major upgrade from your current camera, but be £100-£200 cheaper than when it was launched. You can also upgrade by buying a used camera that is more up-to-date than your current one, following the aforementioned guidelines for buying used.

5. Shopping 'Smart'

If we do need to or prefer to buy new, branded or even third party items, there are a number a ways to avoid paying full ticket price for them:

- 1) **Events:** If you don't mind waiting until late November, it can be worth checking out Black Friday and Cyber Monday deals. These are usually limited to selected items and ranges, but if it does include something you are after, then savings can be made. January sales are less of a thing these days, but are still worth looking at.
- 2) **Deals:** Manufacturers often offer deals, such as cashback, discounted items or even free gifts. Even if you don't want the free gift, you can sell it on or gift it to someone.
- 3) **Shop Around:** Search online to see who offers the best price, but read the small print. You might want to avoid deals which are for 'grey imports'. These are often genuine products intended for overseas markets, and can be significantly cheaper, but the manufacturer won't usually offer warranty or product support, so any problems and you are at the mercy of the seller, who may or may not replace/refund. Plus, any mains adapters/chargers may require an adapter to fit a UK plug. On prices, don't forget delivery costs. Two retailers may have the same price, but if one offers free delivery then the choice becomes easier. Also don't forget to check their returns policy and check feedback/reviews.
- 4) **Voucher Codes:** We've all seen the box when we go to the checkout in an online store 'Enter Voucher or Promo Code'. You sometimes get these in an email but if not then it's worth searching online. The majority of them often don't work, but if you persevere, then you can sometimes find a code that does work, and gives you a tasty discount or free delivery.
- 5) **Ex-Display and Open Box Deals:** Retailers often have ex-display models available. These may have been well-handled so check the condition, but if the condition is good, then go for it. The manager will usually knock something off, but don't be afraid to ask for more, especially if you can justify it by pointing out a missing cable or lens cap. Check out Amazon Warehouse Deals. These are items that have been returned as unwanted, so are classed as 'open-box', but usually arrive in boxed, as-new condition for considerably less cost.
- 6) **Amazon/eBay:** Amazon, more often than not, are cheaper than the main retailers, and surprisingly the goods sometimes come from the main retailers anyway, who use Amazon (and eBay) as alternative outlets to sell their goods. eBay is also not just about used stuff, with many brand new items available on their site.
- 7) **ASK!:** Don't be afraid to ask in-store for a reduction or a freebie to be thrown in. Managers often have discretion or wriggle-room to offer more to secure a sale.

Examples

- I bought my D5000 just after the D5100 had been launched. Originally, the D5000 with 18-55 lens was priced at £799.99, but that day an open-box one at Currys (last in the store) was

being sold for £480. I pointed out to the manager that the lens and battery had been fitted, all items were loose in the box and the USB cable was missing. He knocked £50 off. Camera was fine and still in use today.

- When I upgraded to a D5500, I shopped around and the best price with a kit lens was £599.99, but as I was upgrading and planned to sell my D5000 body I found a body-only deal on Very's website for £499.99. Nikon had a cashback deal that saved me another £50, then I found a working voucher code which knocked off another £30.
- My first camera backpack was bought from Amazon, as they were cheaper than the cheapest retailer (Jacobs). However, when it arrived, it had come from Jacobs anyway, who it turns out sold it cheaper through Amazon.
- My Manfrotto 190 Go! Tripod was priced online for £135 cheapest (RRP was about £180), but I found one as an Amazon Warehouse deal for £75. Arrived mint in box. I also got a free small camera bag worth £40.

I hope you find this useful. I appreciate some of the tips are basic, but I feel it is worth going over them anyway.

Below are some links you might find helpful, showing budget equipment I have found to be great:

Meike version of the Neewer NW910 flashgun mentioned above (I now have 2 of these):

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Meike-MK910-i-TTL-Master-Speedlite-SB900-D800-D810-D7000-D5300-D5200-D5100-D3200-D3100-D3000-Digital/dp/B00HIVXYZ2/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1544013966&sr=8-1&keywords=nw910

Neewer Lighting Kit, stands, brollies & flashgun brackets in carry bag:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Speedlight-Umbrella-600EX-RT-Youngnuo-Neewer/dp/B01ABFSAPU/ref=sr_1_14?ie=UTF8&qid=1544019193&sr=8-14&keywords=neewer+lighting+kit

Really useful Flashgun Brackets - Enable almost any Speedlite/flashgun to be mounted on a stand and paired with any umbrella or reflectors/softboxes etc. with a standard Bowens type fitting:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B01HZ4CHGS/ref=oh_aui_detailpage_o01_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

Bowens fitting reflector with 3 different honeycomb diffusers

https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B01HEXD1VK/ref=oh_aui_detailpage_o00_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

Great low cost octagon softbox, also Bowens fitting:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B00UTPA09C/ref=oh_aui_detailpage_o02_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

Neewer Portable Folding Reflector Set:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Neewer-43-inch-Collapsible-Multi-Disc-Reflector-x/dp/B002ZIMEMW/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?ie=UTF8&qid=1544019320&sr=8-1-spons&keywords=neewer+reflector&psc=1

Remote Shutter Release/Timer/Intervalometer for Nikon - same as mine and 1/10th the price of the Nikon one:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/RGBS-Shutter-Release-Intervalometer-Control-Black/dp/B078ST3XL3/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?ie=UTF8&qid=1544014515&sr=8-1-spons&keywords=nikon+intervalometer&psc=1

Cheap alternative to the Nikon I/R Remote Shutter Release. A quarter of the price of the genuine Nikon, plus you get two!

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Neewer-Wireless-Control-Shutter-Release/dp/B00KXKXJ7S/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1544014373&sr=8-5&keywords=nikon+remote+shutter+release

Meike Extension Tubes for Nikon (also available for Canon & Sony). To be fair I only paid about £23 for these so they have gone up, but still not bad value:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/MK-N-AF1-Electronic-Extension-Adapter-D300SD800/dp/B071VVYFL1/ref=sr_1_14?ie=UTF8&qid=1544014645&sr=8-14&keywords=meike+extension+tubes

Neewer macro led 'flash' ringlight, low cost option for macro lighting:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Neewer-Display-Control-Adapter-Diffusers/dp/B00JO64MY6/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1544016480&sr=8-1&keywords=neewer+macro+light

This article can also be viewed, with links, on my Blog Page:

<http://steve-west.wixsite.com/steve-west-portfolio/blog-1/>

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve West". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.