

Rotolight NEO 2

Geoff Harris, Nigel Atherton and Michael Topham try out this all-in-one modelling light/flash solution in a range of situations

At a glance

- Zero recycle time in flash mode
- 85,000 full power flashes on six AA batteries
- Built-in Elinchrom Skyport HSS wireless flash receiver

The past few years have seen some genuinely innovative LED solutions for working photographers, and keen amateurs, who don't have bottomless pockets or big trailers in which to cart all their gear around. There's the Westcott Ice Light, for example – a daylight-balanced LED wand developed by wedding photographer-to-the-stars Jerry Ghionis – and there are many rectangular LED light panels; and now there's the Rotolight NEO 2. On paper, the NEO 2 sounds like a no-brainer. It combines portability with energy-efficient continuous lighting and high-speed sync flash features. The NEO 2's continuous modelling-light functionality has obvious benefits to the portrait or product photographer, while the flexibility of high-speed flash up to 1/8000sec should be enough to freeze all but the most extreme subjects. And all this for less than, which these days will barely buy a half-decent lens for an APS-C SLR. So, what is the NEO 2 like in practice?

The short answer is, very impressive. Considering its power and flexibility, the unit is impressively compact and portable, so it won't take up a lot of space in your bag. Build quality seems solid, so long as you take reasonable precautions. As a basic LED modelling light, the NEO 2 is a cinch to use. It takes six AA



Connection

You can also physically connect to your camera via a flash lead.

Simple controls

Power and colour temperature are easily controlled via these buttons, which also bring up the more advanced options.

Amateur Photographer Testbench Recommended
★★★★

Power

The NEO 2 provides 85,000 full-power flashes on six rechargeable AA batteries.

Attaching

The unit fits on to hotshoes and can be easily stand or tripod mounted.

NiMH or Li-ion batteries, which provide about 1.5 hours of continuous lighting at maximum power. This is arguably the biggest downside of using the NEO 2 as a modelling light compared to some other rivals, but that's at maximum power, remember – and you also have the option of DC power over the D-Tap connection, or AC power from the included adapter. The batteries last longer in high-speed-flash mode, and can run for 85,000 full-power flashes.

We mentioned how easy the NEO 2 is to use. There is electronically adjustable colour

temperature in both flash and continuous modes, with a built-in Kelvin display, so it's easy to adjust white balance or match ambient light settings for more natural-looking shots. The variable colour temperature range goes from 3150–6300K, meaning it can be quickly and easily balanced to the ambient light, whether tungsten or natural daylight. Rotolight claims the new unit is 85% brighter in continuous mode than its predecessor, and it is certainly brighter than I expected, but not so much that it dazzles your subject.

For wedding photographers, for example,

hotshoe support is a big advantage, as you don't have to wave the unit self-consciously around or stand mount it (though it is easily stand mounted if needed). As well as freeing up your hands, it's a lot less distracting for your subject – you want the happy couple looking at you, not your LED lighting. The NEO 2 also creates a more attractive circular catchlight in the eyes compared to the wand-shaped Ice Light, say, and using it just feels like a more natural and spontaneous experience.

Rotolight further claims its AccuColour LED technology delivers outstanding



The flash capability is sufficient for studio portraits

Fast, portable and flexible

Reviews editor Michael Topham gave the NEO 2 a try in the studio

THERE'S a lot more to the NEO 2 than its portable design, impressive build quality and simple arrangement of twin dials. One of the key features I was keen to try out was its flash capability, and though it's no substitute for the best speedlights when it comes to maximum power output, the fact it supports high-speed sync flash with sync speeds of up to 1/8000sec with zero recycling time will be of great benefit to photographers who'd like to freeze subjects in their tracks and shoot continuously without power loss, light loss or any form of interruption.

I tested the NEO 2 with the supplied Elinchrom Skyport 2.4GHz HSS wireless flash receiver, which offers wireless control for up to 10 lights in four groups up to 200m (656ft). Having the option to control the power output, intensity of the modelling light and temperature control direct from the Skyport mounted to the top of my camera saved a huge amount of hassle. Best of all, there's no delay between making an adjustment via the Skyport and the NEO 2

making the change. To take better control of light spill, I also took advantage of the optional barn doors that came supplied with our review kit. Although it's by no means the quickest of accessories to attach, they're robustly made and are just what you need to direct the light precisely and prevent the spill being so wide. As with the Rotolight AEOS we tested earlier this year, the LED panel keeps very cool in operation and produces very little heat – making it comfortable to use for extended periods in the studio.



Optional barn doors help control the spill of light

Using the NEO 2 for video

AP Editor Nigel Atherton used the NEO 2 on a video shoot

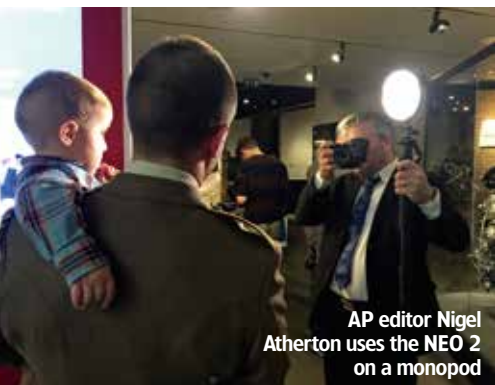
WE AT AP have tried many small LED video lights, so the first thing to figure out is what the NEO 2 offers that the others don't. It doesn't take long to find out. First, it is brighter than other similar-sized lights we have used. When shooting some close-range interviews, I rarely needed to set the brightness level above 25%, though it's great to know that the power is there for longer range work, or those occasions where smaller apertures are required. The usefulness of the variable brightness control is enhanced by the addition of the LED read-out, which displays brightness level as a percentage or, in True Aperture Dimming mode, as an f-stop.

Secondly, the variable colour temperature is a great feature, enabling you to match the available light, either by eye (as I did) or using the Kelvin display when you need more precision. If you need more wacky colour effects than simple white-balance adjustment, a selection of doughnut-shaped filter gels are available that can be attached to the front in seconds. You get four filters with the light.

Thirdly, it may seem a small thing, but the NEO's circular shape makes for attractive catchlights, and if you're filming something reflective enough to show the LEDs, a translucent diffuser gel can be fitted to the front, which also softens the light. For more creative uses, the NEO 2 offers the same selection of customisable CineSFX effects as its much larger sibling, the AEOS: fade-out, strobe, lightning, fire, TV flicker among others.

The NEO 2 comes with a small ball head with a threaded accessory shoe on the bottom so it can be attached directly to the camera's cold shoe or screwed onto a stand. I screwed mine to the end of a monopod so I could hold it off to the side of the subject while I was filming solo in a crowded room.

Overall the NEO 2 is extremely portable and quite lightweight even with its six AA batteries, making it no hardship to carry.



AP editor Nigel Atherton uses the NEO 2 on a monopod



As a modelling light, the Neo 2 works a treat - easily bright enough for this gloomy temple interior, with nice circular catchlights

colour rendering for perfect skin tones, and while such press-release hyperbole needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, a bit of time spent adjusting the white balance and power settings can yield some very nice results, as our test shots reveal. The compact and convenient shape also means you're more likely to want to get out and about with the NEO 2 - we can see travel and documentary photographers using it, as well as portrait and wedding pros, as it's so handy for fill-in light, or adding that extra bit of illumination as the light fades on location.

High-sync flash

While it's perfectly acceptable to use the NEO 2 as a hotshoe or stand/tripod-mounted LED modelling light, that would be missing a few tricks. Being able to switch to high-speed sync flash mode and access sync speeds up to 1/8000sec, with zero recycle time, is a massive selling point for such a compact and reasonably priced unit. The big leap forward is the inclusion of a built-in 2.4GHz Elinchrom Skyport Receiver. You don't need a separate flash receiver and Skyport offers wireless control for up to 10 lights in four groups up to 200m (656ft).

It took a couple of goes to set everything up with the camera, and the manual is rather minimalist, but the effort is worth it. As well as some of the advanced video features covered in *Using the NEO 2 for Video* (left), there are some really nifty extras. True Aperture Dimming, for example, uses shutter speed and ISO information, as well as distance data, to calculate the proper aperture for your shot. It improves speed and use, and helps you quickly get the appropriate power settings for your subject. The NEO 2 comes with a filter pack, filter holder, and a belt pouch for storage, but as mentioned, the unit easily fits into a typically sized camera bag or rucksack - useful, as the NEO 2 comes

in handy as an instant lighting solution out on the street as well as for indoor shoots.

Verdict

While it would be premature to say the NEO 2 will be one of AP's accessories of the year, it's a strong contender. You get a lot of bang for your buck - sophisticated LED modelling light features combined with powerful high-speed flash options - in a robust, easy-to-use and portable package. So long as you realise the limitations of the batteries in constant-lighting mode, and are prepared to cough up for extra accessories if necessary, the NEO 2 is a cracking buy. **Geoff Harris**



Being able to hotshoe or stand-mount the unit gives you flexibility in cramped conditions