

Main test

Elinchrom ELB 400

Just two Elinchrom ELB 400 kits arrived in the UK in March. Professional Photo grabbed one of them

📷 TIGZ RICE

I've been using the Two Head Elinchrom Quadra RX A Kit with lithium-ion batteries – both in the studio and on location – for two years. Since the Quadra's arrival in 2009, its compact nature, lightweight heads and general portability as a battery-powered unit have made it a game changer for many photographers, me included, opening up the possibility of more locations that lacked power supply or were a little more 'off piste' than standard lighting gear would allow. I travel a lot, so it was important for me to be shooting with reliable equipment, and I can't fault the Quadra. It has continued to impress with its stamina on long days of shooting and shows no sign of wear and tear. It is also compatible with full size modifiers, giving me the best of both worlds when it comes to replacing standard studio lighting.

Back in December, I tested a couple of Elinchrom ELC Pro HD 1000 heads, which introduced a couple of new shooting modes – Delayed and Strobo – to the Elinchrom range. I loved the new functions, but they came with a lack of portability due to the size, weight and the need for a power supply on a full studio head. Getting just the heads and the stands around proved to be hard work, let alone adding a camera bag into the equation. The new ELB 400 series, however, combines Quadra portability with the Delayed and Strobo features from the ELC Pro heads. Could this prove to be the perfect portable lighting combination?



So what's new?

I tested the ELB 400 2 Action Head To Go set, which arrived in a foam-packed Elinchrom branded hard case unit, just like my existing two-head kit. At first glance, it's actually quite hard to tell the difference between the two sets, with the exception of the 'ELB 400' text on the side of the battery pack. Both systems come with one battery pack, two lithium-ion batteries, two heads, an EL-Skyport wireless trigger and all the relevant cables and chargers neatly laid out in exactly the same positions in the box.

But there are, of course, changes and these start with the batteries. I was already impressed with the old Quadra's lithium-ion offering, providing a 90-minute recharge time – that's faster than I can use up the power in the second battery. Elinchrom promise 280 flashes-per-charge at full power on ▶





“THE NEW AND IMPROVED BATTERIES COULD POTENTIALLY LAST ME AN ENTIRE DAY”

THIS IMAGE & PREVIOUS:
On a three-hour shoot with model Aurora Galore, I used the ELB 400 on about half power, and hardly used the modelling lamp, getting 406 images – and the battery still had 75% capacity.



the Quadra – although on a mid-range power setting I could usually manage nearer 700 flashes per charge as well as powering the continuous modelling lamp. The new and improved batteries supplied with the ELB now promise 350 flashes-per-charge at full power, which at mid-range power could potentially now last me an entire day of shooting on one battery. The new battery still only requires 90 minutes for a full recharge; and Elinchrom has also introduced a new Battery Rescue feature which claims to restore discharged lithium-ion batteries. What’s even better is that the ELB 400 is backwards compatible with the old Quadra batteries, including the lead gel batteries, which gives some freedom and flexibility for those looking to use the ELB 400 as a top-up on their existing lighting set-up.

Moving onto the heads, Elinchrom has once again done very little to the exterior design, but packed more punch inside with an increase from 8–400Ws to 7–424Ws on both the new Pro and Action heads in comparison with the Quadra. The Action heads offer a minimum flash duration of 1/5700sec through the B port or 1/4000sec when both heads are attached to the battery pack via a 2:1 lighting ratio. These would be, as the name suggests, great for action shots, dancers, extreme sports and lots of movement.

The Pro heads offer a slower minimum flash duration of 1/3000sec through the B port alone and 1/1500sec



LEFT: The new heads don't look that different, the main improvements are hidden inside, including lots of extra power.

THIS IMAGE: Having experimented with Delayed mode to fantastic effect on this studio shoot with model Scarlet Duggan, I'll certainly be using it again.



with both heads plugged in, although this would be great for most instances of photography, especially portraiture and still life. Whichever head takes your fancy, both feature Elinchrom's Full Flash Curve technology, providing accurate exposure and colour consistency throughout shoots.

There has been a minor change to the EL-Skyport, which now boasts 20 frequency channels and four groups to control multiple Elinchrom units at a time. This allows the user to control and manipulate lights remotely, as well as offering a sync speed of up to 1/320sec depending on your camera.

The most noticeable physical and technological changes are in the main ELB 400 pack, where the plastic edging is now permanently fixed in place after feedback on the Quadra model, offering a tighter seal for adverse weather on location. The screw cap fittings on the A and B ports have been replaced with rubber flip-up socket covers, allowing for quicker set up and take down of equipment. On the inside, Elinchrom has engineered a 20% faster recycling time of 1.6 seconds at full power compared with the original Quadra time of two seconds, allowing for faster shooting – especially on those action shots.

By far the biggest change, however, is to the new OLED, which has replaced the old complicated menu with a no-fuss, intuitive, easy-to-follow structure. It also incorporates three new shooting modes brought forward from the Elinchrom ELC Pro HD units. Sequence mode allows you to sequentially trigger up to 20 compatible units in bursts or as a continuous cycle to match the frame rate of your camera. Delayed mode provides a fully customisable rear curtain sync flash option and Strobe mode enables you to fire multiple flashes during a single frame to capture movement-based images.

In use

I had the ELB 400 kit for about two weeks, during which time it was in constant use on both client commissioned work and a few test shoots specifically to try out the functionality of the new shooting modes. Swapping from the Quadra to the ELB was incredibly straightforward, so much so in fact that I had to make sure

I picked up the right carry case when I left in the morning for location shoots!

Although I'd never vocalised any thoughts on the old screw caps on the Quadra ports, the rubber flip caps really do save a good chunk of time in comparison. Other little things, like upgrading the way head-to-pack cables screw into the new heads, added to the overall feeling of improvement. The spare fuses also clipped into the battery packs far more securely than the ones on the Quadra, which gives me a bit more reassurance that I can rely on them if I ever need to.

Having worked wirelessly for so long, I have to admit that I take for granted the EL-Skyport and built-in wireless receivers of the Quadra and ELB 400 units. This was highlighted to me this week whilst shooting for another photographer in a dimly lit network of hazardous wires.

Working on location offered me a great opportunity to test out the battery power of the improved lithium-ion batteries. ▶

“REPLACED THE OLD COMPLICATED MENU WITH A NO-FUSS, INTUITIVE STRUCTURE”



THIS IMAGE: Strobe mode will definitely be useful for action shots of dancers.



During a three-hour shoot, I took 406 images at about half power with one studio head attached, with minimal use of the modelling lamp. After the shoot, the first battery was still showing 75% capacity, so there was plenty more power to keep going if I'd needed to. The 20% faster recycling time was really noticeable on movement-based shoots – which were pin sharp thanks to the fast flash duration – but not so noticeable during a couple of portrait commissions I had been working on over the fortnight. If I didn't shoot a lot of dancers, the Pro heads would be more than enough for my regular workflow.

The new OLED menu system made a massive difference, offering an intuitive and simple-to-navigate structure that didn't require a manual to operate. After two years with the Quadra, I've still not fully memorised the symbols and codes to manoeuvre my way through all the sub-menus, but in a couple of minutes I was happily entering manual settings for Delayed, Sequence and Strobe modes. The ELB 400 also managed to match the high standards of these new shooting modes as powered by the ELC Pro HD heads, so from that perspective, it saved me looking into having two sets of lights. Delayed mode produced some fantastic results and is something I will incorporate regularly into my portfolio of work, along with Strobe for action shots of dancers. Sequence didn't do a whole lot for me, but then I only had one pack, so perhaps if I'd had multiple units I could have been a little more experimental in the studio.

Most of my work sits in the lower end of the power range, so I can't say I really

felt any difference with the additional 25Ws, though the increase from 6.6 stops to 6.9 gave me more flexibility at the lower end of the spectrum, which helped massively while testing the Delayed and Strobe shooting modes.

Verdict

Although it's hard to see the difference on the outside of the equipment, the Elinchrom ELB 400 really does manage to pack a whole lot more into one tiny box! For someone looking to invest in their first portable flash, it's a no-brainer. Lightweight, compact and intuitive, the ELB 400 offers a ready-made kit that will hold its own both in the studio and on location, giving you the freedom to get out and be more adventurous with your photography.

For existing Quadra users, the ELB 400 is a definite upgrade for those shooting sports, dance or movement. Having a built-in rear sync option and the ability to achieve stroboscopic effects in-camera are brilliant additions to your portfolio of skills, but for the standard studio photographer it also offers you additional ways to create atmosphere or tell a narrative without the need for extensive post-production.

For photographers who spend a lot of time on the move like I do, the extended battery life will definitely come in handy. I like the automatic 2:1 ratio on both the Quadra and the ELB 400 and it can be useful for quick portrait set-ups, but for some lighting scenarios I require more control, therefore I would opt for the Elinchrom ELB 400 Action Twin Pack, which offers two battery packs instead of just one. **A**

SPECIFICATIONS

ENERGY (Ws/J)	424
POWER DISTRIBUTION	Asymmetrical 2:1
POWER RANGE (f/stop)	6.9
POWER RANGE (Ws)	100%: 21-424, 66% Output A: 14-282, 33% Output B: 7-142
POWER RANGE	1/1 to 1/32
POWER INCREMENTS (in f/stop)	1/10 to 5/10-1/1
FLASH DURATION AT MAX. POWER (in seconds)	Output A: 1/1200 (Pro head), 1/2800 (Action head). Output B: 1/3000 (Pro head), 1/5700 (Action head). A+B combined 1/1500 (Pro heads), 1/4000 (Action heads)
RECYCLING TIMES (in seconds), FAST MODE	Output A: 0.3-1.6, Output B: 0.17-0.7
ECO MODE	Output A: 0.5-3.5, Output B: 0.3-1.2
COLOUR TEMPERATURE AT MAX. POWER	5500K
POWER STABILITY	±0.5%
MODELLING LAMP MODE	On, off, programmable timer, continuous
FLASHES OUT OF FULL CHARGE AT MIN. POWER	6000 (Eco mode), 5500 (Fast mode)
AT MAX. POWER	350 (Eco and Fast modes)
APPROX. RECHARGE TIME	90 minutes
WEIGHT	2kg (pack and battery), 0.73kg (battery only)
CONTACT	www.elinchrom.com

PRICES

ELB 400 PACK	£869
ELB 400 PACK WITH LI-ION BATTERY & CHARGER	£1,169
QUADRA ACTION HEAD	£345
QUADRA PRO HEAD	£315
ELB 400 1 ACTION HEAD TO GO SET	£1439
ELB 400 1 PRO HEAD TO GO SET	£1409
ELB 400 2 ACTION HEAD TO GO SET	£2039
ELB 400 2 PRO HEAD TO GO SET	£1979
ELB 400 ACTION TWIN PACK SET	£2875
ELB 400 PRO HEAD TWIN SET	£2815

VERDICT

