

1

The World of Wedding Photography



Wedding photography varies from other types of photography in that it moves from place to place as you are constantly trying to catch people in the act of doing something. The pressure to perform your duties quickly can seem extreme when you have to set up and compose twenty group shots with a hundred thirsty people that have only you standing between them and the bar. However, the external pressure from the guests is nothing compared to that internal nagging fear in the back of your mind that you have to get it right because you won't get any second chances to do it over.

Capturing Weddings

Wedding photography is not something that can be distilled into a simple formula that you can repeat over and over. No two weddings are alike and even if you do go back to the same location, the scene is always different every time. Every day has different light, different people, different customs, and so on. You can't sit down the night before and plan your workday or plan what kind of images you want to create. You have to be ready for anything, and you have to go into it with an open mind. Figure 1-1 is an example of the extreme lighting conditions you may face on a typical wedding day.



Figure 1-1: This first dance took place in a very dark indoor location. You can make it look well lit if you know how to mix your flash to get the foreground, while adjusting your ISO to get just enough of the background.

29mm, 1/8th, f4, 3200 ISO

If you are considering diving into wedding photography as a career, or even a part time job, Figure 1-2 is a typical scene you can expect to find at a wedding. Teaching you to see them and capture them with your camera is the goal of this book.



Figure 1-2: Ring shots are a great opportunity to push your creative limits.

50mm, f2.4, 1/256th, 400 ISO

Challenging and Rewarding Profession

The world of digital wedding photography can be both challenging and rewarding. You set your own hours during the week and then on the weekend, you work at the grandest party a couple may host in their entire lives. You get to be a “fly-on-the-wall” on one of the most important and emotional days in a couple’s life, following every move the bride and groom make from the time they arrive in the morning until they leave at night. If you get good at it, they won’t hesitate to pay you large sums of money and fly you around the globe in order to get your services.

As glamorous as the job may sound, the reality is that the digital wedding photographer spends long hours sitting in front of a computer, editing images, building a Web site, working on album pages, answering e-mails, burning discs, and more. The actual wedding shoot is only a small portion of the whole job.

A famous and very true saying about wedding photography is “You can be the best photographer in the world, and still starve if you don’t know how to run a business; or you can be a mediocre photographer and make millions if you are a good business person.”

I’ve had young people ask me what sort of college classes they should take to prepare them for a career in photography. My advice is to take classes in this priority: business management, advertising, Web site development, computer technology, art, and finally photography. Yes, that’s right, photography is last on the list, because without a strong basis in the other skills, your photographic abilities are pointless.

Using the Tools of the Trade

The tools of the trade are few. As businesses go, wedding photography requires only a small cash outlay to get the few pieces of high quality equipment necessary for the job. Learning how to use the equipment is the real challenge, because, fortunately for photographers, having the best tools does not make you a good wedding photographer. Many excellent wedding photographers use old, beat up cameras that are much less capable than the cameras many wedding guests will be toting around during and after the ceremony. However, as you probably already know, cameras don't take pictures — photographers do! A good wedding photographer could do better with a point-and-shoot than what most people can do with a top of the line digital camera.

Camera choices

The specific tools that each photographer uses are a relatively minor part of the wedding photography business. As in Figure 1-3, the important part is how skilled the photographer is at seeing a beautiful moment and capturing it in an artistic manner. For example, when you admire a painting by Picasso, you don't wonder what brand of brush he was using. The tools he used are as irrelevant as the choice of Nikon versus Canon. The artistic vision of the person and the technical expertise necessary to capture that vision are what makes the real magic of wedding photography.



Figure 1-3: The last few moments before the bride heads down the aisle can yield some very emotional images.

100mm, f4.5, 1/90th, 400 ISO

Personality goes a long way

One of the most valuable tools you can have as a wedding photographer is the right kind of personality. You don't have to be the life of the party, but you should have a friendly and outgoing personality that puts people at ease almost immediately. If you don't like people, or if you are impatient or easily frustrated with people that are always late and just generally can't seem to get it together, then this job won't be a good match for you. If you function well under pressure, if you are flexible enough that you won't mind making last minute plan changes when the bride is late, and you like working with people, then this job might be a good match for you.

Training your eye

The last and most valuable tool that you need as a wedding photographer is knowledge. You need to develop your skills and understanding of photography to the point that taking a picture is no more difficult than walking across the room. When you see an activity taking place, you need to move to the location that will allow you to tell the story with your camera. With practice, your eyes will tune in to the types of locations that make good portrait backgrounds. Eventually you will find yourself noticing them even when you are not at a wedding. A trained eye can only be gained through experience and practice.

Getting experience

With this book, you can read all about how to make images as seen in Figure 1-4, but no amount of reading can substitute for the experience you get while actually working on a real wedding. I highly recommend that you seek out wedding professionals in your area and ask them if you can assist or shoot as a second photographer in order to gain the experience and confidence needed before you take on your own first wedding. In the beginning, you should expect little or no pay for the education you get on these jobs. Simply consider it the cheapest college course you ever bought and learn all you can. As your skills progress, you can start being paid for your work, but don't expect to be paid much when working as a second photographer. The point is to get experience. When you reach the point where your mentor has little left to offer, take your portfolio and seek out someone better. Eventually you will have to shoot a wedding on your own to understand the full impact of being a wedding photographer.

Other valuable sources of education include seminars at big photography conventions like the annual WPPI convention in Las Vegas, or your state branch of Professional Photographers of America (PPA). Of course, there are also photography schools where you can get classes on all types of photography and business topics as well.



Figure 1-4: Finding the right light and posing a romantic scene takes a lot of practice.
118mm, f2.8, 1/128th, ISO 400

Recording Life's Milestone with Pictures

In almost every human life, there are at least four major milestones: birth, marriage, birth of the first child, and death. A wedding photographer has the privilege of being a witness and a historian on one of those four big days.

If you've ever looked through old albums of pictures from your childhood, you may realize that the memories you have of your childhood are actually somehow tied to the pictures. For example, you probably have many pictures where you can't remember anything else that happened during that day or even that month, but because you've looked at that picture many times over the years, the events immediately surrounding it are somehow burned into your memory. I can't explain how it works, but I do believe that photographs help us to store memories in a way that makes them last for the rest of our lives.

The first time a bride looks through her pictures, there is a very high likelihood that she will be moved to tears. If you've done a bad job, they will be tears of deep sorrow. If you've done a good job, they will be tears of joy—the same tears that she cried when the groom read his vows and when her father made a toast to their happiness. These are the memories, as in Figure 1-5, that you've frozen in time for her. Other types of photography are important of course, but few are as emotionally charged as wedding photography. What I like most about wedding photography is the fact that my clients think what I do is truly, important.



Figure 1-5: Allowing the couple to create their own pose takes a little bit of coaching and a lot of ability to see when they've got something good and press the shutter before it disappears.

195mm, f2.8, 1/512, 250 ISO

One of the greatest compliments I've ever received illustrated that point even more clearly when one of my past brides wrote to tell me how emotionally overwhelmed she was when she first saw her wedding pictures. Soon after that she decided she wanted to be able to give that same feeling to other brides, so she changed her career goals and she is now in her second year of college on the way to becoming a wedding photographer herself.

Breaking into the Business of Wedding Photography

What is it that attracts so many to the lure of wedding photography? Having been the paid photographer at hundreds of weddings, I still find myself amazed at the number of people that recognize the best angle, and stand up in front of me to try their hand at getting a good shot of the bride and groom. They are all interested in wedding photography on some level. Few have professional aspirations, but many will come up to me repeatedly throughout the day and ask questions because they are genuinely interested in the wedding photography business. You can see the gleam in their eye as they think to themselves, "I could do that!" More fuel is added to the fire when they find out that the bride not only paid my photography fee, but she also paid to fly me out to the wedding site. Then when I tell them that my next few weeks include weddings in Mexico, Jamaica, the Virgin Islands, Aruba, Greece, and Hong Kong, their eyes really get wide and the jaws drop open a bit in disbelief. After all, wasn't it only just a few short years ago that real photographers didn't shoot weddings?

Even today, there is a remnant of that feeling among some older photographers, but the younger crowd is embracing the new world of wedding photography like never before. With the likes of Joe Buissink and Mike Colon showing up on TV shows like regular celebrities, wedding photography is taking a decided turn in popularity. It's becoming downright stylish!

Of course, reading this book won't make you a celebrity wedding photographer, but it will give you all the information you need to start down the path in that direction. Who knows where that path may take you. Even if you don't want to go jetting off to exotic locales, shooting weddings right in your own neighborhood is a great way to make a very comfortable living while doing something that is fun, creative, and truly enjoyable.

Summary

The world of wedding photography is an exciting and challenging place to be. If you are an aspiring professional photographer or simply an amateur that wants to learn more about digital wedding photography, you will find that the business is surprisingly easy to enter into. After you've built a small portfolio by either working with an established photographer, or shooting free, there is no shortage of eager clients who are more than willing to try you. It may take several years to work your way into the higher price bracket, but when you do, you may find clients willing to pay outrageous fees to reserve your services.

The job definitely has its challenges. You have to learn to control your equipment in any sort of lighting conditions imaginable, with lots of hectic activity going on around you, and with lots of people watching and waiting on you, and you will end up spending much more time running the business than what you spend shooting pictures.

The rewards for your labor, aside from making a comfortable living, are that you get to perform a service that is extremely important to your clients. Many of them will tell you that your pictures are one of the most important things happening on the wedding day, second only to the act of getting married. They want very badly to remember this day for the rest of their lives, and they trust you to create the images that will keep the memories alive.

