

Exploring Plastic Cameras



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Kevin Meredith used Lomography's Diana F+ camera, which often produces light leaks for surprising colors on film.

By **Elizabeth Michaelson**

July 11, 2013 - You've seen plastic cameras: With their retro appearance and small size, these playful-looking devices can appear insubstantial and toy-like next to a sleek, digital SLR camera. But [Kevin Meredith](#), plastic camera enthusiast and author of [*Fantastic Plastic Cameras: Tips and Tricks for 40 Toy Cameras*](#) and [*Hot Shots*](#) (Chronicle Books) loves these film cameras and the distinctive images they produce. He discussed plastic cameras' enduring appeal with ShutterLove—and offered tips on exploring these small wonders.

Meredith, who is based in Brighton, England, first became interested in plastic cameras in 1998, when he got a [LOMO LC-A](#). This cult analogue camera is actually made of metal, but it's known as the "camera that kick-started the whole plastic camera scene," according to Meredith. The LC-A's features, including its legendary vignetting (darkness or blurring at the edges of the photo) and vibrant colors intrigued Meredith, and he soon began experimenting with plastic cameras of [all types](#).

The LC-A and plastic, or toy, cameras like the [Holga](#) and [Diana](#) appeal in part because of the organic, imperfect nature of the photos they produce: The saturated colors, light leaks that expose film while it's still in the camera, and blurred imagery are essential parts of their low-tech appeal. (Today the [Lomographic Society](#) manufactures reproductions of the LC-A and the Diana called the [LC-A+](#) and the [Diana+](#), respectively.)

Although plastic cameras have limitations—most are only suited to daylight conditions—they also offer many advantages: "Sometimes compact digital cameras can be a little complicated, and shutter lag can mean missed photo opportunities," says Meredith; but this isn't the case with plastic cameras. Furthermore, "An un-tweaked digital image can be a bit flat and boring looking—apps like [Hipstamatic](#) and [Instagram](#) were developed to get around this." (These apps use software filters to make digital images look more like photos taken with film.) "But when you shoot film, you get gorgeous color without any tweaking, which means photography can be more about taking pictures than sitting in front of a computer."

Plastic Cameras: Options and Accessories

For a plastic camera novice, Meredith recommends the [Holga 135 BC](#), a 35mm camera. "The Holga and the Diana are the toy cameras that most people know about, but most models use 120-roll film, which, per shot, is three times as expensive to buy and develop as 35mm film," says Meredith. "If you're starting out with photography, or are up for a bit of photographic experimentation, it's far better to do it with 35mm film. The [Colorsplash](#) camera is also great for the same reason, but it has more options—multiple exposures [combining more than one exposure to create a single image], long exposures, and a built-in flash that you can tint with colored gels."

Many models come with accessories, or focus on a particular technique or style: The [Holga 120 3D Stereo Camera](#) allows you to take 3D photos, while [Lomography Fisheye](#) cameras produce distorted images. (Lomography refers to both the analogue photography movement and the cameras produced by the Lomographic Society.) Meredith especially likes [action sampling cameras](#), which collect multiple images on a single frame and, he says, are great for capturing motion. "Any camera that can do multiple exposures is always fun," Meredith says. "And an accessory for the Lomo LC-A+, the [Splitzer](#), lets you take a picture in two halves, which is pretty awesome."

One of Meredith's recent favorites is the [Lomography Spinner 360°](#), which produces panoramic photos. "A lot of plastic cameras are basically disposable cameras with better build quality. Some have great characteristics like action sampling, but the Spinner 360° is unique," says Meredith. "The camera spins when taking a photo, drawing the film through it as it goes. It's pretty impressive stuff. Just look at the images."

While many plastic camera enthusiasts are adults, children can enjoy them, too. "I have been letting my three-year-old daughter use Lomography's [Pop 9](#) because it produces nine images on one negative," Meredith says. "We plan to cut the images up into smaller photos that she can use in her artwork."

The Future of Analogue

As digital cameras become ever more prevalent, it's becoming increasingly difficult for film enthusiasts to find labs that develop and process film. Luckily, there are many online photo labs that will service mail-order customers: [Fromex.com](#) and [Lomography.com](#) are two options. Meredith likes [The Vault Imaging](#) and [Colourstream](#) in Brighton and [Photoworks San Francisco](#) in California.

There's one more reason to use plastic cameras, Meredith says: "If every photography enthusiast shot a couple of rolls of film a year, it would help keep labs open and film alive."