

TOP TIPS

finding the perfect wedding photographer

**A NO BS GUIDE TO
HELP YOU CHOOSE
THE PHOTOGRAPHER
RIGHT FOR YOU**

Chris**SUCH**

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Top Tips choosing your wedding photographer

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SUCH, 40 Rectory Avenue, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO6 1AL

Visit our website at www.chrissuch.co.uk

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Forward

All statements in this e-book are purely my opinion, gathered from a 30 year career in the creative photography industry, with the past 20 years as a full-time professional photographer specialising in wedding photography.

The above statement is indeed true, these are all my opinions, and it's all rather splendid, being in a position to pass on my wisdom and knowledge for all things wedding photography related having been a successful wedding photographer for the past two decades. I've seen many changes in photographic styles, equipment, consumer products and wedding traditions, shot at various locations and venues both in this country and abroad, tackled extremes of weather, ridiculous time restraints and technical malfunctions. So here I am, doing the right thing and passing on this hard-earned knowledge to couple's starting out on this wonderful wedding planning journey.

Planning a wedding may seem daunting, there will be those who are using a wedding planner to help spread the to-do-list, but even if you are using or plan to use a wedding planner, having a bit of 'insider information' can only be a good thing to give you piece of mind on whoever you choose to capture your wedding day memories.

Selling our photography service is not the premise for these rambling wedding-related words; I'm here to guide you in finding the photographer for you- only you will know who is right for you.

Every couple is special, every wedding is unique, everyone has differing tastes and no two photographers are the same; sure, many do roughly the same thing, many are USB only, many offer albums, prices vary wildly, as does creativity. So, have a read of my advice and draw your own conclusions. Of course, I'm always at the end of an email or telephone to answer questions.

There, that's now out of the way... we can now crack on with what you're here for.

“It’s all so confusing!”

I know right! It seems a minefield at first glance as your initial Google search brings up 500 pages of results, all within a 10-mile radius of where you live, but I’ve written this to help guide you through this potential minefield. I know there will be some of you out there who aren’t fussed about having a photographer, as well as many of you for whom the photography is a high priority and yes, because I seem to be on a crusade for couples having wonderful lasting memories to look back upon, especially printed memories (I’m like seriously passionate about this part!) I guess I do tend to weight my writings toward why having a photographer experienced with shooting weddings is a good thing and worth investing in.

A wedding photographer really is an investment- you are investing in someone to capture your memories, to be with you on your special day and then to help you, family and friends relive those amazing memories for many years to come. But who do you entrust to capture these memories, who do you choose to invest in? It’s a fairly hefty decision isn’t it with so many options thrown at you, and not a cheap commodity either; as I often say, “this isn’t a £15 yoga mat you’re purchasing on Amazon, it’s more than simply choosing the cheapest one, you gotta think a bit deeper than that to find the perfect one for you!” and this is very true. It could be something as simple as ‘do you get on with the photographer’ or ‘can you print albums’ or other logistical stuff like ‘our wedding is on a beach in Costa Rica, are you allergic to flying?’ Different couples hold different values for different things, so this e-book outlines a few pointers to help you look out for the things that are relevant to you.

* disclaimer: this article is not biased toward us *

It seems that everyone with a camera now calls themselves a photographer, and although technically this is correct, as taking a photograph with a camera is what being a photographer is all about, this does not mean everyone should be trusted with one when it comes to taking people's money in exchange for capturing important events and memories!

Photography is so accessible these days with most mobile devices sporting a decent camera and modern cameras having complex algorithms churning out acceptable exposures most of the time on 'automatic' mode, but a cursory flick through Instagram and Pinterest will score you a plethora of mundane images with various filters slapped on in the hope of creating something different. Have a modicum of patience and keep going and you'll find shining examples of creative awesomeness hidden. They should pop out at you as being different, even if you do not know why. You see, what makes a great image, is not how extreme or quirky a filter is applied or how colourful and bright a picture is, it is a far subtler thing and not every photographer out there recognises this; and of course creativity between photographers varies just as skills do between all trades and professions. The shining examples are out there though, you just have to skim below the surface noise of the unremarkable to find them.

The ability to visualise a scene and shoot it differently to the other 80% coupled with the vision to light it a certain way, or to control the natural light to their advantage is what sets the great apart from the masses. It is not something immediately obvious to most, but the idea is to create an image or set of images that transport the subject back to the moment or to engage the viewer and create an emotional response; of course with most weddings there are still formal moments recorded that are there to capture a record of people attending and these may not be as emotionally engaging, but a wedding collection should contain more than just a series of these. Even the best photographers out there are continuously learning, it's a craft and should be constantly improved.

But, and this is a big but, being a creative photographer is only part of the skill set required to be great (or even good) at shooting weddings. Yes, being creative with technical knowledge is indeed very important if a photographer wishes to improve, and wedding day timings and locations and weather and guests and venue staff all have to be dealt with whilst all the time concentrating on the job at hand- capturing moments and creating memories! But there are other equally important skills needed when one is required to shoot a wedding. I'm going to list some of these important skills along with other tips to look out for and ask about when you are compiling your short-list of photographers to contact.

This guide is a valuable asset to those of you who have wedding photography fairly high up on your list of 'important wedding things to sort' so kick back with a cuppa and read through. The same can be said to those of you who are thinking of getting your best friend (you know, the one who takes great Instagrams of the cat) to shoot your wedding or Uncle Bob 'because he shot that lovely landscape and has a big camera' you guys should also sit down with a cuppa and have a read through, even if just to realise that being responsible for shooting someone's wedding is not the same as shooting one's kids in the woods!

Saying that, there is nothing wrong with getting your cat-shooting best friend or the 'Uncle Bob' and his tasty camera to shoot your wedding day, nothing wrong at all and if that's for you, then embrace it and save a fair chunk of wedding budget to put toward something that is on your priority list. There are going to be obvious risks associated with that, but if you are cool with it, then go for it! There's a wonderful quote, "an amateur takes a fantastic picture when the conditions are perfect, and a professional takes a fantastic picture when the conditions are not." Roll the dice my friend 'cause you are not in control of our wonderful weather! But flip-side that and yes, I've seen some cracking images captured by non-pros. I've seen some shockers captured by pros too, it's the same in all walks of life, not all skills are equal.

Now I don't want you reading this and thinking, "Yeah right, he's just going to list all the things they do!" Far from it! Yes, I'm going to talk about differences between pros and non-pros, experienced wedding photographers and those that don't have much experience (or any in some cases!); there are points on this list that I'm constantly improving upon and working toward too! It's a constant learning curve. So, as the true professional, I've written this from an unbiased viewpoint.

So, go grab a cuppa or a glass of something, and kick back as you read through my Top Tips to guide you in choosing your wedding photographer...

Creative qualities or not

Creative style is a personal taste, and I recommend initially choosing your short-list of photographers based on their personal style reflecting how you imagine your wedding photography to look. This is a good starting point. Ignore budget at this stage and try not to shop on price, you can short-list later on.

Think about what style of photography you are drawn toward; do you prefer a timeless, classic look, perhaps you like the more candid documentary approach, or you're a traditionalist at heart, maybe fashion-styled imagery or avant-garde artistry floats your boat? Whichever style is for you, choose a photographer whose portfolio resonates with you, please don't choose a photographer on price and ask them to shoot a different style, you are not going to get the best from that person- better to choose one whose style is right for you from the outset.

There are many aspects of a wedding that can be captured; bridal/groomsmen preparations in the morning, those morning details like shoes, dresses, flowers, cufflinks, watches, aftershaves and perfumes, arrival shots, wedding ceremony, post-ceremony drinks reception, the group formals, bride and groom portraits, your venue itself, speeches, dancing and evening antics and not forgetting the naturals of guests throughout the day, all which can be captured in different ways depending on the creative eye of a photographer.

You may not even know which style is for you, in which case, it's even more important (again, if photography is on your to-do-list) to spend some time probing the corners of the great and powerful internet for inspiration, rather than randomly picking photographers based on proximity to you. Spread your search net a little further maybe and see what you find.

There are many excellent and creative wedding photographers out there. There are many bland and uncreative wedding photographers out there.

Personality

Goes a long way, right? This is an area often given little thought to. Your chosen photographer is going to be an integral part of your big day and hopefully will be spending many hours in your company before, during and after. You all need to get on together well! This is important to get the best results- imagine how much fun your day will be, having a photographer you want to slap as they try to evoke a smile from you both.

The best wedding photographers have great interpersonal skills, are dynamic, put their clients at ease whilst making the photography fun and yet still create amazing images, even when faced with time restrictions and weather surprises. There is a heck of a lot going on at any one time in the mind of a wedding-shooting photographer!

I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to meet up with your short-list of photographers to get a feel for their personality. Meeting up also enables you to check out their display work rather than purely an online portfolio. In the case of destination weddings where your photographer is based in another country or perhaps lives many miles from you, at least try to plan a few online video chats and request some prints from their portfolio to be posted to you. Everything looks wonderful on a 'phone whilst browsing Instagram; printed stuff proves a decent quality; a low-resolution small screen image is not the same.

It is also worth noting some photography companies have more than one person shooting weddings, so make sure you meet with the photographer who would be shooting yours as styles and personalities vary even if they are 'trained to shoot the studio style'.

Technical skills

This goes without saying really, but with modern cameras being so advanced, even the least-skilled camera owners out there can get lucky with ok looking exposures shooting on auto settings.

Any true professional will know how to shoot in manual mode and wouldn't dream of shooting JPEGs, it's raw files all the way, and the thought of using the pop-up flash makes pros shudder.

A photographer who hasn't studied the art of photography isn't going to know the technical aspects either and this is where they make mistakes with lighting and lens choices- sometimes dreadful mistakes!

Now, I'm not going to delve into the technical side of things, as this is not the place to bore you with f-stops, shutter speeds and iso choices or to blow your minds with the aesthetic qualities of different lens choices in different environments and situations, or the joyous qualities of different light, both natural and artificial, but I will give you a few basic tell-tale signs of poor photography skills to look out for and get you started. I am, however, more than happy to discuss the technicals with you should you be curious!

Lack of detail in whites of dresses and shadows on suits; this is not the be-all and end-all, but worth looking out for poorly exposed shots- the classic fail is a couple standing in shade under a tree and the train of a bride's wedding gown sticking out in the bright sunshine! Also, clueless attention to detail when slapping filters onto an otherwise boring image and 'blowing out' the highlights or 'blocking up' the shadows. Fail.

Dark shadowy or squinty eyes; another classic fail is having people (couples and groups) looking toward the sun and squinting or direct harsh light from above (think midday summer sun) throwing dark shadows where the eyes once were! Fail.

Things growing out of people; the classic lamp post growing out of the top of someone's head or a rubbish bin left in shot. Just a general lack of attention when composing an image and not looking what is in the background. Fail.

Chopping bits off; either cut something off properly or leave it in completely! Shooting a full-length image and chopping the bottom off at the ankles or cropping waist height and cutting off half of the hands are both no-no's! Chopping off the top of someone's head goes without saying. All fails.

Focus; oh fuzzy images how fashionable you are, and many use selective focusing to great effect but a blurry, out of focus photograph is a pretty obvious fail usually.

I can delve deeper into the problems and issues I see regularly, but I'll save that for another time should you wish to ask, this chapter was more about the obvious to the untrained eye to get you started on the basics; there are common mistakes made with lenses, flash settings, camera settings as well as editing errors- all stuff I see more regularly than I wish to unfortunately.

To some, the above aren't issues and there are many out there who cannot spot them even when they are pointed out. But those of you who can spot the difference between a great image and a dreadful snap, even if you cannot put your finger on why, hopefully you'll be looking out for the obvious tell-tale errors from now on if you aren't already.

Editing – the Great Debate

Another grey area here, ‘the elephant in the room’ of sorts among some photographers; to edit or not to edit. There is only one way to say this... generally speaking, cheap photographers either do not edit or if they do it can be executed badly trying to compensate for poor photography skills, and the end results are usually fairly dire! Now I’m acutely aware there are many couples out there that don’t know any different, they see a ‘bright and colourful’ picture and they like it- who am I to judge someone’s personal preference? The same can be said for not noticing poor photography skills (or none?), again it’s not my place to criticise someone for not noticing the difference, there is a wildly varying price market for a reason. I cannot think of any reason to spend £2k on photography if that person cannot see the difference from the £200 photographer.

I’m not beating down on the cheap photographer here, just pointing out what I see regularly. Editing isn’t everything though, I also regularly see mind-blowing excellence from top-end photographers who do not need to edit and ‘capture in camera’- of course they always do tweaks here and there because they can, but like their top-notch technical skills with a camera, they generally possess great editing skills too.

Editing a wedding is not a 5 minute job, even with years of practise and knowing keyboard shortcuts or using post-production controllers with industry standard software and batch processing to speed the process up. This is why the cheaper end of the market often skip any major editing and burn the images directly to USB to hand over to their client. How many hours can you afford to spend editing if you’re only charging a few hundred pounds to the client?

But yes, editing is a grey area and some photographers will edit more than others, some not at all, and others use it badly, whether to compensate for lack of creativity or to hopefully recover from poor photography in the first place.

A touch harsh-sounding I know, but I see it all the time!

Experience is king!

This counts! Yes, this will usually be reflected in price (should be unless a photographer is cutting corners elsewhere) and experience shooting weddings is certainly worth investing in if photography is high on that priority list. As I mentioned at the beginning, if you're not bothered about the captured memories, then save some wedding budget and hit up someone who is starting out or can use a camera well. Everyone has different expectations and you can save some serious money by going down this route.

Of course, all photographers have to start out originally, but steer clear of students and start-ups, hobbyists and cheap 'photographers' if the photography is important to you. Leave them to practise and learn their craft on couples who aren't bothered or to those who could not spot the differences between awesome and rubbish if you showed them. Cheap photographers are cheap for a reason, but there is always a market for them so I'm not dismissing them here.

Knowing wedding etiquette and what to expect during the various stages of a wedding day is equally important as knowing how to react to unforeseen circumstances like venue restrictions, diverse weather, technical hitches etc. This is where being an experienced wedding photographer pays off; a photographer in another photographic field may well be a professional and extremely talented in, say, landscape or architectural photography, but this doesn't always translate to being automatically excellent shooting a wedding.

A photographer will be worth their weight in gold, if they can step in and show how to corset a bridal gown up, tie a cravat, pin a veil back in, or flash a sewing kit for emergency repairs (it has been known to happen!)

The best wedding photographers shoot spontaneously, almost without thinking, quite often pre-guessing the moment, and have a very calming and natural way of styling formal shots.

Portfolios and products

This is another subjective matter with personal tastes differing from one person to the next. Your first experience of a photographer will, most likely, be an online portfolio/gallery as you explore different creative styles of various photographers. The initial portfolio/gallery you view will help you narrow down your options, but a photographer's portfolio reaches further than solely an online gallery (in most cases anyway) it is also about how they present their images to a client. Also, have a read of their bio, see what they value or talk about; you're investing in a person to create your memories as much as the future memories themselves.

Meeting up with your short-list of photographers will give you the opportunity to see what presentation options they offer, the print quality of their products, the attention to detail in how they present their products and also an overall quality feel to their range of options. An image that looks amazing on screen may not look so great when printed.

The unfortunate trend of photographers only supplying files on a USB drive is something to think carefully about. This really only concerns budget photographers (in my experience, no true passionate and creative professional will entertain the idea of giving away their work in this way only) which is not to say that all budget photographers and USBs are bad, but think carefully if you're tempted with something like this. No one is going to compliment how wonderful your wedding USB looks gathering dust in a drawer, and no one is going to be sat around a table in 20 years time flicking through a box of USB drives. Printed memories are cherished far more than an old digital file that can't be accessed anymore in years to come. And don't forget that old laptop you used to own, y'know the one that suddenly stopped working and you lost all the information on it, the one you threw away that time! It happens unfortunately. Printed memories are treasured.

The wildly varying price minefield

This is where we get to the crunch, the most commonly queried subject when looking around at photographers. Yes, prices do vary significantly due to a number of variables; corners can be cut in various ways to reduce costs to the client. I'm going to give you an insight as to why photographer's prices can vary, to arm you as you go information gathering.

Experience; a seasoned professional with years of wedding experience is going to be a safer bet than a part-timer who is fresh to the scene or someone who is a hobbyist. You will always pay more to have 'piece of mind' knowing your photographer is tried and tested. There is no second attempt when shooting a wedding, has to be first time every time.

Service; this will vary among photography businesses and affects price accordingly. Meeting up with a photographer in a local coffee shop to see examples on an iPad and then being posted a USB with your wedding pictures on afterwards is not a professional level of service. Same goes for editing; some edit, some do not, some do it well and others do not. Expect a decent service if you pay for one, and likewise don't if you do not.

Products; a USB drive or DVD disc (DVD really? Still?) pales in comparison to the cost of a professionally designed and handmade wedding album (yes there are cheap albums out there too) add in time spent designing an individual and personal wedding album and 'hey-presto' a couple of zeros added on. 10-minutes to burn a 25p DVD compared to the time taken designing an album that is going to be handmade, unique to you and looked at for years to come? The choice is up to you of course.

Creativity; the top professionals command serious fees to shoot a wedding. They bring a unique experience and mind-blowing creativity from even the most mundane of backdrops. They use their creativity to create wonderful collections and make the full experience fantastic whilst doing so. Do not expect the same personality, creativity and experience felt with a £500 photographer than you'll receive with a £5k photographer. I could mention one of my favourite wedding photographers charges \$20k to shoot a wedding... just saying!

Premises; a high street studio, business park office or wedding boutique shop have considerably higher running costs than a part-timer working off a lap top in their spare bedroom does. Expect a price difference that reflects this. There is nothing wrong with a wedding photographer working from home though, they work on location anyway! It's just a point to consider. Premises are a touch more pro though if you're asking my advice.

Assistants and additional photographers; these will obviously have to be paid for by the photographer, so usually the cost is passed on to the client in some way. There are pros and cons to having a team attend your wedding, and not every situation will require this- in some cases this will actually hamper the end results and vice versa, photography will suffer from not having a team attend certain weddings. An experienced wedding professional should have no problem handling a wedding of 100 day guests without the need for a second photographer.

An assistant is always handy, no matter the size of the wedding party, to help carry gear and set up equipment for time-efficiency, hold reflectors and lights etc. but with wedding parties up to, say, 100 day guests, there is no reason why a lone-shooter wouldn't be able to cope. The only reason to consider requesting an additional photographer is if both bridal and groomsman morning preparations are to be captured and you're both getting ready miles apart from each other.

Once we start hitting wedding parties of 150+ day guests then the logistics of capturing the story of your wedding day generally requires the help of a secondary photographer to assist the primary photographer. With smaller weddings I find two photographers off-putting to guests- a single photographer with an assistant is different to two photographers though. With very large wedding parties of 250+ day guests I'd expect a team to capture the day properly, two photographers and an assistant at least.

Of course, this opinion is based on a photographer capturing the story of an entire day, if a documentary style is required and the photographer is simply walking around snapping 'fly on the wall' moments then there is no reason why they couldn't shoot solo and be discreet. Just don't expect all the story stuff to be included if you're going with this style. There are some wonderful documentary wedding photographers out there, it really is a skill to shot documentary wedding style properly.

Editing and post-production; not all photographers spend time editing their images, some don't edit at all, some are wizards at fantastic editing done quickly while others slave for hours in darkened corners and some send away for others to edit. A photographer or an editor's time costs money, they are still working behind closed doors editing your collection so be wary of those offering everything for nothing. It isn't and shouldn't be only about pressing a button on the day itself, there is far more to wedding photography these days than simply turning up on the day and pressing a shutter release.

On-going training; any photographer who invests in themselves with on-going training to further their creativity, expand their business, learn new skills, to continually evolve themselves etc. is worth considering as they are the true passionate creatives and passionate creatives will be more passionate about capturing your memories. Business courses, photography symposiums and training days are expensive and it is their clients who benefit with wonderful memories.

Those letters after a photographer's name; LSWPP, ABIPP, FMIPA etc. what do they mean and are they relevant in the real world? The main two associations in the UK are the BIPP and the MPA, with the Guild of Photographers falling in next down the line and then also the SWPP somewhere further down the ladder amid the swamp of amateur and semi-professionals. The BIPP (British Institute of Professional Photographers) and the MPA (Master Photographers Association) are the two main professional bodies for photographers and only accept proven professionals to join the ranks. The three levels of qualification are Licentiate, Associate and Fellow (L, A and F) with Fellow being the highest honour granted to only the very best out there. A Fellow of the MPA will have the letters FMIPA after their name for example. Does this mean anything in the real world? Not really, but bear in mind all qualified professionals undertake rigorous testing and generally invest a good deal of time in bettering their skills and techniques which of course always benefits their clients. I've seen fantastic wedding images from non-qualified photographers who do not belong to an association, but thought some 'insider knowledge' may prove useful in case you were wondering.

All those other things needed to be a pro; expensive kit needs updating and replacing/servicing regularly, any serious photographer will also carry spare kit in case of accidents, they will have full business insurance to cover themselves and clients, clients don't grow on trees so even the best of them will have some kind of advertising in place, display products become out dated and these need updating fairly regularly also, etc.

Alternative ideas

True to my word earlier, I did say this wasn't biased toward us and what we do and how we shoot, so here are a few alternative ideas to capture your special day.

Have a # for your wedding day and put up a sign at your wedding reception asking guests to upload their snaps to Instagram using your chosen #.

Disposable cameras on tables can create some odd memories but worth considering for daytime stuff. Remembering to keep the button pressed to charge up the flash is not at the forefront of every guest's mind as they snap away into the evening though.

Props'n'backdrops can be set up in a corner for guests to go make daft faces under the influence of alcohol. Really, more evening biased and suitable as a budget version of a photobooth.

Photobooths are again more of an evening thing but can capture some hilarious drunken moments as guests pile in adorned with daft hats, wigs, etc.

Starting out budding-photographers can be an extremely budget-friendly way of scoring a few memories. Inherent risks involved obviously with anyone practising, but if you are happy with a few snaps then why not look for someone offering to practise at your wedding. Just don't expect excellence!

So, you have to ask yourself when doing your research, what corners you are prepared to cut when considering your photography budget. Please don't think I'm suggesting you consider 'expensive' photographers only, not at all, I'm only pointing out the reasons as to why photographer's prices vary so much- the term 'you get what you pay for' is very real.

Just have a think about the hours a wedding takes up in the life of a photographer, the meetings beforehand and afterwards, the wedding day itself plus add in the hours for editing if a photographer does this, and even time spent designing an album if relevant. And this is without factoring in equipment, insurances and other professional costs involved!

There is a market for all levels of photographer services and hopefully the above tips have given a bit of clarity to help you when short-listing your photographer choices! I know some of what I mention does seem quite harsh to the cheaper end of the market, but as I mentioned at the start, I am aiming at those of you who hold photography fairly high up on your wedding to-do-list, and if this is true in your case, the tips and advice are there for you.

Thank you for taking the time to read this!

Chris

SUCH – EXCLUSIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

web: www.chrissuch.co.uk

email: chris@chrissuch.co.uk

tel: 023 9235 6831

