

THE INDEPENDENT

Independent Photographer

Part 2: The great outdoors



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Introduction



The most exciting photographs are often taken outside: a verdant landscape, a rich red sunset, a stormy sea. The natural world is an enormously rich resource. But what makes one image stand out from another?

Photography is essentially a simple hobby, and recent technological advances should serve to make it even easier to get even better pictures. That is where this latest *Independent Photographer* supplement comes in; it will help each and every photographer to get more from their camera. The focus for this issue is outdoor photography, to help you create those stand-out images, and to get the best out of the prints you make.

The member companies of the Photo Imaging Council (PIC) and the Photo Marketing Association (PMA), who are responsible for the manufacture and retailing of most photographic and imaging products obtainable in the UK today, are always striving to make photography easier and more accessible. So take better photographs, take more photographs and do more with your photographs; but above all, enjoy your photographs.

Nigel McNaught
Photo Marketing Association International

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Charlie Waite captures the landscape

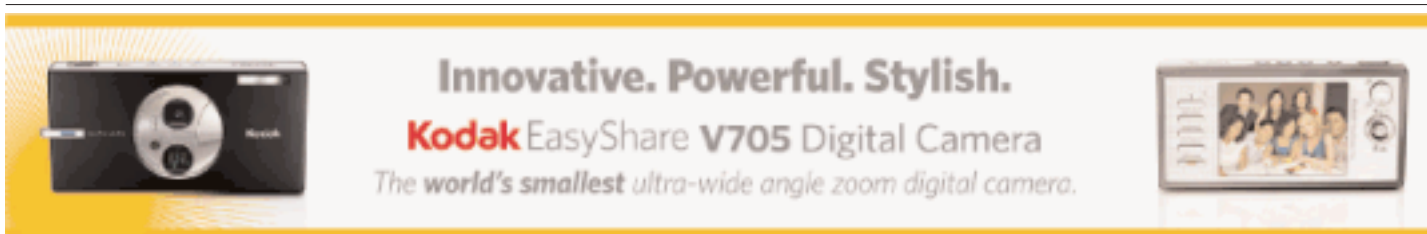
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Every cloud has a silver lining

You don't need bright sunshine to capture great outdoor shots – overcast light conditions can be ideal. In fact, there's no such as thing as bad weather, says Terry Hope

Summer may be slowly drawing to a close, but there is still plenty of good daylight about and lots going on to tempt you to reach for the camera. Even when the nights start to draw in and the weather turns chillier there will still be plenty to photograph and lots going on outside that will yield great pictures.

It's very easy to believe that the only good picture-taking conditions are bright sunny days. In fact, the prospects are better if anything when the sun has gone in, the contrast level of the light has dropped and there is less chance of the scene you're picturing featuring garish burned-out highlights and impenetrable shadows. Overcast conditions also mean that you'll also have to think less about where you point your camera, since you won't be running the risk of looking into the sun or capturing your own shadow in the frame.

Even rainy or heavily overcast conditions have their attractions: a dark, cloudy sky can look a lot more interesting, for example, than one which is either an unbroken and uniform blue or, worse, an insipid, featureless white. Get used to taking the camera everywhere with you and you'll start to realise that there are situations developing all the time that are worth photographing.

Look for opportunities and, particularly if you're using a digital camera and you don't have to worry about the cost of film and processing, shoot plenty of pictures and try out new ideas. After all, it only takes a second to delete anything that hasn't worked out the way you wanted, and it's a great way of teaching yourself new techniques and angles.

General Ground Rules

- Keep that camera to hand at all times. Modern digital compacts can be tiny and are robust enough to carry around in a pocket or handbag. Even some of the latest camera phones can deliver decent, printable results, and are worth using if your regular camera isn't available.
- Don't put the camera away the second that it starts to rain. There's no such thing as bad weather, and pictures of the children splashing in the puddles and having fun can be really spontaneous and the perfect memory of a family day.
- By the same token, don't disregard the camera when the light starts to fade towards the end of the day. Even some relatively basic models will have a facility to deliver results in low light

conditions: read your manual and see if it's possible to switch the flash off, which will then mean that the camera's light meter will calculate an exposure for the light that is available. Remember, however, that the shutter speed that is likely to be set will be slow, and so you might have to balance the camera on something solid, such as a suitable wall, to achieve sharp results. The beauty of digital, however, is that you will see on the spot whether you have got what you want, and don't forget to zoom into the picture on your viewing screen to check that it's as sharp as you want it.

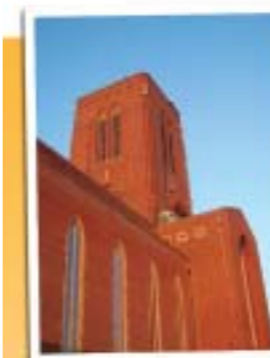
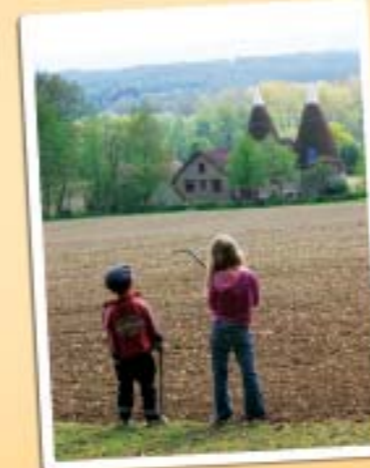
- Don't imagine that the flash is only there to provide light in an interior situation. One of the best things you can do with a modern compact camera is to explore the various flash settings that are available. Many of the more refined models will allow you to either select a burst of fill-in flash to lift the shadows in a subject's face, or to simply turn the flash on when you decide that you need a little extra light in a scene. The typical compact camera flash will only be effective over a couple of metres or so, but it is still capable of making a major difference to your pictures.

Take a new approach

Be ready to experiment and to break the rules. Point the camera into the light from time to time to see what you can get – the camera's meter will automatically cut the exposure and the picture will darken down, but this can look really atmospheric – and also try to be adventurous in the way that you record your subjects.

Individuals don't have to be looking into the camera and smiling all the time: shoot pictures of them from behind, from underneath and from above and experiment with your composition. Try a candid approach at times and be prepared to produce a few duds in the hope that you'll also unearth some gems at the same time. Something as simple as tilting the camera can lift a shot and make it far more dynamic, and don't be afraid to go for the dramatic!

Also get into the mindset that not every picture you shoot of your loved ones needs to be a record shot. The memories you have will be boosted by a selection of photographs that truly reflect all the things that you and your family got up to.



Use the light

Learn to read the light and to see what it's doing. It will change in colour throughout the day and will be particularly warm when the sun is rising and setting. Many photographers love taking pictures of sunsets, but in fact there is a "golden hour" for the light before and after this time that can be equally spectacular as the sunset itself. Very late evening light will become a deep shade of orange and has a fabulously rich quality, but you have to work really quickly with it since it fades from its peak in a matter of minutes.

The two shots of Guildford Cathedral, above, prove the point: they were taken within half-an-hour of each other. In one, the last light of the day reflects from the brick of the building making it look beautifully warm. The second picture shows the building in deep shadow shortly afterwards, and the crescent moon in the sky: an equally effective picture in its own way.

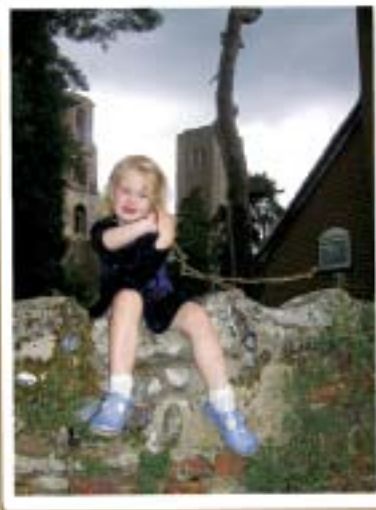
Both pictures were shot simply using the camera's meter reading and, in both cases, the result was the one that was required. The portrait of the girl was also shot at this time of day using the same method, and the beautiful quality of the light that hits her gives this portrait a real lift.



Look to go long

Many compact cameras these days feature a zoom lens, and the idea of this is not necessarily just to get you closer to your subject. The longer end of the zoom can also affect the depth of field that you achieve, and careful use of this can allow you to pull out the subject you are interested in from its surroundings.

The picture here, for example, was extracted from a field that featured scatterings of poppies which, collectively, had little pictorial value. Getting down to a low angle, however, and setting the camera to its longest zoom setting, changed everything. There was some distance between this particular cluster of poppies and their background, and the use of a long lens ensured that, while they were in sharp focus, the area behind was soft and unable to distract. The "compressed" feel of the perspective offered by a long lens can also benefit a picture, allowing areas to be brought apparently closer together. This could allow you, for example, to create more of a relationship between your subject and their surroundings by stepping back and using the long end of your lens to squeeze the elements of your picture together.



Make use of your flash

The built-in flash on your camera is one of the most important controls that you have, and can be highly effective in daylight conditions. Many photographers don't realise that it can usually be activated very simply by using a switch on the camera and, once it's set to fire, you can use it to boost the available light that you are working with to great effect.

Don't overestimate what your flash can do: it is only designed to work over short distances, and there is no point imagining that it will flood a scene with light. What it can do very well, however, is to lift the shadows that can often be found on the face, particularly if you are working with your subject's back to the light.

A digital camera will demonstrate very effectively what can be done. If you anticipate that there is too much shadow on your subject, shoot one straight picture and then activate the flash and shoot one more frame. Now compare the two on your viewfinder: the one with the flash will look much brighter and, while the background will still be dark, your subject will have been lifted away from it. The danger is that you might be too close and that the flash will be too obvious or may even have burned out some of the detail. If so, you'll need to move slightly further back and try again.

The flash can also come into its own by helping to even out the extremes of natural light. It's possible by using some direct flash to shoot a picture of a subject against a sunset, for example, by letting the camera expose for the surroundings and using a flash to balance the foreground. Shot straight, the disparity in light levels would make this an impossible subject to record.



Capture the action

Get yourself out of the mindset of posing your subjects and suddenly you have the opportunity to shoot pictures that are fun and full of life and say far more about your subject.

Once again, it's worth making the point that a digital camera will give you the freedom to shoot as many pictures as you like for no cost, so you might as well go crazy. Set up an action game and just fire away as your subjects let themselves go: you'll soon get the hang of anticipating action and pressing the shutter a moment before everything comes together.

The picture of the girl playing with her frisbee was one of a handful of shots that worked over the course of a picture session that lasted half-an-hour or more. If there had only been one or two pictures taken it's likely that the results would have been very disappointing, but perseverance allowed a great shot to emerge.

Flash can also help you to capture action in a highly dramatic way. The shot of the boy swinging on a rope was a combination of techniques: first of all the flash was switched on so that it was guaranteed to fire and then the camera was swung in the same direction that the boy was travelling, the intention being to match his speed.

The flash has pulled him out from the shadows and has helped to freeze the action at the same time, while the act of moving the camera has created sideways blurring in the background and accentuated the feeling of speed.





Fields of dreams

Photographer **Charlie Waite** likes to see how the land lies

As with any artistic endeavour, a photograph is the sum of the parts that make the pleasing whole. With photography, especially landscape photography, all the component parts should be scanned and evaluated before you depress the shutter. It could even be said that photographers “make” images rather than taking them. This puts the process of photographing in a whole new light.

It’s usually the play of light on a particular landscape that catches my eye and compels me to make an image. I think all photographers should have a love affair with light, although there are times when I will make a photograph that seems drained of light because it conveys a certain mood or atmosphere.

Before even taking the camera out of its bag or setting up the tripod, photographers take certain factors into account. Firstly, photography is very much about perception. When on a mission to make landscape photographs, I take along a small black piece of card with an aperture cut out of it. I find this really useful because I am, after all, composing and constructing an image that will ultimately be extracted from its context.

The image will be taken away from its three-dimensional reality, away from the breeze and the fragrance hanging in the air. It will be confined to a frame and if it’s to be a success, then it should be able to hang on a wall or sit on a mantelpiece or table and endure. Hopefully, it will also evoke a response.

Photographers usually take photographs for two reasons. Either they have an emotional response to the scene, or they wish to record something that amuses, provokes or shocks them.

I try to keep the story as simple as possible. If my eye can’t find a place to settle within the image then I have to refine it and get rid of any elements that are distracting or redundant. These days, we employ computers at the post-

production stage to touch up and improve photographs, but there’s nothing like getting it right “in camera” on the day.

At its best, landscape photography can be a form of contemplation: it’s a time to reflect on my surroundings and take a pause. I don’t like to be hurried or pressurised, as this conflicts with the nature of what I’m trying to do.

When I look into the viewfinder, I try to fine-tune my vision and delve deep into what I’m seeing. I try to look through and beyond what I see in there, not simply at it. I also try to pre-visualise the way the image will appear. I like to take my eye around the edge of the viewfinder, both clockwise and anticlockwise. And I try not to make compromises. The more compromises I make, the less satisfying the photograph will be. Cooking dinner for a group of guests is a good analogy – the host tries to make the meal both tasty and attractive.


When I hear that the weather is changeable and unsettled, I set off to photograph. Bearing in mind that the sky may take up perhaps a third of an image, I like to ensure that it relates in some way to the land below. I especially like to photograph the transition between poor weather retreating and fine weather arriving. Having long admired stage lighting directors, I’ve grown fond of dramatic landscapes.

While I still use film, I realise that digital is wonderful in many ways. But, be it film or digital, I know that the success or failure of an image will be largely determined by its content, balance, design, cohesiveness and atmosphere. Good photography is never easy.

Charlie Waite is a landscape photographer. His company, Light & Land, is the leading photographic tour company in Europe, running worldwide workshops and tours dedicated to improving photography. For more information, visit the company’s website at www.lightandland.co.uk




Charlie Waite looks for dramatic changes in the light when he shoots a landscape



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Site-seeing tour

Photo websites explained and recommended. By David Phelan

Photo websites are a great way of sharing your pictures with your family, with friends and with strangers. Why would you send your digital photographs to a website for display or storage? Well, there are good reasons, including positive public exposure, convenience and even the possibility of making money.

Security is enhanced with photo sites, too. Ten years ago, if your house was burgled, you could be sure that the thief wouldn't weigh himself down with the photo albums which were priceless to you, but worthless to everybody else. Now, though, if your digital snaps are saved on your laptop's hard drive, you can bet they'll be carted off with your precious portable PC. You can save your images to disk (and you must, by the way) but they're still vulnerable to fire. Sending your pictures to a website's servers solves both these problems and some sites even boast that they back up your precious images in two different American states. Be warned, though, some sites eventually delete these pictures, if you don't visit frequently enough.

As for convenience, if you're spending time endlessly copying images of your family into separate large emails, then how much simpler you'll find it to set up a photo album online and just paste the site's address into one message letting everyone visit it.

The process is largely similar whichever site you pick. First, you must sign up. In nearly every case this is free. Then you'll find a series of simple instructions on how to upload photos from your hard drive to the site, subject to how much space you have and if there's a limit to how much you can upload in a month. Then decide who you want to be able to see your pictures – just you, everyone or somewhere in between, in which case you can give a password to the chosen few. And when you want prints, every site makes sure you know how to spend money with them.

If your family think you have a flair for shooting, or if you allow comments from strangers and find they're encouraging too, you could send them to a site such as www.scoopt.com, which tries to sell your pictures for you, offering them to newspapers and so on. If they get a sale, you get half the cash.



Six hosting sites

Jessops Photo Express www.jessops.com

Register for unlimited free storage and receive 40 free prints until the end of September 2006. You can print, share and store your images, with prints costing from 10p each. Your order can be sent to you at home, or delivered to your local Jessops store.

Snapfish www.snapfish.co.uk

Offers unlimited storage space, free, advanced editing features such as borders, cropping, red-eye reduction and more. Prints cost 10p for 6x4ins and has a very wide range of products such as your photos on mouse mats, sweatshirts, coasters and baby bibs.

Flickr www.flickr.com

Membership is free and allows the user to upload up to 20 Megabytes of images a month, or for an annual fee of £13.58 a Pro account has a 2GB a month upload limit and permanent archiving. Offers the neat feature called Tags, so you can highlight parts of photos with comments, and others can comment on them, too, but you can't buy prints.

SmugMug www.smugmug.com

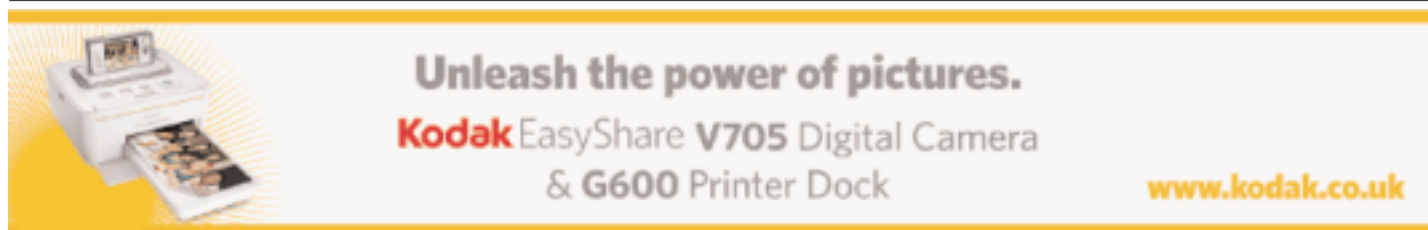
It's not free – you have to spend \$39.95 (£21.75) for a year of unlimited photo storage, email support and no ads in your online albums. Print options are very advanced, with 26 print sizes, not to mention tiles, key tags and aprons. You can make galleries password-protected.

Photobox www.photobox.co.uk

Mostly for sharing but also sells photos if you're a professional photographer. Photos cost 10p per print. This site is heavily geared to prints and offers a bewildering array of sizes, prices and extras, from silver-plated frames to canvas prints. Password-protected.

Photobucket www.photobucket.com

You get 1GB of space free, though maximum file size is 1MB, so make sure your images aren't too high-resolution. Premium accounts have 5GB of space and no ads for \$25 (£13.61). You can upload videos as well as photos and link them to MySpace, and other sites. Prints are available.



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The sky's not the limit

With the help of a computer, there's no such thing as a bad picture, says Steve Chaplin

On the face of it, outdoor photography should be easy: no studio lights to worry about, no time spent waiting for a flash to recharge, all you have to do is point and shoot.

At least, that's the theory. The reality is often different. You don't have to light the scene, sure; but the flipside is that you can't control the lighting, either. And if you're a photographer who favours the fully automatic, point-and-shoot approach, you're going to find that some of your images don't come out exactly as you expected.

Fortunately, help is at hand. Seemingly ruined photographs can be brought back to life with basic image editing skills. Adobe Photoshop Elements 4 is the tool of choice for the amateur photographer. It's got 90 per cent of the features of the full Photoshop, as used by professional graphic designers, but at a price that won't break your budget.

One problem that frequently affects outdoor images is the quality of the sky. If you can see the clouds in detail, the chances are that the ground will be far too dark. But if you optimise the camera's settings for ground level, the sky is likely to be burned away entirely.

Here, we offer a simple technique for restoring the original sky that was captured along with the rest of a digital image. But it's well worth keeping a stock of suitable skies to hand, so you can

substitute them for dull, overcast or bleached-out skies in other photographs that you take.

Cheating? It depends how you look at it. Unless you're a documentary photographer for whom authenticity is paramount, your main goal will be simply to produce the best image you can. And if this means changing a meaningless sky for one that has a greater sense of drama, then so be it: it's really not that different from a traditional photographer fitting coloured lenses to boost skies as they are captured.

Be prepared, also, to play around with the contrast of your images – even at the expense of making them look more like drawings than untreated photographs. Once again, the end result is all that really matters: a graphic effect can be created in a darkroom with smelly chemicals, or far more easily on your computer.

The ability to edit images after they've been shot also allows us to play around with photographic techniques such as variable depth of field, to highlight a close-up foreground object by pushing the background into soft focus. And don't forget that it's easy to change the colour temperature of an image to compensate for poor lighting conditions and inappropriate white balance settings.

The image you capture with your camera is just the first step: it's on your computer at home that the truly creative process begins.

The image you create with a camera is just the first step

Scene 1 Bring those skies back to life

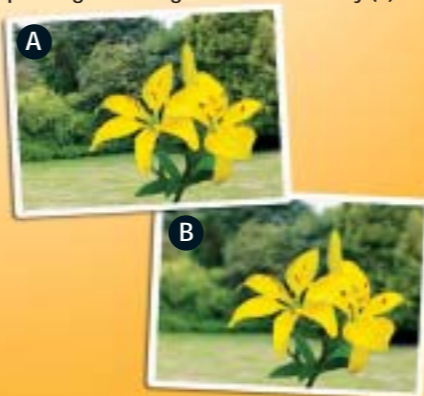
An idyllic pastoral view – so you point and shoot. The trouble is that on a fully automatic setting, the camera has set its exposure for the sky, rather than the ground (A), producing an image that's much too dark. This should be easy to solve: it's a straightforward matter to use the editing software that came with your camera to brighten up the whole scene (B). Now, though, the ground may be brighter – but that sky is completely burned out.

So here's a better solution. In Photoshop Elements, first duplicate the background layer to make a new, identical copy. Brighten up the scene here, exactly as before. Now use the Magic Wand tool to select all that white sky, and simply delete it from the new layer; this will remove all the white, leaving the original, strong sky showing through (C). Alternatively, place a new sky layer behind this one to replace it altogether!



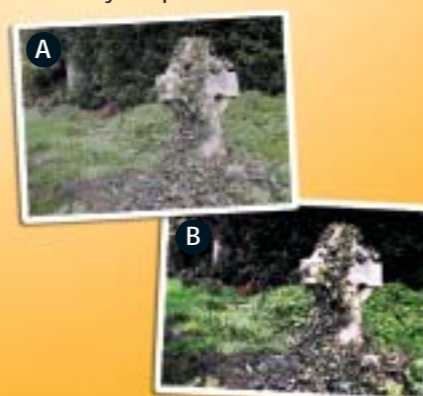
Scene 2 Creating a sense of distance

Zoom lenses allow us to get closer to the subject, and the high resolution of modern digital cameras means we can enlarge the image even more. But it tends to flatten the perspective; here, the flower becomes confused with its background (A). To fix this, select the flower with any of the selection tools, and invert that region, so everything else is selected: adding a fair amount of blur will now bring the flower to the foreground, pushing the background further away (B).



Scene 3 Boosting the contrast

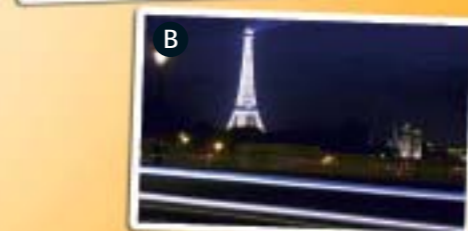
This photograph of an overgrown tombstone in a cemetery (A) should have been far more dramatic than this. But the combination of a cluttered background and equally leaf-strewn foreground means much of the power is lost. All is not lost: here (B) we've greatly increased the contrast – which affects the brightness and the strength of the colours. The result is a graphic, highly stylised image that has much more immediacy and power.



Scene 4 Night photography

When photographing illuminated night scenes, such as the Eiffel Tower shown here, the last thing you want is a flash. Instead, rest the camera on something solid and set a long exposure, using your camera's night shot mode, if it has one.

The trouble is that photos taken at night have an unnatural reddish cast (A). All the elements are there, like the streaming headlights of passing cars, but the effect is more tropical than Parisian. Decent photo editing software will allow you to reduce the red and boost the blue in the picture: the end result (B) is far more evocative.



Understanding file formats

Two things determine how much storage space a photo uses: its physical dimensions and the file format used to store it.

Images are usually saved in JPEG format, which compresses the pictures. Cameras will often offer a choice of Fine, Good and Normal settings; Fine will add the least compression, which means larger file sizes but better quality pictures.

The JPEG format is fine for almost all purposes, but serious photographers, who need to produce high quality prints, prefer to use TIFF files. This creates much larger file sizes, with almost no perceptible difference. When you start to fiddle with the exposure on the computer, though, you may find an unnatural "banding" occurs in JPEG images: the smooth gradient of an evening sky, for instance, can appear to be made of streaks of fractionally different colours. You won't notice the difference on most images, only those with subtle grades of colour over a wide area.

More recently, high-end cameras have started to be able to save images in RAW format: that is, the image exactly as captured by the CCD chip in the camera, with no compression. A single RAW file can fill a memory card. The TIFF or RAW formats are useful only for professional photographers: for the rest of us, JPEG files mean more pictures on a disk and faster transfer to the computer.

Image: JPEG comparison

The photo on the left has been saved as a maximum quality JPEG; the one on the right is lowest quality. When enlarged, as here, we can distinctly see the blockiness caused by over-compression in the right hand image.



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A change of focus

Model Helena Christensen on her abiding passion – photography

When did you first become interested in photography?

When I was 18 and hitch-hiking around the world I had a camera with me, and I suddenly realised how different everything looked when you framed it. You notice all these little details that normally would pass right by you.

What camera were you using when you first started taking photos?

I've always used a lot of different cameras. One of my oldest cameras is a Konica Polaroid camera. I also have a Lomo and a Diana, and for professional shoots I use a Pentax. If I need something easily accessible I might use my mobile phone. I've taken a lot of great shots with my mobile and even held exhibitions with them when they're blown up.

Do you prefer the older cameras?

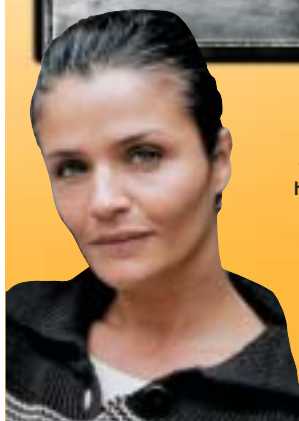
With a film camera it just seems like there's more feeling in it. I like it when pictures aren't perfect. It's always interesting to wait for the moment when you get a photo back and you don't know what the hell happened, it makes it interesting. Sometimes the beauty is in the accident.

Who are your favourite photographers?

Diane Arbus inspires me, as do Sally Mann, Robert Frank, Irving Penn – a lot of old-school photographers. Nowadays, I love how Bruce Weber constructs a photograph and how he sets it all up. I think Mary Ellen Mark takes incredible portraits, and I love Sarah Moon's photography.

Do use elements of the photographers you love in your own photos?

I tear out so many pages from magazines. Looking at them once keeps a thought in my head. You always have your own input though, and that's the most important thing – some sort of consistency. Even if inconsistency is your consistency!



Life through a lens: Helena Christensen and two examples of her work (above)

Is there a particular type of photo you like to take?

Everything inspires me. I take tons of shots when I'm driving in a car, I love the way it looks moved and out of focus. I also love doing portraits of people. We all have two eyes, a nose and a mouth, but you put a camera in front of someone and it's a case of seeing how they react.

Do you notice a difference when you are photographing someone you know?

Sometimes you can be more experimental with people you don't know because there is no history between you. People you know can become really shy because they feel too vulnerable. It's funny because some people can act very naturally in real life but put a camera in front of them and they get withdrawn.

Do you talk to people when you photograph them?

No, hardly. I shoot very fast so there's not even time to talk – they're in and out!

What's it like having your photographs exhibited?

It's a very strange feeling because my photographs are such a personal hobby and then they're hanging on a wall to be judged by people. It doesn't make me that nervous because I know why I took them and how I felt at the time, and I know everyone will feel different. It's amazing when someone comes over and says that my photo really touched them. That makes you happy, but I am also aware that we all look at photos differently, so it's hard to define why a photo is a good photo. That's what's so great about photography – out of all the photos I shoot in a year there's maybe two shots that I'm really, really proud of. It's worth those two shots.

Interview by Dan Poole

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