THE DIGITAL WORLD

Working with digital SLRs not only requires a slightly different skill set, but it opens up a range of possibilities that simply didn't exist when working with film. Beyond having the convenience of digital, the RAW format also enables very subtle image tuning that can profoundly improve the final photo, writes **Ewen Bell**.

Many photographers simply couldn't shoot what they shoot today if not for the digital revolution. The flexibility, quality, capacity and performance of digital equipment far exceeds what could be easily achieved on conventional film. In fact, for travel photographers in particular, digital technology has pushed back the boundaries within which they work.

I learned to photograph on film, with the benefits of advanced SLR technology and automatic light metering. I was taught how to process black and white film in a can, how to make prints in the darkroom and to dodge and burn for effect. I am a child of the analogue era. When the SLR went digital, my ability to learn was increased an order of magnitude.

Ease of learning, greater productivity and ultimate flexibility for the modern photographer; this is what digital is all about.

One of my favourite advantages of digital over analogue is the ability to change film speed from one shot to the next. You can be photographing street scenes in bright sunshine one moment, then head inside to shoot a market the next – just dial the desired ISO setting to match your light conditions and keep shooting. The flexibility of digital ISO is matched only by the quality. Digital cameras actually perform very well at high ISO settings in good light; they don't degrade the image as much as you might expect, if at all. And even under low-light conditions the image quality is invariably far superior to the traditional high-speed film equivalent.

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DIGITAL "FILM"

Another advantage of digital imaging is the RAW format. Combined with inexpensive "RAW Workflow" software, you gain the ability to enhance the image quality significantly, manipulate the exposure of an image with stunning results, and deliver consistent colour balancing for the most demanding of publications.

Even basic controls over exposure compensation can give you subtle improvements when trying to get correct exposures for sunsets, backlit scenes, or night shooting. You can also fine-tune the colours of a sunset to deliver an image that truly represents your recollection of the moment, or add a little extra punch to the image. These optimisations may be minor but they elevate your images to access another level of quality.

Using a RAW file format is an investment of your time towards a better image. It usually demands more work on your part, more technology, and changes the workflow of your photography. It's not for everyone, and it won't make a bad photo into a good one. But it does make a good photo even better and gives you the most flexible options for creative expression in post-processing.

METADATA

A commonly overlooked benefit of digital photography is the potential for indexing metadata with your photos. Even if you don't make any effort yourself in this regard, the camera is already storing date and exposure details in every file it captures. You can go back through old images and see what the camera settings were when you took them, or add useful geographical and naming data at a later date.

It takes very little effort to edit the file names of your photos to include names of locations, identities of people, or any other relevant detail that may assist in searching for a photo at a later date. This isn't true "metadata" but it's still useful if you don't intend to manage the categories and keywords for each photo. True metadata is stored in structural fields saved inside each image, be it RAW or JPEG, and is valuable for commercial applications.

DIGITAL LIFE

The most unusual complaint I've heard about the digital camera is that the images are too sharp; they just don't look the same as regular film. There's some truth to that where point-and-shoot cameras are concerned. The sensors for little compact units are so small that you get a dramatic effect on the depth of field for any given focal length. This isn't the case for DSLRs; they're no different to a conventional 35mm SLR camera and present an image with no more depth of field than the lens aperture will provide.

Professional DSLR equipment does, however, yield stunningly clear images within the working focal range, with clarity of definition not possible on 35mm film. But that fact alone does not make images look unnatural, quite the opposite. Muddy colours and mismatched colour balance are removed from the working environment and replaced with exceptionally natural photographs.

Most opponents to digital technologies come from a lack of understanding or reluctance to change. This is reasonable when you consider the investment in equipment and training that many photographers carry. In a field of technology that has continued to develop so rapidly in the last decade, it's difficult for successful film photographers to feel confident about changing the way they work. Digital is not for everyone.

DIGITAL BACKUPS

The biggest complaint about digital is the perceived lifespan of your images. One friend of mine repeatedly tells people that digital photos delete themselves after two years. Some people believe him, too. He is, in fact, referring to the archive life of CD-ROMs, and he assumes that people only store their images to CD-ROM. The laminate of a DVD or CD disc does have a finite time to live, but it should exceed two years or even ten years given reasonable storage temperatures. Even so, ten years is not the same as "forever".

The most practical means of safeguarding your images is to backup your computer with an external hard drive. If your computer stores the master copy, and the external drive is routinely synchronised, then you've negated the potential for data loss should either of those drives go belly-up. Upgrading your backup disk every time you upgrade your computer ensures your collection is refreshed to a new device on a regular basis.

I wonder how many of us have old print photos stored around the house (without a backup of any sort) that are losing their colours and fading to yellow. I also suspect few of us could easily find the original negatives for any given photo to reprint.

Digital technology is fallible, but increasingly accessible and infinitely more effective.

COOL TIP

Shooting in RAW gives you the ability to significantly enhance image quality, manipulate exposure for stunning results, and deliver consistent colour balancing.

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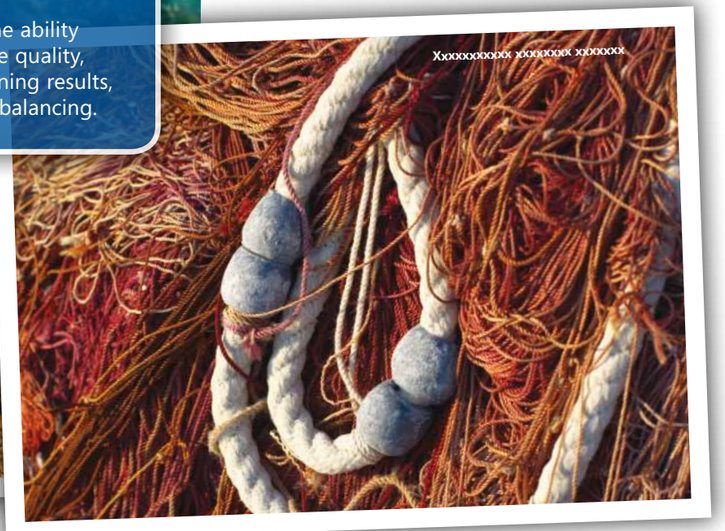

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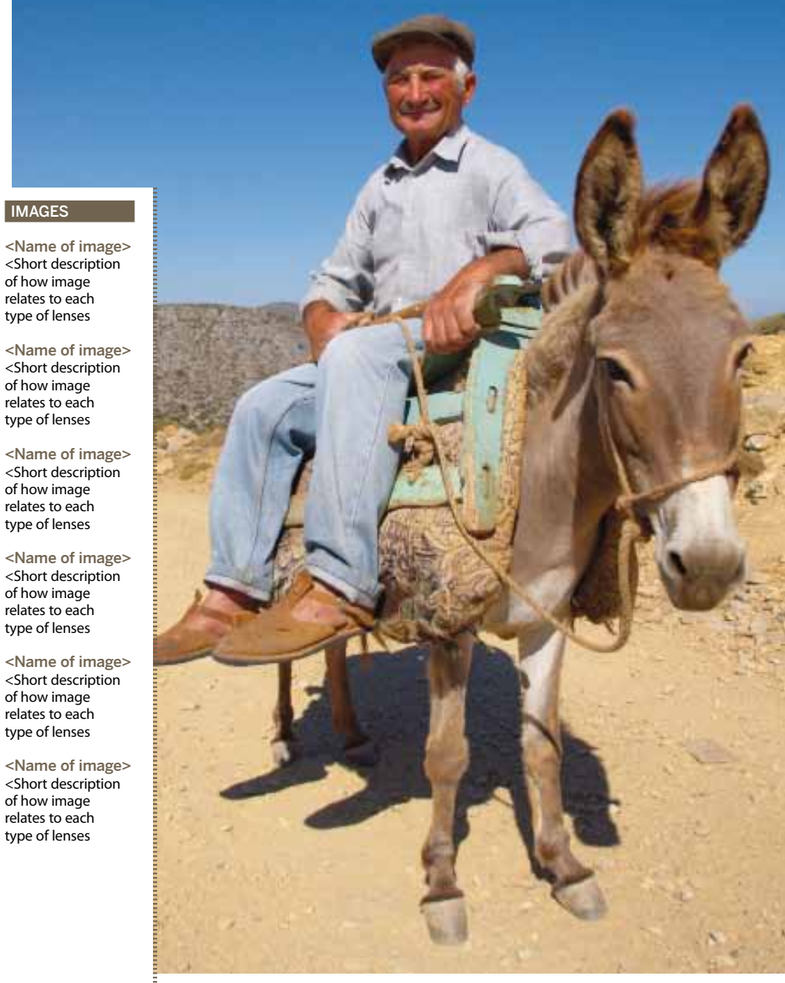

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