

■ Bayon Temple
View across the water,
Angkor, Cambodia

“We have exceptional dynamic range when viewing the world, but the camera is not quite so talented”

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT

A flexible photographer is one who can get the most from their work by allowing the light to tell them where the shot is, rather than trying to dictate where the light should be. The trick lies in-training your eye... Words and pictures by Ewen Bell



■ Low tide
Street scene, local Angkor village

» IMAGES

BAYON TEMPLE

» Shot with Canon 5DMkII; 1/250sec; f/14; 800 ISO; focal length 17mm

LOW TIDE

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/160sec; f/2.0; 1600 ISO; focal length 24mm

SMILING DETAIL

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/1328sec; f/2.0; 200 ISO; focal length 24mm

The nature of most field photography makes it almost impossible to control the light on offer, but learning to recognise the subtle differences in available light can guide your inspiration in new directions. It may seem obvious to suggest that you need to think about where your light is coming from, and what qualities it has to offer; hazy, sharp, flat, warm, angular, dappled, rich or pallid. In practice, it's easily overlooked and taken for granted.

Many forms of photography – landscape and travel and particular – have the added restriction of forcing you to shoot with whatever light presents itself. However, landscape photographers can often dedicate days or weeks to a single location in order to get the most desirable light for their shot, while commercial

studio photographers enjoy the ability to control every aspect of lighting their subjects. Neither of these are possible when you're on the road: you simply have to work with what you've got.

This can lead to some very creative possibilities, but does demand a level of awareness beyond your average holiday snaps. The corollary to working with available light is learning to see what the camera sees.

Dynamic range

The human eye is a master at recomposing a scene to compensate for the hot spots, black holes, colour washouts and steep gradients. In essence, we have exceptional dynamic range when using our eyes to view the world, but the camera is not quite so talented. Digital SLRs are »



■ Smiling detail
Carvings record details of daily life

“The exposures required for the shady side of the street versus the sunny side can vary dramatically”



■ Village scene
Let the varying light strengths guide your composition

particularly weak in their dynamic range compared to conventional film, losing detail quickly between bright and dark sections of an exposure. Sharpness, definition and saturation in landscape colours that our eyes observe on overcast days are most often rendered flat and dull in a photo.

Cameras even struggle to look straight at the light, as most lenses will flare and throw interference across the frame when you point them into the sun.

See the light

Once you begin to tune into the way your camera sees light, you'll be better able to let the light guide your composition.

Still life photography requires soft lighting to preserve the detail of the subjects, so cloudy days are better for composing images of market produce or souvenirs on a stall, for example. When you walk through a typical farmers' market on a sunny day, you notice that some sections are covered over with shade while others are not, so the shaded areas not only have a gentle light to work with, but the shade is edged with bright light that throws an angled cast across the produce.

PRO TIP

MASTER METERING

Learning to use centre-weighted or partial light metering will give you greater control over your camera for complex lighting situations.



■ Extreme contrasts
You must be able to meter for any lighting situations

PRO TIP

GET A LITTLE FLASHY

In cases where the light is dull, add a little spark to the scene with minimal use of your camera's built-in flash. Don't seek to flashlight the whole scene, just give a little fill-in at 1/4 exposure.

Windows and doors

A simple window or doorway has its own microclimate of light. Outside can be blazing bright with the midday sun but step a few feet inside the shade and the doorway acts like a softbox, casting a brilliant but even pool of light into the room. This light is generous for portraits of people, and it's not uncommon to find people glancing through windows and doors anyway. The combination is ready-made for roaming photographers.

Blue skies without filters

Blue skies are a product of the light as well – and it's possible to get rich, deep blues without resorting to the use of filters. Simply wait for the right light to present itself. You need strong sunshine and clear skies: in the very early morning, the sun is still cutting through the earth's atmosphere, so the actual amount of light hitting your landscape is far less than at mid-morning. Once you have strong sunlight you can expose for your landscape composition, and the sky will be comparatively underexposed. It is this difference in exposure between the subject and the sky that generates the rich blue colours.

Shooting head on

Shooting into the light can also be rewarding. At day's end, the sun often takes on a few additional colours, depending on the level of pollution and haze across the horizon. In general, we get the richest colours by shooting across the sun, but as you shoot towards the source of light itself, your lens is washed out by incidental light. Your frame becomes drenched in simplified hues, giving you a monotone palette that balances elements of the composition.

Strength of light

Awareness of the strength of light is important when you're in full control of the camera. The exposures required for the shady side of the street versus »



■ Soft light for detail
Low-contrast situations provide greater depth of fine detail

» IMAGES

VILLAGE SCENE

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/100sec; f/2.0; 1600 ISO; focal length 24mm

EXTREME CONTRASTS

» Shot with Canon 5DMkII; 1/100sec; f/2.8; 6400 ISO; focal length 24mm

SOFT LIGHT FOR DETAIL

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/3200sec; f/2.8; 800 ISO; focal length 24mm

Ewen's Top Five Tips for better candid portraits

01 ON THE FACE OF IT

When it comes to people, truth is most often revealed by their facial expressions. Try to capture that moment of transition between expressions, the moment that reveals a person's character.

02 PROJECT COMFORT

The camera can be a barrier to your subject's comfort. Often you may need to take a few quick shots and get beyond the initial intrusion, with the intention that your latter shots will access more natural and representative expressions. Look for the tension in the face and shoulders and see if you can engage with the subject directly in order to lessen their anxiety.

03 SHARE THE SHOT

Showing people the photo on your DSLR can often create moments of excitement and laughter, after which you can quickly retake the scene and benefit from a bright smile or laughter-filled expression.

04 KEEP MOVING

Another technique to break the stiffness of a subject is to get them to adjust their positions between sitting and standing, to look over their shoulder at the camera, or have someone else start talking to them.

05 TAKE YOUR TIME

The more time you spend with your subject before you shoot, the more chance you have of getting a meaningful and representative image.

“You can’t expect the camera to guess what your creative intentions are in complex light”

the sunny side of the street can vary dramatically. Although your camera uses automatic light metering to balance the shutter and aperture settings, giving you the correct exposure, a working knowledge of how to adjust and make use of the ISO setting puts you in control of the available light.

Why set ISO and exposures manually?

You can’t expect the camera to guess what your creative intentions are when presented with complex arrangements of light. You have to be instructive. Who’s taking the photo, anyway: you, or the camera? Even letting the camera handle the automatic light metering can blind you to the subtle variations of light that surround us at all times. Awareness of what the light is doing is essential for your photography.

When the light is very low, you may need a higher ISO setting to avoid the camera dropping to a very slow

shutter speed, which can cause your shot to be blurred due to hand-shake. If you use shutter priority to avoid blurry photos, the camera will drop to the lowest f-stop and effectively underexpose the entire frame anyway. When the light is too strong, you need a low ISO setting to avoid overexposing or shooting at very high f-stops where the sharpness of your image is compromised by diffraction.

As you change from shade to sunshine, you need to keep changing your ISO setting. As a starting point, you can pick out a high and a low ISO setting, and over time your confidence to use ISO in more subtle ways will develop. A good place to start for beginners is to use ISO 200 for strong light, and ISO 1600 for shade. Most digital SLRs have no loss of image quality at the high ISO settings, provided you have sufficient light to take the shot.



■ The Bayon faces
A high sun creates pockets of light and shade on these iconic carvings

PRO TIP

HEAD ON

In general, we get the richest colours by shooting *across* the sun. As you shoot towards the source of light itself, your lens is washed out by incidental light.

PRO TIP

QUICK DRAW

Pick out a high and low ISO setting as your safety go-to points. A good place to start for beginners is to use ISO 200 for strong light, and ISO 1600 for shade.



■ Steady hand required
Dramatic blur requires fast-moving subjects

Light metering

You also need to be mindful of the quality of light when selecting the camera’s options for metering exposures. If the composition has many dark and bright elements, each section of the frame may require a different setting to expose properly.

In those instances, you can either instruct the camera how to expose the shot, or hope it just gets it right. “Matrix” or “Evaluative” metering is the equivalent of “hope for the best”, and more often than not will give a good result until you enter a more complex situation.

Having your camera set to measure the light from a centre-weighted point in the middle of the frame (sometimes called “partial metering”) gives you that control. You select the part of your scene you want to be correctly exposed through the lens, hit the exposure lock function on the camera, then recompose the final frame before committing the shutter. If you’re in control of your camera, you will rarely need any other metering mode than centre-weighted. »

» IMAGES

THE BAYON FACES

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/250sec; f/11; 1600 ISO; focal length 50mm

STEADY HAND REQUIRED

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/40sec; f/11; 50 ISO; focal length 23mm

REFLECTED LIGHT

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/250sec; f/2.0; 100 ISO; focal length 50mm



■ Reflected light
Low-light situations can be boosted by making the most of reflective surfaces

“Once you’re determining your ISO settings, you’re free to be fully guided by the light itself”



■ **Reaching for the light**
Letting your surrounds block and let through light by turns makes for clever compositions

Once you’re determining your camera’s ISO settings and light-metering mode, you’re now free to be fully guided by the light itself.

It’s a constant challenge to observe the light around you, to look for the twists and turns the light makes as it enters a cityscape, the landscape or a window.

Often you’ll encounter a photographic subject that appeals to your soul but the light isn’t right to get the shot you want. That’s the moment to pause and ask yourself: “Where is the light? Is there another shot here that I’ve overlooked?”

» IMAGES

» **REACHING FOR THE LIGHT**

» Shot with Canon 5DMkII; 1/125sec; f/11; 100 ISO; focal length 24mm

» **LONG SHADOWS**

» Shot with Canon 5DMkII; 1/8000sec; f/2.5; 200 ISO; focal length 50mm

» **GRINNING BOYS**

» Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 1/120sec; f/2.0; 1600 ISO; focal length 24mm



■ **Long shadows**
Once you learn to see light rather than objects, your style will develop in leaps and bounds

» **PRO TIP**

» **LOW CONTRAST**

On bright, sunny days, it can be an effective idea to drop your contrast a little to preserve detail at the edges of the dynamic range – it will make your images a little softer and gentler.

» **How do you get the shot when the light’s not where i need it?**

The answer is simple: you don’t. In the studio you make the light you need, because you’re making the shot you want. Landscape photographers are generous with their time in order to be patient for the light they need. Other photographers have to be more forgiving and less demanding. As a matter of philosophy, try choosing to let go of the expectation that you can get every single shot, regardless of what the light is telling you.

By allowing the light to guide your vision, you enter a very creative realm; a realm in which your photography can head in directions your minds could never have imagined.

For more of Ewen’s work, visit ewenbell.com



■ **Grinning boys**
Perfect daylight conditions for some candid street portraiture

“Let go of the expectation that you can get every single shot, regardless of what the light is telling you”