

DETAILS

Camera: Canon 5DMkII
 Shutter Speed: 1/1600 sec
 Aperture: f/2 Focal Length: 24mm
 ISO Sensitivity: 100
 Exposure Compensation: 0 EV
 Metering Mode: Center Weighted Average

WIDE AND

WONDERFUL

The essence of portrait photography is your connection with the subject. The camera looks both ways, capturing light from the scene and ideas from your mind. In everything you photograph, the character of the photographer is always present. Portraits are as much about investing your own personality into the scene as throwing light on your subject.

If you're shooting portraits with a long telephoto lens, all you're doing is putting distance between you and the subject. The result is usually an impersonal perspective that lacks emotion. The closer you engage with people, the more revealing your images can be – and the key to getting closer is to shoot wider.

Getting closer

I'm often told by people that they love a 100mm or 85mm lens for shooting portraits. Canon and Nikon have offered a very fast 85mm as part of their range for a long time, and the extremely shallow depth of field offered on these lenses is seductive. But 85mm on a DSLR is not equivalent to 85mm on a Hasselblad. Medium format cameras have a wider field of view at 85mm, and even more so when compared to a partial frame DSLR. A better equivalent would be a standard 50mm lens.

Most brands offer affordable 50mm options with a very wide aperture and a compact design, perfect for shooting portraits with a full-frame DSLR. On a Nikon D7000 or Canon 5D, the 50mm f/1.4 lens looks harmless yet takes lovely images when shooting around f/2. You can quickly grab focus on the eyes of your subject and let the rest of the world around them fade into a velvety blur. It takes a little confidence to

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“A good wide-angle lens is the key to getting closer, shooting with patience and sharing your intimacy with the subject”



PRO TIP

ADD CONTEXT TO THE SUBJECT

Give a sense of place and purpose to your portraits by shooting wide and bringing the wider scene into the frame.



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Camera: Canon 5DMkII
 Shutter Speed: 1/640 sec
 Aperture: f/2 Focal Length: 24mm
 ISO Sensitivity: 200
 Exposure Compensation: 0 EV
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given me an appreciation for the wide-angle lens, and revealed the value of shooting portraits with a wider field of view. Putting a 24mm f/1.4 lens onto a full-frame camera lets you access a lovely shallow depth of field, but this time adding an immense amount of context to the scene.

Bringing that context into your portraits helps to identify your subject and their environment. There's much more to someone's life than merely their face. The combination of wide perspective with a shallow focus helps to bring the broader environment into frame without competing for attention. When viewing portraits of this type, the eye is drawn to what remains sharp within the image, but the mind still accumulates the additional information about the subject.

Just as people give meaning to places, places give character to people.

Getting softer

Beginners to DSLR photography are unlikely to go out and buy an expensive 24mm lens and a top-shelf full-frame camera, so experimenting with wide angle and shallow depth of field at the same time can be tricky. The next best >>

PRO TIP

SHOOT SHALLOW DEPTH OF FIELD

Not only can you enhance the attraction of human eyes by dropping out the focus behind your portrait, but you can get more creative with composition and worry less about the details hidden in the background.

stick with the shallow depth of field, because sometimes you'll get it right and sometimes you won't. When it works it's sensational.

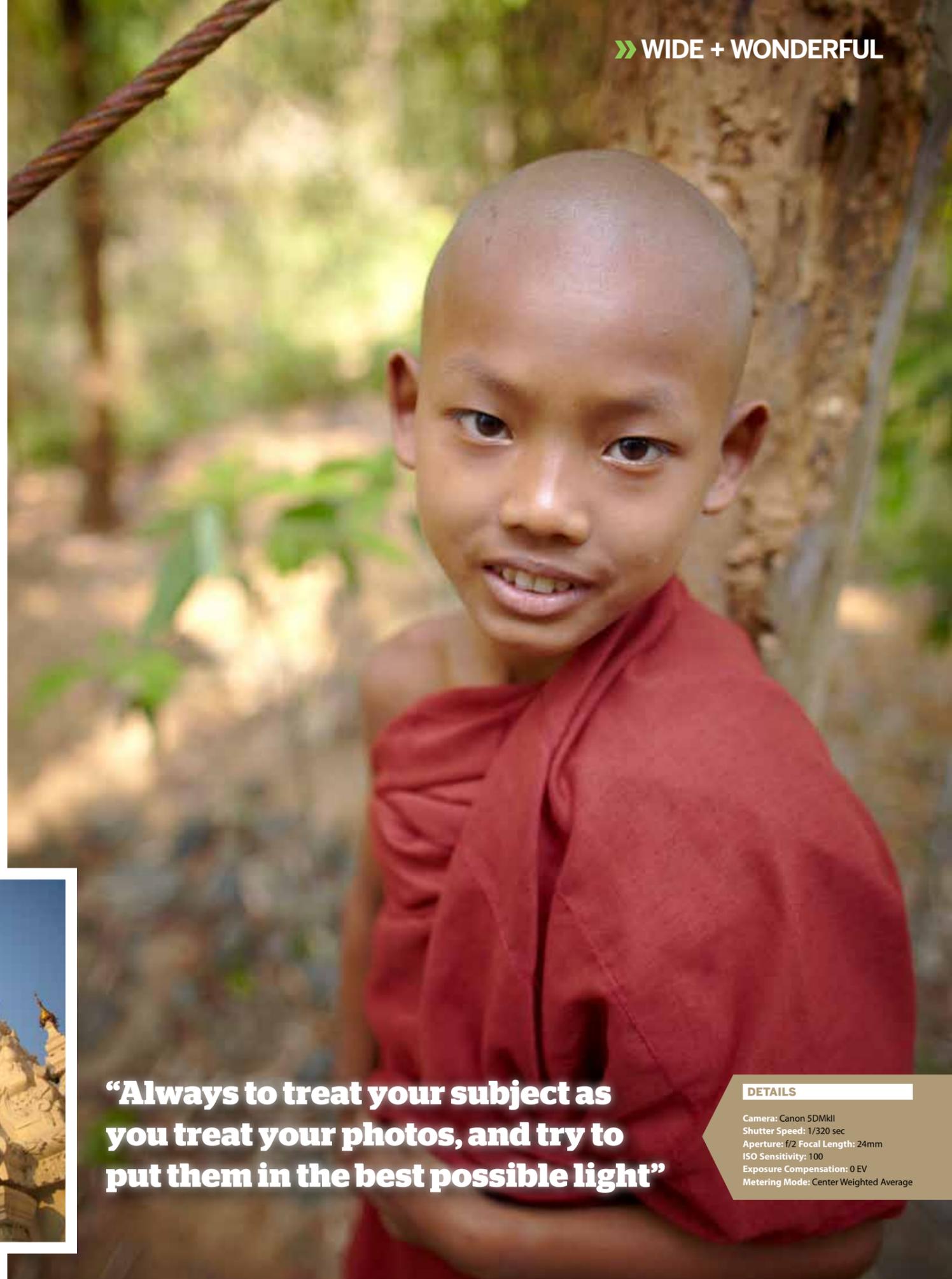
Most DSLR owners don't have a full-frame camera, however, because the APS sized sensors have taken over the market. To get a 50mm perspective, these cameras need a 35mm lens. Both Canon and Nikon make superb alternatives, such as the 28mm f/1.8, but Sigma has a cheaper option for budget-minded buyers. Their 30mm f/1.4 ships with mounts for either brand and performs extremely well. On the APS sized sensors your depth of field is effectively doubled, so you'll need to shoot below f/2 to get that same look.

Getting wider

But why stop at 50mm when you can shoot even wider? My time spent travelling in Asia and wandering through crowded markets has



Shot with Canon 5DMkII
 1/100 sec; f/13; 24mm
 focal length; ISO 100



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Camera: Canon 5DMkII
 Shutter Speed: 1/320 sec
 Aperture: f/2 Focal Length: 24mm
 ISO Sensitivity: 100
 Exposure Compensation: 0 EV
 Metering Mode: Center Weighted Average

“Always to treat your subject as you treat your photos, and try to put them in the best possible light”



Shot with Canon 5DMkII
1/500 sec; f/2; 24mm
focal length; ISO 200

thing is a seriously good ultra-wide zoom lens. The market is flooded with 10-24mm lens options, and the best options open out at f/3.5 when shooting wide. You won't get the dramatic bokeh effect in the background, rather a general softening instead, but you can get good shots in low-light conditions.

Soft light is essential to good portraits, so having a fast lens is very useful. Instead of cranking your ISO all the way to 6400 when the light is weak, you can keep the ISO a little lower where the dynamic range is better. When you shoot wide angle with a wide aperture, you can make the most of natural lighting and leave the flash gear at home. Soft light coming through a doorway, a window or just in the shade of a tree is now ample for your portrait work.

Without a flash gun firing in people's faces, you're free to access natural scenes, unhindered expressions and intimate moments.

Skin tones take a beating in direct sunlight, so working in the shade is a good way to be kind to your subjects. You also avoid squinty eyes and grumpy children. Shooting in softer light makes

a huge difference, but even then it's possible to overcook the exposure or underestimate the contrast in the scene. Shooting in RAW gives you a little extra margin for error, allowing room for toning down the harsh elements when you get the images onto your desktop.

Getting comfortable

Don't let yourself get caught up with the technical issues of photography when embracing portraits. Once you know enough to pick a basic setup for your shoot, the most important factor is your familiarity with the subject. If you can make them comfortable, then they will be revealed in their most natural light. An awkward pose, uncomfortable chair or being forced to look at the camera can impede the shot. Whatever makes them happy will make the portrait shoot go better.

By shooting with a wide lens you not only maintain your closeness to the subject, but you get plenty of headroom in your frames to drag in other elements. Lighting, backgrounds, information and inspiration can all be layered into the »



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Camera: Canon 1DMkIV
Shutter Speed: 1/1600 sec
Aperture: f/2 Focal Length: 50mm
ISO Sensitivity: 400
Exposure Compensation: 0 EV
Metering Mode: Multi Segment



PRO TIP

FLASH IS NOT REQUIRED

A low-power fill flash can be used to add catch-light to the eyes, but this also occurs naturally when you shoot indoors and have a bright doorway or window throwing gentle but angled light into the room.



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shot as desired. Your subject needn't be 80% of the frame, and the more modestly they rest within your composition, the more room you have to build composition. Tight headshots leave little or no wiggle room to get the subject out of dead centre.

Getting creative

Style is a result of variation, and with a wide angle you can be creative with your own variation. Shooting wide forces you to be deeply present within the scene you're shooting, and that can be challenging for some photographers. But expressing something of yourself with the camera is essential to creating your own style.

You may prefer to be a fly on the wall or eavesdrop from a distance, but you have to ask yourself: will that give you the most intimate images? At first the mere presence of a camera can change a scene that's unfolding before you. That doesn't mean you can't shoot candid images with a big wide lens up close, but it takes a little patience.

Getting familiar

I make a habit of photographing strangers on my travels, sometimes

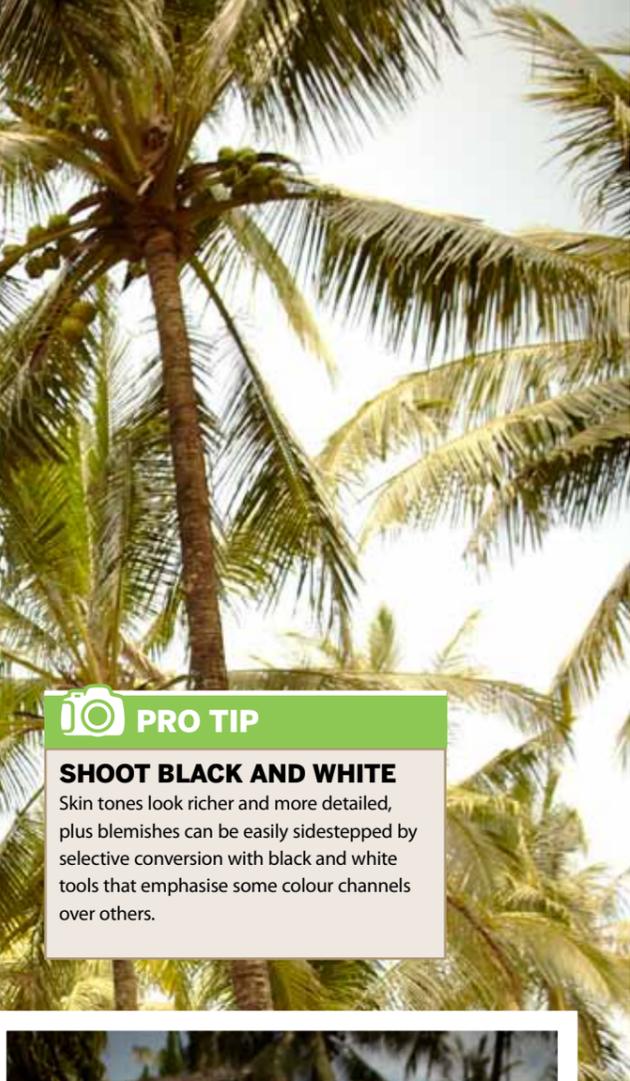
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with direct recognition of the camera and sometimes with total indifference. I take my time to appreciate a new location, share a few of the initial shots with my subjects and then let them go about their business. This patient approach lets me fade away into the scene itself, and yet I can shoot freely having already received permission to take photos. My preference for portraits is always to reveal people engaged in their lives, rather than isolated from their usual place in the world and paused for the camera.

A good wide-angle lens is the key ingredient to getting closer, shooting with patience and sharing your intimacy with the subject.

And always to treat your subject as you treat your photos, and try to put them in the best possible light.



PRO TIP

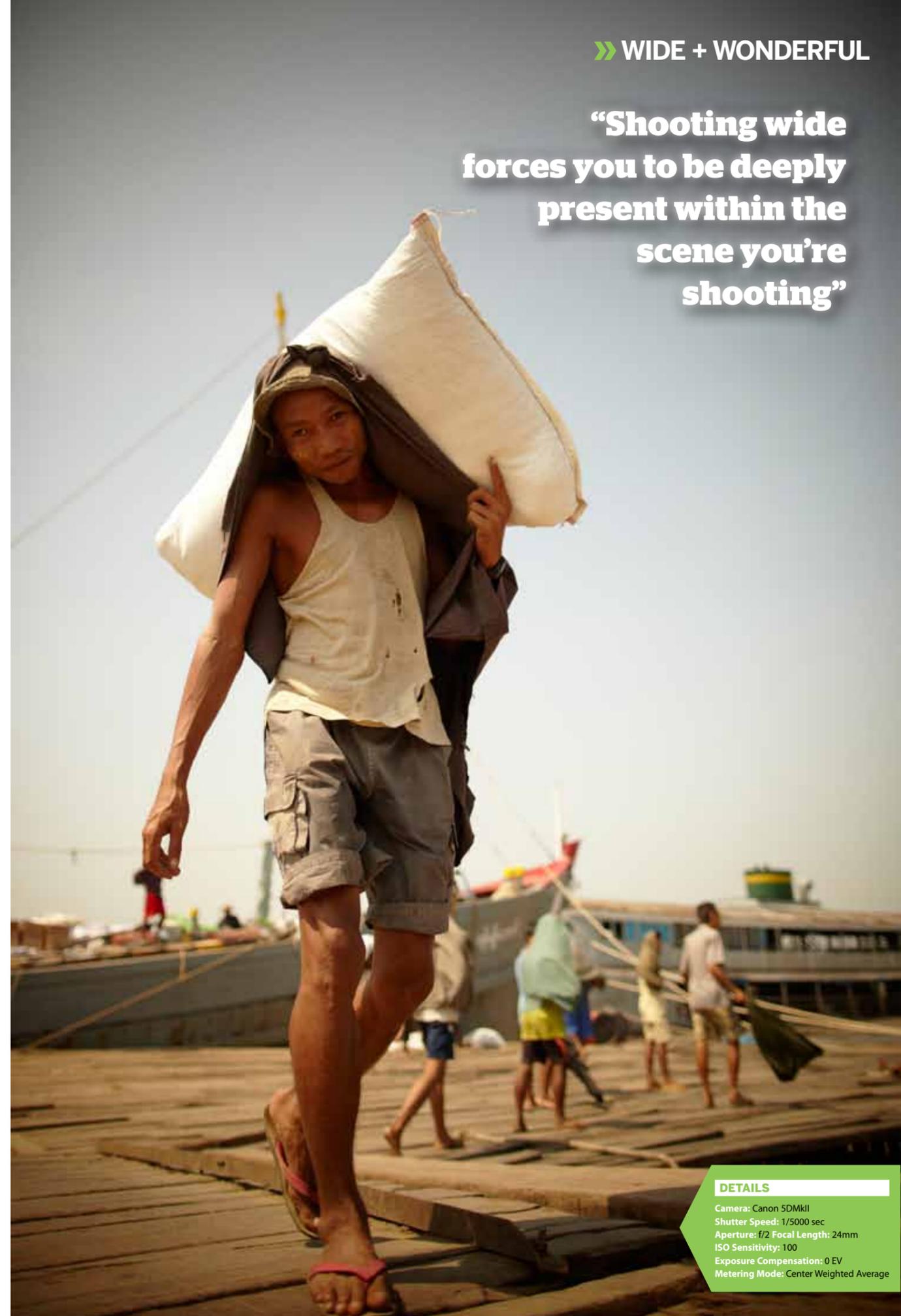
SHOOT BLACK AND WHITE

Skin tones look richer and more detailed, plus blemishes can be easily sidestepped by selective conversion with black and white tools that emphasise some colour channels over others.



To see more of Ewen's work, check out ewenbell.com and photographyfortravellers.com

“Shooting wide forces you to be deeply present within the scene you're shooting”



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