

HOW TO

Shoot B+W landscapes



■ The Bayon, Angkor
Shot with Canon 1DMkIV;
1/250sec; f/13; ISO 400

Landscape photography isn't just about super-saturated colours and the fading light of dusk. B&W offers unique qualities to photographers who want to explore more subtle visions of nature. Words and images by **Ewen Bell**

Artistic values

The general trend for landscape photography is to push for bold and bright colour tones, those rich but real hues that saturate film at the beginning and end of the day. So why shoot B&W instead of colour? There's more to the beauty of monochrome photography than just a nostalgic deference to the great masters – there really is intrinsic value to working in the medium.

Nature doesn't always yield the ideal light and colour to fulfil your goals for contemporary landscape styles. Even on a good day the hours of perfect light are few, and your photographic expression can be reduced to an extended form of weather watching. Waiting for the right sunset can take days or even weeks, depending on your dedication and desires. B&W photography lets you explore a much greater variety of nature's light, and extract a wider range of emotions from those ever-changing landscapes.

For landscape photography, the B&W option can open the doors to creative opportunities that

simply won't play nicely in full colour. Landscapes in B&W rely more on your own character and expression, and less on the colour of the sky. The realm of B&W brings your process of composition down to light and dark, as you play with the range of contrast.

Creative devices

Interesting light is the key to interesting photographs, be they colour or monochrome. Applying filters to a scene gives you the power to manipulate light as it enters the camera, and with digital B&W you can do this at the desktop instead. We'll talk more about specific tools for converting images from RGB to monochrome, but entering the realm of selective colour conversion can make B&W a far more creative process.

An otherwise pallid scene with muted colours and flat contrast can gain a bit of character when you start tinkering with the colour channels during conversion to monochrome. Blue skies can become pure black, green foliage can brighten and shine, or the those earthy red elements can be darkened to add definition to the landscape. You can set the mood to suit your own.

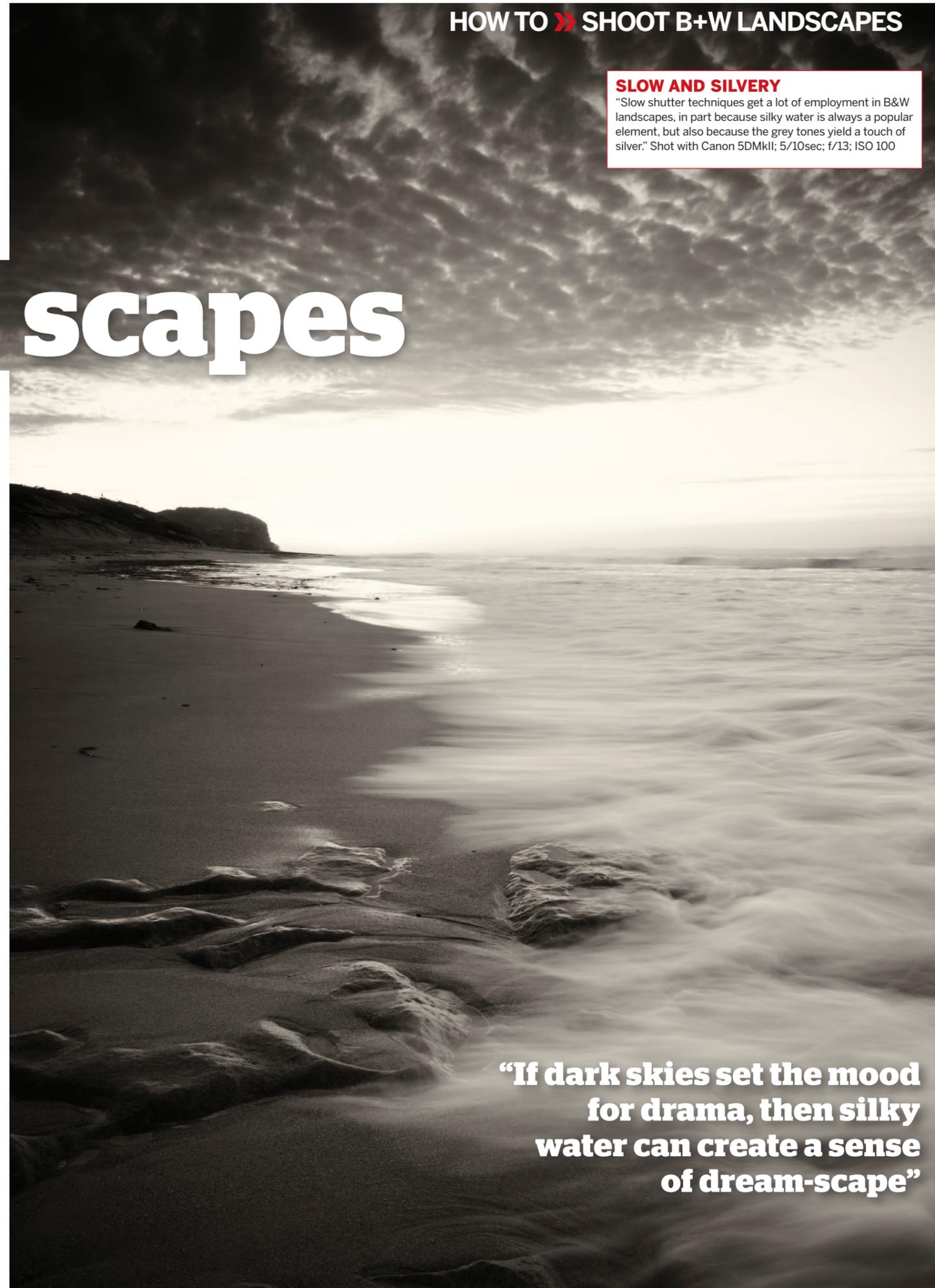
The ultimate filter is not merely one to exclude colour but to exclude visible light entirely, and just focus on the dark light of infrared. Have a look at Annette Blattman's feature on page 112 for some inspiration. Infrared reveals light that our eyes cannot see, allowing the image to highlight aspects that are normally swamped by the visible spectrum. As Annette reveals, you can work with the limited colour palette of Infrared, or you can reduce the image to monochrome.

Dedicated Infrared artists shoot either with IR film (if they can still find it) or a modified DSLR. The digital sensor is pulled apart to remove the standard IR blocking filters and replace them with new filters that restrict visible light instead. It's a rather permanent change, or you can tinker »

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Visit the websites below for these dedicated image processing tools that not only make the most of your RAW files, but provide selective conversion when turning an RGB image into B&W:

- Silver Efex Pro 2 (Plugin for Photoshop/Lightroom/Aperture) niksoftware.com
- DxO FilmPack 3 (Plugin for DxO Optics Pro) dxo.com
- Adobe Lightroom 4 adobe.com
- Capture One 6 phaseone.com

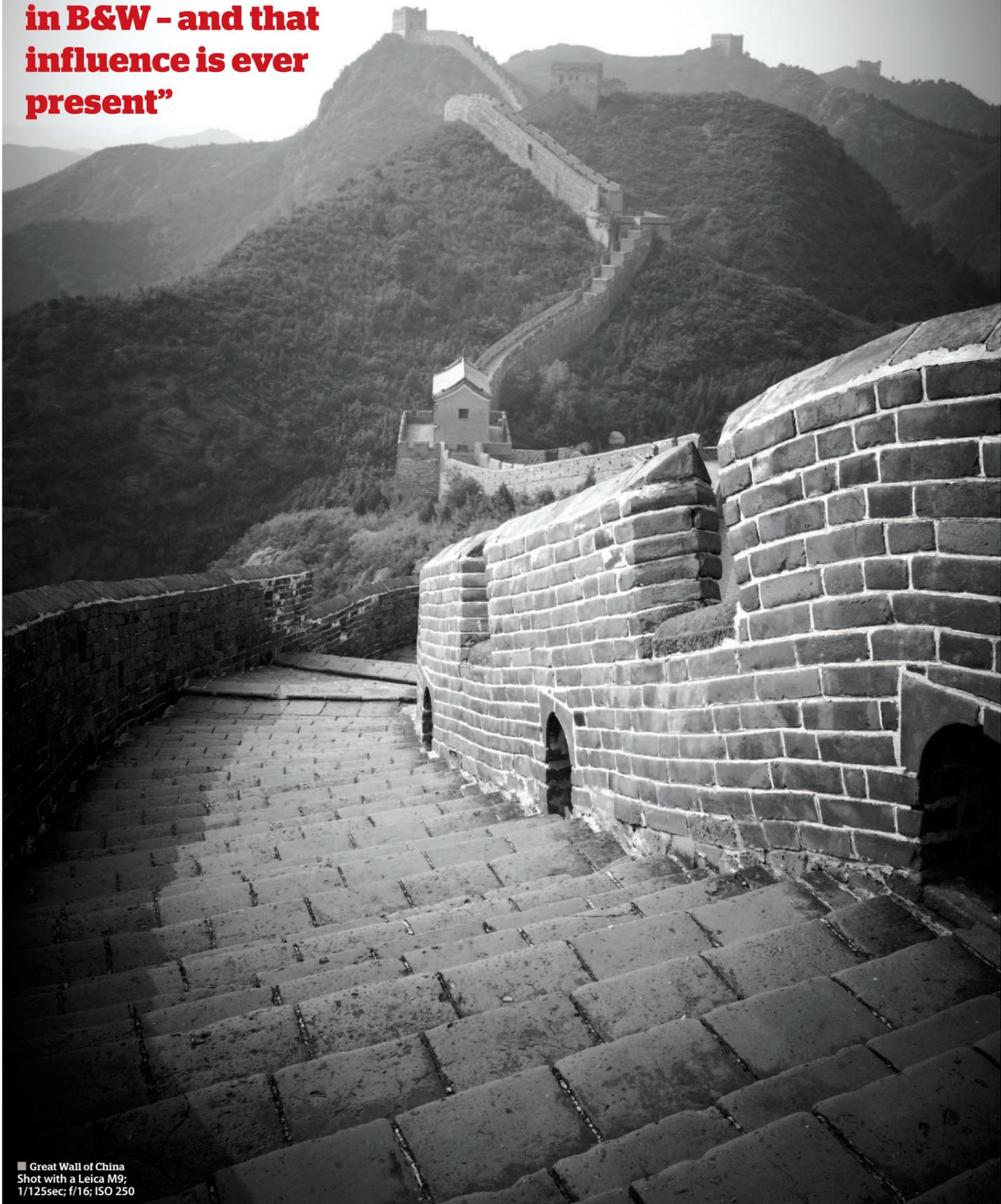


SLOW AND SILVERY

"Slow shutter techniques get a lot of employment in B&W landscapes, in part because silky water is always a popular element, but also because the grey tones yield a touch of silver." Shot with Canon 5DMkII; 5/10sec; f/13; ISO 100

"If dark skies set the mood for drama, then silky water can create a sense of dream-scape"

“The great masters made their mark in B&W - and that influence is ever present”



■ Great Wall of China
Shot with a Leica M9;
1/125sec; f/16; ISO 250

with the art form with the help of an R72 IR lens filter. This exploits the narrow amount of IR light that penetrates the camera sensor while blocking the visible spectrum. The result is very slow exposures and even slower tripod setup because you can't compose your scenes while the R72 filter is on.

Slow shutter techniques get a lot of employment in B&W landscapes, in part because silky water is always popular, but also because the grey tones yield a touch of silver. If dark skies set the mood for drama, then silky water can create a sense of dream-landscape. It's something real, yet we can't see it with the naked eye. To get the maximum effect, look for breaking water like an ocean beach or tumbling river, where the foamy traces of water turn pale and bright and emerge from a heavy sky or dark forest.

Moving water creates contrast by stealth.

After the shutter

The silk and silver effect of slow shutters and oceans gets a major boost in the final print when using metallic papers. Kodak Endura Professional is available at most professional print labs around the country and imparts a true silver lining to your image. You lose a little contrast with this paper but gain a peppery metallic depth that goes beyond anything you'll see on your desktop computer. Light differentially bounces back from deep inside the grey tones, not in a 3D effect but with a vibrant lustre that goes beyond what we expect from monochrome.

Inkjet on Canvas is another good fit for B&W landscapes, especially images processed to look like film. Evoking a film-like character can get a little clichéd, unless you do it really well. A little vignetting of the RAW file, add some muddy tones to the B&W conversion and even shoot with a shallow depth-of-field are good elements to build a look reminiscent of Medium



■ Taj Mahal by Martin Reeves
See more on page 24

INFRARED LANDSCAPES

“Infrared reveals light that our eyes cannot see, allowing the image to highlight aspects that are normally swamped by the visible spectrum.”

ONLINE INSPIRATION

Looking for a little more inspiration to work the magic of B&W into a landscape format? Check out the websites for these landscape artists...

- David Burdeny / davidburdeny.com
- Brian Kosoff / kosoff.com
- Chip Forelli / chipforelli.com
- Martin Reeves / martinreeves.com
- Matt Lauder / mattlauder.com.au

Format film. The recipe is even better if you like to crop square.

If you want to push the boundaries a little further than simply replicating the glory days of Ansel Adams, you can delve into world of high keys or low keys. Instead of exposing for a mid-tone range, you gear the exposure and processing to a restricted key. A high-key exposure is bright and flooded with light, achieved by over-exposing the image and then using your RAW image processing tools to pull back some of the lost detail. Histograms won't help you here; you're entering a world where normal is no longer desired.

Some landscape environments lend themselves to being pushed out of the middle and into a particular key. Long shadows in the mountains gain heightened drama in the low keys, with clear, broad skies reduced to black and the surrounding hills partially obscured by the lack of exposure. There's mystery in the scene by

what you cannot see. High keys are often useful for infrared monochrome, enhancing the ethereal feel of an exposure where visible light is held back.

The relationship between your processing intentions and your exposure choice is critical. Ansel Adams mastered the Zone System for B&W landscapes, shooting negatives a little over-exposed so he could access the maximum detail from dark areas and pull back the highlights once he got into the darkroom. In digital terms, the equivalent would be “exposing to the right”. You grab more data than you need and decide what to do with it later.

That's a good rule if you like to work in the high keys, to work with bright images. Not so useful if your preference is for deep and rich blacks down in the low keys.

Processing essentials

Converting RGB images to B&W is a selective process because you're throwing away two-thirds of your data. Some of the information discarded during conversion can be used to improve the quality of image. This is where the latest RAW processing software packages, featuring dedicated tools for managing the conversion, can give you a little extra quality – plus a few creative options.

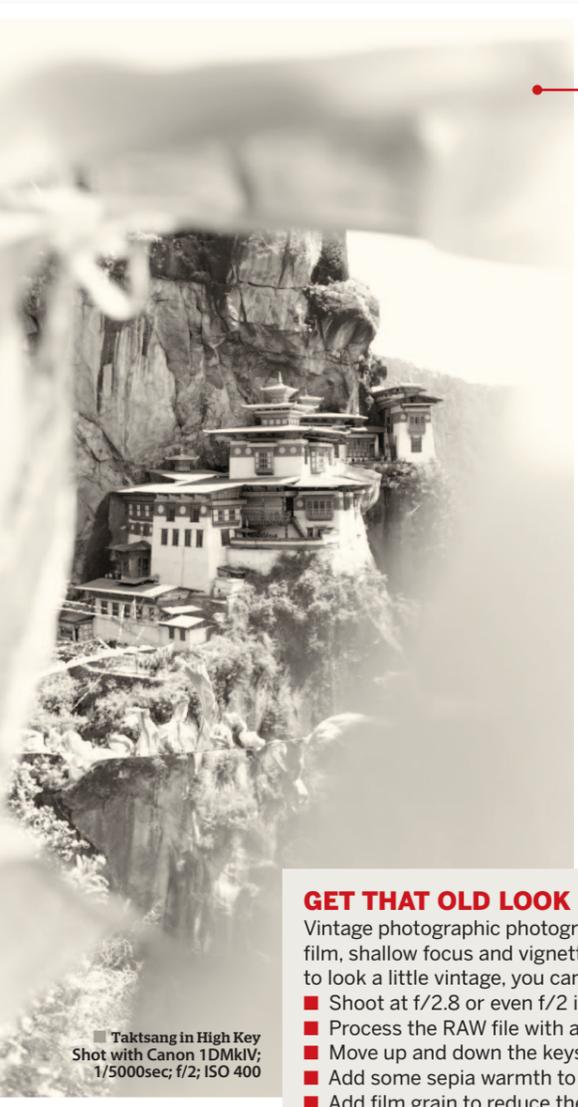
We've listed our top four software options for this job on page 92, and they essentially work the same. You get a tool for adjusting which colour hues carry more or less weight in the mono conversion, a tool for adding split tones to tint »

LOW KEY LANDSCAPES

“Long shadows in the mountains gain heightened drama in the low keys, with clear, broad skies reduced to black and the surrounding hills partially obscured by the lack of exposure.”



■ Annapurnas in low key
Shot with Canon 1DMkIV;
1/320sec; f/13; ISO 200



HIGH KEY HIGHLIGHTS

"A high-key exposure is bright and flooded with light, achieved by over-exposing the image and then using your RAW image processing tools to pull back some of the lost detail."

the image with a little tone, and a handful of presets that encode good starting points.

You can effectively mimic the use of colour filters, even after the shot has been captured. For landscape work, the ability to minimise blue/green tones (using a Red Filter preset) is a good one to play with. Foliage and water turn dark while earthy tones are brighter than normal. A green or yellow filter will give brighter exposures to foliage.

Split Tones are useful for adding blue or gold tints to the conversion, thereby enhancing the mood of the image to a cool or warm style. Split Tones also let you skew the tint for highlights into a different direction to shadows. You're delving into creative territory here, and too much colour can detract from the charm of a B&W image.

Film grain applied on the desktop can also enhance the look of your B&W, depending on subject matter. Grain works best with images that look like they might have been photographed in the days before

digital. If you're shooting minimalist scenes of cityscapes, grain may simply look wrong, but ancient temples in the forests of Cambodia fit nicely with a little faux noise.

Genes for the scene

B&W photography will always be lovely to our aesthetics. It's in our genes. The human eye has two kinds of receptors for light: one that reads colour information; one that just sees light and dark. Our brain recombines these two layers of information to build a mental image rich in colour, but the detail and accuracy comes from the B&W receptors.

This goes a long way to explaining why we humans see the world through rose-coloured glasses, even though our cameras do not.

There's also a cultural reason we love B&W. The art of photography made its most dramatic evolutionary steps through an era of silver exposures. The great masters made their mark in B&W – and that influence is ever present.

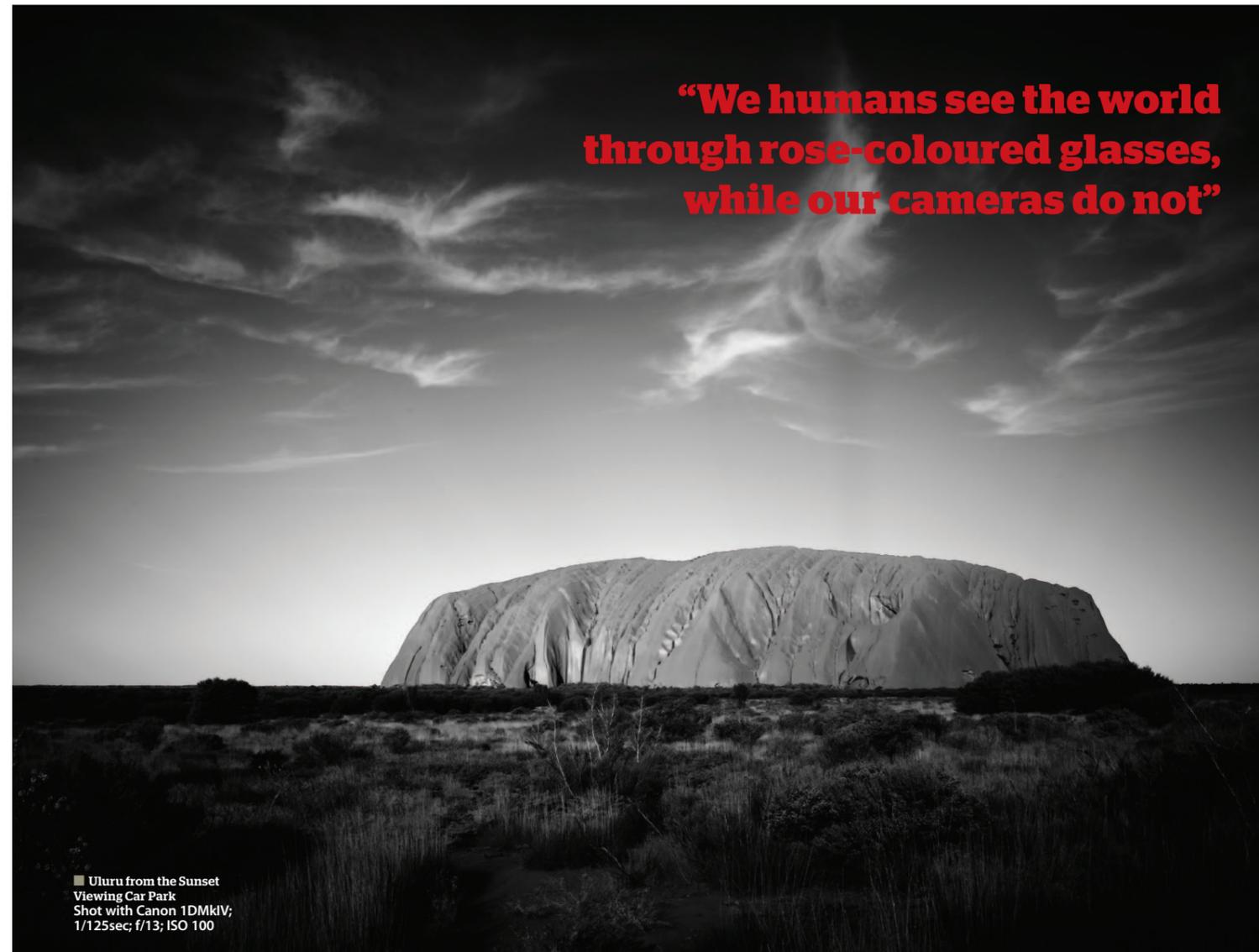
Artistically speaking, B&W offers a great advantage. Images that would otherwise conflict with colour gradings find harmony in the world of monochrome. An exhibition in mono can bring together images that wouldn't otherwise balance each other. Finally, a lot of images that fail to impress in colour come up a treat when processed to monochrome – and are given a little treatment under the tolerances of artistic license.

GET THAT OLD LOOK

Vintage photographic photography laboured under the constraints of slow film, shallow focus and vignetting from the lens. If you want your images to look a little vintage, you can simply add in those same elements:

- Shoot at f/2.8 or even f/2 if you have a fast lens;
- Process the RAW file with added vignetting instead of correction;
- Move up and down the keys for bright whites or intense blacks;
- Add some sepia warmth to yield monochrome with a hint of tone;
- Add film grain to reduce the tell-tale sharpness of digital imaging.

■ Taktasang in High Key
Shot with Canon 1DMkIV;
1/5000sec; f/2; ISO 400



"We humans see the world through rose-coloured glasses, while our cameras do not"

■ Uluru from the Sunset
Viewing Car Park
Shot with Canon 1DMkIV;
1/125sec; f/13; ISO 100



■ Fine art in landscape form
From B&W master Brian Kosoff
(left to right): Lone Pine Peak;
Lake Wanaka; and Lake Superior

**A FEW WORDS FROM...
BRIAN KOSOFF**

I've often been asked, "Why shoot landscapes in B&W instead of colour?" For me the answer is simple: B&W is photography stripped down to its basic elements. Light, tone and composition. I feel that colour can be overpowering, especially since the introduction of super-saturated colour films, plus the ease and overuse of Photoshop and other image editing tools to crank the colour saturation up to unnatural or even vulgar levels.

Colour can be a distraction in an image, one that overwhelms subtlety. I prefer a bit more of a slow exploration of an image rather than the slap in the face that colour can have. It's

"It's photography stripped down to its basic elements"



more of a challenge to use B&W than colour; you really need to have content and interest in the image when you're not solely reliant on colour.

If you don't have interesting light, depth or form-defining tones, composition that makes the eye explore and content of real merit, then you don't have a photograph of lasting value.

