

LOFOTEN IN BLUE



A study in colours
In such an ethereal, mono-tonal realm, colourful fishermen's cabins leap to the fore



Processing landscape images is a critical step to building the intensity of a capture. The job isn't finished until you've tackled the RAW file, until you've dug deep and pulled the very best out of it. The treatment a capture receives in processing will make or break the image, writes **Ewen Bell**.

Creating a treatment for your landscapes is more than just picking a funky preset in Lightroom.

Ideally the treatment itself should be a reflection of the experience; it should carry a hint as to the true nature of the landscape you are shooting.

Lofoten, on the coast of northern Norway, is a unique place to visit in the depths of winter, with dramatic snow-dusted mountains that plunge into the water. The temperature of the ocean negates the Arctic conditions and moderates the extent of freezing. On a cloudy day the cold air and low light creates a deep blue tone that strips

colour from almost everything, with just the deep red tones of fishermen's cottages defying the tonal pallet.

The blend of blue hues and slow skies inspired me to build a treatment for these landscapes that plunges into the world of white-imbalance. Instead of resisting the unusual colour range my chosen treatment embraces it, enhances it and immerses in it. I dropped the colour temperature towards the 4400K mark and additionally dropped the colour saturation to a fraction of its normal level.

Without easing off saturation, the manipulation of colour temperature usually comes across as corrupted »

“The blend of blue hues and slow skies inspired me to build a treatment that plunges into the world of white-imbalance”



Reflections
The cold air and low light strips colour from almost everything

» IMAGES

A STUDY IN COLOURS

» (FAR LEFT, TOP) Shot with a Canon 5DMkII; EF50mm f/1.2L USM lens; 20sec; f/10; ISO 100

CRADLED BY MOUNTAINS

» (MAIN) Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM lens; 30sec; f/8; ISO 200

REFLECTIONS

» (FAR RIGHT) Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM lens; 30sec; f/4; ISO 1600



Filter fun

Achieving the look

"For the silky water seen in this collection, I used a ten-stop Neutral Density (ND) Filter, which helps convert even the most dull, flat, cloudy day into something moody and magical."

instead of calibrated. Subtle application of saturation is the key to flexibility when creating bold treatments. And our aim here is to be very bold instead of very normal. After all, why be normal when you can be interesting?

This set of images from Lofoten were gathered during a 5km walk that took around six hours to complete. Slowly slowly. Every few hundred metres, with tripod slung over my shoulder, a new vista would inspire my imagination and I'd spend a good 30 minutes shooting variations on the composition.

Drawing long clouds and silky water into the frame were the two main objectives. A very powerful Neutral Density (ND) Filter does the heavy lifting, converting a dull and flat cloudy day into a moody and magical capture. A ten-stop ND filter is gold, although in the fading light a four-stop would have been handy too. Given the chance to shoot exposures at 30 seconds you can get some lovely slow scenes, but if time permits then five- or ten-minute exposures are even better.

Silky oceans appear in captures after ten seconds of exposure, but racing clouds need a little more time to emphasise the effect. Chasing clouds is the art of looking for the edges, looking for heavy elements against a light sky. On one occasion the clouds broke above my vista and revealed the early evening stars, offering both sky and heavens in the single frame. Moments like this are rare; you have to be in the right shooting mode already to capitalise on the opportunity.

For landscape photographers Lofoten is 100 percent opportunity.

At the end of a week on the islands I had barely scratched the surface of what this landscape has to offer. Mountains of towering rock, deep coatings of fresh snow and narrow channels of ocean tucked into fjords. Beaches where the snow is washed away by tides, and tides that are frozen solid by the snow. I could spend a month here and still not get bored.

Armed with my blue treatment, I looked back on the rest of my first »



Moody and magical
The ten-stop ND filter does its work on a flat, cloudy day

» IMAGES

SNOWY WATER'S EDGE

» (TOP LEFT) Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM lens; 30sec; f/4; ISO 400

MOODY AND MAGICAL

» (ABOVE) Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM lens; 30sec; f/8; ISO 100

ACROSS THE HARBOUR

» (FAR RIGHT) Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM lens; 30sec; f/8; ISO 400

STEP BY STEP

1 Two filters, a tripod and some creative processing are essential to making this shot (right and far right) work. The scene is composed with the camera locked down in manual operation, so the exposure and focus is configured by the photographer rather than by the camera.

2 Ideally we aim to shoot with an aperture of f/8 on a DSLR to get sufficient depth of field for foreground while staying well inside the diffraction limits of the lens. This scene looks down across the harbour from a reasonable height, so the foreground is quite distant from the camera anyway. Focus on the lens is set to the closest edge of the shore, an approximation of the hyperfocal distance.

3 Once composed, we put a ten-stop ND filter over the lens to really slow down the action. A quick test shot



revealed the scene to be a little under-exposed at 30sec with ISO 100, so we reshot at ISO 400. With the aid of a remote cable release we can shoot longer exposures instead, but at ISO 400 we're not hitting any drama with sensor noise anyway.

4 For very long exposures such as this you don't have to worry about mirror bounce. We still used a two-second timer delay on the shutter to negate any subtle impact from actually hitting the shutter. Old habits die hard.

5 The RAW file was treated in Capture One to bring the white balance across to the blue end of the spectrum at 4550 Kelvin. Saturation is dropped by just over 40% and contrast bumped up by over 10%. This is essential to put back a little of the sharpness that is lost with a low saturation treatment.

6 The creative treatment selected adds a whole stop of vignette to the scene, enhancing the darkness of the clouds and matching the tonal range of the harbour water. Finally a local adjustment layer is painted into the foreground snow and two stops of light added to bring up the detail in line with the horizon.

7 When tweaking the exposure we're paying careful attention to the highlights and looking to avoid excessive blowouts. This scene (right) is built on subtle tones, so it demands a subtle hand when manipulating the final image.



Across the harbour
Saturation is dropped and contrast increased as a finishing touch to the blue treatment

“Anything that narrows your creative style will make your work more distinctive, for better or worse. Mostly better”



flush of Lofoten captures and applied the same response to those scenes. Some worked better than others because some images were captured with a different style of processing in mind.

Knowing ahead of time how you intend to treat your RAW files in processing will change the way you shoot them, especially when working a very bold treatment. You get a little more picky about what you shoot, tailoring your captures to suit the final effect. Anything that narrows your creative style will make your work more distinctive, for better or worse. Mostly better.

A place such as Lofoten will look gorgeous with many kinds of treatments, but etched into my mind's eye are those tones of blue that you get from a cloudy day in the Arctic.

Sometimes photography is as much about what you feel as what the camera sees, which is why processing images with your own treatment is so important to the final result.

For more of Ewen's work here and abroad, check out photographyfortravellers.com

NEGATIVE SPACE

“An important part of the composition style for the ‘Lofoten in Blue’ series is the use of negative space. Leaving empty skies and wide open reflections of water adds scale to the composition, emphasising the importance of those elements that remain in the shot. A mountain or fishing hut takes on a greater sense of importance when you see the empty landscape from which it emerges.”

COLD AS BLUE

Lofoten sits inside the Arctic circle on the coast of Norway, making it a very cool destination for photographers in winter but much warmer than many parts of the Arctic. Ewen Bell runs a photographic tour in the Scandinavian winter from Lapland to Lofoten that begins in the far north of Sweden and finishes in the fjords of Norway. Lofoten is relatively warm with daytime temperatures around -1°C, but in parts of Arctic Sweden the mercury can drop below -20°C.

Modern DSLR cameras have no trouble in these conditions, continuing to shoot happily and with surprisingly little battery drain. At extremely low temperatures the crystals on the LCD display begin to slow down, so previews experience momentary ghosting. The cameras keep taking captures regardless, but a good pair of gloves and a big puffy jacket are handy to prevent the photographer from turning into a ghost as well.



■ Endless variations
“Every few hundred metres, with tripod slung over my shoulder, a new vista would inspire my imagination”