CAMERA NOT INCLUDED

The Photography Zine by Ewen Bell



Edition #2
January 2026

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First published in Australia in 2026 by Twocats

TWO CATS

EWEN BELL



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MUSTANG

Nepal / Himalayas



THE COVER

Photos of the monks in Marpha Gompa, Nepal.

It seems like such a small thing, a photographic print. 6x4 inches rendered onto the cheapest photo paper available in Kathmandu. I had been to this gompa earlier in the year and had a pile of photos to share. As much fun as taking photos of excited little monks can be, that's nothing compared to the joy of handing them back a handful of prints.

The boys lunge to grab the photos, like it was candy. Some prints contain more than one monk, so there's a debate over who gets to keep it. These are rare and personal gifts for young lads who are learning to conform to monastic life.

More than just a photo, they are a reminder that someone took an interest in their lives. Enough of an interest to take a photo, and then a little more care to return with actual prints. Never underestimate the power of a photo to bring joy.















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January 2026

This edition is full of moments from my recent travels in Bhutan and Nepal, even though right now I'm immersed in the Arctic winter. The photos on my laptop are full of sunshine and clear skies, but outside the window we have snow storms and reindeer.

So much of my life is spent delving through the images on my hard disks, reliving past moment instead of living in this moment. Photography is like time travel. I prefer to be in the now, which is one reason I enjoy the act of capturing photos more than sharing them. And yet I cannot NOT share them.

So I post my faves on the Fediverse.
I make YouTubes.
I sometimes organise exhibitions.
And I make this zine.

Sharing is caring.

A quick word of thanks to the sponsors who make this publication possible.

As an ambassador for Lumix Australia I enjoy the privilege of using their cameras and lenses for the vast majority of my photography. We have also worked on a few special projects together, often with a view to donating camera equipment to organisations in Asia and the Himalayas.

I also want to thank Peak Design who have been very generous with my projects. I've bought a fair number of their bags over the years, but Peak Design have reached out a few times to let me road test some of their new models. I love their 10L sling especially, as it fits a pair of S9 camera bodies and three lenses, while still leaving room for a water bottle and extras.

Also need to say a word of thankyou to Angelbird, who have been my go-to brand when buying SD cards for so many years now. I have more to say about that later in the zine!

APPLE PANCAKES

Jomsom, Nepal.

The flight from Pokhara to Jomsom takes about 20mins. On a good day. If the winds and weather do not cooperate, then sometimes we have to go by road instead. That can take anywhere from 8 hours to 18 hours, dependant on the weather factors that precluded an aircraft.

On this occasion our flight was successful. We landed very early in the morning, just before the sun broke over Nilgiri. Our first stop is a little guesthouse next to the airport, where a family makes us apple pancakes and we watch the rest of the flights come and go from the rooftop.

We've been enjoying our pancakes here for as long as I've been travelling to Nepal. Everything about these photos brings me joy.

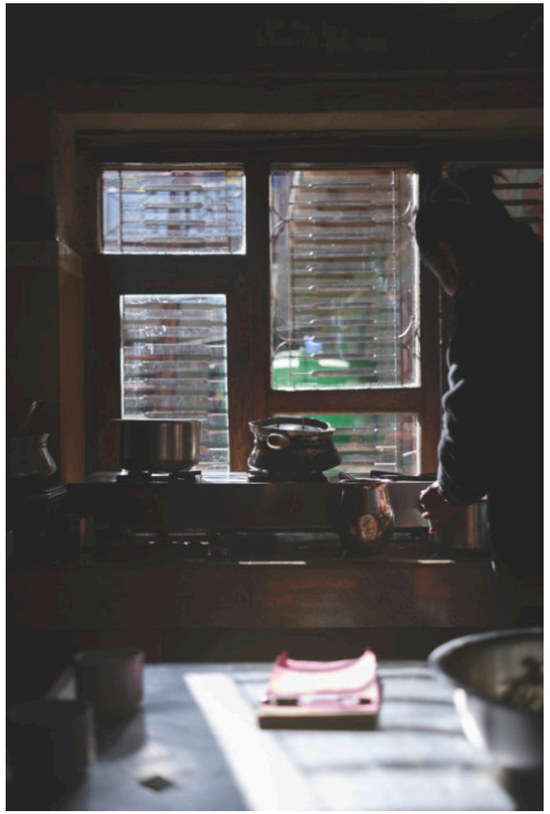
[Images in this series were captured on the Lumix S9
+ TT Artisan 40mm F2]













When first you step into a kitchen like this, we cause a bit of a fuss. We ask to take photos and get awkward smiles. Sometimes it's an excited awkward, and sometimes it's more like "get the hell out of my way I'm cooking" kind of awkward. And then that initial rush is over, and the girls focus on the cooking. And that's when I can really focus on my photography.

“Didi” always remembers me.

I’ve been dropping in to their guesthouse for 15 years, and bringing excited companions to try their super fluffy apple pancakes. In the early days Didi was always in the kitchen, making the magic happen over a couple of hot plates.

The families who run trekking guest houses have a hard life. They have to run a modest hotel in addition to the kitchen. During the high season they are up before dawn and don’t get to sleep until after everyone else has. They have relatively short seasons, and have to make the most of those short windows in Spring and Autumn.

Didi has help in the kitchen now. She gets to sit back and let the next generation make all the pancakes and pots of tea.



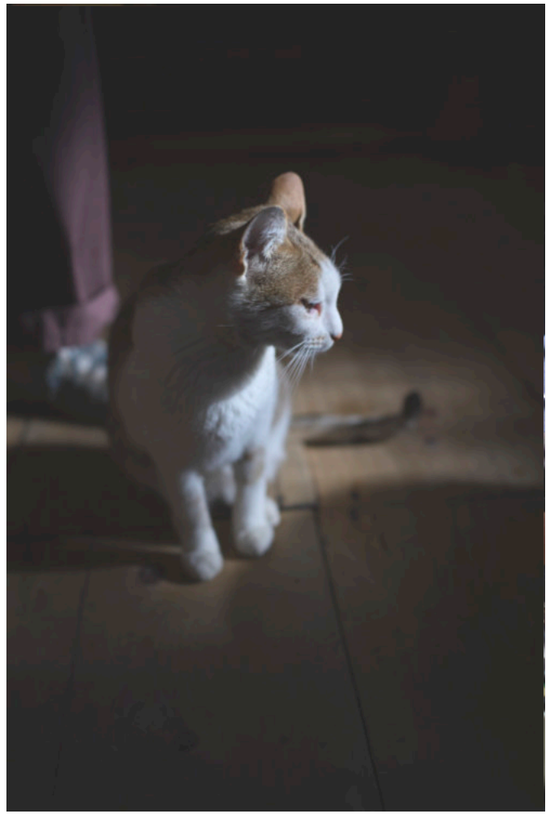


Window light is a favourite of mine.

This particular kitchen gets the winter sun blasting directly through, which is not my usual thing. I normally prefer more gentle indirect light through the window, something that more resembles a giant soft box.

When I first started travelling to Nepal I was shooting with a DSLR camera, and you had to be careful with blowout in high contrast scenes like this one. Today the camera sensors have a lot more dynamic range, and can cope much better with light that we once regarded as problematic.

Creatively I still prefer softer light. But every so often you just have to lean into what's on offer.







I love getting the whole story, from start to finish. I don't always need all the bits in between, but I want to get that last moment. I need to see where the story ends. Steam rising up from the apple pancakes, illuminated by the morning light, will do it for me.



BUMTHANG

Bhutan / Himalayas

TSHECHU

Bumthang, Nepal.

I used to think the monks are what made these festivals special, but when you look closely it's the community who really shine.

Tshechu are a sacred ritual conducted at Temples, Gompa and Dzong all over Bhutan. They are a series of dances and ceremonies that last for up to three days. The monks choose auspicious dates for a tshechu, and maybe even invite some special guests from far away to boost the spiritual offering.

When you first attend a tshechu the impressive costumes of the chams (masked dances) are usually what catch your eye. These are physically impressive, visually striking, and rather compelling for the photographer. But the chams are just one layer, and at these festivals there are many many layers to observe.

[Images in this series were captured on the Lumix S9
+ TT Artisan 40mm F2
+ Lumix S 18mm F1.8
+ Lumix S100mm F2.8 Macro]







The temples do not exist in isolation. Most of them can only survive with the support of their local community. Nearby villages often provide food and clothing for the monks, help build and maintain the temples, and are essential to putting on a good festival.

When a festival is conducted, it is for the benefit of the community. Tshechu are conducted as a mark of respect for the people who keep the temples alive. When locals attend, they are mindful of the gift they are receiving. They dress in their finest clothes and act with reverance. They are guests of the temple, and try to behave with due respect.

Most of the time!





During a festival there are many community members who participate in the events. Women train all year to perform songs and make offerings in between the chams. Locals help the monks to make and repair masks and costumes.

Even the kitchen at the temple gets extra assistance for the festival, to help prepare hot meals and hot tea throughout the day.

Food is brought as offerings to the dignitaries, and then shared amongst the crowd attending. So much of the day is focused on the opportunity to give and share. The spiritual side of a tshechu is conducted by the temple, but the foundation of the event comes from the community itself.



















Not all the chams are performed by monks. A local community members provide extra talent and experience to complement the small number of monks at this temple. They are very skilled, and very fit!



We met these girls earlier in the day and had a special photo shoot with them. I got a chance to send them a bunch of pics the next day. It's quite lovely to be here and make folks feel special just by taking their photo. I really love that.



WHO MADE THIS?

Meet The Author

My name is Ewen Bell and I'm a photographer based in Melbourne, Australia. I've been very lucky in life to had the opportunity to make a career from photography.

For over two decades I've been travelling and shooting, which is why I have this photo of me in Bhutan when I was MUCH younger and better looking than I am now :) You can tell it's an old photo because I'm holding a DSLR camera.

Photography has changed my world, so I want to help others find their voice with the camera as well. I love sharing my photos, but also love sharing my knowledge about taking photos. That's why I'm making a zine, in addition to my blog and my YouTube channel.

ewenbell.com



EWEN'S WORKSHOPS

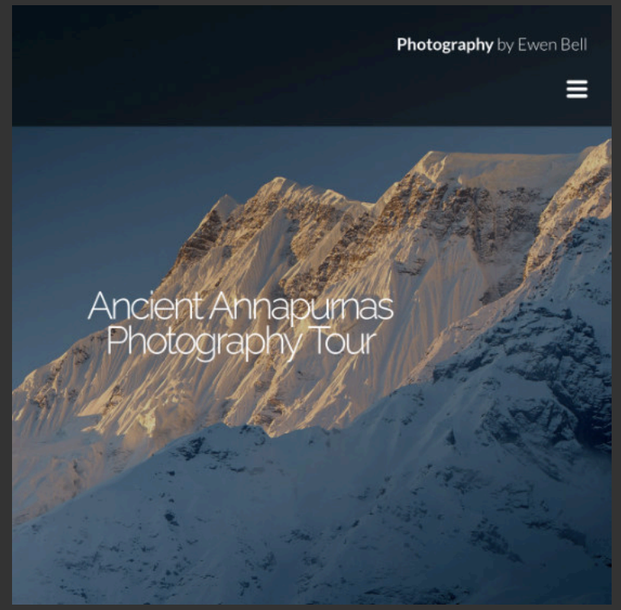
Intimate photographic experiences with Ewen Bell

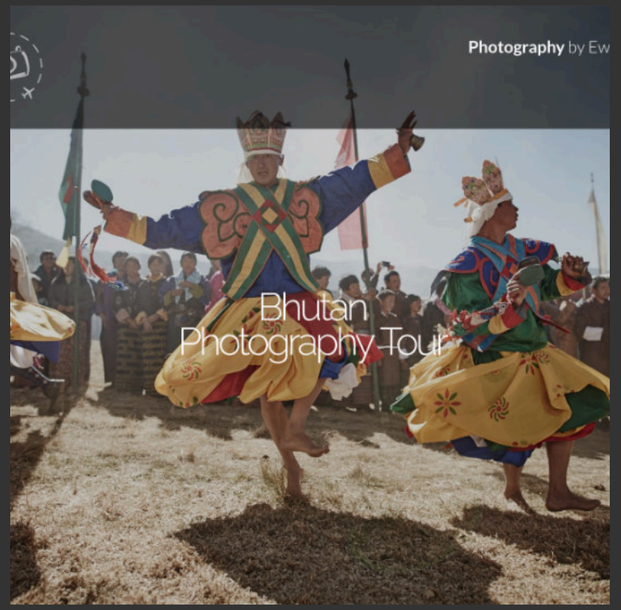
Every year I run a handful of workshops and photo tours in various parts of the world. I have been doing this for twenty years now, and every year I try to find ways to make each experience more rewarding. It's never the same workshop twice.

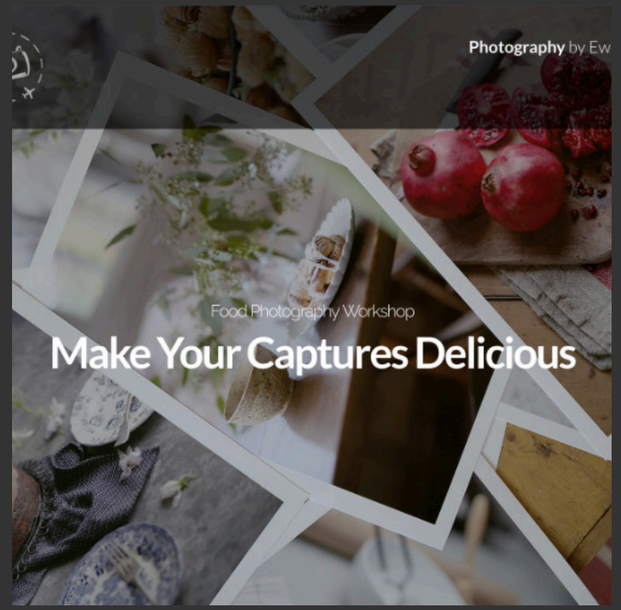
I run my tours in places I know very very well. I don't outsource my expertise. I care about these places and believe they offer something special to my companions. We learn about the cultures and landscapes, as much as we do photography.

Visit the website for more details.

ewenbell.com/tours









THIS PAGE IS SPONSORED

Thankyou Angelbird

Angelbird make a bunch of high performance memory card, and now also some excellent USB/Thunderbolt cables. My journey with this brand began in 2020 when we started making recipe videos at home. Shellie did the recipe development and styling, and I did the video and editing. We quickly realised that “sustained data rate” was way more important than any maximum speed a card night claim to offer. The max speeds you see on the labels tend to drop off after a minute of shunting data onto the laptop.

Anyway, back then I scored a killer deal on some 256gb micro SD cards by Angelbird, and I've been buying their stuff ever since. My minimum spec for SD cards now is V60, which means 60MBytes/sec (480mbps). This gives me enough grunt for shooting 6K 10bit video, or for high speed continuous burst when shooting birds or festivals. And it's fast to download at the end of the day. That matters when you're on the road.

Angelbird also supported us on the Tashi documentary project, with their affordable yet impressive SE range of CFExpress cards. I'm still using these in my Lumix S1RII, and still using my Angelbird SD cards in my other cameras. So I'm super happy to have them as a sponsor of this publication.



RINPUNG DZONG

Paro / Bhutan



THICK N THIN

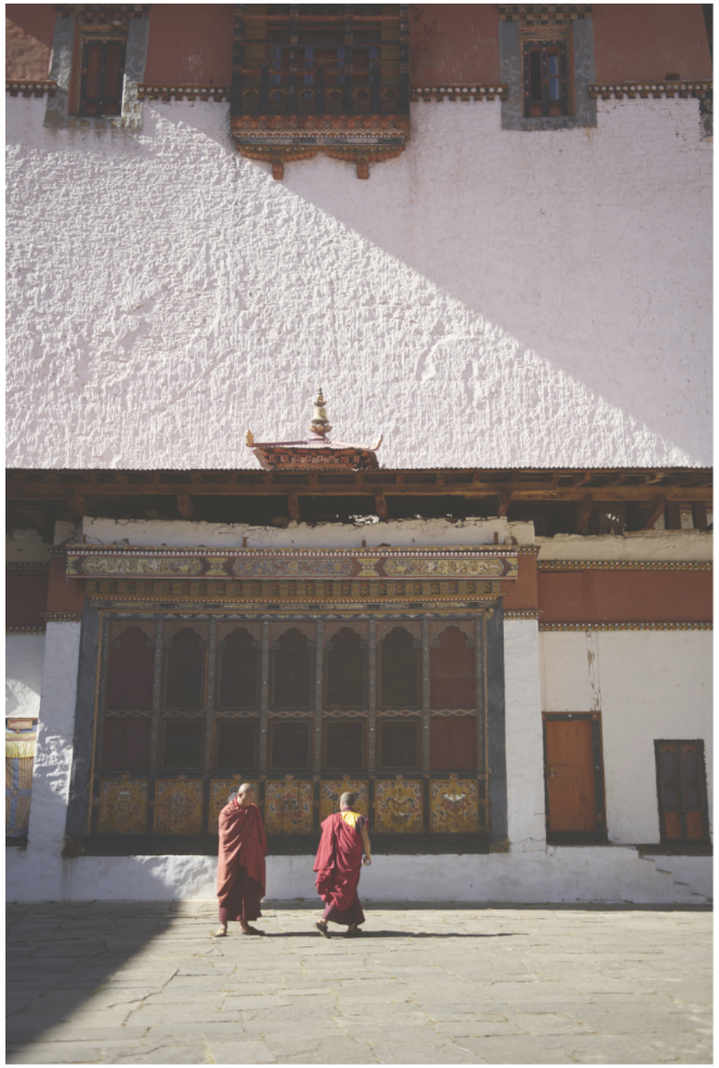
I read an article by Joan Westenberg recently, about the idea of “desires” being classified as thick or thin. Comparing the meaningful to the transient, and the nurturing to the hollow.

It made me think about my photography in the same terms.

Joan talks of the 'thin desire' to check your social media and how, "The person who checks their notifications is, afterward, exactly the same person who wanted to check their notifications five minutes ago." Nothing much changes.

I feel this way when posting to social media as well. The satisfaction of sharing is momentary, as your photos disappear into a ocean of electrons. I find most social media to be deeply unsatisfying, and even manipulative. It’s not healthy for me.

There are many humans among us who pursue photography for no other purpose than to add posts to their social media. Photography is not their objective. They’re chasing clicks, not creativity.



Thick desires are what push us to grow into a different person. Learning to take photos as a craft. Learning to tell stories and share your perspective of the world. Learning to slow down and understand your subject before you take a photo. Learning how to find your voice with the camera.

I have often felt this chasm between the thick and thin. Momentary desires such as trying to grab a photo of a farmer with their yak before they disappear along the trail. I reach for it, like candy. Versus the desire to use my camera to collect stories and share the human condition. To visit the nomadic herds and understand why entire families move up and down the elevations between the seasons. What makes more of a lasting impact, a photo of someone's face or the stories that led to this moment?

Those things of substance, the hard things that took time and threw you into uncertainty, are also the things that most matter when you look back on your life.

I am increasingly intolerant of thin desires. They annoy me, even though they mostly arise from within me. I am increasingly intolerant of Instagram and rapidly allergic to Facebook. My tolerance of these platforms wears thinner by the day.



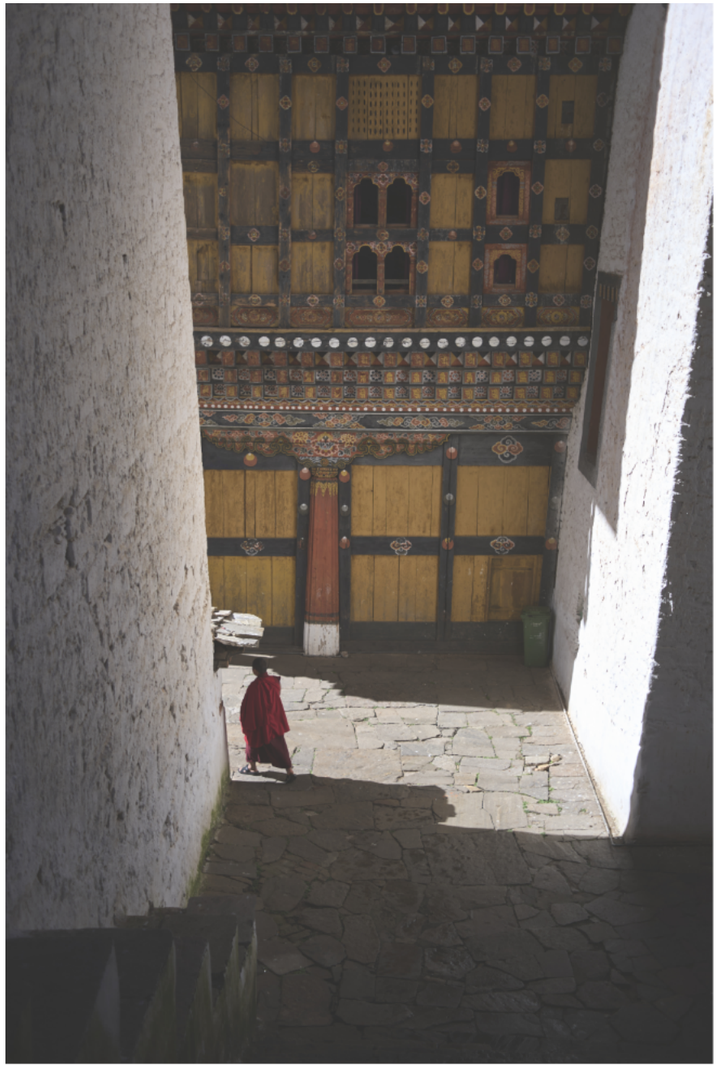
As I get older, and in many ways less tolerant, I am more drawn to the process of photography than the photos themselves. The images are paper thin, if ever they even exist on paper at all. Most of my work has the depth of an electron.

While the photos are thin, the experience that created can be transformational. The time spent in the mountains waiting for a sunrise, or watching the night sky hoping for an aurora. That effort to remove yourself from a warm and cosy space, then head outside into the cold. A “thin” mindset may regard this as wasted time, without reflecting on the experience of being present with nature, or even the anticipation of what is to come.

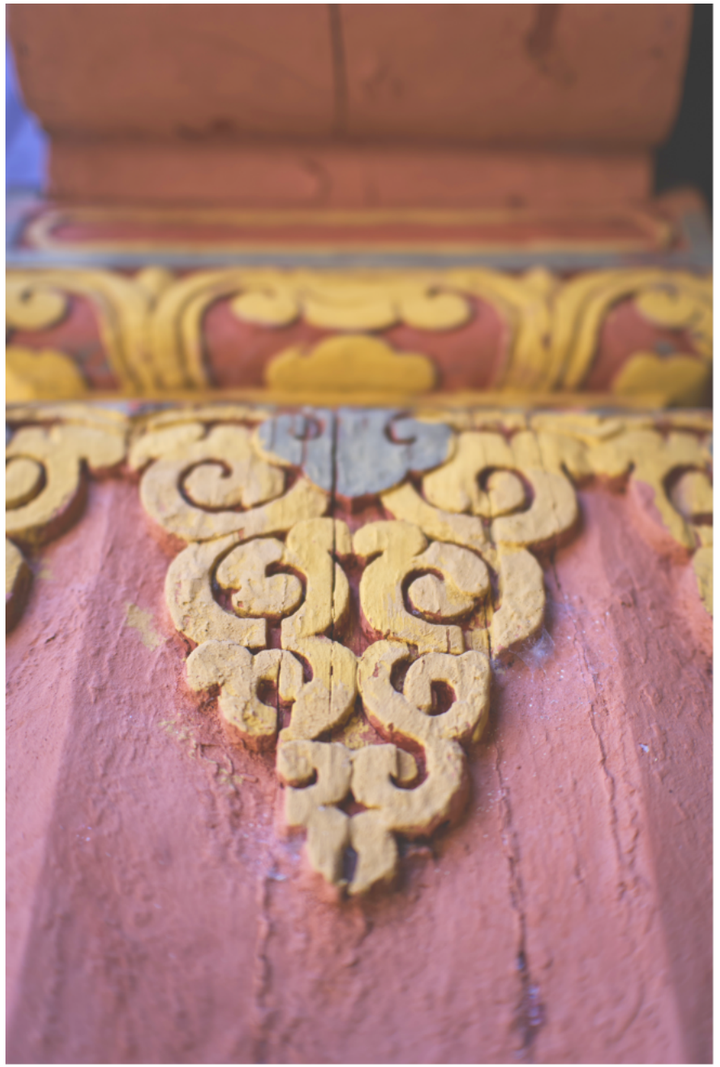
The “thick” mindset knows that good things come from doing the hard things. We can maybe go one better still, and seek to share that effort with a few friends and turn the act of photography into a collective memory. We can share more than just the photos. More than just the ideas. The fact that you're here reading this suggests that some part of you also craves something more substantial.

– Ewen

You can read my original inspiration by Joan Westenberg here: https://www.joanwestenberg.com/thin-desires-are-eating-your-life/



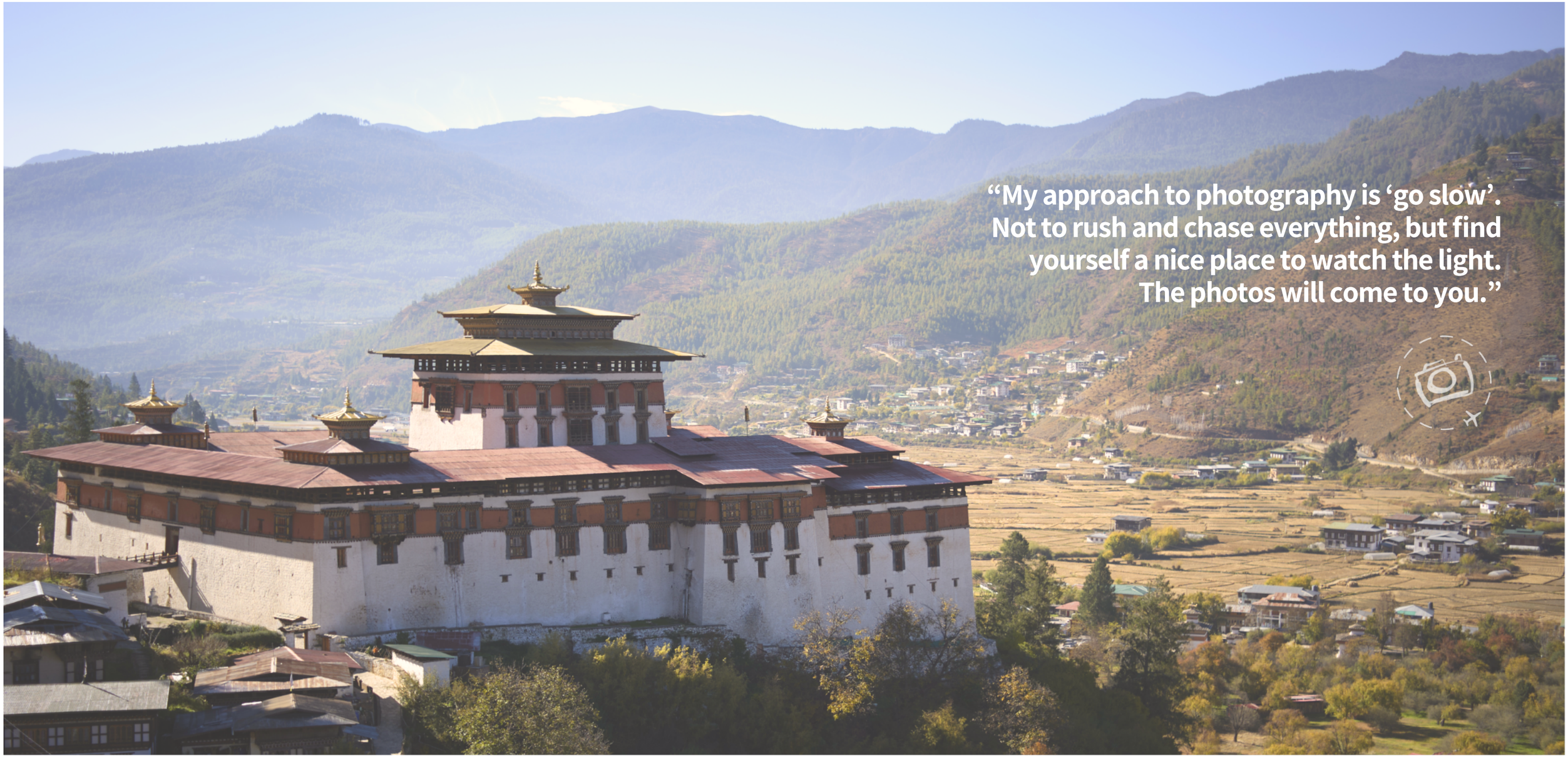









DZONG


“My approach to photography is ‘go slow’.
Not to rush and chase everything, but find
yourself a nice place to watch the light.
The photos will come to you.”

GOOD GEAR



CHEAP AURORAS

14mm F2.8 MF (Full Frame) from TT Artisan

I've been chasing auroras for over 15 years now, and there are two things that make this difficult. The weather, and very fast wide lenses. When I say wide, I really mean ultra wide. Aurora in the north are very very big, and even with a 14mm lens you won't be sure to capture all the action.

But it's a good start.

F2.8 is the minimum I want for auroras. F4 lenses are very slow and dark, which make it hard work on a moonless night trying to extract detail from the aurora activity. Sometimes they are slow and gentle, but sometimes they are fast and detailed. So a fast lens gives you options.

My favourite aurora lens is without doubt the Sigma 14mm F1.4 AF. It's a work of art and delivers bright images free of distortions. It's expensive, but not crazy expensive. It's still cheaper than my infamous Zeiss 15mm MF F2.8 that I bought so many years ago. That combination of very fast and very wide is typically expensive.

Until now.





I've had a chance to try the TT Artisan 14mm F2.8 MF on our dark Arctic nights. Keep in mind this lens sells for roughly US$200, so I'm not expecting it to deliver the same brightness and detail that I get from the Sigma 14mm F1.4.

The results are pretty nice.

This is a seriously compact lens to pack, and hence a great companion to my teeny tiny Lumix S9. It has a 77mm thread for when you want to work with filters. It has some quirks, including a second lens hood to deliver that 77mm thread.

It does have vingetting, but not too much. My lens does show astigmatism across the plane of focus too, making some stars look wonky while others are nice and sharp. Lucky for me I'm shooting auroras and not the Milky Way. This 14mm is not free of flaws, but it is cheap. This is the lens you buy when you just want to experiment with shooting the night sky at F2.8.

I'll be making some videos and posting a full review to my blog soon, but in the meantime enjoy some of our "Christmas Lights" from here in Arctic Norway.




DJ-OPTICAL
1:2.8 Ø77









#EWENTUBE

I share a bunch of photos and ideas on my YouTube channel. You can also watch them on the Fediverse via PeerTube for those who prefer ad-free viewing

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