

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Packing an extension tube as a standard part of the kit gives you an inexpensive and very light option for shooting improvised macro out in the field. Ewen Bell takes us in for a closer look...

I don't own a macro lens, I have to confess. I already have to slink past airport check-in counters in the hope that they won't weigh my camera bag, so adding yet another hefty lens to my kit is not an ideal option. But every now and then I find something really small and really fascinating that I want to shoot up close. There's nothing like the intricate curves and colours of native flora to add some contrast to a set of landscape images in the Red Centre, for example. Well, my solution costs about \$100 and weighs less than a spare battery. It's called an extension tube.

Little bit of outback
"Every now and then I find something really small and really fascinating..."



Extension tubes are usually simple bits of technology: a hollow barrel that sits between the camera and your lens, which, once inserted, effectively changes the focal plane. The smart versions of modern extension tubes retain data communication between the lens and body, or enable the autofocus to function. But since this is a tremendously handy quick-fix workaround for low-cost macro, luxuries such as autofocus are neither assumed nor critical.

Once you slip that tube between the lens and camera, you're essentially rendering the lens ineffective for normal duties, no longer able to focus on infinity and transforming the focal range to something measured in centimetres rather than metres.

My favourite combination is a 70-200mm zoom with a 25mm extension tube, starting with a quality piece of glass to ensure I finish with a quality macro shot. Canon, Nikon, Sony and others all make superb versions of this lens, tack sharp and lightning fast at f/2.8 and equipped with image stabilisation to help steady the shot in low light. Adding a 25mm extension tube to a 200mm lens brings my macro range down to about 1:2, while at 70mm I have 1:1.

Zooming between this range lets me adjust between those two levels of close-up. Focus is achieved by simply locking in the manual focus, selecting

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Dragonfly
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/100sec; aperture priority; f/7.1; ISO 1600; 70-200mm with 25mm extension tube

Little bit of outback
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/400sec; aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 400; 50mm lens

Red Centre scrub
» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/800sec; aperture priority; f/2.8; ISO 200; 70-200mm with 25mm extension



Red Centre scrub
Foliage along the Kata Tjuta walk

Dragonfly
A simple extension tube gives you great macro capabilities on the fly



THE SOFTER THE BETTER

Avoid direct light for macro shots in the wild; the world of things minute turns harsh and drastic when bombarded with brilliant sunshine. Bright sunlight can dominate life at the macro level!



It's in the detail
 "If you start with a quality lens, you will finish with quality macro shots"

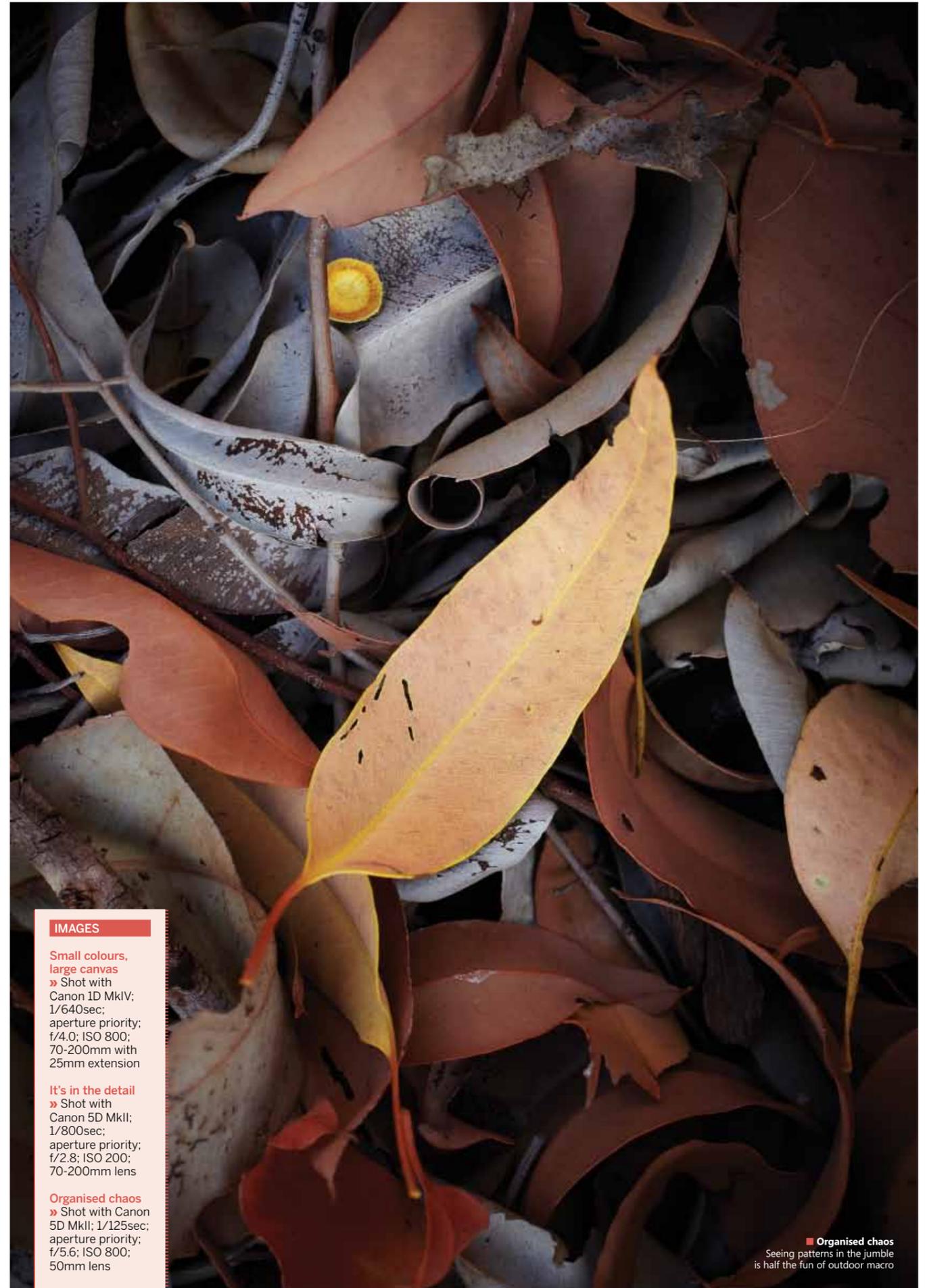
infinity and pushing the lens closer to the subject. The lens won't focus on anything outside a very narrow band of distance, so you'll quickly notice when you're coming into range. Canon's extension tube, used with their 70-200mm, for example, does support autofocus operation – but you still have to get within that band before letting the camera pull focus for you. This is one occasion when autofocus is not always ideal, and there is a better way to get the shot right.

Switch to continuous mode and crank up the shutter. I like to dial up a little extra ISO to enable more generous shutter speeds without sacrificing my depth of field, and provided you're not shooting in semi-candle light the high ISO settings of most DSLR cameras will barely impact your image quality. I routinely shoot in daylight at ISO 1600 to harness both speed and depth simultaneously.

With the camera locked to manual focus, high shutter action and my preferred depth of field, I get ready to shoot. I start by framing up the shot and positioning the lens to suit my focus. I pull back just a smidge, hold down the shutter and let the continuous frames fly. As the camera grabs a sequence of frames, I gently push forward through the subject, slow enough to avoid blur at my high shutter speed. What I end up with are lots of frames that are just barely out of focus, and a few key

"To this day I cannot walk past a nice patch of leaf litter without contemplating potential compositions"

Small colours, large canvas
 Nothing like a miniature perspective to round out a set of travel photos



IMAGES

Small colours, large canvas

» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/640sec; aperture priority; f/4.0; ISO 800; 70-200mm with 25mm extension

It's in the detail

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/800sec; aperture priority; f/2.8; ISO 200; 70-200mm lens

Organised chaos

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/125sec; aperture priority; f/5.6; ISO 800; 50mm lens

Organised chaos
 Seeing patterns in the jumble is half the fun of outdoor macro

“If your taste is for very shallow depth of field, this technique will give you the exact frame you’re after”

frames that have precisely what I want. Then it's a simple matter of discarding the frames I don't need – either on the spot, or later on a desktop if the differences are too minute to make out with the naked eye.

If your taste is for very shallow depth of field, this technique will give you the exact frame you're after. If you've opted for a wider depth of field, you'll have a few extra frames from which to pick a favourite.

I've used this technique to shoot green ants, red spiders, yellow ochre and all manner of botanical blooms. If you start with a quality lens, you will finish with quality macro shots. I've also coupled the 25mm tube with a 50mm standard lens, but the combination plants you too close to the subject and the lens itself begins to crowd out the light. Telephoto lenses with the longer extension tubes not only give you intensely close macro, but let you shoot from a safe distance.

My very first exhibition was of dry leaves set in the outback, and to this day I cannot walk past a nice patch of leaf litter without contemplating potential compositions. This isn't always a matter of macro shooting, just getting very close to the little things discovered on my journey. I've even found that my 24mm prime

EXTEND YOURSELF

Get yourself a kit of extension tubes, ranging from 5mm to 25mm. The longer the lens, the longer the extension.

Intricate curves
A new world is opened up on closer inspection



Hold still
Macro requires a steady hand

IMAGES

Intricate curves
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/500sec; f/2.8; ISO 1600; 70-200mm with 25mm extension

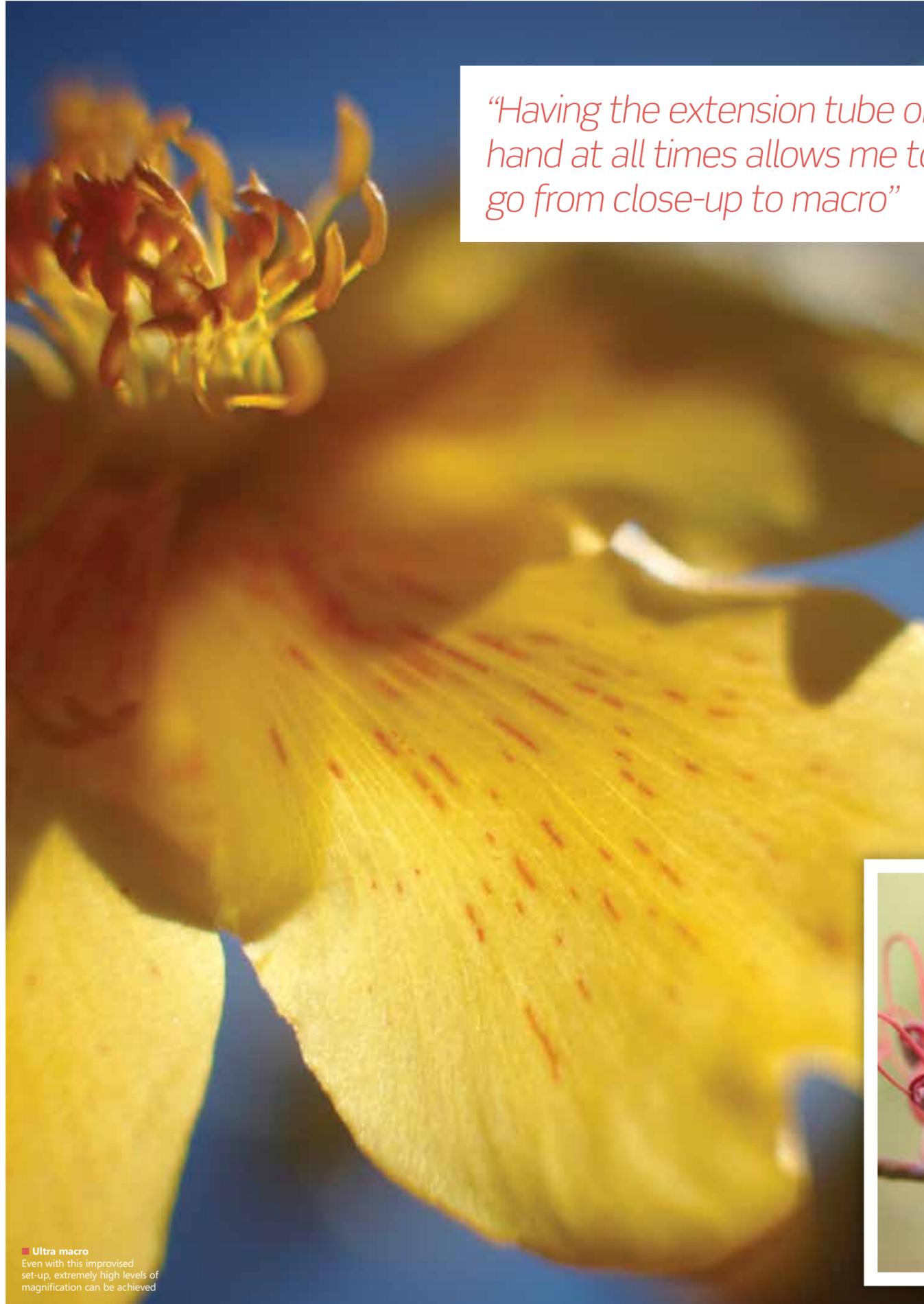
Hold still
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/400sec; f/7.1; ISO 1600; 70-200mm with 25mm extension

New perspective
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/64sec; f/4.0; ISO 1600; 70-200mm with 25mm extension



New perspective
Look closer and you'll be amazed at the compositions you'll uncover

“Having the extension tube on hand at all times allows me to go from close-up to macro”



■ Ultra macro
Even with this improvised set-up, extremely high levels of magnification can be achieved



■ Tiny treasures
Flora at Kata Tjuta

lens will get extremely close to flowers, and offers a unique wide-angle perspective at the same time. Having the extension tube on hand at all times allows me to take it one step further, to go from close-up to macro.

Stopping to focus on a few bits of bark and leaves beneath a towering eucalyptus gum gives you another perspective to appreciate. Little things matter as much as the grand landscapes. The inherently narrow depth of field offered by getting close-up to the subject gives you a lot of opportunities for creative composition, and enhances your appreciation for the fine detail of the natural world. Unlike a classic landscape image, you don't have to wait for the perfect light either.

Anything that slows down your pace while shooting is a good thing. This is the photographic equivalent of stopping to smell the flowers, only I suggest taking a few photos as well.



■ Pan for gold
You don't have to wait for the perfect light in this miniature world



■ Look closer
Stop and smell the flowers – and snap a few shots while you're at it

- IMAGES**
- Ultra macro**
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/5312sec; f/2.8; ISO 100; 50mm with 25mm extension
 - Tiny treasures**
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/1328sec; f/2.0; ISO 100; 50mm lens
 - Pan for gold**
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/1000sec; f/2.8; ISO 100; 70-200mm with 25mm extension
 - Look closer**
» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/400sec; f/4.5; ISO 400; 70-200mm with 25mm extension