



*“Softness in light is a wonderful quality to capture”*

Watching the last gasps of light reach across mountaintops inspired me to appreciate the serenity and charm of soft light. Gently, gently, even under heavy clouds and grey skies, there is joy in that light which lacks contrast. Words and images by **Ewen Bell**

# SOFT LIGHT PLEASE

**L**ate afternoon has arrived in the Mustang region, west of the Nepalese Annapurna Ranges. Kagbeni is a gateway town, the last post before entering the Upper Mustang where a small chorten marks the way forward. The valley sweeps wide at this point, with a broad and flat moraine below filled with boulders, rocks and gravel left behind by the retreat of glaciers. Horses and goat herders cross the moraine, navigating the divergent branches of river flow with temporary wooden bridges made of logs and stone.

The sun has gone behind a mountain, just one of many massive peaks in this part of Nepal that's too small to earn a name. The valley is shaded, but a little of the sky is still illuminated as a dab of sunlight reaches over the mountain and through low clouds. The light is very soft. With the help of a graduated ND filter, I can bring the clouds into the same exposure range as the shaded valley, and I snap a few variations to capture the silvery tones.

■ **Tukeche**  
Stone and wood lend a monochromatic tone to the Annapurnas

“By the time your clock hits 9am, the best of the day’s soft light has passed, and what remains is already harsh”



■ **The Ladder**  
Gentle shadows appear as clouds skirt the sun



■ **Motorbike**  
Colours pop out on cloudy days

Photography is all about the light, but sometimes I have to look closer to see the potential of that light as it fades into the evening. Softness in light is a wonderful quality to capture.

### First light

First light in the mornings is often warm and invariably soft. The sun is still cutting through a few thousand miles of atmosphere and hence is not at its brightest. This means that shadows in the composition are relatively soft, gentle and embracing instead of harsh and cutting. Under the noonday sun those same shadows become devastating for composition, much less forgiving than in that first hour of the day.

This is the charm of soft light, allowing you to emphasise the scene with long shadows, but still kind enough to stay within a stop or two of dynamic range.

By the time your clock hits 9am, the best of the day’s soft light has passed, and what remains is already harsh. In the first few minutes of sunrise you can even shoot portraits in that direct light and retain enough subtle detail to preserve skin tones with the help of some softening of a RAW file.

And the colours are warm, but only softly so. Evening sunsets are often dramatic and saturated with colour, the result of haze and pollution filling the distant horizon. Mornings are the opposite, clear and crisp as the night sky retreats to reveal the sun. Gently at first.

### Flush colours

Muted colours appeal to me greatly. Too much of modern photography, on film or digital, has resulted in hyper-saturated

#### IMAGES

**Tukeche (previous spread)** » Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/2000sec; aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 100; 24mm lens

**Motorbike** » Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/1328; aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 100; 50mm lens

**The Ladder** » Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/5312sec; aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 100; 24mm lens

**Tea Time** » Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/800sec; aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 100; 24mm lens



■ Tea Time  
Subtle moments gain  
from subtle lighting

## “When is the colour enough colour? Sometimes less is more, even where landscapes are concerned”

hues that exaggerate reality, ultimately producing images that stand removed from it. The muted tones from soft light restore a gentle quality to your photographic expression, a sense of restraint and a more genuine representation.

If you can work in the range of muted tones, more often it gives your work an impression of confidence, that you are happy with your work and don't need to resort to cheap theatrics by dragging your colour saturations to the right.

I might be a little at odds with dedicated landscape photographers here. I know some talented chaps who do amazing things with film and seek to saturate their tones at sunset as much as possible. They underexpose the film and over-saturate



### ND grad filters

These come in lots of different strengths, such as 3-stops of light at the far edge (ND8) or a single stop version (ND2), plus a variety of steepness to the gradient. I use an ND8 with a wide gradient, but more advanced filter sets let you stack multiples for additive ND impact and greater control over the gradient. If you buy good glass, then get a stacking mount for your lens, or use the hand-held technique described earlier – but be aware that this leads to inevitable scratching of the filter and requires frequent replacement.

the prints to get the maximum colour. But to what end? When is the colour enough colour? Sometimes less is more, even where landscapes are concerned.

My hero for fine art landscapes is Sydney photographer and filmmaker Murray Fredericks ([murrayfredericks.com.au](http://murrayfredericks.com.au)), whose sensitive captures of salt lakes and moody skies are beautifully controlled. His work shows a mastery of colour, instead of being slave to it.

### Pretty people

I've always advocated that you should treat your portraits as you do all types of photos,

and try to put them in the best light. Soft filtered light dimly creeping in through a window or a doorway is one of my favourites when taking portraits. It often requires working at a higher ISO to get a clear shot, but that should never be an obstacle to your composition. Our lovely modern DSLRs are very capable, and ever more so when shooting RAW.

I love shooting people on cloudy days, in dim doorways or sitting in the shade of a tree while the sun blazes away nearby. I don't mind blowing out the background a little

and letting the subject stand firm in the foreground. Where the light is soft, the composition is kind.

Little surprise that when we walk into the harsh light of day we reach for the sunglasses, something to shield the unwanted abundance of light. If our own eyes avoid direct sunlight, then it's better we avoid photographing someone else's eye in that same direct sunlight. Truly bright eyes are the result of being open to the camera, and truly great portraits require a subject who is comfortable in the light. A little bit of light, not too much.



■ **Annapurna Sunrise**  
The rewards for getting up early



■ **Jomsom**  
Be gentle with that contrast slider when processing RAW images

IMAGES

**Farewell**

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/400sec; aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 100; 24mm lens

**Annapurna Sunrise**

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/500sec; aperture priority; f/13; ISO 400; 16-35mm lens

**Jomsom**

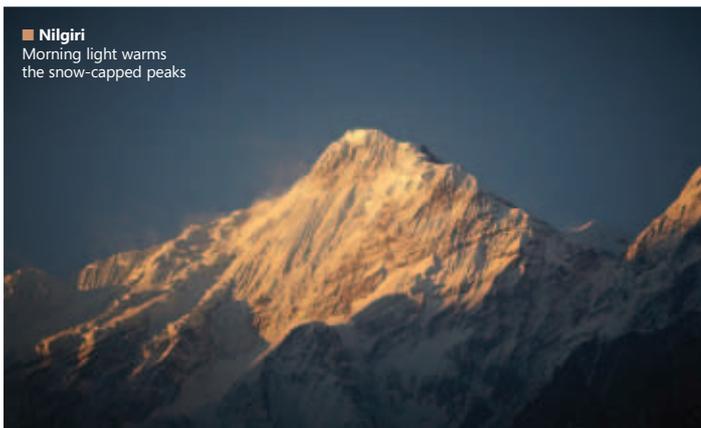
» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/500sec; aperture priority; f/13; ISO 400; 24mm lens



*“Too often I overlook the variety of light once the sun has turned shy”*

■ **The Bridge**  
ND Grad filters bring clouds under control

■ **Nilgiri**  
Morning light warms  
the snow-capped peaks



### PRO TIP

For better control over available light, graduated neutral density filters are cheap, easy-to-pack and an essential part of any well-packed camera bag.

### Gradually inclined

Sometimes the dark and heavy light of dusk, with clouds riding high above, is very soft and potentially very flat. Enter the graduated ND filter. These cheap and easy-to-pack bits of gear are an essential part of any well-packed camera bag. There's no need for elaborate filter holders and tripods – just slip one across the lens itself with one hand and compose with the other. Perfection comes with practice; just buy a bag of cheap ones and start experimenting with their effects.

Mostly I use an ND grad filter to balance water and sky, because reflections off a still lake are several stops darker than the subject they are reflecting. You can also use a grad filter to bring darker tones to a cloudy sky, adding some mood to an otherwise flat landscape image. ND stands for neutral density, so it stands to reason that such a filter can help soften the light to good effect.

Polarisers are just the opposite,



■ **Shutter Bugs**  
Skies are at their most  
gentle before the sun rises

selectively removing light at certain angles and effectively adding contrast to a brightly illuminated scene. The general rule for a polariser is that they have the most impact when the light is already a problem.

After a few weeks of travelling through Nepal and the mountain trails of the Annapurnas, I was impressed not only by the clear air and vivid mornings, but

by the gentle quality of the light that falls on serene landscapes on a cloudy day. Too often I overlook the variety of light once the sun has turned shy. I watched my fellow travellers shoot madly at the impressive valleys below us from the town of Kagbeni, and was reminded of how charming the soft light can be.

Grey is not always grey. It can be silver, too.



■ **Jeep Stand**  
Add drama to clouds  
with an ND grad filter.

### IMAGES

**The Bridge »** Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/400sec; aperture priority; f/13; ISO 200; 24mm lens

**Nilgiri »** Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/160sec; aperture priority; f/13; ISO 800; 70-200mm lens

**Shutter Bugs »** Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/100sec; aperture priority; f/7.1; ISO 800; 16-35mm lens

**Jeep Stand »** Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/64sec; aperture priority; f/10; ISO 1600; 16-35mm lens