

FASTER LEARNING

# Getting better at getting better

On a recent photographic tour of China, **Ewen Bell** revisited what it was like to be thrown in the photographic deep end. Here, he discusses ways to streamline the learning curve. All images by **Cortney Johnson**

I was discovering the challenges of shooting with a traditional styled Leica M9, while two of my companions were discovering the world of consumer level Canon DSLRs. After two weeks of travelling in China, it became apparent that your choice of camera can make a big impact on your learning curve as a beginner.

**A step back to move forward**

In the hands of a young and inexperienced enthusiast, a Canon 600D with a wide-angle Tamron 10-24mm lens was pumping out a dazzling collection of images. Meanwhile I was struggling to come to grips with the rangefinder technology still employed by a very valuable

Leica M9. It took all my experience and skill to keep pace with the 600D, and in truth I fell short on numerous occasions.

An entry-level Canon (or Nikon, or Sony) with a good lens offers a seriously fast focusing system, affordable options for quality lenses, plus a brilliantly detailed rear screen so that you can see what you're shooting. And that screen made all the difference.

Another of our companions had a similar camera, a Canon 40D, which represents an older model than the 600D but a little higher up the pecking order. Aside from a few small performance specifications, the major difference between the old and new is that rear screen. The 40D was built at a



■ Long shadows  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/30sec; f/1.1; ISO 100;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

time when high-density LCD screens were too expensive for low-budget DSLRs. The result is that you can't discern sharpness in your images when reviewing, and the reproductions lack vibrant tones even when they exist on the captured file.

These two cameras offered each of their owners a very different experience as they grappled with new techniques, explored the technical abilities of the camera and sought confirmation of their attempts to capture the light. The 600D rewarded its owner with instant appreciation of a job well done. When learning your craft in photography, it's always



■ Wide-angled innocent  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/125sec; f/5.6; ISO 200;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

important to know when you've got it right.

Meanwhile, the Leica M9 was pushing my patience and skills to the limits. The rangefinder system uses a converging image to indicate where your focus sits, and it's fully manual. It takes time to master the system, to get familiar with each of the Leica lenses and how they translate from the viewfinder to an image. Unlike an SLR camera, you're not seeing what the lens sees, so the experience of composition demands more of your imagination.

With a manual focus rangefinder camera in hand, I was suddenly thrown into the role of a beginner once again. I realised how important the rear screen can be when refining your photographic process, and what a difference a bright and fast screen can make. Unfortunately the Leica M9 is slow to render, the screen is very small and the resolution

**“The Canon 600D rewarded its owner with instant appreciation of a job well done”**

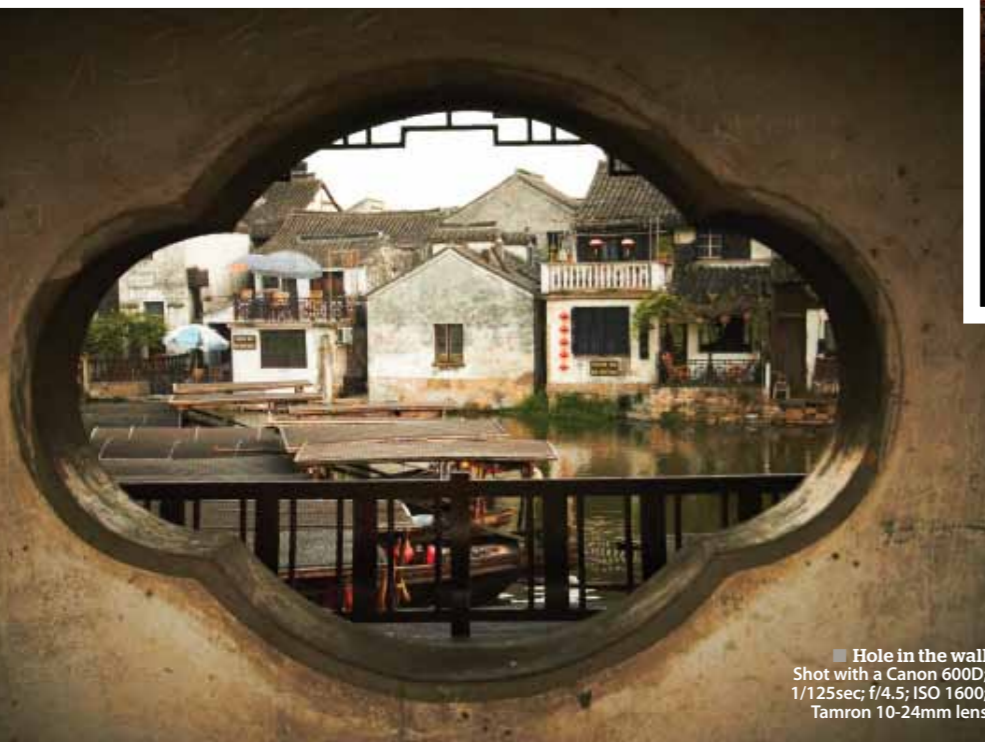
disappointing. That screen was barely more useful than the viewfinder.

**Reward your own successes**

When I learned photography it was on film, and back then I never had the option to instantly review my work. That was last century in more ways than one. Today's beginners have all the options in the world and need not go without a big, bright screen that reveals the best of their art.

**ADVANCED TIP No.1 THE NUMBERS GAME**

Most beginners focus too hard on how many of their shots are not ideal, and not how they can be improved. To stay positive and open to ideas, you need to focus on those images that make you happy and recognise that professionals throw away around 90% of what they shoot – if not more.



■ Hole in the wall  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/125sec; f/4.5; ISO 1600;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens



**“Professionals only share a fraction of what they keep, and keep a fraction of what they shoot”**

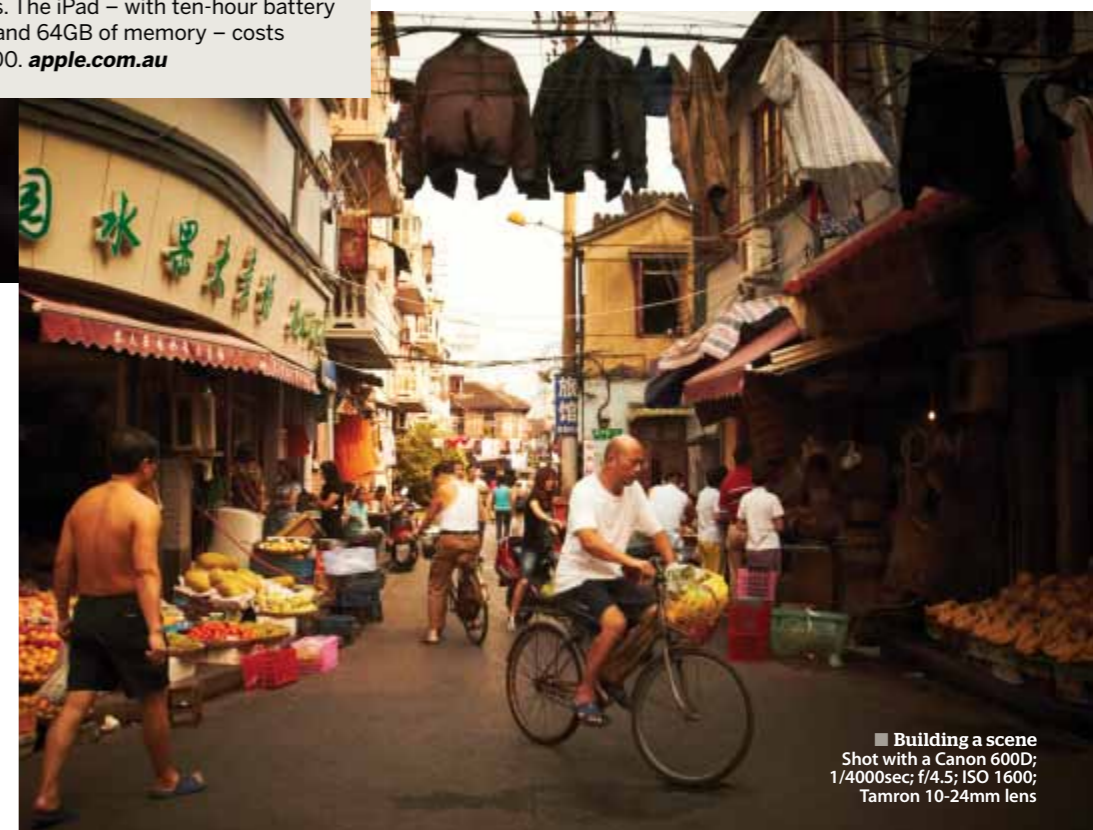
■ Getting closer  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/100sec; f/5.6; ISO 400;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens



■ Low-light lanterns  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/30sec; f/4; ISO 500;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

**ADVANCED TIP No.2  
IPAD FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS**

User interface and interaction with the images makes the process of rolling through your shots an immersive experience, plus a bright and vibrant screen reveals the best of your shots. The iPad – with ten-hour battery life, Wi-Fi and 64GB of memory – costs under \$800. [apple.com.au](http://apple.com.au)



■ Building a scene  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/4000sec; f/4.5; ISO 1600;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

**Quick List**

- Get a camera that has more ability than you; don't just buy the cheapest model.
- Review all your work on the same day you shoot.
- Spend time absorbing inspiration from other photographers.
- Embrace mistakes and continue shooting, even if you think they're not brilliant photos.
- Shoot every week to build familiarity and experience with your gear.
- Get a wide-angle lens and get closer to your subject.
- Always look for the light... because cameras don't photograph subjects, they photograph light.

The same goes once you've taken the images off the camera. My companion, who was shooting on a 600D, was also toting an iPad 2, which accepts SD cards and copies the images onto internal memory as a backup. Once downloaded to the iPad, you have a superb quality screen and superior user interface for exploring the images of the day. Hundreds of frames can be rummaged through with ease and speed, plus the ability to drill down into the details and examine the image quality. Even RAW files work fine on the iPad, by virtue of extracting the JPG preview built into each RAW image.

Reviewing your own work is one of the most important factors when learning a new skill. Ideally photographers should review on the same day, and repeat as often as possible.

Whether taking a moment to check your shots while you're shooting, or spending an hour to immerse your attention in the day's work, the closer you connect your review to your experience, the quicker your creative mind can adapt to the challenge.

Musicians call it "muscle memory" and sports stars call it "feeling for the game". What's really happening is you're learning what works and repeating that positive feedback as often as possible. Beginners usually fall into the trap of failing to see the success in their work, instead worrying about how many images don't meet their expectations. Professionals only share a fraction of what they keep, and keep a fraction of what they shoot. To maximise your learning curve,

you need to isolate the frames that reveal your best efforts and consciously reward yourself.

**Learn from your mistakes**

Ironically, you also need to pay some attention to the failures, but only in the right context. Review a particular scene, location or day of shooting and ask yourself: "What could I have done differently?"

Professionals spend a lot of time reviewing their commercial sets in search for gaps, and they set about filling those gaps at the very next opportunity. They create the habit of making a mental shopping list of subjects, techniques or styles to implement on the next attempt. »

**“The more eager you are to examine your mistakes, the quicker you will learn from them and experiment with different ideas”**



■ Market mayhem  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/500sec; f/11; ISO 1600;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

The more eager you are to examine your mistakes, the quicker you will learn from them and experiment with different ideas.

**Technique versus talent**

Many people over-emphasise the importance of technical skill when getting into photography, as though this is the essential foundation for great photos. It isn't. The more you know about the camera the more techniques you can employ, that is true, but plenty of people pick up a DSLR with absolutely no prior knowledge and within weeks are shooting lovely images rich in composition and subjective interest.

Letting go of the technical pursuit is not just a nice idea, it can be a powerful technique in itself. When I find myself hitting the wall with “photographers’ block”, I have a mental switch to jolt me out of the funk. I set my preview to render black and white only, kick up the contrast,

add an extra 2/3rds of a stop of exposure compensation and dial down my f-stop to the minimum. I call it the “low-fi mode”, which produces harsh monochrome images that are slightly overexposed and packed with contrast.

**Playing fast and loose**

When I enter low-fi shooting, I'm making a conscious choice to chill out on the photography and shoot with abandon. I take the mental arithmetic out of the equation and just relax with the camera, even shooting frames from the hip without bothering to examine the viewfinder. Once free of the burden of trying to shoot a perfect frame, I start getting creative with the gear. I can play with slow shutters, shoot from ankle height, chase chickens or experiment with light bulbs. With a high quality screen on the back of a DSLR, you get strong feedback on which of your experiments have worked the best.



■ Night lights  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
8/10sec; f/13; ISO 3200;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

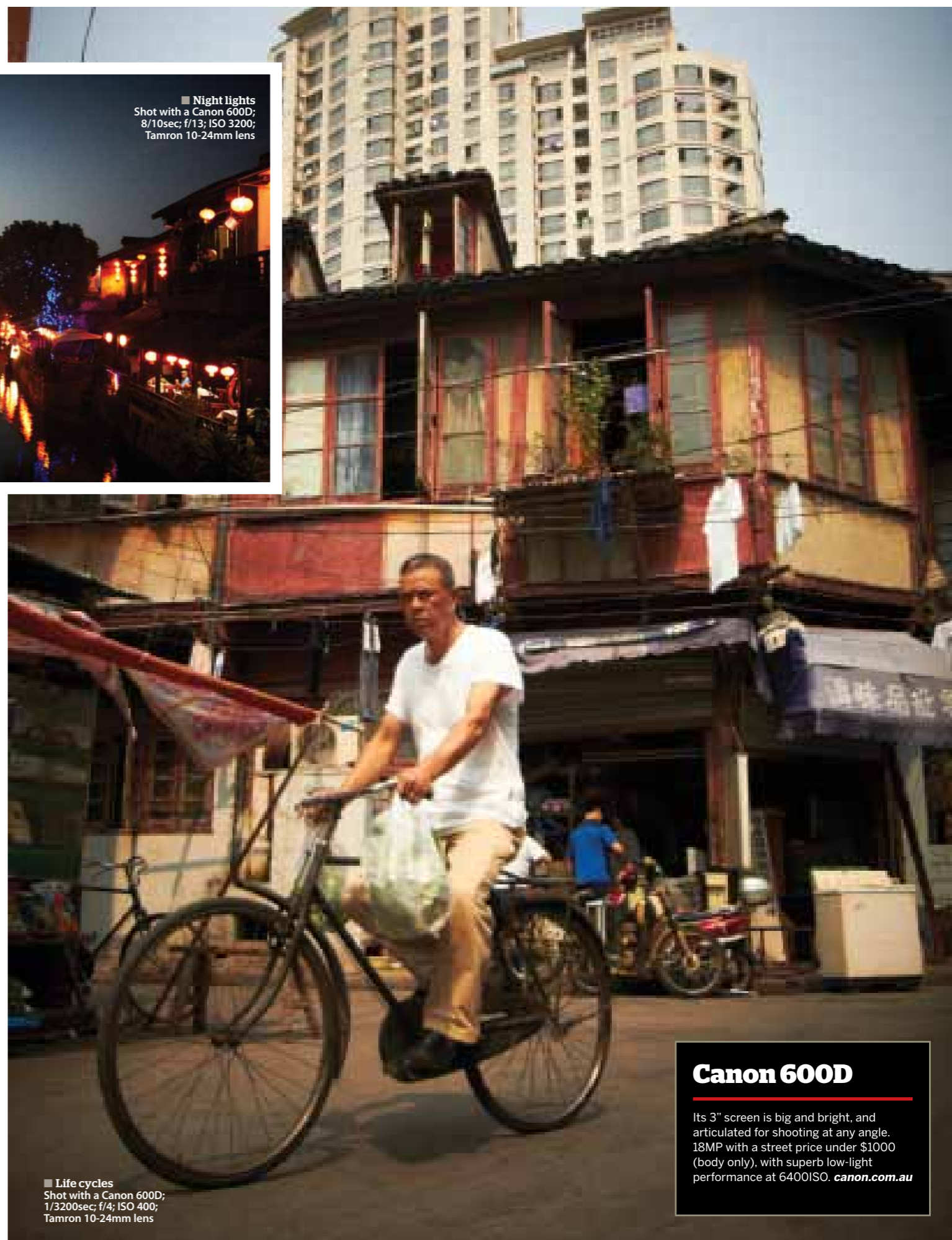
**ADVANCED TIP No.3  
WIDE INFLUENCES**

The more you expose yourself to artistic influences, the more inspiration that will creep into your work. Studying works by great painters, master photographers and other artists will help feed your subconscious collection of ideas. Appreciation of aesthetics is not limited to one field of visual arts. Watching a Tim Burton movie, for example, always makes me want to experiment with more subdued colour ranges, while visiting a Picasso exhibition makes me yearn for bright hues and strong lines.

Somewhere in that mix might be a real gem, or perhaps they'll all be rubbish. Who cares! The point is to tinker with the dials and see what they do. Low-fi also invites mistakes along with experiment, giving you a chance to see what happens when you get it really wrong. We learn faster by making really big mistakes than by receiving constant praise. By taking the effort to learn from those mistakes, and see results from our efforts, we lock in what we learn and are ready to move on to the next challenge.

In the absence of quality feedback, we learn more slowly. Waiting a week to see a roll of film processed is no longer a problem, but a poor quality screen on your DSLR can seriously slow down your absorption of new skills. Expanding your review to bigger and better interfaces like a laptop or tablet adds yet more opportunity to refine your learning curve.

Seeing is believing.



■ Life cycles  
Shot with a Canon 600D;  
1/3200sec; f/4; ISO 400;  
Tamron 10-24mm lens

**Canon 600D**

Its 3" screen is big and bright, and articulated for shooting at any angle. 18MP with a street price under \$1000 (body only), with superb low-light performance at 6400ISO. [canon.com.au](http://canon.com.au)