

LIGHTING TECHNIQUE

The Angle of Light

Cameras don't photograph objects, they photograph light. The key to shooting images that capture the moment is to let the light guide your photography. Words and images by **Ewen Bell**.



ONE OF MY GUIDING PRINCIPLES for travel photography is to look for the light. Regardless of how enthralling an object might be, the light is what makes an interesting photo. In the absence of a studio and flash gear, I work with natural light and I get the best results when I simply let the light guide me.

Light comes in many qualities and each adds a different character to a scene. Sunsets at dusk, shade on a sunny day, bright skies filtered beneath a cheese cloth, strong silhouettes turned black by the sun.

In every kind of light, I'm still looking for one essential ingredient: the angle of the light.

Wide open spaces

Landscape scenes often rely on strong light and clear skies for bold colours to emerge, but those colours are only as bold as the angle of light will allow. If you shoot with the sun directly at your back, expect to get flat contrast and muted tones. Shoot across the light and you reveal the true colour and contrast of your scene.

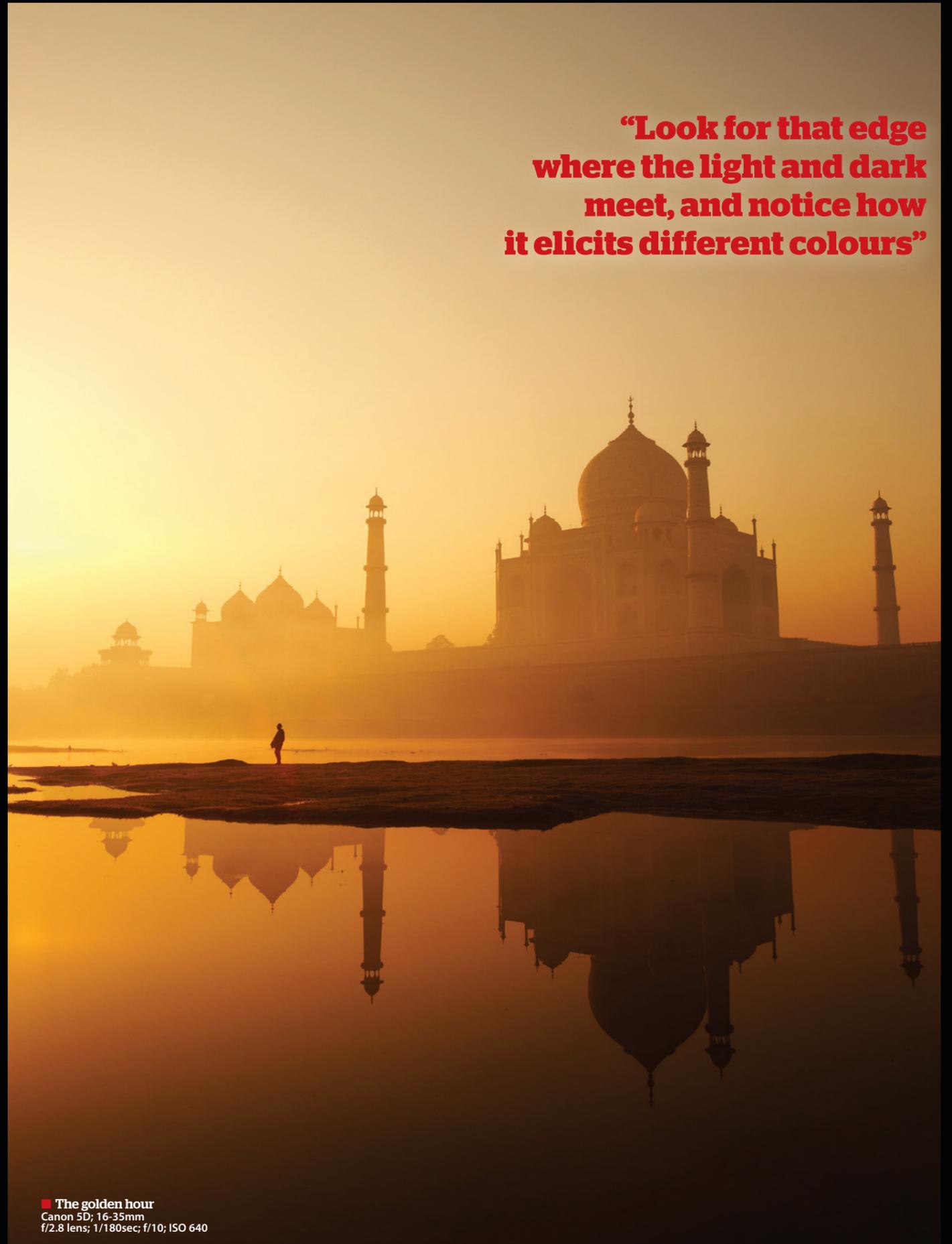
Late in the day the evening skies build colour for landscape work too, and here again the choice of following the sun or shooting into it is usually pretty clear. You get a different experience of sunset according to your angle into the sun, or across it. Sunsets are usually more vivid with warm colours than sunrise because the angle of light passing

HISTOGRAM HISTORY

Don't be afraid to reject your camera's histogram display and shoot outside the box. Histograms are great for keeping things nice and normal, but who wants to be normal when you can be interesting? Letting elements of the frame blow out, over expose or disappear into the black is part of how you play with the light.



■ **Across the angle**
Canon 40D; EF50mm f/2.5 lens; 1/800sec; f/5; ISO 200



“Look for that edge where the light and dark meet, and notice how it elicits different colours”

■ **The golden hour**
Canon 5D; 16-35mm f/2.8 lens; 1/180sec; f/10; ISO 640



“A fascinating object in bad light is not as attractive as an ordinary object in great light”

light. Super low angles of soft light throw long shadows within a gentle range of stops.

In the shadows

My favourite angle of light is easy to find almost throughout the day. When the sun is blazing away high above, people naturally take shelter, and standing inside a doorway, a window or sitting on a porch the light is often truly lovely. Shelter from the sun creates an effect similar to a giant studio soft-box, both soft and angled. For portraits there is no easier light to work with – or to locate.

When shooting in markets, you see this effect a lot too. On the edge of a big covered market, the sheltered sections are in the shadow, yet retain brightness. The light bouncing in from beyond the shelter throws a softer light across the scene, and all you have to do is change your angle of shooting to generate an angle of light. Stand with the light at your back and the images are flat, but shoot parallel to the outside light and you start getting diversity in the scene.

Some elements catch the light, colour tones get saturated, and as you tilt towards the intense outside world you can flood the background to emphasise the bright field around the scene. Look for that edge where the light and dark meet, and notice how it elicits different colours from different subjects.

This kind of light is perfect for the complex

scenes of a busy market, letting some subjects pop out of the frame while others are washed away into the background.

Black & White

Colour can be misleading to our aesthetic senses and the true essence of light is often best revealed in Black & White. Grey tones are what matter for a good exposure, not colour tones, and a splash of bright hues can distract you easily from what the light is really doing.

The essence of Black & White photography is building composition with light. There is nothing left but an absence or presence, just degrees of variation. In the absence of colour information, the impact of contrast becomes far more tangible. You can more easily see what the light is doing and be more conscientious about the character of light you are working with.

Depending on the style you're shooting for, too much or too little contrast will detract from the image. If you like working in Black & White you may already appreciate that there is a little more headroom when shooting high-contrast light. Your RGB sensors are effectively capturing three times the information you need for a grey-scale rendition, and you often need to boost contrast a little compared to a colour treatment of the same frame.

through a hazy heated atmosphere blocks certain wavelengths.

In that hour after sunrise, the sun gains strength and turns from warm to white. During this period you can often shoot towards the sun and let your colours wash out in the excess of light. It's a different objective to building rich colours, but an effect I really like.

The first few minutes after sunrise offer a unique opportunity, not only because direct light is still very weak and soft, but because the angle across the landscape is dramatically low. It throws a unique perspective on villages, portraits and still life. I once shot an exhibition in the Australian Outback based on leaves and grass photographed in the first few minutes of



Wide and open
Canon 5D; EF50mm f/2.5 lens;
1/180sec; f/10; ISO 200



In the shadows
Canon 5D; EF50mm
f/2.5 lens; 1/180sec;
f/8; ISO 200



RAW PREVIEW

When shooting RAW, you can set your on camera preview to use a Black & White rendition. This not only gives you a hint at what a B+W processing might yield, but highlights the grey tones instead of the colour tones. Only the thumbnail preview or backup JPEG will be affected; the RAW file remains untouched and original.



■ Working with harsh light
 Canon 5D; EF50mm f/2.5 lens;
 1/180sec; f/11; ISO 200

Even if you don't intend to process your images in Black & White, using the monochrome preview option can help train your eye to look more closely at the light. Setting the preview rendering (Picture Control for Nikon, Picture Style for Canon) in the camera menu converts your JPEG captures but not the RAW file.

You get to preserve a digital original for future

processing, but use the Black & White information to guide your shooting.

Bright is beautiful

The most dramatic angle of light is the silhouette, an effect created by letting a strongly backlit scene dominate the exposure. Strong light and sharp focus on the subject outline make for a strong

silhouette, so getting the light rushing forward from directly behind your subject is essential.

When shooting portraits on a brightly lit day, I can still turn the sun to my advantage. I place my subject with their back to the sun until their entire face is hidden by their own shadow. Simply expose for that shadow, let the background blow out and you get soft skin tones that move out of the wild brightness of the background. Silky tones contrast with the snarling sun. Bright sections behind the subject blow out and fringe elements between the light and dark turn vivid hues. I don't fear letting parts of a frame blow out entirely; I don't let the histogram determine my exposures.

This is critical when working with light, because our camera systems are designed to seek an average, to pick the middle ground. Usually I want something interesting instead of something average. That's when I look for the angle of light to throw a little character onto my subjects.

When I let the light guide me, I'm seeking the angle of light. Cameras capture light, not objects, and so I look for light not subjects. A fascinating object in bad light is not as attractive as an ordinary object in great light. Another way to look at this is matching the right light with the object. Given a certain kind of light to work with, you'll find some subjects more interesting than others.

Photographic work is all about the light.

“I don't fear letting parts of a frame blow out entirely; I don't let the histogram determine my exposures”



ISO, I SAID

The ability to shoot in modest light conditions is one of the great gifts photographers have gained with digital cameras. Soft shadows and subtle light variations can be captured with quality in low light conditions. Low light can be playful; no light can be dull, however. Shooting in the dark might be technically possible, but you still want enough light to bring character into the composition.

■ Don't fear blowouts
 Canon 5D; EF50mm f/2.5 lens;
 1/1500sec; f/2.5; ISO 200