Travelling light

35mm, 1/5000 at f/2.8, ISO 200

Professional photographer **James Morgan** offers some pointers on getting better results from different styles of travel photography

I first got into adventure travel photography while going to university in Reykjavik, Iceland. The light there is hard to control, but if you get it right it's absolutely breathtaking. Every weekend I was out hiking the glaciers and exploring the coastline. I ended up selling quite a few of the images to various travel companies and magazines and all of a sudden it became a feasible way of supporting myself. I've pretty much been on the road ever since, getting to places and seeing things I wouldn't otherwise have ever had the chance to see.

Environmental portraits

These are the foundation of my work as a travel photographer, serving as a link between my subjects and their context. The image above is from a story about a Kazakh family who use eagles to hunt for foxes and other large prey in the Altai Mountains of western Mongolia.

In my opinion it's crucial to involve the subject as much as possible in choosing a location. Photographs in which the subject is an active participant of the creative process always come out better – after all, it's their story you're trying to tell.

Technically, the main challenge of environmental portraiture is in setting an aperture and shutter speed which enable your subject to interact with the background in a way that serves the meaning you're trying to convey. In this image I was keen to portray the hunter, Kwanduk, as being in harmony with his eagle and horse but somewhat alienated from the barren landscape of the Mongolian mountains.

Landscapes

I like to photograph big open landscapes using wide focal lengths and narrow apertures (higher numbers, remember apertures are fractions). The narrow aperture gives a good depth of field, keeping the landscape in focus from the foreground through to the background. It means, however, that there is less light available and so the shutter speed has to drop accordingly.

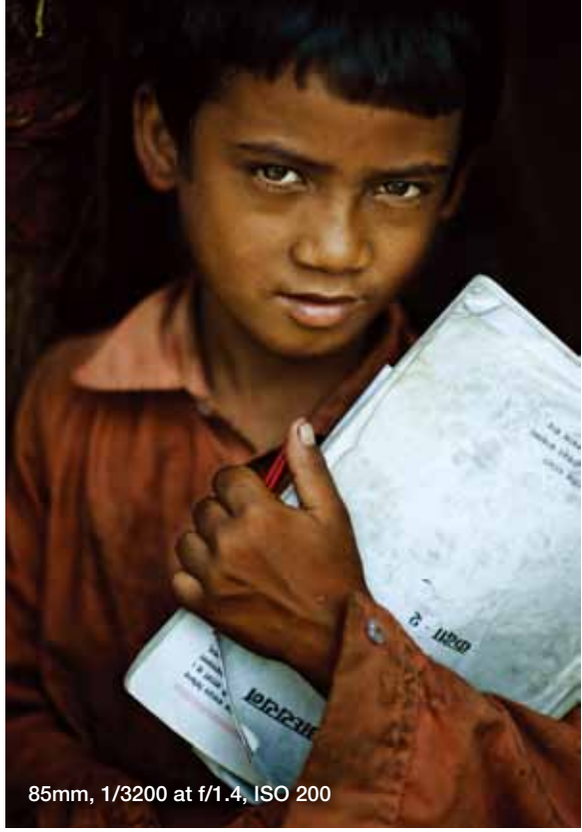
Fortunately in this photograph there was plenty of clean Siberian light, helped by the fact that all the shattered ice bounced light back up into the frame, and so I was able to shoot handheld at 1/250. If there had been less light I would have had to either use a tripod or push the ISO.

Modern DSLRs keep expanding the boundaries of usable ISO – my camera claims to be able to photograph at ISO 102,400! The reality is that I rarely use it above 1600 and I've never seen anything over 3200 that I'd feel comfortable publishing.

Another key part of landscape photography, with its many widely scattered elements, is finding common ground between highlighted and shadowed areas. A lot can be done in Photoshop later – the Dodge and Burn tools are particularly effective in localised exposure adjustment. But in order to maintain the dynamic range of this image I used a polarising filter to bring some depth back into the sky (the filter cuts the reflection of sunlight on moisture in the sky) and reign in some highlights by killing the reflection of sunlight on the ice shards in the foreground.

Seated portraits

Many travel photographers use a combination of zoom lenses in order to give them maximum versatility and reduce the need for swapping lenses as the action is unfolding. Personally though, I use almost exclusively prime lenses (lenses with a fixed focal length) for all my work, but especially for formal portraiture.



85mm, 1/3200 at f/1.4, ISO 200

There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, primes allow you to shoot at much wider apertures (right down to f/1.4) giving you the option of a hair's-breadth depth of field. You can see here that the young boy's eyes and hand are sharp whilst the focus quickly drops off as your eye moves back to his temples or down to his neck line. This is what gives the image depth and gives the subject the immediacy I was after.

Secondly, in order for zoom lenses to work at different focal lengths they have movable optic elements that are inevitably not as good quality as static glass. I regularly use a 14-24mm zoom

17mm, 1/250 at f/16, ISO 200

600mm, 1/1000 at f/6.3, ISO 200

for high-end professional work, but to me, images from a prime lens have an aesthetic quality that you just can't get from zoom lenses – no matter how much lens manufacturers try to convince you otherwise!

Capturing action

Shutter speed-priority – where you choose the shutter speed and the camera sets the corresponding aperture – is obviously useful when you're shooting a situation that is changing rapidly. For this image I tied my shutter speed to 1/1000sec in order to ensure that every frame froze the action, catching individual water droplets as Pepen Hendrix tore up the waves that morning.

I often borrow a 600mm prime lens for surf photography. Unfortunately it's not a lens I can practically incorporate into my general travel equipment due to its size (it weighs about 5kg), not to mention its price (about US$10,000). If you need a long telephoto for shooting surf from the beach or a biker from a distance, and this lens isn't an option, you can try a teleconverter. Nikon and Canon both make 1.4x and 2.0x converters which attach to your lens and multiply their focal lengths. You usually lose a stop or so on the exposure, but this is less of a problem with modern ISO capabilities and the introduction of image stabilisation and vibration reduction lenses.

Underwater

Shooting underwater poses all sorts of challenges which affect the hardware you will need. If you are happy to shoot film, you can still pick up Nikonos cameras, a series of rangefinders that were made in the 1960s and can be fully submerged without the need for a housing. Otherwise, you can either use underwater compact cameras or buy a housing for your DSLR.

The first thing to know about underwater photography is that focal lengths are squeezed, so that an 18mm lens will look more like a 35mm etc. The other problem is that colours drop out of the spectrum quickly, even when in crystal-clear tropical waters. It's almost impossible to get full-colour rendition using natural light alone at depths of more than 5-7m. The solution is to use very wide lenses, and, if photographing at any depth, to use submergible underwater strobes.

In this image I've used a 16mm fisheye lens in an 8inch dome port. I've also lifted the ISO to 1600 in order to keep a fast shutter speed despite the fact that the water has filtered out a lot of the natural light. Another trick I've employed is setting the focus to manual and taping the focus ring to around 30cm or so. It's very difficult for a camera's autofocus to pick out focus points underwater, particularly when you have an entire village of Papuan children diving in on top of you.

Post processing

I shoot all my images as RAW files and then convert them to TIFFs. Post-production is a crucial stage in the process and I use ACR – Adobe's Camera Raw, a part of Photoshop – to correct levels, alter contrast and control localised exposure, dodging and burning, white balance, black and white conversion etc.

Post-production has come a long way since processing film in the dark room but, along with all the new possibilities, come a new set of pitfalls. It's all subjective of course, and the aesthetics are constantly evolving, but a quick tour of Flickr reveals how wrong you can go. There's no doubt that there are some great artists working in the realm where photography and digital art overlap but I prefer to stick within the guidelines of journalistic practice – not adding/removing elements to the photo and not compositing exposures.

You can process a batch of images used solely the slider controls in ACR, but sometimes it's necessary to open Photoshop itself to do the final adjustments. Most of the work I do there revolves around these three tools:

Levels: An adjustable histogram that enables you to set white and black points as well as adjust the overall exposure of the image. This is useful as it enables you to pull back on blown highlights and to readjust the median exposure accordingly.

Curves: This tool enables you to make very precise adjustments to contrast in certain areas of an image by increasing the value of specific points across its entire tonal range. If you're working with a large number of photos shot in similar light you can cut corners by saving a 'curve pattern' and applying it as a default to subsequent images.

Dodging/Burning: This is the equivalent of dodging and burning with chemicals in the darkroom. Dodging lightens areas while burning deepens shadows and brings in highlights. This is the most controlled way of adding contrast to an image and is great for bringing out really fine detail. ΔΔ

16mm, 1/8000 at f3.2, ISO 1600