

Pre-visualisation & Lenses



Having the Right Focus for Great Images

By Nick Melidonis

Impact in landscapes can come from many elements; great light, mood, expressive skies, seeing the ordinary as extraordinary, strong design and composition to name a few. Most successful landscape photographers whom I know have the power of pre-visualisation, that is, the ability to see beyond the literal at the point of capture to an image that exists in their mind's eye. They can see the finished product after enhancement, dodging, burning, tonal and colour adjustment etc.

Pre-visualisation is one of the most powerful creative elements and one of the most difficult to

master, and as we will see in a moment, the right choice of lens has a part to play in the process.

The great American landscape photographer, Ansel Adams once said, *"If I feel something strongly, I would make a photograph equivalent of what I saw and felt. When I'm ready to make a photograph, I see in my mind's eye something that is not literally there in the true meaning of the word. I'm interested in expressing something which is built up from within rather than extracted from without."*

Adams was a master of manipulating the contrast of his negatives during processing and his

This was a grab shot while doing an assignment in Melbourne. The stark pylons against the storm clouds and the monochromatic nature of the scene made me pre-visualise a simple, split-toned blue and sepia image. I chose a medium telephoto lens (150mm) to compress the pylons and retain a strong graphic feel with repetition of the shapes. Canon5D, f10 @ 1/500 second.



legendary techniques of dodging, burning, selenium toning etc produced amazing prints with great tonal values, clarity and detail. Yet the final outcome never existed in nature. It was pre-visualised at the point of capture and produced in the darkroom, and all this well before the digital age and Photoshop came along. It makes an interesting point to ponder when you encounter the next big debate on 'truth in photography'. Ansel died in 1984. If he were alive today, he would have devoured the endless possibilities that digital technology affords us and he would have probably transformed the process as he did the wet darkroom.

What pre-requisites do you need to maximise pre-visualisation? In my opinion, you need to develop mastery in three areas:

1. Know your camera and equipment. You must understand all the creative controls available to you including, as we'll see below, how your lenses see and distort the landscapes around you. Camera technique should be a given.
2. Understand what technology and tools are available to you. If you can pre-visualise what your landscape images will look like, you must have the technical skills to produce and print the final result.
3. Have an extensive mental store of great images as benchmarks. Seeing lots of great landscapes by talented photographers whom you admire (books, exhibitions, and workshops) will provide the look, feel and treatment you desire for your image at the moment of capture. *Better Photography* prides itself in bringing to you some of the best photographers in Australia who share their images and techniques to give you the benchmarks and skills you need. Learn from them and then develop your own style and interpretation.

Pre-Visualisation and Lenses

When I see a landscape in my mind's eye, I am already making a choice of which lens to use in a similar way a golfer intuitively knows which club to select. The difference here is that I can pre-visualise several images by using different lenses.

Most lenses see differently to our eyes and distort the world. A focal length of 50-55mm is considered 'normal' (for 35mm film cameras or full size sensors) and give a perspective similar to what the eye sees. Focal lengths of less than 50mm (e.g. 28mm, 24mm, and 16mm) are in wide-angle country and with focal lengths of greater than 50mm, you are in telephoto country. I tend to use extremes in wide-angle and telephoto lenses for impact and this can often turn an ordinary landscape into an extraordinary one.

Wide Angle Lenses

Shoot a scene with an extreme wide-angle lens and you will expand your view to get an amazing sense



Dead Vlei, Sossuvlei dunes, Namibia. Canon 5D, f9 @ 1/160 second. I chose a medium wide-angle lens (35mm) to provide good depth with minimum distortion. Note the foreground pattern in the cracked earth and the old twigs to give a sense of perspective to the image. I liked the simple elements in this image with contrasting red dunes and blue sky.

of space. Foregrounds become very prominent while backgrounds appear to stretch out to infinity and become very small. Wide-angle lenses also give you a great depth-of-field and along with an expanded perspective, are well suited to landscapes of large open spaces, seascapes or landscape features where you can't move back far enough to capture most of the scene.

Often a very desirable element in a wide-angle photograph is an interesting object in the foreground, (see above photo), or shooting patterns



Entrance to the Namib dune area, Namibia. Canon 5D, f13 @ 1/125 second. The 400mm lens compressed the undulating road flanked by a seemingly endless fence on both sides. The car was included to give a sense of scale. Image compression formed by long focal length lenses can often provide interesting perspective different to what the eye perceives.

and shapes such as ripples in a sand dune that seem to go on forever.

Telephoto Lenses

Using long telephoto lenses, such as a 400mm, will 'compress' an image. The background looms larger than life and becomes very prominent compared to the foreground. This can give an interesting effect, for example, to roads and fences that can lead from

the foreground well into the distance. Long telephoto lenses can also select an area in the background that you want to make your centre of interest. An example is a shaft of light through the clouds on a mountain village on the far horizon.

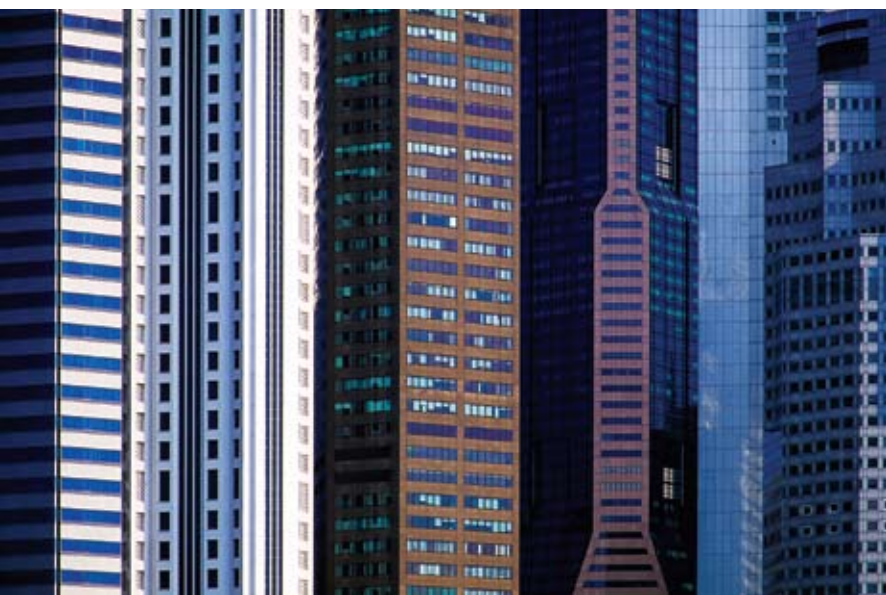
Telephoto lenses produce shallow depth-of-field compared to wide-angle lenses. That fact can become a creative choice if you want to make a face prominent against an out-of-focus background, but problematic if you want to get a large depth-of-field. In the latter case you would need a very small aperture and probably a sturdy tripod to handle the resulting slow shutter speed.

Normal Lenses

On a full size sensor SLR, I often use focal lengths of 35mm to 80mm to shoot a series of overlapping images to stitch together as a panorama (see my previous two articles in *Better Photography*). This produces a very pleasing panorama with a perspective similar to what the eye sees and similar to shooting with true panorama cameras such as the Fuji GX617 or the Hasselblad X-pan. Contrast that with the perspective you obtain when shooting with an extreme wide-angle lens and cropping the top and bottom of the image. The former approach is usually more successful and with more pixels produces a higher quality image.

Normal focal lengths as macro lenses are also fun to use in what I call micro-landscapes. Patterns and textures can take the appearance of landscapes and create a curiosity factor for the viewer.

To sum up, develop and use the powerful



Singapore Skyline. Canon EOS 3, Fuji Velvia, 400mm lens. Telephoto lenses are excellent in selecting and exploring a small portion of a larger whole. The skyline stretching out before me was very busy and cluttered. I pre-visualised a tight, generic, iconic skyline image comprised mainly of squares and rectangles that make a statement about high rise living anywhere in the world.

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with Richard White

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Richard White has been involved in photography for over 25 years. He is a Double Master of Photography with the AIPP, an experienced teacher and lecturer and has taught workshops locally and overseas since 1995. In 2003 he received a Victorian Arts Council Grant for overseas study and won the Victorian AIPP Landscape Photographer of the Year Award. He is also a master darkroom printer, an exhibitor of landscape photography and is collected Australia wide.

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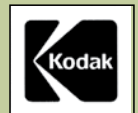
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Jackie Ranken

Master Australian Institute of Professional Photography.
Fellow New Zealand Institute of Professional Photography.
2002 Canon Australian Professional Photographer of the Year.
2002 AIPP Landscape Photographer of the Year.
2003 AIPP Landscape Photographer of the Year.
World press award (2nd Environment stories section)
2005 AIPP Highest scoring print & Photo Book of the year
2007 NSW AIPP Photographer of the Year



Mike Langford

Fellow/Master Australian Institute of Professional Photography.
Fellow New Zealand Institute of Professional Photography.
1992 Australian Geographic Photographer of the Year.
2002 NSW Landscape Photographer of the Year.
2004 NSW Landscape Photographer of the Year.
2006 NZIPP Photographer of the Year, Landscape Photographer.
Corporate, architecture photographer of the Year.
2007 AIPP Landscape Photographer of the Year



Sossuvlei dunes, Namibia. Canon 5D, f11 @ 1/50 second. The 24mm lens stretched the sand ripples which were being made prominent by the shadows of the setting sun. Having shot numerous patterns by nature over the years, it was easy to pre-visualise this prominent foreground against the receding backdrop of the giant dunes.

creative approach of pre-visualisation to produce different landscapes with impact and develop a comprehensive stock of great benchmark images to draw on at different focal lengths.

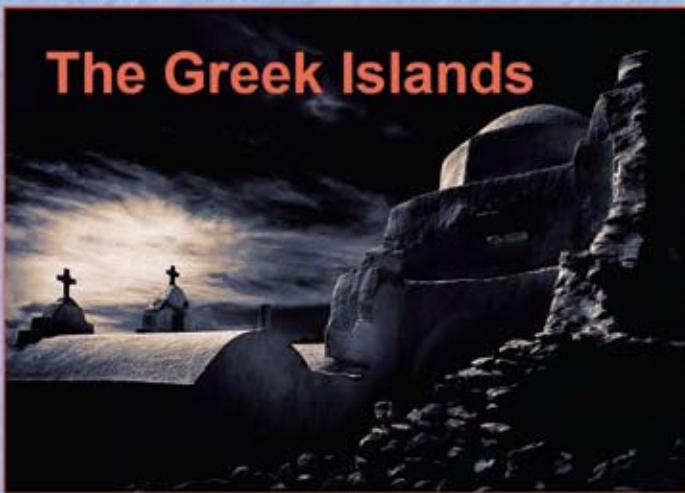
Pre-visualisation requires lots of practice to master and we all get it wrong from time to time, but the rewards are great when it works. Train yourself to see landscapes as your lenses would.

Nick Melidonis is a Master of Photography and has twice won the AIPP Australian Landscape Photographer of the Year. He is also the 2005 WA Landscape Photographer of the Year. Nick leads photo tours to the Greek Islands and in 2008 Andalucía in Spain. He conducts seminars and workshops and is available as a speaker. You can contact Nick at nickphoto@iinet.net.au or visit his website at www.nickmelidonis.com.



Road and field, Melbourne countryside. The ad agency brief called for a road disappearing to 'nowhere'. We needed a happy, blue sky and so this approaching storm shot was rejected. The amazing early morning light on the wet, lush grass and the yellow road made a very pleasing picture. I shot two versions with a 16mm lens and this one with a 45mm lens. I felt the perspective similar to what the eye sees was the better of the two. Although I pre-visualised a broody image stretching out to infinity, my first instinct was wrong and the medium focal lens gave me a better perspective.

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