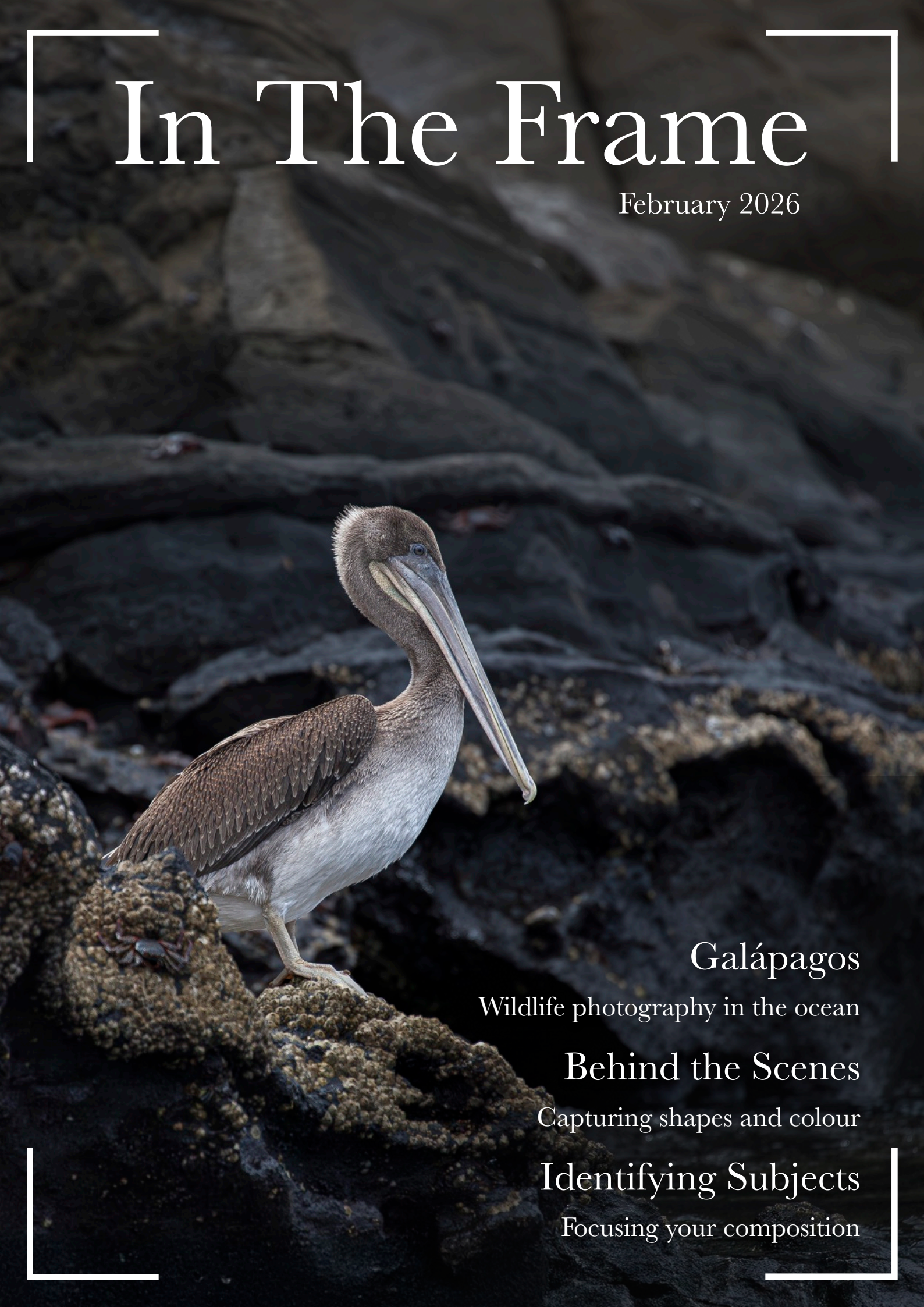
In The Frame

February 2026



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In The Frame

February 2026

Issue 21

Mobile Edition

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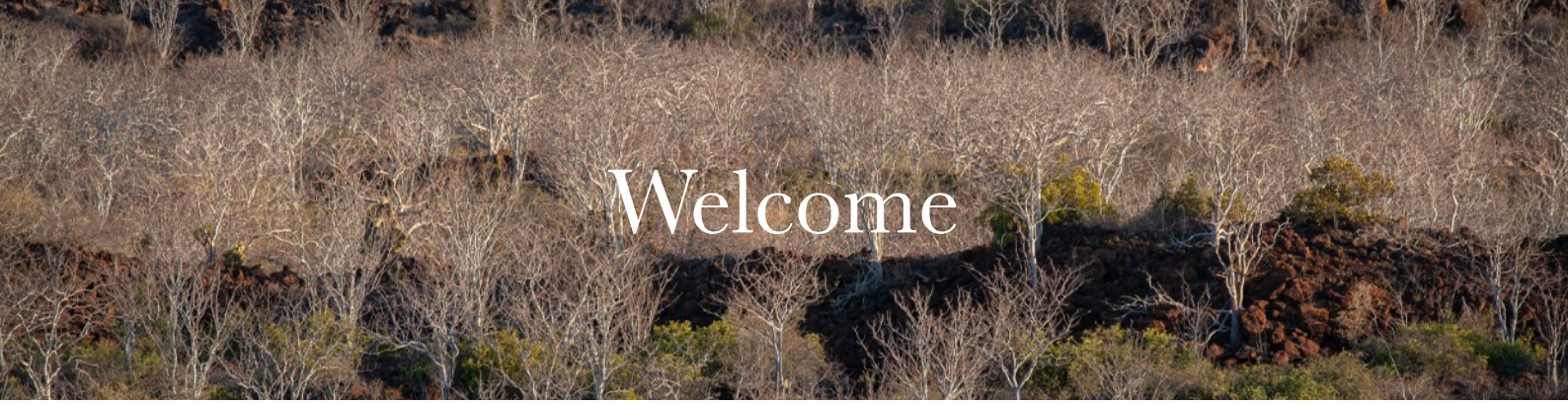
Welcome

Hi, welcome to the February 2026 issue of *In The Frame*.

I've spent a lot of the last month editing, and had a brilliant time revisiting old locations and looking through images I haven't seen since the day I took them. I always think that leaving some time between a shoot and adjusting an image can give you a fresh perspective, and sometimes it's easier to understand what you were trying to capture with a little distance.

That said, I sometimes leave things for months after an intense trip, gradually returning to the images as they sit like a guilty pile on my hard drive. Editing is such a different activity to photography, usually at home in a dark room rather than outdoors and exploring in nature. It's strange how these two form halves of the same process, and I often put off editing, only to find that I really enjoy it once I've started.



Welcome

I am ready to be out with the camera again, though, and I'll be in Lofoten at the end of February, my favourite time of year to be in the north. Where I live in the southwest of the UK, we've had barely any snow recently, and I'm hoping for a full experience of Arctic winter, perhaps with a little clear sky and light.

This month in the magazine, we head to the incredible location of the Galápagos, which I explored around ten years ago on a trip focused on wildlife photography. We examine a colourful image from Lofoten, which was a stroke of luck, as there are a few things I'd have changed, and I may have an opportunity to try again this month. Finally, we expand on the ideas from last month's issue on visual weight, with an article about understanding the subject of your image.

I hope you like this issue, and thank you for reading.

Kevin

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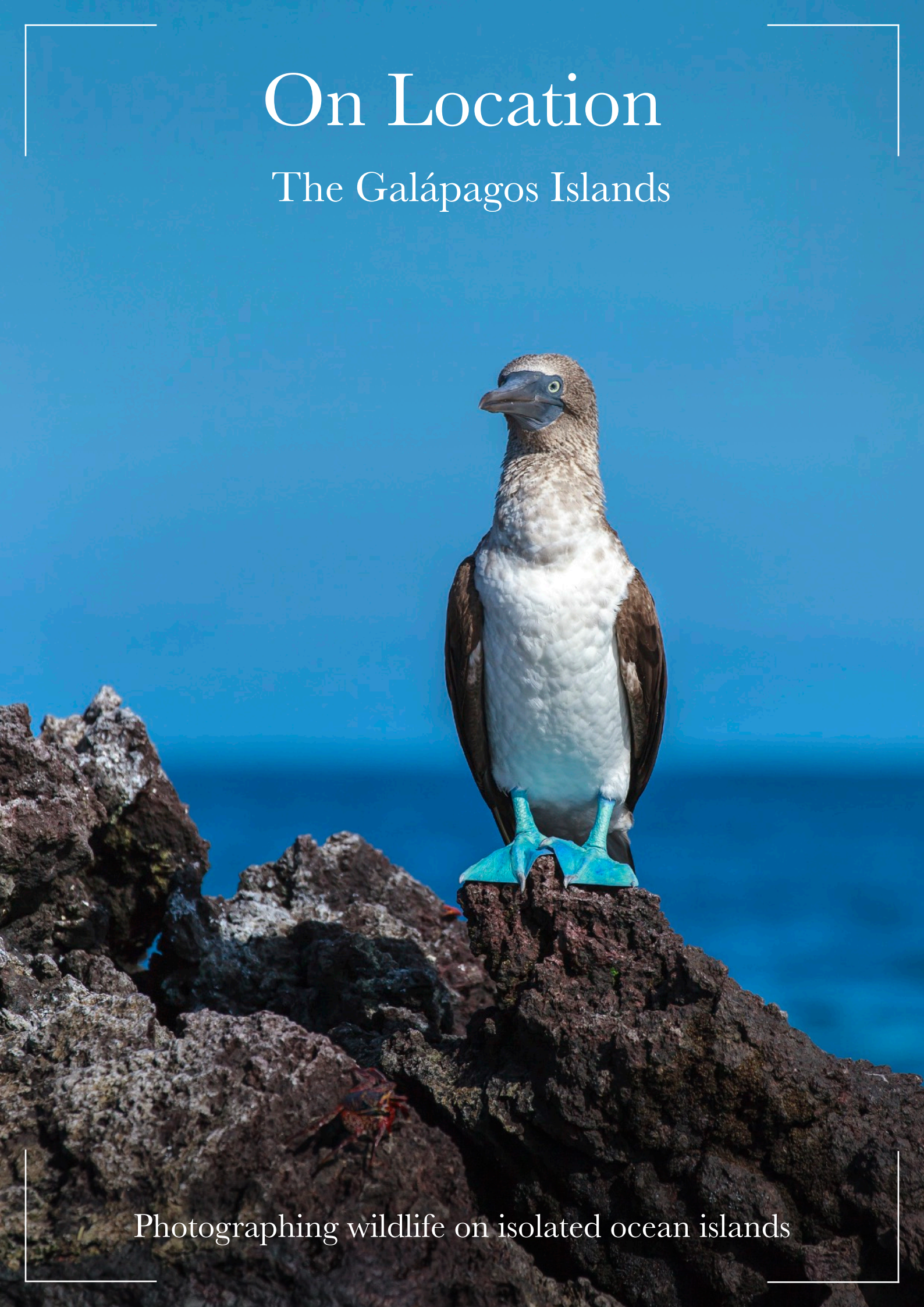


Photographing wildlife on isolated ocean islands

Introduction

I have always been drawn to South America, and have spent months exploring different parts of the continent. Many of my travels there happened before I took photography more seriously, so I have fewer strong portfolio images from Brazil, Peru and other regions outside Patagonia. However, it's hard to take bad pictures in the Galápagos Islands.

One of the most exciting things about travel in South America is the collection of incredible natural and historic sights found in every country. It has the Atacama Desert and Machu Picchu, Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia and the sprawling city of Rio de Janeiro. On a continent which includes the fjords of Chile and the Amazon rainforest, there is always something to discover.

The Galápagos has an almost mythical status among travellers to South America. It's expensive to visit, so many young backpackers don't include it on their itinerary. It's also a long additional journey, with a flight of around two hours and then a lot of boat travel to make the most of the experience. Yet among all the incredible places to visit in South America, Galápagos might be my favourite.

I spent ten days on the islands in 2016, at a time when I was investing more and more time in photography and had just enough experience to capture the islands. However, I was inexperienced with wildlife photography and missed opportunities I'd make more of today. It's unlikely I'll get back to the Galápagos any time soon, but ten years on from my travels, I decided to revisit the images.


Isla Pinta
Isla Marchena
Isla Genovesa
Reserva Marina
de Galápagos
Santiago
Isla Fernandina
Isla Isabela
Isla Baltra
Isla Pinzón
Parque Nacional
Galápagos
Puerto Ayora
Isla Santa Fe
Isla San Cristóbal
Puerto Baquerizo
Moreno
Isla Floreana

History

The Galápagos Islands are a small chain of volcanic islands, 1,000km off the coast of Ecuador and surrounded on all sides by endless open ocean. Eruptions still happen today, gradually changing the shape of the archipelago and creating new parts of the landscape, but it's very rare for visitors to witness any volcanic activity in this heavily restricted terrain.

There are 13 main islands, a few smaller ones, and hundreds of rocks scattered among them. The terrain is flat, the ocean surrounds you, and the Galápagos can feel like the most isolated and remote place on earth. Although there are some visitor facilities, it's always clear that you are a long way from the mainland, and that what you can see is the extent of the world around you.

Conditions on the islands are harsh and there is no known history of indigenous settlement. Their first recorded discovery was in 1535 by Bishop Tomás de Berlanga, who found the Galápagos by accident when his ship drifted off course. British sailors later explored and mapped the islands, famously with Charles Darwin on board HMS Beagle, as part of surveys of the South American coast.

Only four of the islands are inhabited, and the modern conservation programme is comprehensive. Ninety-seven percent of the land is protected, with strict rules covering tourist activity. Food is not permitted on most islands, stepping off trails is prohibited, and there are caps on visitor numbers and ship sizes. You can only visit the uninhabited islands with a licensed guide. Boats operate on a 15-day circuit and must not visit the same landing site twice in one cycle. Although tourism is an important part of the economy that protects the Galápagos, the rules around it minimise impact as far as possible.

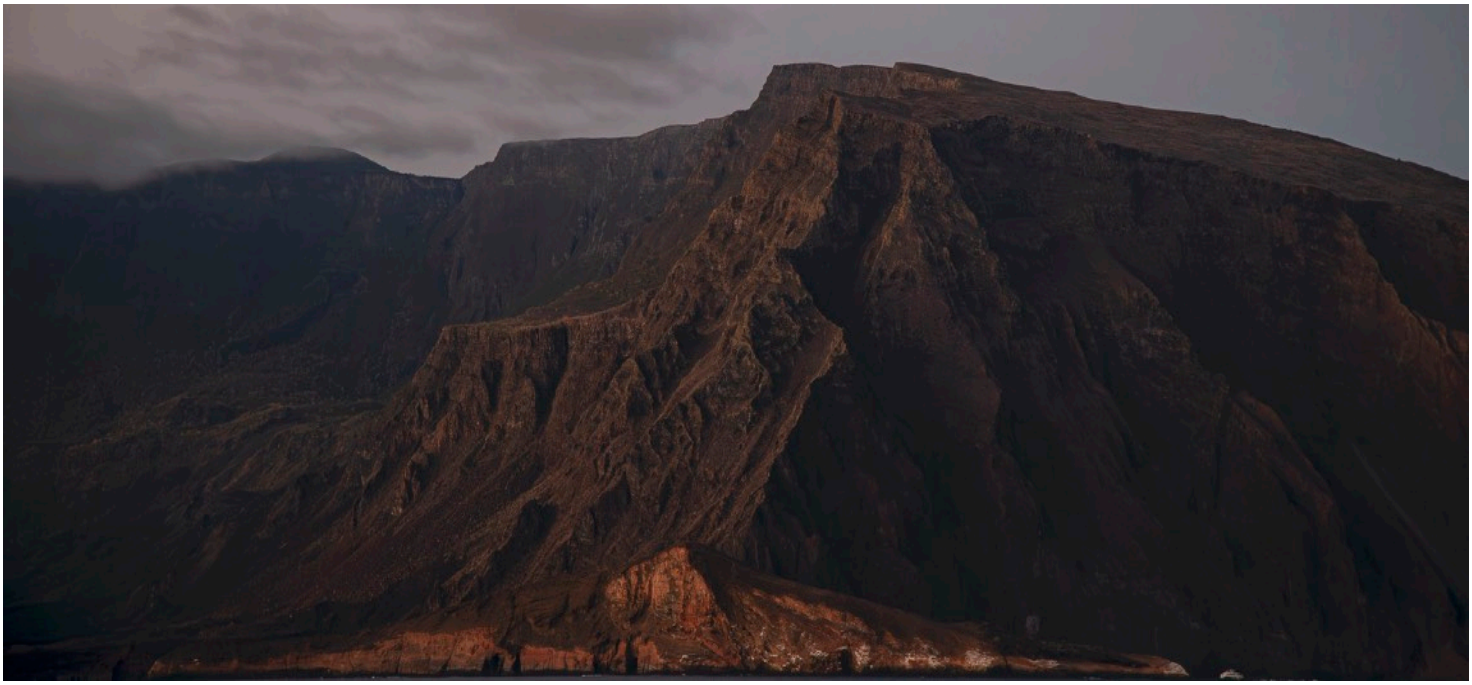
Visiting Galapagos

The conservation rules limiting activity on the Galápagos mean that visiting the islands is one of the most expensive travel experiences in South America, but arranging a trip is fairly easy. There are direct flights from Guayaquil and Quito and, surprisingly, three different airports in the archipelago. Landing involves a disconcerting descent over open ocean until the runway appears at the last moment.

You can book flights and hotels and explore the inhabited islands independently, and you'll still find plenty of wildlife around towns and villages. However, the draw of the Galápagos is the wilderness, and the best way to experience it is on a boat tour of the more remote spots around the archipelago.

My friend and I chose an eight-day tour on a boat carrying 16 people, committing to spend the week in close contact with a small group of strangers for an adventure very different from my usual independent journeys. We would sleep, eat and travel together on the boat, only getting off for short walks on the islands and occasional snorkelling offshore.

I'd flown to Ecuador from the US on a series of tightly timed connections - any delay would have meant missing the boat - so I spent most of the journey worried about traffic and late arrivals. It took more than 24 hours to reach the Galápagos, but the tours are well organised and the airport efficient, so barely two hours passed between descending over the ocean and setting off in a small catamaran toward the first remote island.



Life Onboard

I don’t have much sailing experience aside from a few short tours and occasional overnight stays, so a full week at sea was an intimidating idea. Everything had its place on the boat, from tiny cabins with just enough room for a bunk bed to the main communal area, which served as briefing room, dining area and bar.

There was a neat rhythm to the day: an early breakfast and morning excursion, rest and lunch as we travelled to the next spot, an afternoon landing on shore, then more sailing as we ate and slept. The boat moved frequently, only allowed to stay a short time at each landing site. Some nights we moored in a bay; other nights we skimmed over endless dark water with no land in sight.

The strangest experience was travelling overnight, as the boat rocked and bounced while I tried to stay attached to my tiny bed. Even calm nights can be choppy so far from the mainland, and my dreams were full of odd scenes shaped by the motion. We would watch the sun set over the nearby islands, sleep rocking in our cabins, and wake somewhere entirely new. I never quite knew where I was.

There was no signal of any kind - no phone reception, no TV, no radio - and each evening we played cards by lamplight, spread across the same tables where we ate our meals. Our tour was the ideal size: small enough to know everyone, large enough to break off into groups for deck chats or games indoors.

The Islands

The remote islands of the Galápagos have one of the strangest atmospheres of any place I've visited. Most were barren and flat, with small bushes and grasses among the rocks, muted greens and browns surrounded by the blue of the ocean. Strict visitor limits mean your group is often alone, and the only sounds are wind and the constant calls of birds.

I wasn't expecting to be impressed by the wildlife. Although the islands are famous for rarity and diversity, I worried I might be bored of birds after eight straight days. I have great respect for the patience of birdwatchers, but you often need to bring your own excitement, and I wasn't sure I had the discipline.

Instead, the sheer number and variety of birds was overwhelming. There are flightless cormorants, waved albatrosses, unique species of hawks and doves, enormous pelicans, and of course the hilarious blue-footed booby. At times you must pick your way around lizards or giant flightless birds settled firmly on the path, unbothered by humans. You can look across a small patch of landscape and spot dozens of species scattered between the bushes.

I'd brought a long lens, expecting to spend most of my time photographing small creatures in the distance, but often I was more focused on avoiding wildlife that had wandered too close than searching for subjects on the horizon. The challenge wasn't finding an animal in the barren landscape, it was getting through each stop without trampling on one.

The Shores

Each walk on the islands started at small jetties and landing areas, where we arrived on zodiacs that ferried us to shore from our main vessel. Most of the islands we visited were uninhabited, and the wildlife covered every inch of the terrain, so you had to watch your footing from the moment you arrived. The most difficult to avoid were the iguanas, who had no fear of humans and blended perfectly into the volcanic trails we followed.

We also used the zodiacs to explore the coastline from the water, sometimes spending the morning picking our way around rocks and investigating small coves for the creatures lining the shore. There were enormous, red crabs covering the rocks, and marine iguanas on every available platform and surface.

One of the highlights of Galápagos wildlife is the blue-footed booby, found on many islands in the chain. They don't appear everywhere, and some islands have red-footed boobies instead, but sometimes we would find large groups of these unusual and comic birds. They really are as fun in reality as they appear in pictures, with a permanently confused expression that perfectly matches their vivid blue feet.

Like much of the wildlife here, you don't need to carefully plan a photograph of a blue-footed booby: they'll walk right up to you with no sense of danger. Although I didn't manage to film their one-footed mating display, I was able to capture hundreds of images of them perched on the rocks.

The Ocean

The only time I didn't have my camera while exploring the Galápagos was in the ocean. We started each day with a morning planning session, and sometimes it was snorkelling off the coast rather than walking on the islands. We'd head off on the zodiacs to a quiet spot to explore life underwater.

The wildlife experience was just as dramatic offshore as it was on land. It was easy to find roaming green sea turtles floating in the open ocean, and these animals had no concerns about us strange creatures swimming beside them. While the turtles weren't curious about us, you could lie still and let them swim around you, getting close, but without encroaching on their lives.

The sea lions had a different attitude, sometimes becoming extremely interested in us and finding ways to play. They would swim across me and stare at my snorkel, or watch from a distance as I wandered around looking for creatures on the shore.

One playful sea lion would stop a short distance in front of me, then swim straight towards me and down the length of my body, coming close as if to investigate. It was very clear just how much better they were at manoeuvring in the water, and that I was powerless among them in their world.

Photography

I'm not an experienced wildlife photographer, and capturing the Galápagos was a real challenge. It was a great way to learn a new style of photography, but my clearest memory is trying to make the most of such a rare experience in such a beautiful place.

A tour of the islands isn't ideal for landscape photography; the terrain is mostly flat and time on land is tightly restricted by the rules that protect the environment. The light was often harsh and direct, and we were constantly moving and exploring whenever out with the group.

However, my long lens gave me opportunities to find animals in the distance and frame them within their surroundings. I could look for birds perched on the edge of a rock or surrounded by interesting foliage, and gradually became more skilled at spotting not just wildlife but potential compositions as well.

The pictures I took on that trip are so different from my usual style that I never widely published or used them in any of my projects, and this is the first time I have gathered so many into one place. It didn't start a new direction towards wildlife photography, but the Galápagos remains one of my favourite places in South America.

At just the right angle, Blue Footed Boobies can look almost majestic. Most of the time, though, they look hilariously confused.

The landscape in Galápagos is often sparse, but there are some trees and small bushes that survive in the constant wind

These bright red crabs are everywhere, and their vivid colour helps you avoid standing on them by accident

Conclusion

My trip to the Galápagos had an unexpected epilogue when the tour boat I travelled on exploded and sank two weeks after my visit. The cause was a gas leak while the yacht was between tours, and the incident killed one crew member and injured another. It was unsettling news, and a reminder of the risks people face when living in such a remote environment.

Everything about the Galápagos is fragile, and there's a stark tension between tourism income supporting the communities who live on the islands, and the restrictions that need to be effective to preserve the environment. The tour boats are important sources of work for people who live there, and accidents like this can have a big impact.

Overall, the Galápagos is one of the most organised and thoughtful destinations I have visited when it comes to balancing the competing demands of economy, tourism and the natural environment. We can contribute as visitors by using local companies, donating, and supporting the conservation work on the islands by raising awareness.

The Galápagos is a conservation success story, and the islands' protected landscapes and marine areas support a thriving group of unique species. However, it's an example of just how strict we need to be to protect a fragile environment. Tourism still puts pressure on the islands, and new threats - plastic pollution, climate change and invasive species - continue to emerge. The work to protect the Galápagos will never be finished, but it's amazing to see the results up close.

Behind the Scene

Nusfjord | Lofoten

Capturing shapes and colour in
the huts of Northern Norway

On Location One

Lofoten has the ideal landscape for panoramic views of mountains rising from the ocean, and it's one of my favourite places to explore big open scenes with a wide lens. However, the islands are also covered in traditional colourful huts that have been used by fishing communities for centuries, and they make the perfect subjects for small cosy scenes in the villages.

Many of the huts found in Lofoten today have been converted into (or deliberately built as) accommodation for visitors, but they still have their original design and colours, and they look incredible when set against the harsh snowy backdrops of Norway in winter.

I'm most comfortable with landscape compositions, and the scenes I am drawn to in Lofoten usually include one or two huts as small features in a wider view. However, on this visit to Nusfjord, I wanted to practise getting up close and creating more intimate compositions using details and textures in the buildings.

Nusfjord is well known for its cosy atmosphere and its position in a narrow fjord near the sea. The village has several streets of colourful buildings, and the shore is lined with huts resting on stilts over the water. It can be a busy place during the day as visitors arrive to explore the small shops and restaurants, but I arrived early in the morning with time to wander the quiet lanes.

On Location Two

Sometimes, you can find a particular state of mind when exploring streets with the camera, where you're alert but relaxed, wandering slowly with full attention on the shapes, colours and textures around you. I'm not well practised at photographing village scenes, but the process of looking for small details is similar whether you are exploring woodland, buildings or a collection of rocks on the beach.

Strolling around Nusfjord, I discovered staircases, boats, wooden fences and richly textured walls in shades of red and yellow. The challenge wasn't finding something to shoot, but narrowing down the options until I had something bounded and coherent to use in a composition.

Landscape photography can feel like building an image, but photographing detail is more about stripping things away. It's more like carving a sculpture than painting a picture, and it's easy to become overwhelmed when you're looking for features to capture while also trying to simplify the frame.

Shapes like the end of this fence made great subjects for abstract or geometric compositions, and I liked the layer of snow that had gathered on each piece of wood. However, I was constantly pulled back to the vivid colours of the huts while walking through the village, and I was determined to find a way to capture them against the snow.

Composition One

Many images from Norway include bright red fishing huts along the shore, and they make the perfect burst of colour in otherwise monochrome winter scenes. However, Norwegian architecture uses a wider range of colours, and the practice has a long history with interesting cultural roots.

The bright colours in coastal towns helped sailors identify communities and find their way home, and the paint preserves the wood against the wind and salt spray of the sea. Red paint was cheaper, so yellow and white buildings often signified wealth and status. Even now, larger buildings are more likely to be yellow, whereas the small fishing huts are usually red, though this is mostly a traditional practice and no longer limited by the cost of paint.

Nusfjord has a beautiful collection of colourful buildings in different shapes and sizes, and I kept looking for a spot where I could capture several together. This area by the shore had a walkway running along the harbour, with boats moored alongside a row of red huts and larger yellow buildings behind.

The angles you can reach in Nusfjord are limited, and the village is surrounded by high cliffs, with few options to get above the scene for a wider view. However, I wanted to challenge myself and find an image that focussed on the colours and shapes of the huts, rather than stepping back for my usual wide perspective. The angle I wanted didn't need to contain everything, it just needed to hint at the atmosphere of the village using smaller elements of the architecture and colour.

Composition Two

This small group was perfect for showing the vivid colours and character of Nusfjord. I found an angle off the main harbour where two red huts lined up neatly with larger yellow and white buildings behind them, and I searched for a position where they overlapped.

Usually, I try to separate different subjects and give everything its own space in the frame. However, the huts themselves weren't really my subjects. To focus the image on colour, I needed to fill the frame with the red and white painted walls, joining everything into a single block of colour rather than a set of separate structures.

In editing, I would crop to a wide horizontal format so that the colour could take up even more space in the photograph. This would help to avoid distractions in the sky or foreground, and keep the line of huts as the main feature.

I also liked this position for the different angles, with the central hut pointing diagonally away from the camera. My usual approach is to flatten a scene into two-dimensional shapes by standing in front of it and treating it as a collection of geometric patterns. This composition was more challenging, and it felt right for a session where I was trying to get out of my comfort zone.

Edit One

My first edit to this image was targeted at the piece of sky above the red huts.

This was not a good sky for the scene, and it was the main area of compromise in the image. I was focussed on my walk, trying to find details and shapes in Nusfjord, and looking for different kinds of subject and composition. However, I had limited control over the weather and only one good opportunity to explore the village on this trip.

The darker cloud directly behind the huts allows the roofs to stand out against the background, providing a strong backdrop to the scene. However, the bright line on the edge of the cloud draws attention, and the rich blue sky in the top corner introduces new colours that distract from the reds and yellows in the middle of the frame.

I darkened and reduced colour in the sky as much as possible, but there was a limit to how much editing would be realistic. I concluded it was better to accept a slightly distracting natural sky than an unrealistic one that draws attention to bad editing.

The only way to complete this image would be to shoot it again under an overcast sky, but I hadn't fully appreciated the problem on location and lost the chance to improve the shot. I have since discovered that the building on the left has been fully painted yellow, and I hope to return to Nusfjord in February for a second attempt.

Edit Two

The next stage of editing focussed on the colours and textures of the huts. Building an image around colour gave me more flexibility to enhance the tones in the buildings, and to push the editing further than I might have done otherwise.

I wanted viewers to see the vivid yellow and red walls that stand out against the monochrome of Lofoten in midwinter. This final presentation of the huts is a little more vivid than they appeared in real life, but it emphasised the differences between the huts and their surroundings.

Edit Three

Breaking down the thinking behind an image can be incredibly useful, and I often learn something new about a photograph while writing these articles. Editing and explaining the sky was more difficult than I'd anticipated, and I began to wonder how different the scene might have been without that patch of blue.

I mocked up an alternative version to show the difference, using the sky from a photograph taken nearby. With grey cloud in the background, the huts stand out clearly against the surroundings, and there's nothing to compete with their red and yellow finish. This is much closer to the photograph in my head, and a better way to focus a viewer on colour.

When we are shooting a new kind of subject, as I was in Nusfjord, it's easy to forget other things as we focus on areas that are new and unfamiliar. I usually pay close attention to the sky, but all my attention had been on finding a good composition from the features around me. That made it harder to notice details like the cloud cover at the moment I took the shot.

I won't keep this version of the scene, as I generally don't use sky replacement as an approach to editing and adjustment. However, this test confirmed my concerns about the original shot. It also gave me an important reminder about watching the sky, especially when we are concentrating on subjects that are close by.

Reflections

I wanted to discuss this scene as an experience of searching for a new way to capture Lofoten, with colour as the central feature. However, perhaps the real lesson from this image is about mental bandwidth in photography.

Whenever we are learning a new skill, our minds can usually only focus on one or two small practices at a time. In a sporting context, a coach will give an athlete just one or two points of feedback before moving on to the next area of development, as overloading someone with complex feedback after a training session only makes it more difficult to learn when focus is split between too many changes at once.

As we gain experience in photography, we stop noticing many of the things we do automatically. We dial in camera settings, change position and height, check for focus, and make dozens of other small checks and decisions. We can't pay conscious attention to everything, so we learn each component until it become a habit.

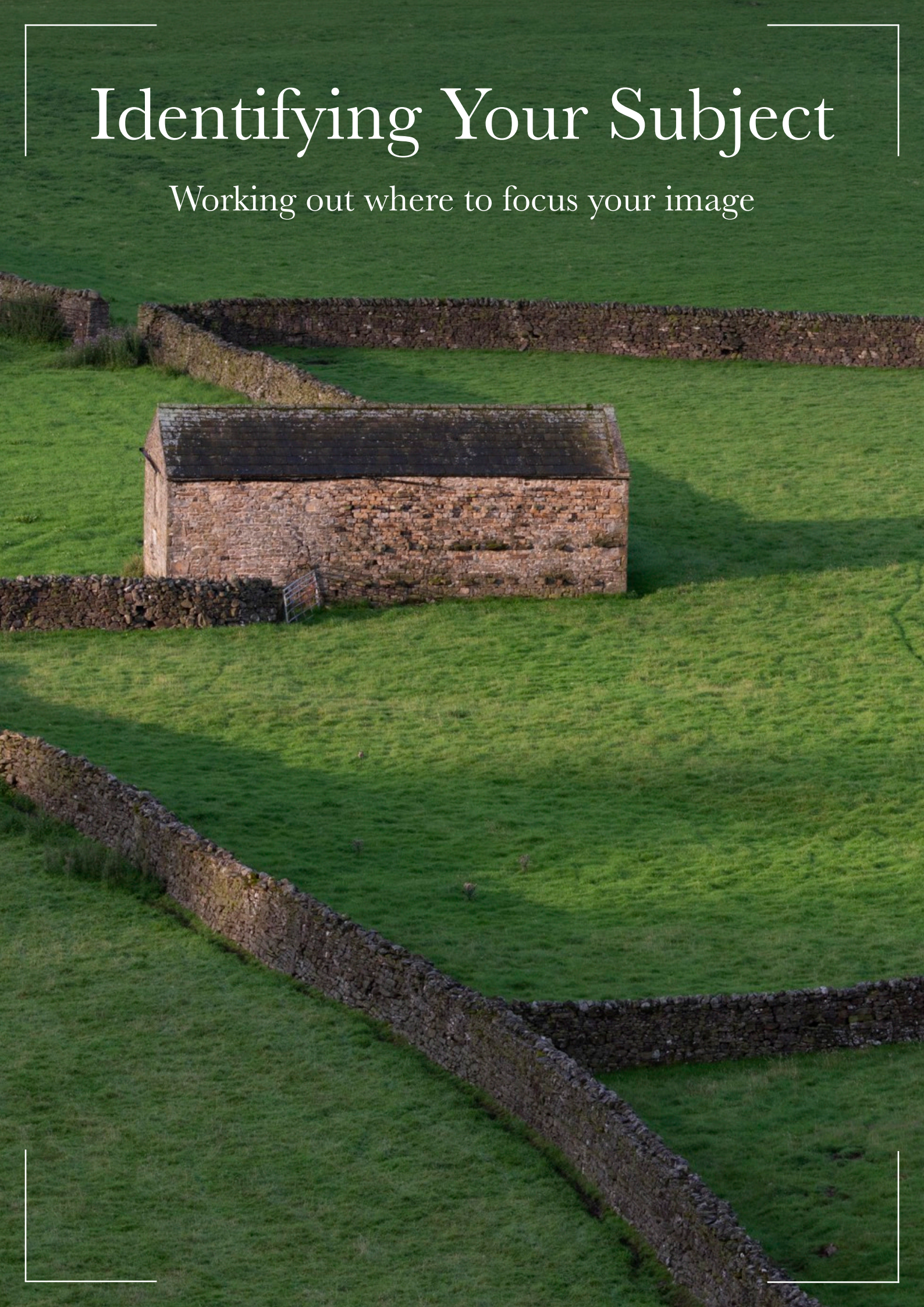
My experience looking for new subjects in Nusfjord was a reminder of what it feels like to be a beginner in photography, and how easy it is to forget some of the basics when we are learning something new. Checking the sky would have been automatic in a more familiar environment, and not noticing it was a sign of being at my mental capacity at the time.

It's important not to criticise ourselves too heavily when we miss something that feels obvious in retrospect. In this case, it was a sign that I was exploring new types of subject, which is important for long-term development. However, it could just as easily have been because I was tired and cold, and my bandwidth was lower that morning.

The important thing is not avoiding mistakes, but developing the ability to notice them and find ways to reduce them, and hopefully make new and better ones in the future.

Identifying Your Subject

Working out where to focus your image



On Location

One of the things I love about photography is the way it combines ideas from different fields. There's a little physics as we learn how cameras and lenses affect the image that appears, but no single correct way to make each photograph. There's some art and design theory that tells us which combinations of colour and shape can work together, but still plenty of room for personal interpretation and style.

The most interesting combinations might be where our natural sense of whether an image is working meets the training and knowledge that can tell us where it went wrong. Last month, we talked about how the concept of Visual Weight can be used to understand when a scene is feeling unbalanced. This article is about learning how to identify the true subject of your image.

When we take a photograph, we might expect to already know what we are trying to capture, as the subject is what drew us there in the first place. However, subjects can be tricky, and sometimes the feature that caught our attention is hiding within something else. We may think we've noticed a tree, when it's really a particular branch. We might put a mountain in our frame, but the real subject is a patch of light on its side.

Identifying the correct subject is important because it influences almost every other decision we make when capturing and editing a photograph. If we identify the wrong subject, we can go on to make poor decisions about framing, camera settings, or editing options. Sometimes the process of making an image feels more difficult than it should be, and that happens when we don't recognise our true subject.

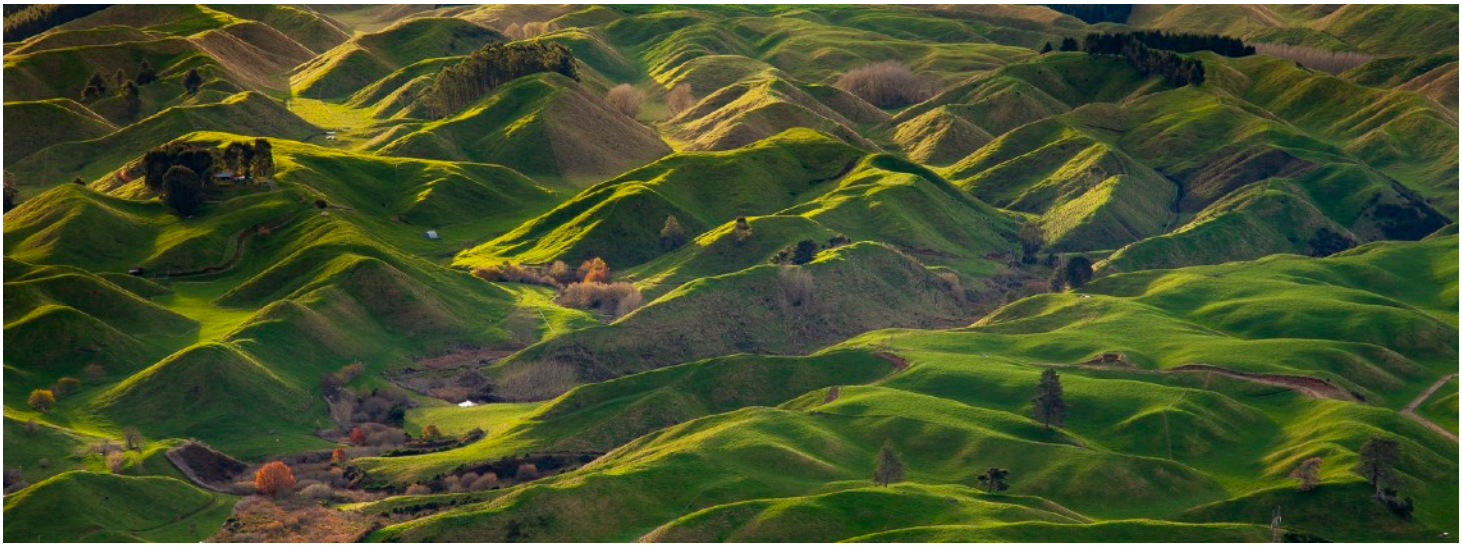
Why It Matters

The subjects in our frame can help us decide how to capture and edit the image. We might look for a leading line to draw a viewer towards a central mountain, or edit the brightness of a dark area to make sure that it's noticed in the finished photograph. Composition and editing choices can make subjects stand out, blend in, or connect with other elements. Knowing our subject matters when we go through that process.

Each choice we make in composition and editing should have a clear answer to the question of why we're doing it. Why are we zooming in? Why are we moving position? Why are we reducing saturation? Most answers to these questions relate to our subject and how we are communicating with a viewer about it. If we haven't properly identified our subject, we'll have the wrong answer to our 'why' question a lot of the time.

In the image above, I found it impossible to get the framing right. I zoomed out wide to capture as much of the landscape as possible, but that made the most interesting parts too small. I tried cropping to a wide image, but found that the sky dominated the scene.

It wasn't until later that I realised I had the wrong subject. I wasn't drawn to the scene as a whole, but instead to the small area of rolling hills and autumn trees in the middle distance. In trying to work with the whole scene, no amount of zooming and cropping could make the image work. When I knew what I was shooting, I could ignore most of the features and focus on the part that really mattered.



With a more clear understanding of my subject, I could frame this scene more effectively.

Identifying Your Subject

I don't want to overstate this problem. Most of the time, we know what we are photographing. In many cases our main subjects are distinct features: people, mountains, trees, lighthouses, animals, or some other clear object that we can recognise and use when we're deciding how to capture and edit the scene.

However, things get more difficult when our subject is not about a particular object. It might be a patch of colour, a pattern formed by a set of different objects, or the atmosphere of fog moving through a clump of trees. When an abstract feature catches our attention, it can be easy to become distracted by a nearby object, and think that is our subject instead.

I struggled for some time with the composition above, taken outside a rusting gate in the streets of Bucharest (although it could have been almost anywhere). I was drawn in by the vivid colours and interesting textures of the paint, but spent most of my time forming compositions with the lock. No matter how I positioned it, the image didn't seem to work.

Fortunately, I noticed that the lock didn't make a good main subject; it was the least attractive component of the scene. When I reframed to focus on the colour and texture, it made more sense to move the lock to the edge of the image as a small point of interest, but allow the colours and texture of the paint to fill most of the frame.

Subjects and Editing

Knowing your subject isn't only about composition. The choices we make in editing should also be deliberate, and tuned to what we want to show a viewer in our scene. In many ways, editing is about communication, and we can only do that effectively if we understand which subject we're talking about. Without that knowledge, our image is like a long, rambling speech that never gets to the point.

I made this image one evening during twilight in the northeast of Madeira. There were several potential subjects in the scene, including islands on the horizon, clouds in the sky, and streaks of light and dark in the water. When it came to editing, I needed to choose which subjects to focus on before I could decide what to do.

If I wanted a viewer to notice the colour and shapes in the sky, I might have cropped out some of the water and given the top of the image more room. If I thought that the patterns in the ocean deserved more attention, I would have removed a lot of the colourful sky. To focus a viewer on the islands, I would have darkened them and lightened the surroundings, adding contrast to pull attention inwards.

Instead, I realised that this scene was all about texture, and that changed how I approached the edit. I muted the colours in the sky and softened the whole frame so that there were soft textures throughout. I lowered contrast so that viewers could study each part without getting distracted by any one area. It didn't matter whether I decided that the sky, the water, or the idea of texture was the subject of the image, but the edits had to match that decision for the photograph to communicate my intention.

Subject Hierarchy

In the last article about an image from Lofoten, not fully recognising my subject made it difficult to finish the photograph, and I could probably do a better job with another visit. During the editing process (and while I was writing the article), I realised how important colour was as a subject, and made some choices that emphasised the walls of the huts. However, I'd have framed the image differently if I'd been more aware of this on location.

As photographers, we often notice textures, colours, light, patterns and other more abstract features in the scene in front of us. In Nusfjord, I knew that colour was important, which led me to find a position where the huts overlapped and formed a continuous band across the frame. However, I wasn't operating consciously enough, and missed the fact that the blue patch of sky would compete with the colours of the walls.

In reality, photographs often have a set of subjects, some of which will be distinct objects while others are more abstract ideas. The huts themselves were a kind of subject, as was the mountain behind and the buildings in the background. Walking around a complex village presents you with dozens of subjects at once, which is why finding a single composition is so tough.

However, even with lots of subjects, we still have to decide which ones are the most important. In this image, I did notice the importance of colour, but didn't pay it quite enough attention and missed the blue patch of sky above. If I'd made a clear choice to focus on colour in the moment, I might have waited until there was more cloud or found another angle to avoid the open sky.

Noticing Subjects on Location

We need an awareness of our subjects throughout the process of creating a photograph, but it's particularly important on location. It tells us everything from where to stand, to which focal length to use, to how to set up the camera. Consciously identifying your subject takes some practice, but it's something you can build into your approach on location.

There isn't much pressure to develop this habit consciously. Most of the time, we instinctively recognise our subjects, make decisions about which are more important, and use that to guide us when taking the photograph. However, we all likely know the feeling of struggling to frame an image, moving around a scene that 'should' work but doesn't.

This is the best time to stop and ask yourself the question, "what is this photo about?". You'll notice the physical objects very easily, but it helps to have a mental checklist of other features that might have drawn your attention, like light, textures or colour. It's always helpful to run through this list, but the clearest sign that you need to step back and rethink is when you are struggling on location.

A good test is whether you can describe the image in a few words, without naming a single object. If that comes easily, it might be a clue that your image is not about a particular thing in the scene, and what caught your attention might be something more ephemeral, like a pattern. That can give you a better starting point when framing and setting up the photograph.

Barn and Fields

For this image in the Yorkshire Dales, I initially wanted to use the pattern of walls as a foreground to a wider scene, but struggled to find a composition that included the trees and fields in the distance.

When I redefined my subject as the pattern itself, framing the image became much easier. Anything that didn't fit the pattern had to be excluded, and I could concentrate on finding the right section of the walls and creating the most satisfying arrangement.

I included the barn as an anchor for the pattern, but deliberately didn't make it too large in the frame so that my image clearly communicated that the set of walls were the main subject.

Conclusion

Thinking through and identifying your subject on location is a tiny extra step in creating a photograph, but for some scenes, it can make a huge difference. I think this is because it comes so early in the process. We make so many decisions in framing, capturing and editing an image that a little uncertainty at the beginning can lead to a very confused result at the end.

To practise this habit right away, it's worth revisiting a few of your current images, especially ones that never quite worked as you hoped. Is the focus of the image really the feature that drew you to the scene, or was there something more abstract that caught your attention? It's rare that we completely miss a patch of light or burst of colour, but sometimes we don't recognise their importance.

The practice of identifying abstract subjects is also a useful way to explore other people's photography, particularly if someone you admire has a distinctive and unusual style. Check out Mike Curry for a brilliant set of examples of patterns as subjects, often formed by surface reflections in moving water. You'll notice that some of the most interesting photographers are barely focused on distinct objects at all.

It takes some time to develop this habit, and I still often forget to question myself about my subjects until I start to struggle with the scene. However, it's a great way to mentally reset on location, and it can also reveal new subjects that help you expand your range and style.

Thanks for Reading

I hope you liked this issue of In The Frame, and I'd love to hear any feedback or ideas for what the magazine might cover in the future. If you'd like to support this project and help me continue to write about travel and photography, there are a few ways you can contribute.

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In The Frame

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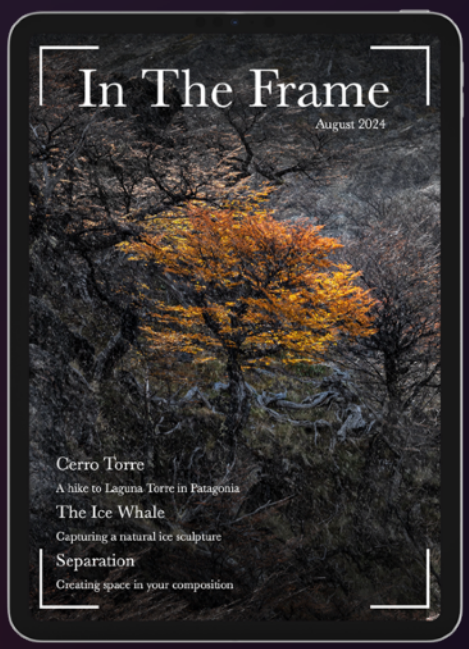

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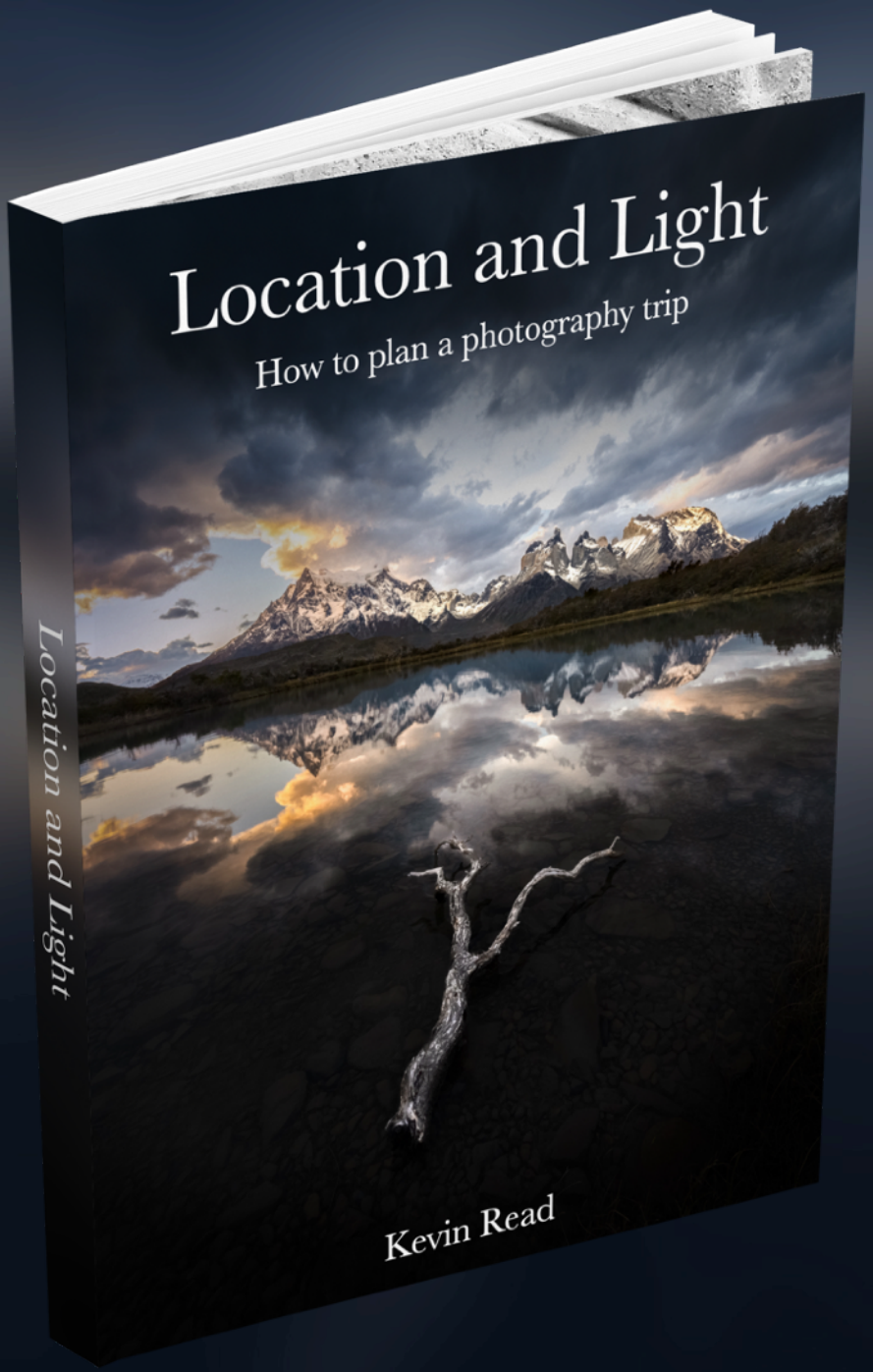

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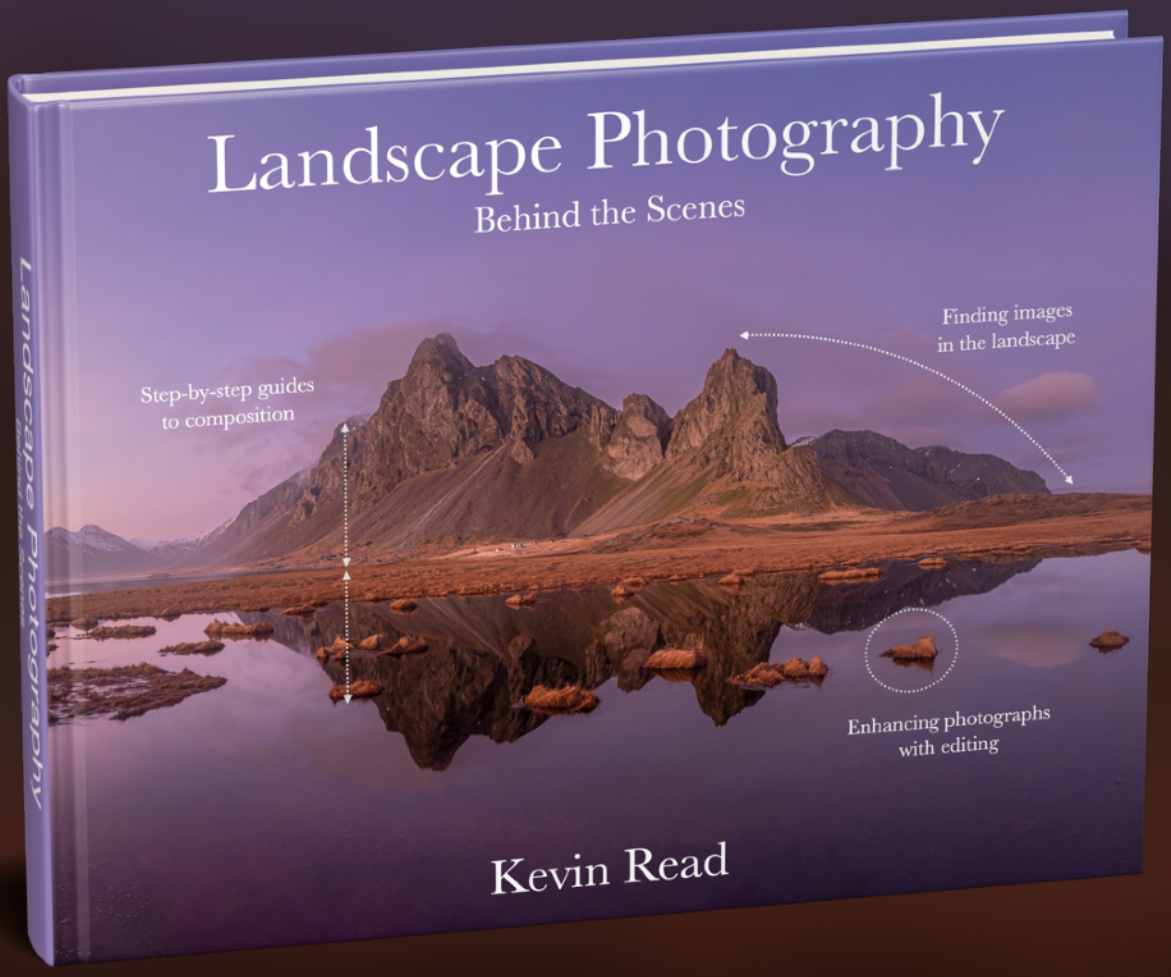

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