

# WITHIN THE FRAME

THE JOURNEY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC VISION

SECOND EDITION



**David duChemin**

FOREWORD BY JOE MCNALLY

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

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**Within the Frame, Second Edition**  
**The Journey of Photographic Vision**

David duChemin

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*To my mother,  
who gave me my vision of the world and the heart to love it.*

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## About the Author

David duChemin is a humanitarian and world photographer, author, and international workshop leader. He has photographed on all seven continents, looking for adventure and beauty along the way. He is the author of several books about the craft and art of photography, including *Within the Frame*, *Photographically Speaking*, and *The Visual Toolbox*. He is the accidental founder of [CraftandVision.com](http://CraftandVision.com)—an online educational resource for photographers—and a passionate fan of the amateur.

David's work can be found online at [DavidDuChemin.com](http://DavidDuChemin.com), as can his blog and the growing community of photographers who read it.



Photo: Yves Perrault

# Contents

Foreword, by Joe McNally . . . . .xi  
Introduction. . . . .xiv

## CHAPTER ONE

It's About Vision . . . . .2  
    Understanding Vision . . . . .4  
    Chasing Vision . . . . .6

## CHAPTER TWO

Within the Frame . . . . .8  
    Photograph What Moves You. . . . .10  
    Make Me Care . . . . .12  
    Putting It in the Frame. . . . .14  
    Excluding It from the Frame . . . . .18  
    Indecisive Moments . . . . .21  
    It's All Subjective. . . . .23  
    The Illusion of the Exotic . . . . .26  
    Putting Time Within the Frame. . . . .28  
        Length of Time . . . . .28  
        Choice of Moment . . . . .34







### CHAPTER THREE

## The Artist and the Geek . . . . .36

Gear Is Good, Vision Is Better . . . . .	38
Decent Exposures . . . . .	44
The Best Digital Negative . . . . .	45
Exposing for the Highlights . . . . .	46
Seeing the Light . . . . .	48
Choose Your Lens Based on Behavior . . . . .	52
Telephoto Lenses. . . . .	55
Pushing the Wide. . . . .	57
The Rule of Thirds . . . . .	61
There Is No Un-Suck Filter . . . . .	64
Inspiration and Perspiration . . . . .	66

### CHAPTER FOUR

## Storytelling . . . . .76

Universal Themes . . . . .	78
Conflict Within the Frame. . . . .	82
The Photo Essay . . . . .	84
Relationships . . . . .	91
Attention Management . . . . .	94
Leaving Clues and Provoking Questions . . . . .	97

### CHAPTER FIVE

## Photographing People. . . . .104

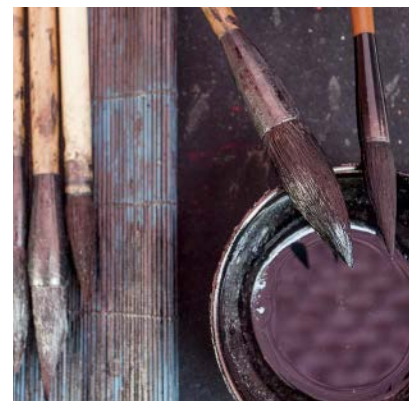
Approaching People. . . . .	106
The Language Barrier . . . . .	111
The Eyes Have It . . . . .	115
Capturing Emotion. . . . .	118
On Giving and Taking . . . . .	124
Indecent Exposures . . . . .	127

Photographing Children . . . . .	129
Photographing the Elderly . . . . .	134
Candid vs. Portraits. . . . .	141
Why Photograph Candid Street Scenes? . . . . .	141
Staying Focused . . . . .	143
Abstracting People . . . . .	149
Lighting Challenges on Location. . . . .	150
Four More. . . . .	156

**CHAPTER SIX**

**Photographing Places . . . . . 162**

Research . . . . .	164
Scouting . . . . .	166
Not-So-Great Expectations . . . . .	169
Be Prepared . . . . .	172
Beyond the Postcard: The Value of Wandering . . . . .	177
Slow Down . . . . .	181
The Feel of Place: Sensual Exploration . . . . .	182
Be Present: Physical and Emotional Receptivity . . . . .	184
Be in the Right Place... . . . .	184
...At the Right Time... . . . .	186
...In the Right Frame of Mind . . . . .	187
Photographing Iconic Places . . . . .	190
Iconic Images in Mundane Places . . . . .	193
Making the Image . . . . .	197
Wait for It . . . . .	197
Seek It . . . . .	198
Mine It . . . . .	198
Adding the Human Element . . . . .	199
Adding Scale . . . . .	202
Landscapes. . . . .	203
Creating Depth with Layers. . . . .	210
Photograph the Big Stuff . . . . .	214
Shoot the Details. . . . .	217





## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Photographing Culture . . . . .222

Cultural Sensitivity . . . . .	225
Research and Ask Questions . . . . .	225
Values and Taboos . . . . .	226
Different Isn't Wrong . . . . .	226
We Are All Different, We Are All the Same . . . . .	228
History and Heroes . . . . .	230
Photographing Food . . . . .	234
Festivals and Celebrations . . . . .	237
Photographing Art . . . . .	241
Photographing Language . . . . .	243
Photographing Faith . . . . .	244
Remember the Deeper Subject and Find a Way to Express It . . . . .	246
Be Respectful . . . . .	248

# Final Thoughts . . . . .252

Index . . . . .	257
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# Foreword

BY JOE MCNALLY

This book is like a great photograph. It is seamless, intuitive, and filled with minor details blended with larger themes. It has impact—the color play is so strong it’s like a hard and fast punch to the visual gut. Still, there is nuance and subtlety that shimmer like a catchlight.

It is sympathetic, warm-hearted, and decent. But, just like any effective photo, it is unflinching and sparse, and it hones in on the essentials. Interesting and vivid, it pulls the eye, and then, once the eye is intrigued, it directs and shapes where it needs to go and what it is supposed to look at.

It is vibrant and quiet at the same time. It teaches you without dogma or bombast, and it leads you on a journey that you are so engaged to take that you look around at the end of it and can’t really believe how far you’ve come. It looks and feels effortless, which masks the intensity, sweat, dedication, and hard work that went into its creation.

And, just like a great photograph, once you view it and let it filter into your eyes, your head, and your heart, you will never, ever be the same.

It is a book filled with color, light, and learning, which is no surprise, given the author, David duChemin. He is a photographer with a purpose, hence this book. He knows, and states right up front, that the world does not need another pretty picture book or another set of stylish, attractive, brittle pictures. His counsel to photographers about photographing places—go deep rather than broad—perfectly describes this book.

Both the pictures and the writing on these pages don’t stay on the surface of things. They both go deep, to the heart of the matter, to the core of both the purpose and method of making great photographs. He is a wanderer, to be sure, but it is a sure-footed wander, and he takes you on every step, explaining the principles of good photography, offering practical and surprising advice, and making sure that, as a reader, you stay inside his head and therefore his vision, right from the moment he shoulders the camera bag and heads out the door.

You are right there with him as he articulates the reasons for his choice of lens or f-stop, his compositional approach, his techniques about exposure, and his grasp of light and how to use it. He throws open his camera bag and lets you peer inside to see what he takes and why he takes it, right from essential hardware like the telephoto and the tripod to the pocket fillers like sun block, local currency, and extra eight-gig cards. The book is brimming with real-time, practical advice on how to make storytelling pictures about culture, faith, food, people, and places—in short, the world.

If the book simply stayed right there in the realm of how-to, go-to advice, it would be a wonderful book indeed. But it crosses the line from useful to inspired because David opens up much more than his camera bag. He opens his considerable heart and mind, both of which belong to a masterful storyteller driven by an acute sympathy for the human condition, coupled with an intense curiosity and respect for both the differences and the sameness of the world.

He openly talks of the interior conflict common to all shooters—that of the artist and the geek. As he says, gear is good, vision is better. That discussion, honest and open, separates this book from so many currently on the shelves that are more than happy to tell you the right f-stop.

It is far harder to figure out how to make a good picture. It is far harder to know how to intuitively work a street and, with respect and care, get inside people's fences and boundaries to create images that matter. It is hard to be in the mix of color and light and people—this noisy, fast-paced world—and be able to distill that cacophony into a simple, powerful photo that makes the reader feel like they were right there in the din, in the market, in the temple, in someone's shop or home.

It is in this realm that David centers so much of the discussion, and a valuable discussion it is. He talks about how vision and technique combine to make art and craft. He shows the artist plenty about the gear, to be sure, and he explains very well the buttons and dials of all the digital machinery. But he also beckons to the geek in all of us and pulls us beyond shutter speeds and white balances into the heart of the matter—pictures that speak, pictures that tell true stories, pictures that inform the mind and move the heart.

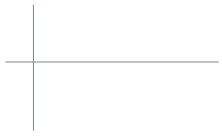
As he mentions on his website, David is an inveterate do-gooder with a camera in his hand. He has traveled the world to all manner of places, distressed and otherwise, working with relief organizations, bringing back pictures that cannot be ignored. He describes his mission:

“Anyone can take a picture of poverty; it’s easy to focus on the dirt and hurt of the poor. It’s much harder—and much more needful—to pry under that dirt and reveal the beauty and dignity of people that, but for their birth into a place and circumstance different from our own, are just like ourselves. I want my images to tell the story of those people and to move us beyond pity to justice and mercy.”

How do you make pictures that move people? How do you work in unfamiliar places, without the convenience of language, and achieve understanding and common ground quickly? How do you come back with images that are real and true, deeply human and connected? How do you photographically explain and interpret the world instead of making a snapshot of it?

*Within the Frame* is a book that, in plain but eloquent language, grapples with the core issues of how to make great pictures. You go out into the world with a seasoned traveler and a keen observer who understands people and places as well as he understands the camera. He shows you not how to resolve the conflict between artist and geek, between storyteller and technician (that struggle will always be with us), but rather how to embrace it on all levels. He gives you the tools and information that enable you to make the camera—a machine—an extension of the human heart and mind. Then he gives you a road map to his own and invites you on the journey.

This is a trip well worth taking.



# Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the passionate photography of people, places, and cultures. It's a book about chasing your vision and telling your stories as clearly and passionately as possible with compelling photography. It's a book for everyone who's wanted to shoot images of the places and people they love, whether or not they ever go around the world to do it.

---

► Canon 5D, 135mm, 1/3200 @ f/2, ISO 800

Delhi, India. Two men drinking chai at a Nizamuddin shrine. The half-figure of the woman to the left still speaks more to me than the men themselves.









---

▲ Nikon D3s, 26mm, 1/1000 @ f/11, ISO 400

Lake Turkana, Northern Kenya.

## Why I Wrote This Book

You should also know what this book is not. It is not a manual; your camera came with one. It is not a book that tells you exactly what to shoot or how. And it is most decidedly not a book about “travel photography.” Those books have already been written, and the last thing anyone needs is another book telling them to put film into lead bags. In my research for this project, I read a great many of those books, and I can safely say the need for another one is precisely zero.

Surely the needs of a photographer who travels are different from one who does not, but the art of expressing an encounter with people, places, and cultures remains the same whether or not you get on a plane. The details of gear and packing belong in a book that addresses traveling, not expressing vision.

I wrote this book because it’s the book I wish I’d had. The cyber shelves of the Internet are full of how-to books but are conspicuously thin when it comes to why-to books. I’m aware of just how insanely presumptuous it is to write a book because in so doing, we authors are saying we have something to offer that is so valuable that you, the reader, should shell out \$50 to hear it. Crazy. So I’m putting this one out there with a great deal of humility and the hope that it does for you what my early influences did for me.

I use the word “vision” too much in this book. It’s in the subtitle. It’s in the section headings. It’s in the text over and over again, and it’s not the result of forgetfulness on my part. It’s not even an effort to pad the word count to make my editor happy (though don’t think for a minute I didn’t consider it). This book is about the passionate photography of people, places, and cultures; without vision and a desire—even a burning need—to express it photographically, there’s just no point. If you come away with anything from this book, I hope it is a renewed resolution to seek and serve your vision through this elegant craft. And I hope this book gives you a few more tools that make your craft equal to the task.

“It is a book about chasing your vision and telling your stories as clearly and passionately as possible with compelling photography.”

---

► Nikon D3s, 23mm, 1/250 @ f/11, ISO 200

Northern Kenya. You have to photograph what you love. I'm never happier than when I'm in a new culture, surrounded by life. And if I can be on my belly in the dirt photographing against the evening sun? Even better.

## Special Features

When I first conceived of this book, I wanted it to be more than a travel photography book. In the years since the first edition was released, people have reiterated that this was the right choice. It was this focus on vision—and yes, even passion—that made it what it was. One of my favorite sections of the book is “Without the Frame,” offering short vignettes of the story behind the photograph and a chance for me to remind both you and me of the more important elements, like respect, patience, and a willingness to be observant. These are the real work of the photographer.

You will also find Creative Exercises throughout the book, most of them new to this edition. The more I work with talented new photographers, the more I realize they know how to use a camera (sometimes better than I do), but they get stuck a little more often on the way to learning other skills. I'm hoping these exercises help those who need to get unstuck.

When you register this book, you'll receive access to a short companion video that offers a more personal look at my work and the things that are important to me as I create it. This video lets you sit down at the computer with me to look at some photographs and hear my thoughts on why and how I created them.

To access the video:

1. Visit [peachpit.com/register](http://peachpit.com/register).
2. Log in to your Peachpit account, or if you don't have one, create an account.
3. Register using the book's ISBN, 9780134288628. This title will then appear in the Registered Products area of your account, and you can click the Access Bonus Content link to be taken to the page where you can view the video.



## A Note on the Second Edition

When the first edition of *Within the Frame* was published, it was received with more enthusiasm than I ever imagined. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages, and it has opened the door for more books and wondrous opportunities. A few years have since gone by and I'm a little older and, it could be argued, a little wiser. This second edition takes advantage of those years. I've swapped out some images that no longer reflect my vision in the best possible way, and I've done the same with a few of my ideas as well. That's the nature of vision: it's a personal thing and it changes as we do. What has not changed is my desire to re-release this book into the world in the hope that it finds a place in your heart and mind and, in some way, illuminates your own journey.

# Storytelling

THROUGH THE AGES, myth and story have been the primary vehicles for communicating meaning and truth. They are not merely the stuff of bedtime tales. The primary storytelling medium in our culture is the cinematic film, and given the billions of dollars attached to the film industry—as well as the royal status of its stars—it should be clear how important story is to us. An understanding of the elements of story and how they can be incorporated into your photography will make stronger images.

---

► Fuji X-E1, 18mm, 1/15 @ f/2.8, ISO 6400

Lalibela, Ethiopia. The first time I photographed the pilgrimage to Lalibela, I didn't see a cell phone. Now mass is conducted under the lights of the strangely juxtaposing candles and cell phones. That juxtaposition and the change that it implies is the heart of the story in this image.





It doesn't matter what you are photographing; a sense of story will make your images more engaging and compelling.

Story told in a single frame of a photograph and story told in a movie or novel are very different kinds of story. One occurs over a minute period of time, perhaps 1/500th of a second, while the others are told over longer periods—hours—and reflect experiences or circumstances that span days, weeks, years, even generations. What makes it difficult to tell a story in a single frame is the inability to form a classic plotline, but this doesn't make storytelling impossible; it simply confines us to certain conventions. When those conventions are understood, they allow us to tell, or at the very least imply, more powerful stories.

When I consider the unique challenges of telling stories within the confines of a single photographic frame, two aspects of storytelling come to mind. The first is the study of themes that tie the image to our deeper, more universal human experience. The second is conflict, revealed in the frame by contrasts. With regard to technique, the photo essay is the time-honored means by which photographers have told longer stories, and composition the means within our single or multi-frame stories to move the plot forward.

## Universal Themes

A story succeeds or fails on empathy, or lack of it. If you don't care, it's not a relevant story. Understanding themes offers a quick way toward understanding how to tell a story about which people will care deeply.

Ask a friend what the last film they saw was about, and the usual answer will be a recap of the plotline. Character X did this, and then this happened, and to get out of it he did this and this, etc. That's plot. But a plotline doesn't describe what a movie is *about*. For example, the plotline is a story of a boy and girl, but the story is *about* something more. Perhaps it was about revenge or love or the search for meaning—the deeper theme that moves the film from beginning to end. Remember the earlier discussion about subject versus subject matter? Same thing. The theme is what the movie—or photograph—is about; it's the subject. The plot is the way in which it's told, or the way the photograph is composed and shot.

---

► Canon 5D, 17mm,  
1/125 @ f/9, ISO 800

Varanasi, India. As the sun rises over the River Ganges, this man does his daily devotion—an act that's been continued by millions of people over thousands of years. His search for absolution and meaning is one of the deepest themes of human existence, and it resonates across lines of gender, race, and creed.

If photographs are to tell or imply a story, they must be *about* something. Truth, justice, love, or the lack of these things, or the search for those things, are strong universal themes. Loneliness, betrayal, our tendency to self-destruct, death, resurrection, the bond of family—all of these are strong themes. And the more universal a theme you echo in your image, the more powerful it will be and the broader the audience. If you're thinking that this is a little too deep for your style of photography, what about themes like harmony, balance, or beauty? What about the old versus the young or new, or the past versus the present?







If you want your photographs to tell a story, make them *about* something. It doesn't have to reflect deep brooding themes. It can be a photograph of an orchid that's about serenity or the wonder of the natural world. It can be about innocence or the simple power of a line. An image of a crocus breaking through the crust of snow and ice can resonate with themes of resurrection and new life. Portrait photographers: make your image about the person you are shooting, reveal the character underneath, and say something about them. Whatever you're photographing, make it *about* something, so the people who see your image feel something, so they care about your image.

This can't be overstated: the more powerful and universal the theme in your image, the more powerful and universal the impact of the image. To put it another way: the more deeply they care, the stronger the story.

I realize that not everyone feels the need to harness their inner George Lucas. Most of us just want to make photographs. I get that. But if our photographs echo something deeper, they will appeal to a greater number of people. Take, for example, a photograph of a child looking very camera-aware and with a neutral expression, wearing traditional clothing—this photograph may tell you something about the child and the culture in which she lives, and that will have some appeal, but it won't be universal. But when that child laughs, she immediately displays a positive emotion that is understood and shared universally, and the photograph is imbued with that universal appeal. Take the example of a Nepalese man—his portrait has general appeal, but when you photograph him praying, your image is no longer about the man but about the search for forgiveness or connection with God, a powerful theme that gives your image universal appeal.

I should also add that not every photograph needs to be a story. Some are more like poems. Some are like impressionist paintings. All touch us differently; the story is just one of the ways in which we can make a connection to the reader of our images, but it's one of the more powerful, and is particularly useful to the kind of photography about which this book is written. Read on.

---

◀ Canon 5D, 17mm,  
1/250 @ f/7.1, ISO 100

Havana, Cuba. A pigeon flies over the St. Francis of Assisi convent in Havana. A dove occupies a strong place in Christian symbolism, as does the cross, and even St. Francis himself. But on a more universal level, a dove alighting over a sacred place—in this case, directly toward the top of the frame—is rich in symbolism and meaning and therefore has greater universal appeal than if this were a flamingo flying over a hamburger joint (though that's an image I'd very much like to see for other reasons entirely).

## Conflict Within the Frame

Harken back, if you will, to twelfth-grade English Literature class. Remember the teacher droning on and on about Man versus Man, Man versus Nature, and Man versus Himself while you dreamed about the cute foreign exchange student who would later go on to break your heart and date your best friend, leaving you to wander aimlessly into the wilderness and struggle for your survival while

---

▼ Canon 5DII, 24mm, 1/100 @ f/10, ISO 100

Chiang Mai, Thailand. The conceptual contrasts in this image are what drive it forward and give it a sense of story. The contrast between the Thai men planting rice and the western teepees in front of which they're planting is where the story occurs. We may not know the story, but it pulls us in with the suggestion that one of these things ought not belong.





battling your inner demons? You do? Well, that's a great story and it contains some great conflict. In fact, it contains man-against-man, man-against-nature, *and* man-against-himself types of conflict. You had no idea at the time that you would become a classic cautionary tale, did you?

Going back to the droning Lit teacher, conflict is the heart of all story. Without it, there is no story. For a photograph to contain or imply a sense of story, it must have conflict.

But how do we bring conflict to play in a frame? Obviously, we can photograph moments of actual open conflict—guns and fists and angry gestures. But what of stories that are not about open conflict? What about stories that are about something else but still need conflict to move it forward?

Conflict in a still photograph is most often shown in contrasts. Not just the visual contrast of dark tones to lighter ones, but the more conceptual contrasts of big/small, mechanical/natural, smooth/textured. Any pair of juxtaposed or implied opposites creates what I call “conceptual contrasts” that imply conflict.

---

▲ Canon 5D, 85mm,  
1/100 @ f/8, ISO 400

Delhi, India. A man sits reading the Koran at Nizamuddin shrine in Delhi. The apparent contrast between the Koran and the cell phones—the ancient and the modern, communication with God and communication with man—provides the conceptual contrasts in this image.

## Creative Exercises: Conceptual Contrasts

Here's a great way to begin seeing conceptual contrasts.

**Exercise 1:** Go out and shoot a series of images that contrast with one another. The first might be of a big subject, the second of a small one. The next set might be hard versus soft, the one after that might be land versus water. Look for photographs that contain contrasting subjects. Other than that, there are no rules. Come up with your own contrasts.

**Exercise 2:** Combine these pairs of opposing contrasts into one image. Instead of two images—one wet, one dry—you're aiming for one image combining both wet and dry. One image with both young and old, one with both few and many, and so on.

**Exercise 3:** Look at other photographs and seek out the contrasts. Not all of them will be obvious. And I'm sure there will be plenty where the contrasts are not conceptual at all, and only appear in terms of contrast of tone or lines, but they too can imply a sense of conflict and imbue an image with a sense of story.

This concept applies to all kinds of images. Even a sunset shot can contain elements of conceptual contrast: sky versus earth, sun versus water, light versus dark. Strongly opposed or contrasting elements create a compelling sense of conflict, which is the heartbeat of the story.

## The Photo Essay

The challenge of capturing or implying a story with photography is made easier when you can photograph it in a longer form—in several frames that tell the story in more detail and more breadth than a single image alone could do. Enter the photo essay, the traditional means by which photographers have told longer stories.

There's a visual language at work here, a convention that's evolved to help us string our story together and give our audience the tools to interpret it. Used well, a photo essay is a powerful means of expressing your vision. And as electronic media becomes increasingly prominent, the photo essay is getting more powerful with the addition of ambient sound, interviews, video clips, and music in the form of multimedia slideshows.

Long-form photo essays generally share the same types of images, and while this is by no means a formula, it provides a framework—a starting point built on established conventions. Here are the usual suspects, accompanied with images from the stupa at Boudhanath in Kathmandu.

---

▼ Canon 5D, 85mm,  
1/50 @ f/5.6, ISO 100

In the inner circle of the stupa, devotees and monks pray, read, and meditate. A medium shot like this brings the action in a little and provides you with a more intimate look into the details of the story. In this case, the robe, the empty shoes, and the sacred text all point toward Buddhism, the faith associated with this place.



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► Canon 5D, 27mm,  
1/500 @ f/4, ISO 100

A woman feeds the pigeons and sends them fluttering. Not critical to the story, the pigeons in this wide shot remain an important part of my experience at Boudha—always present, always filling the air with sounds of nervous flocks scattering. This kind of establishing image helps show the context of the story—the stage on which the story occurs.



---

► Canon 5D, 70mm,  
1/500 @ f/4.5, ISO 400

This monk very patiently allowed me to photograph him, both his portrait and his hands. When I edited the sequence of him, it was his hands, and the subtle out-of-focus details that constitute the background of this image, that contributed to the story more than his face. The beads, talismans, and worn hands tell more than his otherwise stoic face.

**The Establishing Shot:** This is the wide shot. These images generally say, “This is where the story is going to take place.” It establishes context, setting, and often mood.

**The Medium Shot:** Images that get closer to the action, these shots generally say, “This is what the story is about; this is who the characters are.” Not all photo essays are about people; the characters in your story could be horses, or weather, or boats, for example.

**The Detail Shot:** A closer, tighter image of details relevant to the story. In the case of a photo essay about horses, it might be the detail of a horse’s saddle. In the case of an essay about weather, it might be an old barometer or a car damaged by hail.





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► Canon 5D, 57mm,  
1/400 @ f/4, ISO 400

A young acolyte, friendly and curious, happily poses for my camera. Of the many portraits I took, this one felt among the most universal—he's a Buddhist monk, but also a child, unguarded and full of curiosity. The portrait brings to an essay its intimacy and connection to the viewer.



**The Portrait:** A tighter portrait or headshot—often an environmental portrait.

**The Moment:** A photograph that captures a gesture, an exchange, or the peak of the action. This is the “wow” shot.

**The Closer:** This one wraps it up, provides some resolution, or just provides a natural place to put the story to bed.

While not every photo essay will have each of these kinds of images, they will have most of them, and certainly they will have the first three. *National Geographic* has made an industry of perfecting the photo essay and is an excellent place to look for inspiration—not only in the quality of the images, but in the kinds of images they choose to tell the story.



▲ Canon 1Ds Mk III, 85mm, 1/100 @ f/1.2, ISO 800

A woman lights a candle after night has fallen on Boudhanath, a beautiful serene moment that adds some impact where other images might be more about information.

▼ Canon 5D, 25mm, 1/10 @ f/16, ISO 400

The blur of a devotee and the spinning prayer wheel around which she walks implies an unceasing motion. This wheel, and others like it around the Boudhanath stupa, is in motion day in and day out.





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▲ Nikon D3s, 20mm, 1/400 @ f/8.0, ISO 200

A monk walks around the stupa swinging his incense while younger monks walk a slightly faster pace past him. This kind of image helps establish the action and the characters at the center of the story.

## Relationships

How the elements within the frame relate to one another says something about the relationships between them. One object larger than another might imply a relationship of power. The space between two elements or characters within the frame tells something about their connectedness. Objects separated by greater perceived space imply a relationship of distance or alienation, where objects much closer together might imply a relationship of intimacy. While you often can't physically move the objects around, the laws of perspective allow you to do it simply by changing the position from which you make the photograph. By moving to the left or right or pivoting around your subject matter, you can often create greater or less distance between those elements. Move one way and you bring them together visually; move the other way and you separate them. By so doing, you are choosing to tell this story more directly and with less ambiguity.

The same is true of vertical relationships—moving your point of view higher can diminish the appearance of height differences and thereby bring an equalizing effect between elements.

Your choice of lens has a significant role in establishing visual relationships. I discussed this in Chapter 3, but it's worth a reminder: the effect of compression that various lenses create can help you tell your story by altering the perception of distances between elements.

Separate from the relationship between objects in the frame, your point of view, or chosen camera angle, has an effect on the implied relationship between the viewer or photographer and the subjects. Looking down on a man sitting at street level can imply a position of power over him—as though you were physically, and symbolically, looking down on him. Making the image from street level implies greater equality and creates a more sympathetic image. One communicates condescension or pity; the other communicates respect, kindness, or empathy. Photographing a statue, you might choose your angle based on how you feel about the statue itself. If you're shooting a statue of a man you feel great respect for, you might choose to shoot from a lower angle, making the statue loom larger, creating the perception of power and grandeur.

“How the elements within the frame relate to one another says something about the relationships between them.”





## Creative Exercise

There are stories all around us. For now, find something simple. A morning at a farmer's market. Your daughter's birthday party. The first snowfall of the year. Your assignment: in 8 to 12 images, show me who the characters are, what their stage or context is, and what they are doing. If there are relationships, show me those. If there are key moments—opening a gift, hugging a friend in thanks, blowing out the candles on the cake—show me those too. Give me a beginning and an end. It doesn't have to be Pulitzer material; it just needs to get you receptive to the key elements of story and to get you thinking in terms of a series of photographs that work together. One image might do it all, but in the likely event that it doesn't, try your hand at creating a small body of work that tells the story in a fuller way through several images.

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◀ Canon 5D, 17mm, 1/160 @ f/8, ISO 400

Sapa, Vietnam. Hmong girls watch schoolboys playing New Year's games. Their obvious distance and clear separation implies differences in gender roles and says certain things about the relationships between males and females in this patriarchal society.

## Attention Management

Stage magicians and sleight-of-hand artists have something in common with photographers: both deal in perception and use visual clues to lead the audience to certain ends. In the case of the magician, that end might be a sense of wonder created by illusion. In the case of the photographer, it might be an emotion or thought created by the content of an image and the way that image was composed. Either way, both depend on directing the eye of the audience, and the best of them do it without the audience feeling led, manipulated, or aware of the device.

To make full use of this, we first need to understand what people look at. Returning to the magician for a moment, he understands that people see large movements before small movements. So a larger movement on stage might direct attention away from the smaller movement of secreting an object or pulling a hidden object from its hiding place. It's often called "misdirection," but calling it so is a misnomer that implies something has gone wrong. "Redirection" and perhaps "attention management" would be better terms. The magician studies human behavior and—knowing that we are generally predisposed to look at big movements before small ones, or to relax our attention when we laugh—uses that to his advantage. So it is with photographers.

So what do we look at? What is the eye drawn to, and how can that be used to more intentionally direct the eye through the frame? Generally, we notice areas of light before areas of dark, and large elements before smaller one. We look to warm colors before the cooler ones. Here's a short list of elements that draw our eye:

- Large elements before small elements
- Light elements before dark elements
- Warm colors before cool colors
- Focused elements before blurred elements
- Elements in perspective before flat elements
- Isolated elements before cluttered elements

- High contrast before low contrast
- Oblique lines before straight lines
- Recognizable elements before ambiguous elements
- Human/alive elements before inanimate elements

Once we become aware of how the viewer’s attention will behave, it’s much easier to gently push and pull the eye around the frame—to say, without a word, “Look here,” or, “This is less important.” Important elements might be lighter, larger, warmer, or sharper than less important elements. Elements that have no relevance at all should probably be cropped right out as you shoot, but hierarchies of importance exist in a visual story, and less important elements are still necessary. Think of it in terms of primary elements and secondary elements.

The photograph of the running monk (primary element) has the Thiksey Monastery as its background (secondary element); the visual clues provided by the architecture and color of the monastery building are important so you don’t want to crop them out, but the man is *more* important. The fact that the young man is wearing a more saturated, warmer color than his surroundings immediately helps set him apart from the cooler tones of the stone and draws the eye naturally toward the intended center of interest first. Similarly, the panning renders the background less sharp than the monk, and the monk in turn is less sharp than the kettle, giving us different levels of visual mass and a natural progression for the eye to follow. The eye moves from monk to kettle to background, but always returns to the monk because he holds greater visual interest for us. The photograph is about the man and his kettle—so he needs to be clearly identifiable as the primary element—but part of telling a story about this particular man is his context.

Some of this might be refined in post-production as well, with the digital equivalent of dodging and burning, making areas of primary importance lighter and areas of secondary importance darker. Darkening the corners with a subtle vignette can lead the viewer’s eye to the center and keep it from drifting into the corners. Slightly desaturating or blurring secondary elements can have a similar effect, reducing their visual mass and lessening their pull on the eye.

This is not the only means by which we can lead the eye. There are others—pointing, for example. For the magician, the simple nonverbal gesture of

“What is the eye drawn to, and how can that be used to more intentionally direct the eye through the frame?”





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▲ Canon 5D, 33mm, 1/30 @ f/22, ISO 100

Thiksey Monastery, Ladakh, India.



pointing, or even looking at something, makes the audience look there, too. In the photograph, this might be the eye line of someone in the image, creating an implied line in the direction of his or her gaze that leads your viewer to look that way, too. It might be leading lines in the images that converge in one direction, also pulling the eye there. Strong diagonal lines in a frame already pull the eye and, with a little foresight while shooting, can be used to pull the eye in the direction you want it to go. Changing your shooting position only a little might result in straight lines becoming oblique, making your image more dynamic and, again, providing subtle but important attention management tools for you to more intentionally guide the eye of your viewers.

## Leaving Clues and Provoking Questions

A great storyteller doesn't tell absolutely everything. She tells enough to make you care, to tell the story and move the plot, and no more. Extraneous details don't provide anything more than confusion. In fact, more than just cluttering the story, a flood of details kills the mystery and the engagement. A good story has a sense of wonder; it raises curiosity, and it leaves something untold for us to gnaw on. Perhaps it's a glance out of frame; we're familiar with the look of affection a woman has on her face, but who is she looking at? A face moves into silhouette as you press the shutter, and suddenly a photo of a specific woman is a photo of a woman around whom there is some mystery.

What you leave in the frame must be part of the story, must be part of the visual plot, even if that's simply establishing the setting. Be very selective. Leaving a cluttered background by shooting wide and indiscriminately does not establish setting; it's lazy photography. The more elements there are within the frame, the less power each of them has, and your story becomes diluted.

Leave enough clues to tell the story, and exclude enough to create a sense of mystery. Unanswered questions engage a viewer and create an interaction between the image and the viewer—a deeper level of viewing that allows us to think and feel more connected to the story. Similarly, placing details in the image that are discovered only after looking at it for a while can contribute to a feeling of surprise, even the feeling of being let in on something. It gives the image an extra layer, engaging the viewer longer or more often.



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▲ Leica M(240), 21mm, 1/180 @ f/3.5, ISO 800

Lalibela, Ethiopia. The Christmas pilgrimage in Lalibela, Ethiopia, is an astonishing gathering of people who come to celebrate the centuries-old stories surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. None of the images here tells a full story, but all of them contribute to a fuller picture of the event. Accompanied by an article that fleshes out some of the information you can't deduce from these images, you'd get a more complete story, but together, without the words, they still provide a mix of impact and information that stirs curiosity, imagination, and emotional responses in a way one single image might not be able to do.



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▲ Nikon D3s, 22mm, 1/2500 @ f/18, ISO 200



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▲ Fuji X-T1, 14mm, 1/60 @ f/2.8, ISO 3200



▲ Leica M(240), 21mm, 1/1500 @ f/11, ISO 400

▼ Fuji X-T1, 18mm, 1/60 @ f/4.0, ISO 800





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▲ Leica M(240), 21mm, 1/250 @ f/16, ISO 800



▲ Leica M(240), 21mm, 1/90 @ f/16, ISO 800





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▲ Fuji X-T1, 48mm, 1/100 @ f/4.0, ISO 800

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◀ Leica M(240), 21mm, 1/45 @ f/9.5, ISO 800



# Index

5-in-1 reflector, 155

## A

about this book, xvii–xix  
abstracting people, 148–150  
Adobe Lightroom, 19, 64, 65, 66, 216  
Adobe Photoshop, 57, 64, 66  
aesthetics, 18  
After-Action Review (AAR), 168  
Agra, India, 14–15, 125, 192  
anger, 120  
angle of view, 53, 91, 130, 149  
Antarctica, 204–205  
aperture settings, 44, 45, 48  
architecture, 214–216  
arts, 241–242  
assignments, 73  
attention management, 16, 94–97  
Awash, Ethiopia, 17

## B

backgrounds, 152, 153, 214  
backlight, 51, 152, 153, 208  
Bangkok, Thailand, 42, 62–63, 108, 109, 214, 234–235  
Bangladesh, Sherpur, 184–185  
batteries, 172  
beggars, 126  
Beijing, China, 156–157, 173  
being moved, 10–11  
being present, 184–189  
Bhaktapur, Nepal, 241, 242  
Biratnagar, Nepal, 112–113, 153  
black-and-white images, 19, 212–213  
blinking, 117  
blog of author, 255  
blur effect, 149  
body language, 156

BOMA Project, 127, 130, 160  
boredom, 120  
Boudhanath stupa, 12, 27, 85–90, 106  
bouncing light, 155  
bracketing exposures, 47  
Brandon, Matt, 122, 232  
breaking rules, 73  
British Columbia, Canada, 58–59, 174–175  
Buddhists, 88, 104, 106, 108, 158  
buildings, 214–216  
business cards, 133

## C

Cairo, Egypt, 68–69, 120, 140, 146–147, 182, 206–207, 222–223, 243  
calligraphy stands, 217, 218–219  
cameras  
    learning the settings on, 34  
    point-and-shoot vs. SLR, 143  
Canada  
    British Columbia, 58–59, 174–175  
    Vancouver, 4–5, 25, 215  
    Yukon, 208  
candid photos, 141–147  
Capa, Robert, 18  
caring, 12–13  
Cartier-Bresson, Henri, 21, 34, 179  
Castro, Fidel, 230, 232  
catchlight, 118, 153  
celebrations, 237–240  
Chambar restaurant, 4–5  
Chandni Chowk, 182–183  
Chiang Mai, Thailand, 82  
children, 129–133  
China, Beijing, 156–157, 173  
choice of moment, 34–35  
clichés, 190, 192  
closer shot, 88  
close-up photography, 221  
clouds, 208  
clues, leaving, 97  
color temperature, 49  
communication  
    language barriers and, 111–114  
    nonverbal, 113, 156  
compass, 187  
composition  
    attention management and, 94–95  
    excluding elements from, 18–20  
    framing elements in, 14–18  
    human subjects and, 156  
    Rule of Thirds in, 61–63  
compression, 53, 55, 207  
conceptual contrasts, 82, 83–84  
conflict, 82–84  
constraints, 73  
contrast, 82, 83–84, 200, 208  
converging lines, 215  
CraftandVision.com website, 255  
creative exercises, xviii  
    on abstract photos, 150  
    on approaching people, 139  
    on conceptual contrasts, 84  
    on discovering your vision, 7  
    on finding inspiration, 72–73  
    on image composition, 64  
    on isolating subjects, 20  
    on journaling about places, 189  
    on noticing light, 52  
    on searching for the unexpected, 181  
    on shooting with simple cameras, 43  
    on storytelling, 93  
    on studying photos you love, 14, 72  
creative process, 66, 71–73  
Cuba  
    Havana, 74–75, 80–81, 140, 154, 180–181  
    Old Havana, 60, 194, 198, 230–231, 232, 238  
cultural photography, 222–251  
    arts in, 241–242  
    faith in, 244–251  
    festivals/celebrations in, 237–240  
    foods in, 234–237  
    history/heroes in, 230–233  
    languages in, 243–244  
    research conducted for, 225–226  
    sensitivity required for, 225–230  
    *See also* travel photography  
cultural sensitivity, 225–230  
    research and, 225–226  
    respect and, 226–227, 248, 251  
    similarities/differences and, 228, 230  
    values/taboo and, 226, 248  
curiosity, 27

## D

DavidDuChemin.com blog, 255  
decisive moments, 21, 34  
Delhi, India, xiv–xv, 10, 83, 110, 122–123, 250–251  
depth, visual, 210–211  
depth of field, 44, 45, 203, 205  
details  
    photo essays and, 86  
    portraits and, 156  
    tips for shooting, 221  
    travel photos and, 217–221  
diagonal lines, 97  
diffusers, 151, 152, 155  
digital darkroom, 64–66  
digital negatives, 45–46  
digital noise, 44, 46  
direction of light, 51  
Douz, Tunisia, 144–145, 205  
duotone images, 19

## E

Ecuador, Quito, 66–67  
edge-cut sun, 215–216  
Egypt  
    Cairo, 68–69, 120, 140, 146–147, 182, 206–207,  
    222–223, 243  
    Giza, 164–165  
elderly subjects, 134–139  
emotion  
    in iconic places, 190  
    in landscapes, 210  
    in portraits, 118–124  
    in religion, 248  
essays, photo, 84–90  
establishing shot, 86  
Ethiopia, 221  
    Awash, 17  
    Harar, 225  
    Lalibela, 61, 76–77, 98–103, 179, 239–240  
exclusion, 18–20  
exotic subjects, 26–28  
expectations, 169–172

exposure, 44–48  
    digital negatives and, 45–46  
    factors related to, 44–45, 48  
    image quality and, 46–47  
Exposure Triangle, 48  
extension tubes, 221  
eyes in portraits, 115–118, 153

## F

faith, 244–251  
fear, 119–120  
festivals, 237–240  
fill light, 152, 216  
flash  
    bouncing off walls, 155  
    child photography and, 130  
    diffused, off-camera, 152  
    remote, 152, 155  
    sacred places and, 251  
    *See also* lighting  
Florence, Italy, 2–3  
focal lengths, 53, 56  
food photography, 234–237  
foreground images, 205, 211  
frame, the  
    excluding elements from, 18–20  
    expressing time in, 28–30  
    including elements in, 14–18  
    placing elements in, 61–63  
France, Paris, 200–201

## G

Ganges River, 32–33, 78–79  
gear  
    traveling with, 169, 172, 173, 176  
    vision vs., 38–43  
geek factor, 38  
giving and taking, 124–127  
Giza, Egypt, 164–165  
Gobi Desert, Mongolia, 202  
Gough, Gavin, 109  
graduated ND filter, 207  
Grand Palace, 62–63, 108, 109  
Guevara, Che, 230, 233  
guidebooks, 114, 178, 184, 226

## H

Hanoi, Vietnam, 193, 217, 218–219  
happiness, 119  
Harar, Ethiopia, 225  
hard light, 49, 50, 51  
harsh overhead light, 151–152  
Havana, Cuba, 74–75, 80–81, 140, 154, 180–181  
heroes, cultural, 230–233  
Heyerdahl, Thor, 224  
highlights, 46–47  
Hillary, Sir Edmund, 224  
histogram, 45–46, 47  
history, cultural, 230–233  
Hokkaido, Japan, 208–209  
horizon, position of, 205, 207  
horizontal orientation, 16  
human element, 199–201

## I

iconic elements, 193–196  
iconic places, 190–192  
indecent exposures, 127–128  
indecisive moments, 21–23  
India  
    Agra, 14–15, 125, 192  
    Delhi, xiv–xv, 10, 83, 110, 122–123, 250–251  
    Jodhpur, 18, 245  
    Kashmir, 56, 136–137, 199, 248–249  
    Ladakh, 56, 96, 120–121, 153, 186, 211  
    Old Delhi, 30, 132, 182–183, 220–221  
    Srinagar, 26, 246–247  
    Varanasi, 24, 32–33, 78–79, 167, 170–171  
inspiration, 66, 71–73  
    creative process and, 71–72  
    suggestions for cultivating, 72–73  
interpretational photographs, 164  
iPhone, 42, 43, 176, 187  
Isle of Skye, Scotland, 212–213  
ISO settings, 44, 48  
Italy  
    Florence, 2–3  
    Monterosso al Mare, 130–131  
    Rome, 148–149  
    Venice, 29, 36–37, 39, 40, 41, 65, 70–71,  
        162–163, 217

## J

Jahan, Shah, 192  
Jamaica, 188  
Japan, Hokkaido, 208–209  
Jodhpur, India, 18, 245  
*Jungle Book, The* (Kipling), 192

## K

Kairouan, Tunisia, 22–23, 196  
Kapusinski, Ryszard, 222  
Kashmir, India, 56, 136–137, 199, 248–249  
Kathmandu, Nepal, 12, 27, 45, 47, 50, 54–55, 85–90,  
    119, 128, 151, 158–159, 228–229  
Kenya  
    Loiyangalani, 135  
    Maasai Mara, 252–253  
    Northern, xvi, xviii–xix, 8–9, 104–105, 106–107, 115,  
        116–117, 130, 160–161, 227, 228, 237  
Kipling, Rudyard, 192

## L

Ladakh, India, 56, 96, 120–121, 153, 186, 211  
Laforet, Vincent, 56  
Lake Turkana, Northern Kenya, xvi  
Lalibela, Ethiopia, 61, 76–77, 98–103, 179, 239–240  
landscape photography  
    lenses for, 57  
    tips for shooting, 203–210  
    See *also* places  
language barrier, 111–114  
    key phrases to learn, 114  
    steps for overcoming, 113  
languages, written, 243–244  
laughter, 120, 124, 136  
leading lines, 208  
legal issues, 134  
lenses, 52–60  
    behaviors of, 52–55  
    landscape, 57  
    macro, 221  
    perspective-correction, 215  
    portrait, 55, 59, 117, 129  
    telephoto, 55–57

- visual relationships and, 91
- wide-angle, 57–60, 129, 211

Lewis, C. S., 38

light

- bouncing, 155
- closeness to source of, 155
- direction of, 51
- fill, 152, 216
- hard vs. soft, 49–51
- quality of, 48–52

lighting

- for food photography, 234, 236
- for landscape photography, 207
- for on-location portraits, 150–155
- for sacred places, 251
- for texture details, 221
- for travel photography, 186

See also flash

Lightroom, Adobe, 19, 64, 65, 66, 216

location photography. See travel photography

Loiyangalani, Kenya, 135

Lonely Planet guides, 114, 178, 184, 226

Louvre, The, 200–201

Lucas, George, 81

## M

Maasai Mara, Kenya, 252–253

macro lens, 221

magicians, 94

magnification, 53

Mahal, Mumtaz, 192

McCurry, Steve, 106, 117

McNally, Joe, xi, 71

medium shot, 86

memory cards, 172

Michelangelo, 18

mind, frame of, 187–189

mining shots, 198–199

mobile photography, 42

model releases, 134

moments

- choice of, 34–35
- decisive, 21, 34
- indecisive, 21–23
- photo essay, 88

Mongolia, Gobi Desert, 202

monochrome images, 19

Monterosso al Mare, Italy, 130–131

mosques, 68–69

motion blur, 149, 208

movement

- motion blur and, 149, 208
- panning to imply, 31
- shutter speed and, 28–29

Murphy's Law, 176

muse, creative, 66, 71–73

mythology, 248

## N

*National Geographic*, 88, 117, 127, 224

negatives, digital, 45–46

Nehru, Jawaharlal, 232

Nepal

- Bhaktapur, 241, 242
- Biratnagar, 112–113, 153
- Kathmandu, 12, 27, 45, 47, 50, 54–55, 85–90, 119, 128, 151, 158–159, 228–229
- Sankhu, 138–139

Nizamuddin shrine, 10, 83, 122, 251

noise, digital, 44, 46

nonverbal communication, 113, 156

Northern Kenya, xvi, xviii–xix, 8–9, 104–105, 106–107, 115, 116–117, 130, 160–161, 227, 228, 237

nostalgia, 129

## O

off-camera flash, 152

Old Delhi, India, 30, 132, 182–183, 220–221

Old Havana, Cuba, 60, 194, 198, 230–231, 232, 238

older subjects, 134–139

on-location portraits, 150–155

overhead light, 151–152

## P

panning, 31

panoramas, 57

Paris, France, 200–201

- participation, 189
  - passionate stories, 13
  - patience, 196, 197
  - patterns, 210
  - paying for photos, 126–127
  - people, 104–161
    - abstracting, 148–150
    - approaching, 106–110, 139
    - candid shots of, 141–147
    - children, 129–133
    - composing shots of, 156
    - elderly, 134–139
    - emotions in, 118–124
    - eyes as the key to, 115–118
    - giving and taking with, 124–127
    - indecent exposures of, 127–128
    - language barrier with, 111–114
    - on-location lighting for, 150–155
    - power of connecting to, 160
    - scale indicated by, 202
    - travel photos and, 199–201
    - See *also* portraits
  - Percy, Bruce, 65
  - perspective-correction lenses, 215
  - photo essays, 84–90, 98–103, 241
  - photographer's vests, 176
  - Photographically Speaking* (duChemin), 13, 255
  - photography
    - subjective nature of, 23–25
    - visual language of, 13
  - Photoshop, Adobe, 57, 64, 66
  - pickpockets, 144
  - places, 162–221
    - being present in, 184–189
    - buildings in, 214–216
    - details of, 217–221
    - expectations related to, 169–172
    - human element in, 199–201
    - iconic elements of, 193–196
    - indicating scale of, 202–203
    - landscapes as, 203–210
    - making the image in, 197–199
    - preparing to photograph, 172–176
    - researching, 164–166
    - scouting, 166–168
    - sensual exploration of, 182–184
    - shooting iconic, 190–192
    - slowing down in, 181–182
    - timing photos of, 186–187, 197
    - visual depth of, 210–211
    - wandering around, 177–181
    - See *also* travel photography
  - Plutarch, 252
  - PocketWizard radio remotes, 155
  - point of view, 20, 91
  - point-and-shoot cameras, 143
  - pointing, 95, 97
  - polarizer, 207
  - portraits
    - abstracting, 148–150
    - approaching people for, 106–110, 139
    - candid photos vs., 141–147
    - capturing emotions in, 118–124
    - children as subject of, 129–133
    - composition of, 156
    - the elderly as subject of, 134–139
    - eyes as the key to, 115–118
    - giving in exchange for, 124–127
    - indecent exposures and, 127–128
    - language barrier and, 111–114
    - lenses for, 55, 59, 117, 129
    - on-location lighting for, 150–155
    - photo essays and, 88
    - See *also* people
  - postcard shots, 179, 181, 190
  - post-production tools, 64–66
  - prayer, 87, 246
  - preparation, 172–176
  - publishing images, 134
- 
- ## Q
- Q'tub Minar monument, 110
  - quality of light, 48–52
  - questions, provoking, 97
  - Quito, Ecuador, 66–67
- 
- ## R
- radio remotes, 155
  - RAW formats, 46
  - receptivity, 188
  - redirection, 94

reflectors, 151, 152, 153, 155  
relationships, 91–93  
religion, 244–251  
remote flash, 152, 155  
representational photographs, 164  
researching  
    cultures, 225–226  
    festivals, 238–239  
    places, 164–166  
respect, 226–227, 248, 251  
reviewing photos, 168  
Rome, Italy, 148–149  
Rule of Thirds, 61–63

## S

sacred places, 246  
sadness, 119  
Sahara Desert, 205  
Sankhu, Nepal, 138–139  
Sapa, Vietnam, 49, 92–93  
Scotland, Isle of Skye, 212–213  
scouting places, 166–168  
seeing, 189  
seeking shots, 198  
Senegal, 142  
sensual exploration, 182–184  
serendipity, 176  
shade, 118, 151  
shadows, 46–47, 149  
Sherpur, Bangladesh, 184–185  
shutter speed, 28–29  
    blur effect and, 149  
    decisions about, 44, 48  
    movement and, 28–29  
    panning and, 31  
sidelight, 51  
signage, 243–244  
silhouettes, 149, 156  
similarities/differences, 228, 230  
Simon, Paul, 246  
skies, 207–208, 215  
slowing down, 181–182  
smiling, 122  
soft light, 50, 51, 155  
spiritual places, 244–251

squinting, 118  
Srinagar, India, 26, 246–247  
stock photographs, 190  
storytelling, 76–103  
    attention management and, 94–97  
    conflict and, 82–84  
    image series example of, 98–103  
    leaving clues in, 97  
    photo essays and, 84–90  
    relationships and, 91–93  
    universal themes and, 78–81  
street scenes, 141–148  
subject of photos, 23–25  
sunrise/sunset  
    knowing times of, 187  
    portraits shot into, 152

## T

taboos, cultural, 226  
Taj Mahal, 125, 191, 192  
taxicab drivers, 198  
telephoto lenses, 55–57  
    candids and, 144  
    landscapes and, 57  
    portraits and, 55  
texture, 221  
Thailand, 42, 62–63, 82, 108, 109, 214, 234–235  
themes, universal, 78–81  
Thiksey Monastery, 95, 96, 120–121, 211  
time considerations, 28–35  
    camera settings and, 34  
    choice of moment and, 34–35  
    panning related to, 31  
    shutter speed and, 28–29  
    travel photography and, 186–187, 197  
tourist attractions, 190–192  
traffic issues, 144  
transitions, 208  
travel photography, 162–221  
    being present for, 184–189  
    buildings in, 214–216  
    creating depth with layers in, 210–211  
    details included in, 217–221  
    expectations related to, 169–172  
    frame of mind for, 187–189

gear for, 169, 172, 173, 176  
human element in, 199–201  
iconic elements in, 193–196  
landscapes and, 203–210  
making the image in, 197–199  
preparing for, 172–176  
research for, 164–166  
scale indicated in, 202–203  
scouting process for, 166–168  
sensual exploration for, 182–184  
shooting iconic places in, 190–192  
slowing down for, 181–182  
timing considerations in, 186–187, 197  
wandering for, 177–181  
See *also* cultural photography; places  
tripods, 172, 203  
Tunisia  
  Douz, 144–145, 205  
  Kairouan, 22–23, 196

## U

underexposing images, 46  
universal themes, 78–81

## V

values, cultural, 226  
Vancouver, Canada, 4–5, 25, 215  
Varanasi, India, 24, 32–33, 78–79, 167, 170–171  
Venice, Italy, 29, 36–37, 39, 40, 41, 65, 70–71,  
  162–163, 217  
vertical orientation, 16  
video companion to book, xviii

Vietnam  
  Hanoi, 193, 217, 218–219  
  Sapa, 49, 92–93  
vision, xvii, 2–7  
  chasing, 6–7  
  expressing, 73  
  gear vs., 38–43  
  refining, 254  
  understanding, 4–6  
*VisionMongers: Making a Life and a Living in  
  Photography* (duChemin), 255  
visual inventory, 177–178  
visual language, 13  
*Visual Toolbox, The* (duChemin), 255

## W

wandering, 177–181  
water rituals, 29  
web resources, xviii, 255  
wetness, 23, 25  
why-to books, xvii  
wide-angle lenses, 57–60, 129, 211  
wireless remotes, 155  
wonder, 27  
World Vision, 56  
written language, 243–244

## Y

Yukon, Canada, 208