CONFESSIONS OF A NOT SO PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER

By Peter Laurenson

What defines a 'professional' photographer; and is computer-based post-processing cheating?

In this age of digital pixels and instantaneous social media-based, often free-to-air, self publication it's never been harder to make a living from professional photography. While I did start my own journey into photography with some manual photography night classes before I set off on my O.E back in 1988, that hardly qualified me as a professional. Probably like most photographers, I'm essentially self taught, both in terms of taking pictures and, since the advent of digital, post-processing them.

As the years have passed and my photographic experience and knowledge have grown, I've sometimes pondered what the gap is between me and 'real professionals'. Certainly, my gear has never been top end. Today I own a Nikon D750. It's a beautiful camera, but still there are more 'professional' models within the Nikon stable, the D850 and Z7 to name just two. While I've been able to win photo competition awards, have had quite a few of my images published in various publications

and sell some of my images in their own right and as featured in calendars, I certainly don't earn anywhere near enough from my photography to make a viable living. Perhaps that's the only meaningful measure to determine whether someone is 'professional' or not?

But it's also worth considering reputable professional photographic practises. Aside from using top-end professional gear, other professional practises that come to my mind include frequent use of a sturdy tripod (and cable or wireless shutter release), use of fixed focal length specialist lenses, use of filters, being very selective about light conditions, shooting in manual mode, usually using spot metering, rather than leaving some shooting decisions to in-camera programming; and shooting in Camera RAW mode, along with having the skills to effectively process those files. I'm sure there are some other practises I should list too – and if I was a 'true professional' I'd know what they are!

Part of me would like to be recognised as a professional photographer. Put that down to artistic pride and ego mainly. Sure, more money would be nice, but really it comes down to the extent that others appreciate my work. Rightly or wrongly, that does matter to me and being recognised as a 'professional' might be a nice manifestation of that appreciation. But I'm sufficiently honest with myself to know that I fall short against my list. Another interesting self observation though, is that my shortfalls are mostly by choice. I could actually adopt more professional photographic practises more of the time, but I choose not to. Why? In my case, because the sheer pleasure I get from taking and processing photos in the way I choose to overrides my ego frailties. Let me explain...

The origins of my photography lie in quite fast-paced, constant backpacker travel through mostly developing countries. In this mode, carrying a lot of camera gear is a significant burden in terms of more than just weight. The risk of theft increases. The degree of spontaneity reduces. Consequently I mostly shot hand-held, relying on a wide ranging zoom lens. Lazy I know, but I was able

to take a lot of interesting photos, many times where I couldn't have if I'd been more technically diligent. It was an enthralling journey of discovery, where my photography never became a travel burden.

My photography began before the digital age, but while I was a manual mode photographer, I only ever used colour print and slide film and never gained any darkroom experience. Before pixels, with no back of camera screens for instant feedback, I had to be on top of my exposure settings, otherwise costs and/or disappointments mounted up. But even then, handing my film over to a lab sometimes ended in frustration. Use of old chemicals could really mess things up. And there was a big gap in my ability to enjoy complete control of the end result. Back then I think professionals were exerting more overall control on their end results than me, either by processing their own black and white film or working much more closely with only selected top-end processing labs.

But then along came digital. According to Mr Google the first DSLR was Minolta's 1.75 megapixel RD-175 in 1995. Nikon's 2.73 megapixel D1 followed in 1999 – the first digital to be built from the ground up by a major player. I bought my first DSLR in 2005 - a 6.1 megapixel Nikon D70S, replacing my Nikon F801S film camera. I really loved my F801S, but felt that digital technology had progressed sufficiently for amateurs like me to get on the bandwagon. Immediately I enjoyed the ability to adjust ISO frame by frame if required - two main exposure tools had just jumped from two to three. Having instantaneous back-of-camera feedback was also a big development, initially probably just making me a bit lazier about exposure setting. Otherwise, I continued to shoot pretty much as I had done with my F801S. To begin with, I was oblivious to perhaps the biggest game changer of all - while the D70S could shoot in Camera RAW, I had no post-processing knowledge and just stuck with jpegs.

Post-processing seeped into my photography skill set over the next five or so years. In about 2010 I got my first edition of Photoshop and since then, have never looked back. Even then though, it took until mid 2014 for me to click on to the power and wonderful freedom of RAW files. Finally I was starting to build post-processing skills that approached what the professionals were applying.

25.4x25.4mm MOS sensor
20.1 megapixels
24-360 F8.8 lens
340g

35.9x24mm CMOS sensor
24.3 megapixels
24-120 flat F4 lens
1450g

These days, a lot of my photography occurs on mountain slopes in places where a big heavy DSLR tends to stay in my pack. Tramping and climbing have largely replaced backpacker travel, but my need to travel light and remain photographically spontaneous and opportunistic remains the same. While I love using my Nikon D750, I frequently use a mirrorless compact camera (currently a Lumix TZ220) in the hills.

'Shadow and Light' is a stitched image, created from 8 hand-heldportrait shots, taken on my Lumix TZ220. It is a dawn view of the top 600 metres of Mt Taranaki (New Zealand), taken from the southern rim of Fantham's Peak. Syme Hut sits to the left of the summit cone, which has projected a shadow out to the far left. Mounts Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu are

SHADOW AND LIGHT

F8, 1/160s, ISO125, 24mm

silhouetted on the right skyline. It was my fifth trip up this route and the best light so far. I've printed this image at 1.2m wide by 40cm high and, in terms of colour and sharpness, it stands up very well.

Digitally enabled mirrorless technology has really come of age. The amount of photographic power that can be packed into a space the size of a sardine can is quite astounding. While some may deem my gear 'amateurish', when using my TZ220 I still shoot Camera RAW files using spot meter, with manual settings. The TZ220's three quarter sensor's 20 megapixel files aren't quite as nice as my D750's full fame 24 megapixel files, but they're still pretty good – easily sufficient for print publication. The TZ220's built in Leica optical zoom range is outrageous – 24mm to 360mm. Of course, there's no such thing as a free lunch - the higher end of the zoom is not great, but image sharpness is, for the most part, not an issue and it being so tiny, there's no need for a heavy-duty tripod.
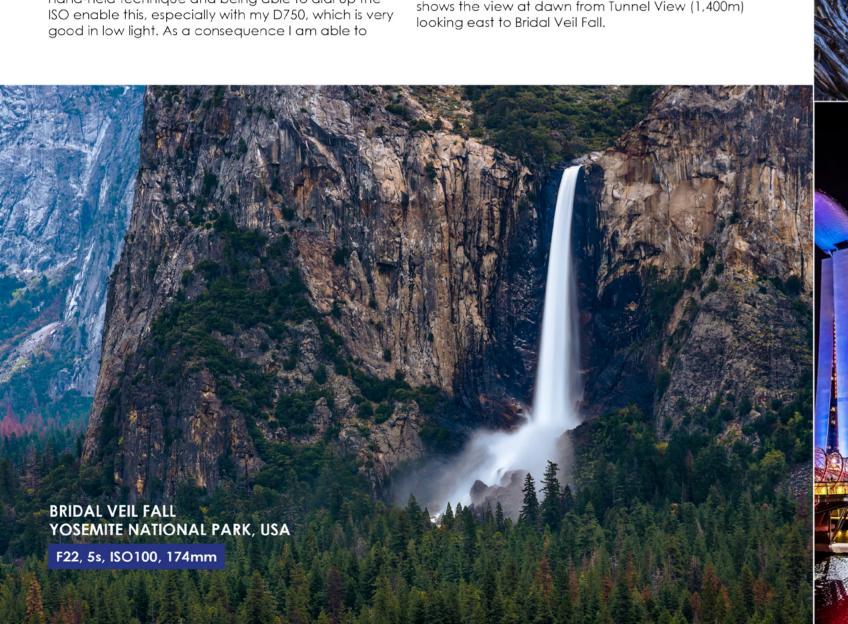
More generally, whether I'm using my TZ220 or D750, I use a tripod less than many professionals do. Good hand-held technique and being able to dial up the ISO enable this, especially with my D750, which is very good in low light. As a consequence I am able to

capture a lot more action than some do and, when with non-photographers, I tend to hold tramping progress up less.

In my shot 'Autumn Reflection' which shows a small lake between Cromwell and Clyde in Central Otago, a tripod would have been impossible as I was balanced on driftwood right on the shore line. In post processing I used adjustment layering on the foreground as a graduated filter to allow the foreground detail and colour to come up, balancing the top and bottom halves.

'Singapore Light Show' is another case in which I didn't use a tripod. It shows (from left to right) the Helix Bridge, Marina Bay Sands, the Art Science Museum, and Marina Bay. When I took it, I was on my way back to the hotel with my family after dinner and had no time to set up a tripod. But because the D750 is so good in low light at higher ISO settings, I was able to take this hand held stitch of 2 landscape shots.

However, when I want to catch water movement such as in my shot 'Bridal Veil' a tripod is usually essential. This shot was taken on my Nikon D750 and shows the view at dawn from Tunnel View (1,400m) looking east to Bridal Veil Fall.

AUTUMN REFLECTION
F16, 1/60s, ISO100, 24mm

BRIDAL VEIL FALL
YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, USA
F22, 5s, ISO100, 174mm

SINGAPORE LIGHT SHOW
F5, 1/20s, ISO1000, 24mm

I shoot a lot of panoramic series that I stitch together in Photoshop later. I often find that a standard landscape or portrait format is too limiting when trying to capture the vast magnificence of our natural world. Stitching also brings the advantage of creating bigger files that can be printed larger or more freely cropped. Stitched panoramas don't have to be restricted to grand horizontal landscapes either. Vertical pans enable me to capture wider angled images than a single wide angle shot can. I've got some really interesting results in human-made and urban settings too, although subject movement, hard angles and straight lines can present challenges. There is certainly an art to getting the most from a stitched series. It adds another whole dimension to my photography which I love.

Aside from a ubiquitous UV filter (for lens protection) I don't use lens filters. I've tried them and hence understand their capabilities, but I find using adjustment layering in Photoshop to be more versatile than any set of filters. Is this cheating? One method uses glass on the end of the camera while the other achieves the same or perhaps better results on screen. Both options are forms of image manipulation. My view is that it's the end result that counts and using either method requires skill and artistic judgement.

When considering the validity of post-processing techniques, here's a useful analogy from the alpine world. Although crampons, as a highly energy efficient alternative to cutting steps, had been in use in the European Alps well before the end of the nineteenth century, it wasn't until after WWI that they started to be accepted by most serious climbers in New Zealand. Until then 'old-school' and 'purist' climbers deemed the use of crampons to be unsporting and cheating. Today, in the photographic world, some (probably more novices than professionals) still apply this sentiment to post-processing. I'm the first to concede that 21st Century computer-enabled post-processing makes it easier to create really stunning images. But let's not forget that the professionals were post-processing long before the digital age – it's just that darkrooms have been replaced by computers. Yes, I think computer-based post-processing is much more accessible (and versatile) than dark room or lab post-processing was, but to do computer-based post-processing well still demands a very wide range of technical and artistic skills and judgement.

The photo 'Incoming' is a stitch of 2 landscape shots taken on my Nikon P7800. It shows me sheltering from snow squalls at about 2,000m on Mount Taranaki with two of my sons. Those crampons came in handy that day! I couldn't have taken this image in one wide angle frame as I was too close to my own feet but stitching 2 made it possible.

Today the preferred base image file format for professionals is RAW. In its unprocessed state a RAW file is dull and flat, but once you open it in Camera RAW, a whole world of artistic potential is released. Of course, if you want to create images of a 'professional' standard, then once you've chosen your subject, getting things right in camera is still crucial. But today more than ever, that is just the first step. Digitisation in photography has introduced a new and sometimes alternative set of tools and techniques open to photographers. And because of that, in my perhaps 'not so professional' opinion, photography today has never been more enriching.

INCOMING

F5, 1/1250, ISO100, 28mm