

Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography



JOURNAL 10

Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography



This journal is published by aspect2i.co.uk
Contact: journal@aspect2i.co.uk



© Cover Image: by Michael Pilkington

No part of this journal may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from aspect2i Ltd.

The copyright to all photographs and text featured in this journal belongs solely to the authors of the photographs. For permission to use any of the images included in this journal please pass your request to the publisher, who will then forward the request to the authors.

Copyright © aspect2i Ltd 2025. All rights reserved.

JOURNAL 10

Introduction	4
Feature	5
Why did you take it? <i>by Michael Pilkington</i>	
Travelogue	14
An Arctic adventure <i>by Peter Moore</i>	
Featured photographer	25
Gordon Hutchinson	
Broadening horizons	36
On another level <i>by Paul Gallagher</i>	
How I got the shot	43
Up in the air <i>by Michael Pilkington</i>	
The making of a photograph	48
All's well that ends well <i>by Stephen Carroll</i>	
End note	51

Well there we have it: the hottest and driest summer since records began! For many, it was a pleasure to experience what many of our European counterparts get a taste of each year by sitting in the garden and lighting the barbeque, but it was also a dry season for landscape photography. Miles of fields full of crops and dull green trees are not the ingredients that inspire us to get out. Given the harsh conditions the climate has delivered this summer, many of the trees are displaying signs of stress and autumn colours are beginning to appear even now in early September..

With a very early autumn now forecast we can look forward to some of the most favourable conditions we hope for with the sun low in the sky, changeable conditions, and further into the winter months, frosts and maybe snow. Along with the seasons, time passes by and we have reached Expressions number 10 already!

In this edition Michael Pilkington begins by considering whether we should ask ourselves why we are about to take a photograph. All too often we can head home after a day out with a healthy number of image files, but have we truly explored the subject or were we hoping to find the winner in amongst the catch?

Peter Moore whets our appetite for some of the best winter conditions and shares his experiences of traveling through Lofoten and Senja amidst the grip of an Arctic winter. In this edition our featured photographer is Gordon Hutchinson. Since a young age Gordon has always had a love of the visual arts, and even though he ultimately entered a long career as an engineer, his love of art through photography remains. He shares with us his journey and why he has decided to pursue the highest award available, a Fellowship of the Royal Photographic Society.

For the first time in any edition of Expressions you will see images taken in an entirely different way than we have shared before; with a drone! There is no mistaking the popularity of drones today and Paul Gallagher shares with you the very different trials and tribulations of working with this piece of kit has posed.

As always, Expressions is free to everyone, so if you know a budding photographer or a visual artist you would think would enjoy what we are offering here, then please share this link with them aspect2i.co.uk/downloads/expressions



Why did you take it?

by Michael Pilkington

Why did you take it?

by Michael Pilkington

This is one of the most fundamental and common questions I ask when looking at client images on photography workshops. It seems a simple question and one which is easily answered. However, the answer in reality does not reflect this. Indeed, the question 'Why did you take it?' is not given a lot of thought, and this can be the difference between an excellent image and an average, or even a bad one. Reflecting this, responses can be convoluted and unclear.



© Michael Pilkington

As landscape photographers, we are often fortunate enough not to be rushed. This does not mean that we don't have to work quickly, as sometimes this is the case. In fact, many non-landscape photographers have the impression that we are involved in a leisurely pursuit, hanging around waiting for the light to change in our favour. As you know, this can be far from the truth. Perching on a rocky outcrop by the edge of a storm-charged sea with the wind and spray blowing towards you and a blizzard about to hit you requires the photographer to work fast, ensuring you do not drop any equipment into the swell. You need to know how to assemble your kit, load your filters, and set the necessary exposure in double quick time, and all without falling in yourself!

However, in the main, we can take time to contemplate and choose the image that we will take. But is this the case? Often when arriving at a location there is an inclination to walk around ever so briefly and then set up your tripod, attach the camera and start shooting. There is an emotional surge and mental obligation to 'get one in the bag'. Let's face it, you have driven or walked miles to a particular location, and you have an obligation to be successful, to bring home some great images. The question is what are you doing to make this happen?



© Michael Pilkington

My experience, having worked with lots of photographers over many years, both as a workshop leader and one-to-one, is that people do not take the time to stop, think and experience their surroundings. Often, there is an urgency to start taking photographs, with the hope that the discovery of a successful image is back at home, scanning the raw files on your computer. On consideration, this is very much 'after the fact', and you are often a long way from where the photograph was taken, so "nipping back

out to have another go” can quickly turn into disappointment at the lost opportunities. To add to the disappointment, whilst you are looking at the image files and recounting the time you were there, you piece together the places you should have set up and see with staggering clarity where you could have done better!



© Michael Pilkington

The first thing to do when arriving on location is to stop and look around you. This means not just looking at what is in front of you, but turning around and surveying what is behind you, and surrounding you. The change of perspective on the direction of light and subject matter can be transforming. When you stop to look, you will start to see the possibilities available to you. The shape of trees, branches or grasses may be interesting. The play of light and shadow. The juxtaposition of different components in the scene. It is important to take stock of the potential photographs and to give yourself time to assimilate and digest the opportunities; in short, allow yourself to ‘connect’

Taking time to think is perhaps one of the most important things in making a photograph, deciding on what should be included and, more significantly, what should be excluded. Often, when reviewing images in the field, I find that they can be confusing and simply do not convey to the viewer what the photographer was trying to achieve. I often use an analogy to describe this. Consider actors performing on a stage. There should be a single lead performer, the star of the show. That lead may have some support actors, but they must not detract from our star; but complement. And then there is the rest of the cast who occupy the rest of the stage, and they must complement rather than detract from our star.



© Michael Pilkington

Consideration should be given to the non-visual aspects of the image; the wind, the temperature, the prevailing weather and how these are going to influence your choice of subject and how you are going to embrace them. Are these dominant aspects of the scene and to what extent do they contribute or

add to what you are trying to achieve and convey about the environment you are in? All of the above can fail without having an emotional connection with what you have photographed. This underpins the very essence of the image. Conveying this is perhaps the most difficult aspect of our photography, but it can help you realise the image you want. Experiencing the scene before me is, of course, dominated by the light and the way in which it is illuminated.



© Michael Pilkington

Light is the fundamental component of photography after all. However, we have more than sight as a sense with which to experience the environment we are in. We have smell and touch, and sound. I used to work in the City of London decades ago, and walking to the office in Canon Street, I used to pass an art gallery every day, and remember seeing this painting that was on display in the window for some weeks. It was of a field, long grass, yellowed by the arid conditions and the heat of the sun beating down on it. There was a tree casting shade onto the ground below it, within which sheep were sheltering from the brightness and heat of the midday sun. I remember staring at this painting every day it was there. I could imagine, even feel, the heat of the day. I could hear the crickets and other insects in the grass and the sound of a gentle breeze blowing. I could even smell the grass and perhaps the odour of the animals. I always wish I could have bought that painting, but it was probably well beyond what a twenty-something could afford.

Somehow the artist had managed to capture all of these different dimensions in his painting. Firstly,

you have to understand what emotion you are feeling and wishing to convey. The emotion comes from the scene before you. A good exercise in understanding this is to go out and take photographs that match a certain emotion. It is difficult but can be enlightening and help train your thought processes.

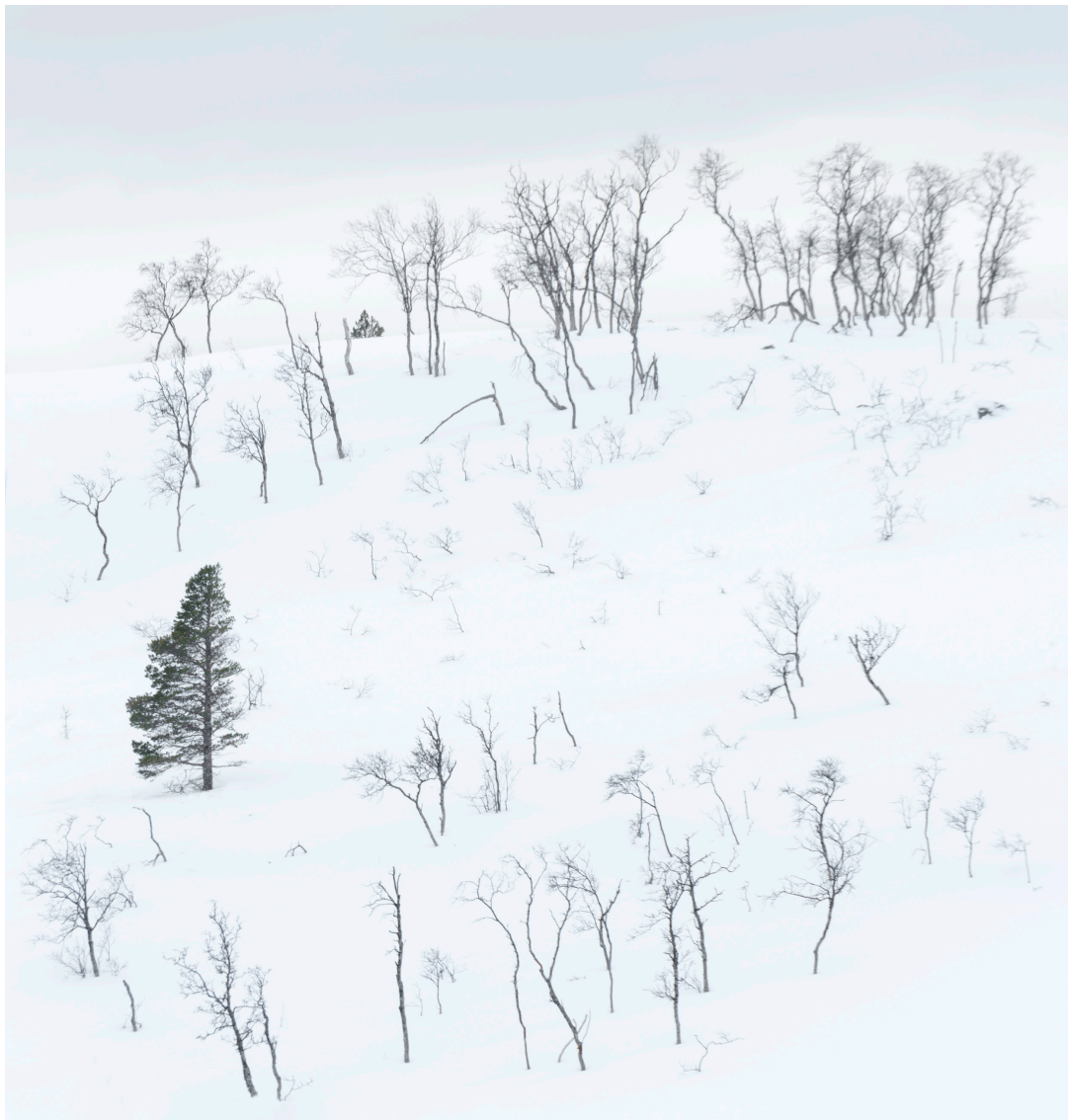


© Michael Pilkington

Your image may be dominated by colour. It is well known and documented how different colours evoke different feelings. For example, blues symbolize rationalism, wisdom, faith and trust. Green is the colour of hope, spirit, balance and calm. A limited palette of colours can be soothing, high contrast and dynamic range may be jarring, but equally, could be considered as energising!

All of what I have spoken of comes down to one thing. Pre-visualization. The ability to visualize what the final image will look like. When surveying a scene, I try to visualize what the final print will look like and how I would like the viewer to respond. It is at this stage I will begin to consider the tones of the image. The choice between printing lighter or heavier tones will hugely influence the viewers response

to the finished photograph. I even give consideration at this stage to what paper I would use. Finally, I ask myself if I would be happy to put the final print on my wall. If the answer is yes, or even probably, then I go ahead and take the photograph. So before you release that shutter, before you even set up your camera, think 'Why am I taking this?'



© Michael Pilkington



Norwegian Arctic adventure

by Peter Moore

Travelogue - A truthful account of an individual's experiences to or within a particular place

In February 2024 I travelled with aspect2i on their Norwegian Arctic adventure to the Lofoten archipelago of islands and the more distant and northerly island of Senja.

Norway's landscape is the result of its northerly location and the erosive action of many ice ages. The land is dominated by sharply cut mountains and is contained in the west and the north by a coastline that is deeply indented by fjords.

Looking out of the aeroplane windows as we approached Narvik was like looking down on an altogether new world. The view was dominated by snow-covered mountains as far as the eye could see.



© Peter Moore

During the trip there were around seven hours between sunrise and sunset, and at its highest, the sun reached about seven degrees above the horizon. These low sun elevations have significant advantages for landscape photographers. Firstly, the sun was high enough to provide plenty of light but not always high enough for the sun to be seen above nearby mountains. Consequently, the lighting was mainly indirect, beautifully gentle and usually had a warm hue. Secondly, the golden hour seemed to last through the day. There was a graceful and almost imperceptible transition from morning blue hour to golden hour and back to evening blue hour. Clouds in any direction could appear in hues from a thin shade of yellow through to pale pinks and reds, all set against a sky dominated by tranquil hues of blue and cyan. These colours would then be reflected by water, rocks, snow and ice. This lighting presented fabulous photographic opportunities coupled with some interesting challenges in post-processing.



© Peter Moore

Neutral-density, graduated filters were very seldom required, thanks to the low contrast lighting conditions. However, I used 6 and 10 stop neutral density-filters extensively to enable very long shutter speeds which have the effect of averaging out the tonality in moving water and clouds. This “smoothing” effect can hide distracting details in water and lead to a simplified composition which has more emphasis on the form and textures seen in solid structures such as rocks.

Throughout the trip we were blessed with temperatures ranging from 0°C down to as low as around -10°C at night. Luckily there was overnight snowfall on a few nights. When this happened, we left the hotel early the next day to try to arrive at our target location ahead of other visitors.

Our first location was a beach near Leknes which had received a fresh layer of overnight snow, making for superb clean foregrounds. A lazy river made a snaking entrance to the beach and along with some dune grasses poking up through the snow, this became a great lead-in to an island and the flank of a distant mountain.

The first time that we drove towards the head of a snow-choked, glaciated valley, the road ahead disappeared behind a bend and it felt like we were heading for a collision with the mountainside. Then, almost miraculously, around the bend there appeared a tunnel entrance, which swallowed our vehicles, and minutes later we emerged into daylight and found ourselves in a different valley and surrounded by wonderful new views. We passed through many tunnels on our travels; it is obviously cheaper to cut a tunnel than to build a road over or around a range of mountains.



© Peter Moore

While scouting a rocky shoreline, I was talking with Paul Gallagher about his method for identifying interesting foregrounds. He gave me some tips and then he showed me an unusual shape in the rocks of a wave cut platform, and that was it: I was engrossed for the next 10 minutes. The closest foreground rocks were less than a metre from the lens, in this case a 40mm Voigtlander, and yet the depth of field is all encompassing. This was achieved by mounting the lens to a mirrorless camera via a tilting adapter. That adapter allows up to 10 degrees of tilt in any direction, which permitted the plane of focus to be adjusted to coincide with the almost horizontal plane of the key subject matter in this photograph. With the plane of focus locked in, I set an aperture of f/11, fitted a 6-stop neutral-density filter, set the ISO to the camera base level, set a shutter speed of 10 seconds, and then I made a test exposure to check everything was sharp and properly exposed. Then I made several separate exposures when the waves were breaking around the rocks.

Whilst driving to our final shooting location on the first day, there was a gorgeous warm glow that was picking out an unusual cloud formation above a nearby mountain. It was clear to me that the warm light on the cloud would be short-lived at best. After hurrying to disembark the vehicles, some of our group made a beeline for a path to the edge of the sea. Within just 20 metres of the vehicles, I couldn't help noticing the lovely soft side lighting on the pillows of virginal powder snow that enveloped an otherwise rocky foreground. The composition came to me in an instant and I worked as fast as I could



© Peter Moore

and made an automated focus stack at $f/5.6$, which may sound too wide an aperture, but when assembled in PS, delivered sharp detail throughout. Within seconds of capturing the images some of our group found their way to the edge of the sea and into the picture, and of course, the warm glow on the cloud had begun to dissipate. I rejoiced that I had made the capture without any distracting footprints or persons in the frame.

We experienced snow fall combined with severe winds during two of our days in the Lofoten. Visibility was very poor due to vast amounts of spindrift that were being picked up by the ferocious winds. Plans had to be changed due to road closures. Thankfully the Norwegians don't let such things hinder them too much, and the roads were quickly snow-ploughed, and we managed to get out and experience the challenge of making pictures with horizontal snow and winds that were almost blowing me off my feet.



© Peter Moore

On one of these days, we visited a cemetery that was virtually snow bound. The weather was so awful that only 2 of us were daft enough to get out and give it a go. Under the relative shelter of the tail gate of the car, I adjusted my camera and lens settings to suit the conditions.



© Peter Moore

Then I went forth with camera in one hand and a big lens cloth in the other. A shutter speed of 1/160s was slow enough to record movement in the snowflakes, and fast enough when helped by vibration reduction to record the scene sharply. The absence of any sky or horizon line, and the muted colours, give a strong feeling of isolation.



© Peter Moore

Like many visitors, I loved the brightly coloured buildings, and I made it my mission to photograph them in the best and worst weather conditions possible, to capture an image that screamed out "this is Norway." I found a red barn on the brow of a small hill and at the foot of a tall mountain. Sustained gusts of wind were throwing spindrift into the air and were conspiring to blow me and my tripod over. I spent around 10 minutes clutching on to my tripod and recording every gust of wind. The image shown is an attempt to portray the conditions, with the windblown snow showing up against the red wall and causing recession in the distant mountains and the total obscuration of the line where the sea meets the sky. I had secured my "this is Norway" image.

Senja is located at 69°North, a cool ten-hour, 460km drive from Leknes. Driving north to Senja we passed through some lovely scenery and over some exposed mountain passes where the outside temperature dropped to -13°C. Eventually it became dark, and we were hungry, so we pressed on to our hotel in Hamn. Senja has a different character to Lofoten. The mountains are a little bigger, typically up to 1,000m, and the roads are mainly found inland and go over mountain passes. Senja has many birch tree forests, which are largely absent on Lofoten. Senja is further north, harder to get to, and consequently is less well-trodden than Lofoten.



© Peter Moore

The next morning, we sped off to a special fjord where dark rocks descend precariously in convex slopes into the sea, and where impossibly jagged peaks resembling dragon's teeth rise straight up to

the sky. When we arrived the first rays of the morning sun were just starting to hit the peaks. I found a pool of almost frozen sea water, so cold that it had the consistency of wallpaper paste, and which was decorated with gorgeous plates of ice. This was to become my foreground. Thankfully the pool was bathed in a lovely soft blue light with no harsh shadows, but for how long? The closest foreground was only 30cm away from the lens, making focussing problematic. For expedience, I fitted an auto-focus lens and set the controls for a focus stack at f/8. Later in post processing, eight exposures were stacked to give the required depth of field. Later, at home, I looked at dozens of winter images from this location and found none with ice that looked like this, so I hoped that I had captured something a bit different.



© Peter Moore

The birch trees on Senja appear almost skeletal during winter. They endure very severe conditions and many of them have limbs missing or are inclined at impossible angles. There is no mistaking that they have a hard life. A long telephoto zoom lens was essential for isolating small stands of trees. The birches often appear in small groups, always with young saplings near to the parent trees.

One night on Senja, we were treated to an excellent auroral display. The hotel had a viewpoint that overlooked the sea. This was ideal because aurora shots are invariably improved when there is a body of water to reflect the gorgeous light. I shot from 10 pm for almost two hours, and throughout that time, the northern lights became better and better, while the display arced and moved across the sky as the earth rotated under the solar wind. Using a 20mm lens I shot at an aperture of f/2 and kept exposures below 10s to avoid the stars being recorded as streaks. It is important not to overexpose the aurora, which is deceptively dim compared with the stars. I checked the histogram regularly. I keep the green peak over to the left. In play-back the stars should appear in a myriad of colours.



© Peter Moore

If the stars appear as mainly white in play-back, that is a strong indication that exposure needs to be reduced. A phrase that Michael uses a lot in relation to post-processing is “recover the light.” It is the case with aurora pictures that you must recover the light by use of adjustment sliders in the Light panel. The Clarity slider may also be useful. It’s best to be cautious with the saturation slider to avoid super saturated-electric greens.

By the end of the trip, I had accumulated an unusually high number of keeper images, and I realised that northern Norway had become one of my all-time favourite locations for photography. I kept asking myself “why haven’t I been here before?” Looking back at the trip, and at my edited images, I can safely say this was the most productive photography trip I have ever made. I hope to return.



© Peter Moore



Featured photographer: Gordon Hutchinson

Gordon Hutchinson

Whilst many photographers we meet display a clear interest in their photography and are keen to become better, sometimes we encounter people with what would seem a boundless energy and limitless passion for learning. Our Featured Photographer in this issue is Gordon Hutchinson, and he perfectly fits that description. A former student of the arts, a long career as a qualified engineer and a prolific dancer, we just had to have a conversation with the man whose enthusiasm is infectious in everything he does.



© Gordon Hutchinson

When we have talked about your photography, it was clear that visual arts have been an important part of your life for many years. Can you share with us when your love of the arts was discovered?

I'm sure that this goes back a very long time because, as with many young children, I was particularly attracted to creative activities such as painting, drawing, music and building/making things.

My father, a long-service soldier in the British Army, was, for his last posting stationed near Nottingham, where I attended school in the local village. The art teacher, having seen my painting of an Arctic Tern, asked if I would be interested in sitting the entrance exam for the Art School in Nottingham.



© Gordon Hutchinson

Having passed the exam and starting at the school, I soon discovered that the range of art subjects covered was quite extensive, ranging from typical visual arts such as drawing/painting, designing and painting posters, lettering, lino cuts, clay modelling and so on, to artisanal types of creative art such as making decorative items from wood or sheet metal (copper) and to trade skills such as sign writing, technical drawing, and so forth. So, it was here, at Nottingham Secondary Art School, that I had my first extensive encounter with a variety of visual arts and, unbeknown to me at the time, partially laid the foundation for me to pursue a career in engineering.

Having attended art school, you ultimately chose a career as an engineer. How has being a student of the arts and pursuing a career in engineering shaped or influenced you as a photographer?

I shall digress for a short while, so that you may understand how an art school lad ended up as an engineer.



© Gordon Hutchinson

The journey from art to engineering, probably started when my father's Army service came to an end, because it was at that time that my parents moved to Kent, where they had previously bought a house. This meant that I left school at the age of fifteen, much earlier than was usual! So, aged fifteen, and being unsure of what I could, or even wanted to do, I took a job in an office in London. However, after three or four years I decided, that because I enjoyed technical drawing at art school, I would see if I could get a job to train as a draughtsman. I was fortunate enough to be taken on as a trainee with a scientific research organisation in Kent. However, having starting from an academically very low level, due to my art school background and, then after another year or two, setting my sites a little higher, I spent some years studying to become a qualified engineer!



© Gordon Hutchinson

As for “how a career in engineering shaped or influenced me as a photographer”, I’m not sure that it did. I think it much more likely that my fundamental characteristics and aptitudes are what shaped, and influenced, both my engineering and my photography. For example, although there may be some differences between the skills required to be a good engineer or a good photographer, there are many more that are very much the same, e.g., creativity, technical skills, attention to detail, continuous learning, adaptability, resilience, experimentation and problem solving, with the main differences probably being artistic vision, mathematical/scientific skills and statistical/data analysis.

You have mentioned that you pursued a passion for dancing and are/was a dedicated student reaching quite a high standard. Being another art form, what is it about dance that you draw from as an expressive artist?

I think, in answering your first two questions, I've expressed my belief that there are many similarities in the qualities required for both engineering and photography and here, yet again, it is my opinion,



© Gordon Hutchinson

that much the same applies to ballroom and Latin dancing. However, I do think that the main differences are more apparent. For example, trying to attain a high standard in dancing requires a particularly high level of dedication with the need for musicality, a high level of fitness, with good motor control and balance, and for competitions, the ability to 'get it right first time' when under stress!

Ballroom dancing is particularly enjoyable and satisfying when moving to the music, with your dance partner, in a way that reflects the mood and emotion of the music – there is usually a sense of elation when a routine is danced, not only with technical perfection, but also if danced with grace and fluidity



© Gordon Hutchinson

Latin dances, often emphasizing rhythm, bring a different sense of enjoyment and fulfilment because of the variety and the 'storytelling', which ranges from intimacy and passion to exuberance. Many forms of Latin also need a good level of fitness and, unlike ballroom, often requires coordination and connection with your partner at a distance, which requires a different set of skills to be developed. I find that the sheer energy, and exuberance, with some Latin dances is the most enjoyable aspect.



© Gordon Hutchinson

From your images, you clearly have a passion for woodland environments and being there with your camera. Many photographers see woodland as a challenging place to pursue their work. What is it about woodlands that appeals to you so much?

Well, first and foremost, I enjoy woodlands because when you go into them, it often feels as if you're going into a different world! For example, entering under the cool canopy on a bright, hot, sunny summer's day, there's a dimness and coolness that is suddenly very different to what you've just left behind because of the quietness, tranquillity, and calm.

Photographing woodland appeals to me because it is often difficult to 'make sense' of what is there before you, and the challenge of trying to bring order out of, what is often, disorder and chaos. And, when achieved, gives a sense of accomplishment! For example, where sunlight filters through the canopy you get dappled patterns on the woodland floor and the light on leaves create intriguing patterns and, where the canopy is particularly dense, this effect can seem quite magical, particularly where the beams, shining onto leaves, seem to be like 'jewels' in the gloom! Rivers and streams running through a woodland create an added dimension by providing breaks in the canopy, often with the tree branches arching over them, seemingly trying to prevent this.

So, in peaceful settings like this, time slows, allowing you to absorb the beauty and calm which will, hopefully, be reflected in the photographs taken.



© Gordon Hutchinson



© Gordon Hutchinson

In recent years you have chosen infrared as your chosen genre of photography and you are just embarking on a journey to submit a panel of images to achieve your Fellowship from the Royal Photographic Society. Why have you chosen infrared for your Fellowship panel and what inspired you to pursue this award?

Paul, I think that you and Michael must bear part of the responsible for me embarking on this journey, but let me give you a little bit of background, before I explain why.

I've been taking photographs for very many years, not as a serious amateur but, as with many people, a means of recording family occasions and holidays. However, this has, in more recent years not only developed into a passion for capturing the essence and beauty of Britain's natural landscapes, but has also grown into the desire for creating fine art prints which, for me, is the ultimate expression for a photographic image.

Now, until about four yeas ago most of my photography was in colour with some B&W. That is, until I saw some IR images in a photography magazine that intrigued me and which caused me to have a camera converted specifically for IR photography. Shortly after this, I had the good fortune to discover the aspect2i website, because it was here that I found a workshop that brought together my interest in IR photography and printing. This, as it turned out, was the perfect start to my infrared journey as it not only helped me get to grips with how to capture an IR image, but also how to edit and print it. I couldn't have asked for more!

Much of my photography since, has been with IR imagery, as this form of image making seems very

well suited to me, both visually and aesthetically. My choice of using IR images from within woodlands is because, with IR, I can create the soft, gentle, images that have an almost ethereal quality. This is very much reflective of the way I see woodlands as being different, quieter, and almost magical places.

Paul, having attended several workshops with you and Michael, I can now tell you that it was, after my second workshop with you both, that your comments about my images, supported by Michael, that gave me the confidence to enter two panels, of six images each, into an exhibition held at the Mall Galleries in London in 2024. Before this, I had hardly ever shown my images to anyone, let alone shown them in public. Although being extremely nervous, I was also intrigued to see how people would react to my images. So, after watching and listening for a while, I was relieved to discover that they seemed to be quite well received. Now, since that time, and with increasing experience, training and confidence, I have decided that putting together a panel of images for the RPS Fellowship Distinction was a challenge that I would love to undertake. However, I have already learned that, because of the dedication and expertise needed to achieve the required standard, this is a decision not to be taken lightly!



On another level

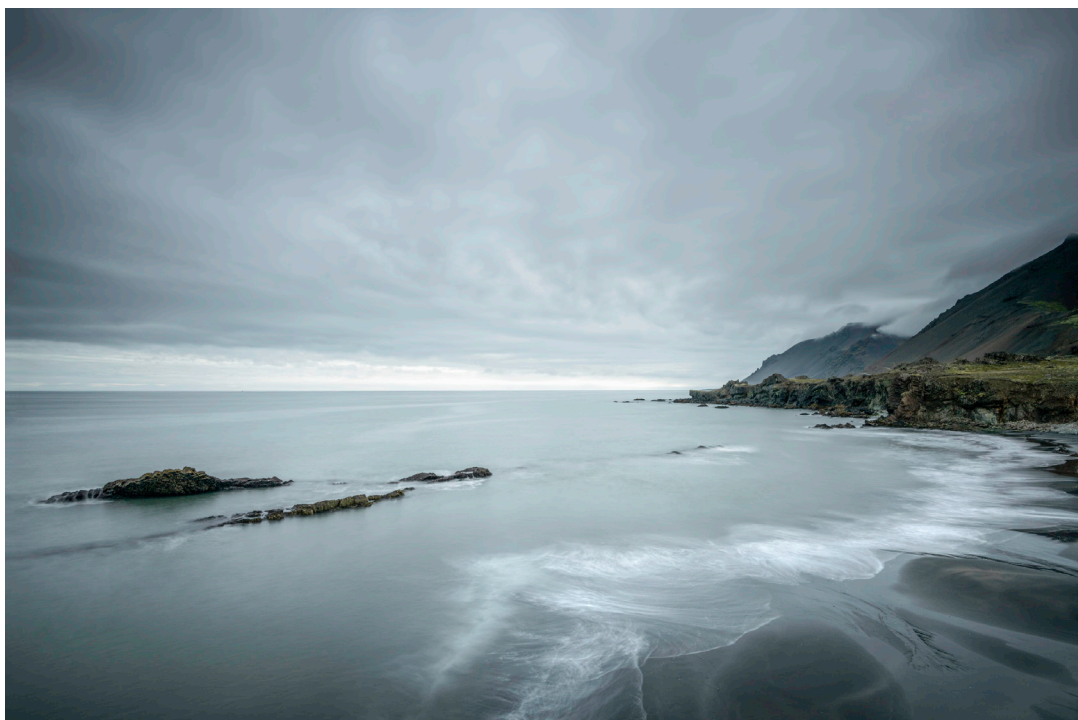
by Paul Gallagher

On another level

by Paul Gallagher

When drones started to become popular a decade ago, my initial opinion was of them being toys that sounded like angry wasps flying above my head. Furthermore, having taken a closer look at one, the size of the camera looked positively 'Mickey Mouse', the lens diameter being smaller than a penny piece. I originated from a place of large-format cameras and backpacks that weighed over twenty kilograms, so this almost entirely plastic kit, didn't convince me at all.

All that being considered, the video footage from these little flying machines began to draw my attention as what they were capturing was once only possible from a helicopter and there were so many people out there enjoying doing just that. Social media platforms that were once entirely dedicated to images from the ground were now awash with videos of people flying over beaches and mountain tops, and in some circumstances, in landscapes I knew very well and had been to many times.



© Paul Gallagher

After intrigue evolved into fascination the time came when the order button had been pressed and a DJI Mavic Pro was wending its way to me in the post. Although it was essentially a flying camera that I had bought, it was like no camera purchase I had experienced before as virtually nothing about it was familiar. The initial set up was nothing less than baffling with GPS calibration, initialising the controller and removing the tiny gimbal sleeve which was beyond fiddly and felt like you could snap it off at any moment. Thankfully, much of this complexity is no longer with us and modern drones do not require the same level of dexterity and care.



© Paul Gallagher

These were the days before controllers could be equipped with built-in screens and so you had to use your mobile phone, which in turn had to have an app installed just so you could get it in the air. With all the calibration complete and the tiny cables attached to my mobile phone, I made first contact with my new flying machine. This first encounter of seeing through the drone's camera was as unfamiliar to photography as anything I had ever experienced before. The drone was positioned in the middle of my garden and the very first drone view I saw was an incredibly wide angle view of the blades of grass on my lawn with my home in the background, the equivalent on putting your camera on the ground and pressing the shutter.

It was at this juncture that I realised I had to forget the camera and simply learn how to fly the thing. For anyone that has not flown a drone before, it's a little like when you see children in front of gaming screens with both their thumbs interdependently pushing and pulling two levers at a rapid rate. I pulled both levers forward on the controller and within seconds the drone screamed into life, and rose into the air. What followed on this maiden voyage was me attempting to understand which way the levers worked and often going backwards rather than forwards. A few things occurred to me during this initial flight. Firstly, I was not looking at the drone much at all but had my eyes fixed to my iPhone screen ensuring I didn't fly into a neighbour's house. Secondly, having got the device airborne, all I could think about was how I was going to get it back!

In the truest sense of the phrase, "What goes up must come down", I was mostly concerned about it coming back to where it took off and not crashing into another garden.



© Paul Gallagher

Therein lies the initial challenge of flying a drone. You spend a lot of money on something and the only way to use it is putting it at risk. The first year of flying for me was a blend of learning to fly and control the drone's position and gaining confidence knowing that I could get it back in one piece, but there are always scares along the way. My first real exploration of drone flight took place in what I would confidently today describe as one of the best landscapes to fly a drone: the Highlands of Iceland.



© Paul Gallagher

As with much of Iceland, there are rivers cutting into the landscape everywhere charged by the summer snowmelt. I decided to gather some footage whilst flying the drone up a river following its meandering path in a deep ravine. All was going well until I made a second sharp turn when the drone went out of sight, and at the same instance, out of signal range. I was horrified to realise that my almost new drone had lost signal and the screen on my mobile phone turned black and the wonderful footage of the drone passing over the rapids was replaced with a warning saying, "Signal Lost".

It is these moments that make drone photography very different from the calming experience of standing behind your camera safely attached to a tripod less than a metre away in full sight. Thankfully I had read that if signal is lost you should immediately stop forward travel and gain altitude as quickly as possible until the controller and drone make contact again. Within a minute the drone's view reappeared on the controller screen, the adventure was halted, and the drone was heading back to me.

I believe my perception of drones and the quality of equipment meant I lost out on many an occasion by not considering using it for still image photography. During the process of buying kit, we all understandably check statistics like sensor size and dynamic range. The Mavic Pro I bought could only boast 12 megapixels in direct comparison to my Nikon D850 with 47 megapixels. I was very keen on the drone footage I was seeing everywhere so I only considered it as a 'movie' camera for the first few years and certainly not a competitor for the Nikon.



© Paul Gallagher

If becoming a drone operator was not enough of a challenge, accruing lots of video footage that then needed to be edited was another. I am used to editing platforms like Lightroom and Photoshop and quickly realised I had to master an entirely different program to get vaguely close to the footage I was inspired by. For some time, I would return from a trip and browse the video thumbnails and watch them on my computer screen knowing that the editing and possibly applying music was a huge challenge. I did try with some success, but it was a direction that would only serve to soak up spare time when there were always image files from my camera that took priority.

Naturally, this left me with two choices: to continue to gather footage with little intent of editing it, or to explore using it as a camera. As I mentioned, I was not convinced by the statistics I had read for the drone, but these concerns were somewhat alleviated by the quality of the footage I was capturing. This led me to using the drone in a very different way indeed. Rather than sending the drone up and flying over the landscape recording the moment, I began utilising it as a means of visualising the landscape from a completely different perspective.

Needless to say, the landscape looks very different from even fifty metres up and the very wide angle of view was not at all appealing initially. On the ground working as a photographer, you often have the option of utilising foreground details in a composition or you can elect to fit a long lens and compress features. With a drone these choices are largely unavailable, although modern drones now have the functionality of several focal length lenses.



© Paul Gallagher

Essentially, I had to relearn the drone again, not how to fly it, but what I could now do with it as a camera. I had to embrace the machine as a scouting tool, a surprisingly steady tripod, and, to my surprise, a quite impressive camera! My reward was image files that proved to be incredibly flexible that held very good dynamic range, albeit from a tiny little lens and a 12 megapixel sensor. On my return home I was not restricted to looking at short videos I had captured, but I enjoyed using the image editing platforms I was familiar with. Although the files were not at the same quality as my Nikon, they were more than good enough, and the drone provided me with images of the environment that spoke a lot about being high in the skies and looking down at the beauty of the wider landscape.

Embarking on a new direction in your photography using a drone will not appeal to all photographers, but when the trepidation of learning to operate it becomes second nature the experience becomes rewarding and offers a choice.

As simple as it may sound, the world looks very different from above and being able to capture moments of light that stretch to the horizon, for me, certainly did broaden my horizons.



Up in the air

by Michael Pilkington

Up in the air

by *Michael Pilkington*

Having visited the Highlands of Iceland a few times before, and seeing some of the images that can be had from a higher perspective, I was motivated to acquire a drone for the first time this year. I bought one of the cheapest and smallest drones you can get. It weighs less than 250 grams and fits in my camera bag, taking no more room than a 24-70 lens. That means it is always with me and easily deployed. Should I see an opportunity, then I would be able to grab it.

Despite my best intentions to practice before using it on a photography tour, I never actually got around to doing much. I managed a couple of quick flights from my garden to take some shots of the house from above, I watched an hour-long YouTube video on how to operate it and, lastly, consultations with friends who have drones to garner some top tips. At the end of the day, I thought it was not terribly difficult and my first trip being in the Highlands of Iceland, apart from mountains and hills, there wasn't that much to crash into, so I wasn't overly concerned.

I have no interest in taking video and simply want to get still images. I have heard it said that the drone is like a flying tripod. That is to say that you have a still camera that is rock solid at any given height. That is exactly what I wanted.

I'm not particularly keen on images that look straight down on a subject. Some of these are interesting for sure, but I consider them a little 'old hat'. What I envisioned was flying at relatively low altitudes to gain a perspective that would be akin to standing on a hillside. Typically, I found that I was flying at 20 to 40 metres, which isn't that high really. For context, the height limitation for this drone (to be compliant with regulations) is 120 metres.

It can be difficult to see the screen on the controller. This is like looking at an image on the back of your camera and suffers from the same problems: reflected light on the surface of the screen and insufficient brightness. Perhaps the biggest challenge is trying to work out what you are seeing and what the position of the drone is related to where you are standing. Also, as odd as it may sound, it can be challenging to gain an understanding of which direction the drone is pointing, particularly when there is no direct sunlight. You have no reference point bar the image on the controller. With a camera, you can look at the scene and determine what is around the subject and make decisions on zooming in or out, panning or moving the camera to a slightly different position to get a different perspective. With a drone, everything seems far away, and you are viewing the world beneath with an extremely wide-angle of view. I suppose this challenge simply arises through a lack of experience, and I will become more proficient in seeing compositions and positioning the drone in the best place more easily in the future.

When launching your drone into the air, you often do not have any idea as to what you will see. You could be standing in front of a big rock face or hill and simply wonder what is over the other side. In the Highlands of Iceland, you can be fairly sure it will be something interesting, and so it was on this occasion. The drone lifted to about 30 metres, and I started flying it away from me. Over the ridge in front of me, after about five minutes, was a large expanse of black volcanic sand stretching out a long way with some very interesting hills in the distance that were hugging the edge of a lake. I thought to myself that it would be perfect and made my first image.

Though I was quite satisfied, I thought that I was still too far away. That is another thing I learnt while flying the drone. Many of the things you want to photograph are a long way away, and it takes time for your drone to fly there (well, mine does as it is very small and not so powerful). I also thought that the lake was too close to the left-hand side of the frame. So onwards I flew and banked to the left to correct the composition. This time, I had over compensated. The hills were too close to the right-hand side of the frame now, although the lake was pretty much in the middle, the main features in the composition were still too distant.



© Michael Pilkington

Continuing onwards, I flew to the right to try and give the hills more space. I was quite happy with this composition. Everything seemed to be in the right place with the hills and lake nicely positioned within the frame. The black sand had a lighter ridge section extending from the left and sweeping up towards the hills, which guides the eye through the image. If you zoom in on the bottom, there are some huge rocks scattered about.



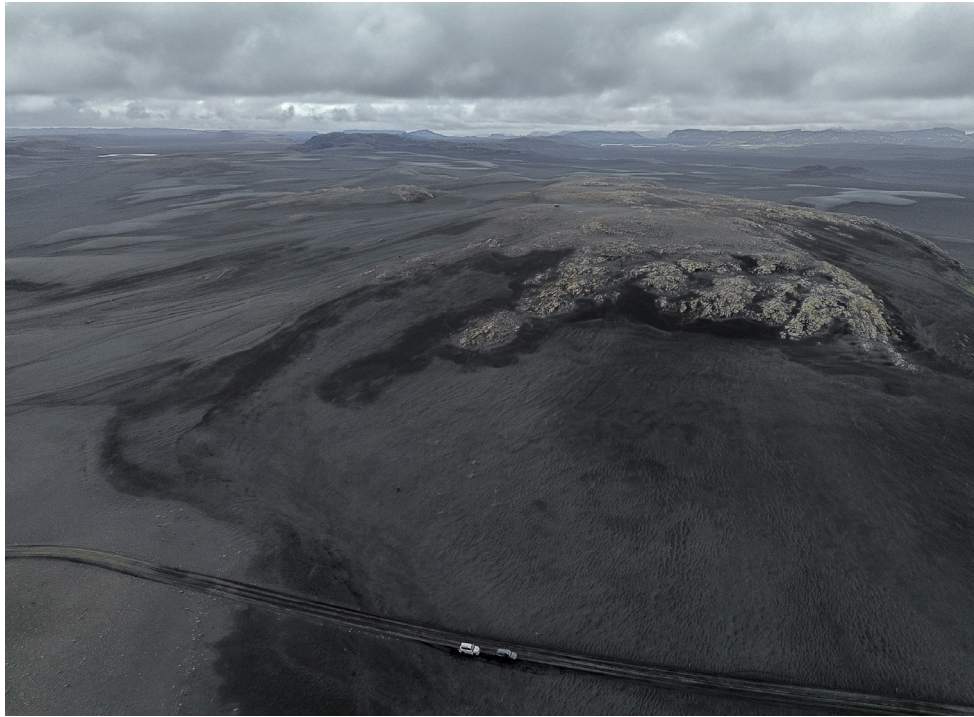
© Michael Pilkington

I checked what was remaining in the battery. You do suffer range anxiety with a drone. I drive an electric car, so I am very familiar with this! I thought that I would have enough juice left to go a little further and see what this revealed. I am glad I did, as this was the image that brought all the elements together. The hills and lake are sufficiently dominant in the image and are clearly the key elements of the composition. Another lake, to the right, had revealed itself and formed a perfect echo of the main one I had been targeting. The lighter sand on the volcanic ridge provided a perfectly positioned curve that leads into the image and is graphically dominant. Being closer, I could see gorgeous textures and features in the landscape below. I was very content.



© Michael Pilkington

I turned the drone around and headed it back towards me (in reality this was more of a zig zag rather than a straight line as I was still getting used to the controls). I was presented with another opportunity. As the drone approached me, it encountered our vehicles parked down below and they appeared in the frame. This was another chance to capture the scale and isolation of the place. This image really shows the scale of the place. As you drive along, you know it is vast with few tracks winding their way across the desolate landscape. However, a little elevation and you can really appreciate that it goes on for miles and miles. A vast volcanic desert.



© Michael Pilkington

When you download your images to your laptop you can truly evaluate what you have managed to capture. The processing of the images from the drone requires a lot more work than the image files from my Nikon D850. Essentially the lenses aren't as good, the file is smaller, with a narrower dynamic range, and the colours can be way off, especially the blues I found.

It is important that we do not get carried away with the novelty of drone photography and the arial perspective. It was crucial for me to have a relatively low perspective revealing and exaggerating the majesty of this unique and somewhat alien environment. I did not want this to be an obvious drone image. I wanted to convey a sense of scale, solitude, and endurance here. This sentiment, or pre-visualisation, is carried forward into the editing by keeping the palette of colours subdued. I did not let the sky dominate by allowing less of it in the composition so that it did not compete with the landscape. Overall, I wanted to convey the emotions I felt at the time: awe, wonder and appreciation of an unspoilt dramatic land.

I am very happy with my first expedition with the drone. I am excited about exploring this genre of photography more and how to shape it into my personal perspective of the landscape.



All's well that ends well

by Stephen Carroll

All's well that ends well

by Stephen Carroll

Generally speaking, a bright sunny day with a clear blue sky, such as the day on which this photograph was made, is not going to be one that sees me making a grab for my camera bag and heading out to shoot landscapes. However, having invested time and cash in travelling to the prairie lands of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, I was not going to spend time sitting in a hotel just because the weather did not look like it was going to cooperate on this particular occasion.



© Stephen Carroll

You can shoot rewarding landscape images in such conditions. It is just a bit, quite a lot in fact, harder. You will have to deal with high contrast and dark shadows, along with a lack of interest and drama in the sky but it can be done. Not getting out and about was not an option.

The trip I was on was an exploratory one. My photographic companion and I had done a lot of research on locations in advance of travelling, and additionally, we were investigating, on an ad hoc basis, anything that looked like it might prove photographically fruitful as we drove around the backroads. At the very least, some locations with potential for shooting on another day might be found.

Late in the afternoon, we took stock of the day. The sun had shone without a break, we had scarcely seen a cloud, we had taken several shots, but we were both fairly sure that none of them would be among the most memorable images from the trip. We reflected that we had about ninety minutes of driving ahead of us before reaching our hotel, and that was assuming that the snowy roads would not cause us any problems. There was a possibility that sunset and the period thereafter might provide better lighting conditions. We could hardly call ourselves landscape photographers if we were not aware of that. However, we needed to have some subject matter to work with, and the landscape is vast and largely empty. We had already visited our planned locations for the day and decided to head towards the warmth and comfort of Kindersley, but to keep our eyes open on the way.

After a while, I said let's have a look down here and made a left turn onto one of the smaller grid roads. After a couple of miles, we saw some trees in the distance. Trees were an indication that there might also be buildings, as the early homesteaders usually planted trees for the shelter they provided. Sure enough, we soon saw that among the trees were a farmhouse, a large barn and various pieces of farm equipment. We stopped the car, retrieved our bags and tripods and set about making some images.

The photograph in this article was shot after walking into the scene and looking back towards the road we drove in on, which is beyond the farmhouse. The car has been parked out of the scene so that it is not in shot. Our first shots had been taken from the roadside. Of course, in snowy conditions, it is important to avoid making footprints, which will spoil later shots, so you have to start from the edge of a scene and work your way inwards.

As soon as we started shooting, we noticed that the light, which had been of a very high colour temperature all day, was rapidly warming. Very soon, we had beautiful warm, low light raking across the area. The mood had changed – and our moods were lifted. We both got some lovely shots of the large barn and some fences, and trees. The sun then set behind the camera position in the featured photograph, and the mood was different again. We had both forgotten the long hours of driving and the relatively unproductive day.

The photograph in this article was taken after the sun had set. The temperature was close to minus forty. I framed the shot and then considered the practicalities of effectively capturing the image. I needed everything to be pin-sharp. My tilt lens would not handle the situation because of the vertical height of the old cart wheel so close to the camera. That was a relief to me as operating the tilt and focus mechanisms in such a temperature is far from easy. I opted for a bit of focus stacking, focused on the near point, hit the shutter button, and the technology took over, and I soon had a set of exposures waiting to be blended together in Photoshop.

There was a very faint pinkish hue just above the horizon, and I enhanced that slightly in post using Colour Grading in Camera Raw, being careful to ensure that the foreground snow also had just a hint of the same colour.

When the light died, Jan and I headed for the hotel, and I think we both enjoyed dinner and drinks a little bit more as a result of that chance left turn.

End note

“Sometimes you have to listen to yourself and be okay with no one else understanding”

Christopher Barzak

Self-doubt is a killer to the creative soul. It could be said that the least creative path for the photographer to follow would be one that aims to replicate the work of others that have inspired us. As part of the early creative journey this is fine and simply serves to refine our skills and instil a sense of achievement and progress.

As the photographer moves forward over the years this will slowly become somewhat tedious, not to mention options will begin to run out as none of us can get to all the places our most revered photographers have been to. So, what then? Do we just choose another photographer and begin again, or do we choose to think for ourselves?

The issue with emulating the work of others is that, at best, you will have a portfolio that people will relate to and possibly like, but it says very little about you. This is a comfortable place to be, and understandably so; you are creating work for which you know the desired outcome, and we have to be honest about it, using the same ingredients in subject and post processing to arrive at the same place. Whilst this is enjoyable and none of us can be acquitted on this offence, this can only lead to a creative drought.

For any photographer who finds themselves doing this, they must be reminded that the photographer that has influenced them and commanded their attention has one day ignored the shackles of conformity and chosen a new direction. It is this ‘new’ that captures the attention of people, photographers or not. The best photographers in the world have made names for themselves by discovering a fresh pair of eyes, and when following that new way of seeing they have believed in themselves.

The most rewarding creations are ones that were created for us. To have no one else in mind is to truly follow your instincts and intuitions. If we are considering what comments we may get in return we are catering for other people and in doing so, the more of this we consider, the more compliant we become with the norm and mediocrity sets in, and soon enough, boredom will soon arrive. It is a journey of passing through self-doubt, embracing a lack of concern of what others may say which leads us into a realm of freedom and exploration.

No matter what we do or create in life, there will always be those out there that will find fault and often without good understanding or knowledge to judge. I say let them be and wallow in the warm blanket of freedom and individuality.

If you would like to comment on what you have read, you have something to add, or you have any questions that may help you on your way in your photography, then please get in touch. You may want to contribute as a featured photographer or submit an article. Just follow the email link below and feel free to drop us a line with your thoughts.

Frozen Lands, Flowing Light, Timeless Images

*Explore our winter tours and start your next
photographic journey*

aspect **2i** master your
photography

aspect 2i master your
photography

www.aspect2ico.uk

