

TAKE BETTER TRAVEL PHOTOS

How do you capture that sense of place?

Photographer **David Yarrow** explains how he creates that evocative feeling of atmosphere

To capture the essence of place, an image normally must have 'contextual narrative' – in other words it must not be zoomed in too tight around one subject like portraits tend to be. The characters within the vignette must have room to breathe – this normally means working with a 100mm lens as it's wide enough to take in the whole scene but also capable of capturing a specific moment within that. I think the best art can be looked at for a long time, finding new stories each time you see it, and I do prefer images with a deeper depth of field. This encourages me to close the aperture down a little and work with a slower shutter speed to capture more detail.

For this image, 'Mankind', I wanted to return home with an image that conveyed the raw enormity of a South Sudanese Dinka cattle camp in an elemental and biblical setting. Something timeless and vast. I was the first photographer to visit this 25,000 strong cattle camp, which was close to the heart of the civil war last year, and I felt a responsibility to get it right. The smoke gives a sense of place and an ethereal countenance: 'Mankind' is heavenly on one glance and Dante's Hell on the other. **📷**

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1 Put in the leg work

Don't expect to get a stunning picture by driving an hour from your front door – those that do have been extraordinarily lucky. To make your image stand out, you must often sacrifice comfort and go the extra mile – literally. If I leave Heathrow on a Monday, I don't expect to be in a position to take a big picture until Thursday at the earliest. For this image, it took me 72 hours on the road after arriving in South Sudan to reach the town of Yirol.

3 Know the area

Scout a location during the middle of the day with no camera and try to immerse yourself there; it's most likely that the light will be better in the evening or following morning, so go for the first time and just explore and think about what you could do. Good things take time and require the use of the brain and soul, as well as the eye – the camera is just a conduit. I took 'Mankind' at 5.40pm, but visited the camp from 10am until midday and worked out where everything should be 30 minutes before the sun went down.

4 Go against the light

I very rarely shoot with the light – it is dull and too literal. If possible shoot against the light, with the light 90° to you. Late evening light is wonderful to work with and creates moods to a picture and offer that vital sense of place. Always ask yourself, how can I make this image interesting rather than generic? That is hard these days, but is entirely possible if a photographer has a low acceptance for average.

5 Ditch the tripod?

I don't understand why some people shoot with a tripod when there's plenty of light. I shot this with a hand-held Nikon and the definition's perfect. Leave the tripod at home – they're cumbersome and with today's camera bodies they're rarely needed. Reserve your energy for thinking, not carrying.

2 Research before you go

Do your research on the location from the comfort of your home. The internet makes this so much easier now. Examine how other photographers captured a location and think about what they have got wrong and what they've got right. In studying the work of others that had been right to the heart of South Sudan, I felt that they'd all shot too low so that there was no sense of scale to the cattle camps. That's why I took a ladder, carrying it all the way to the location – no one had ever seen a ladder before in Yirol – and it made all the difference.

TOP TIP

Pay for the best lenses that you can afford. If a 7-day trip costs £1,000, buy a lens that costs half that and will last for years. 'Mankind' was taken with a Nikon 58mm f1.4 – a majestic lens.