

Light

And Why it's Okay to be a Control Freak

Part I: Glynn Lavender and Malcolm Fackender explain how to find, recognise and use natural light for stunning results like these.

THERE HAS BEEN an awful lot written about light in photography magazines – and rightly so! Light is just about everything when it comes to capturing great images.

The word 'photography' has its roots in the Greek words *Photos* and *Graphia* – to write, with light, so to say light is important would be an understatement.

Depending on the type of photography you do, your say in the type of light you shoot in can vary greatly. The landscape

photographer uses time to control light, so your choice of the time of day will dictate very much the mood and feel of the images you get.

Getting up early in the morning to catch the first low angled rays of sun as they kiss features in a scene is one way to control how your image is going to look.

Staying later in the day as the sun sets and produces low angled, warm light is another classic way of creating a mood in our images that elevates them from snapshots to photographs.

The main problem, as any landscape photographer will tell you, is that it often doesn't pan out the way it was planned! The sunrise is blocked by clouds, the sunset has no clouds and fizzles out to nothing, or the day is simply overcast and dull.

It can be highly frustrating, especially if you are travelling and only have a limited time in the location you want to shoot.

Controlling Light

The world of the portrait photographer, however, is very different.

The ability to either move your subject to where the light is good, or **create** your own light to produce the mood and drama you want in an image, changes everything, and for us this is where one of the greatest pleasures in photography lies – the ability to **create** an image whenever and wherever we want.

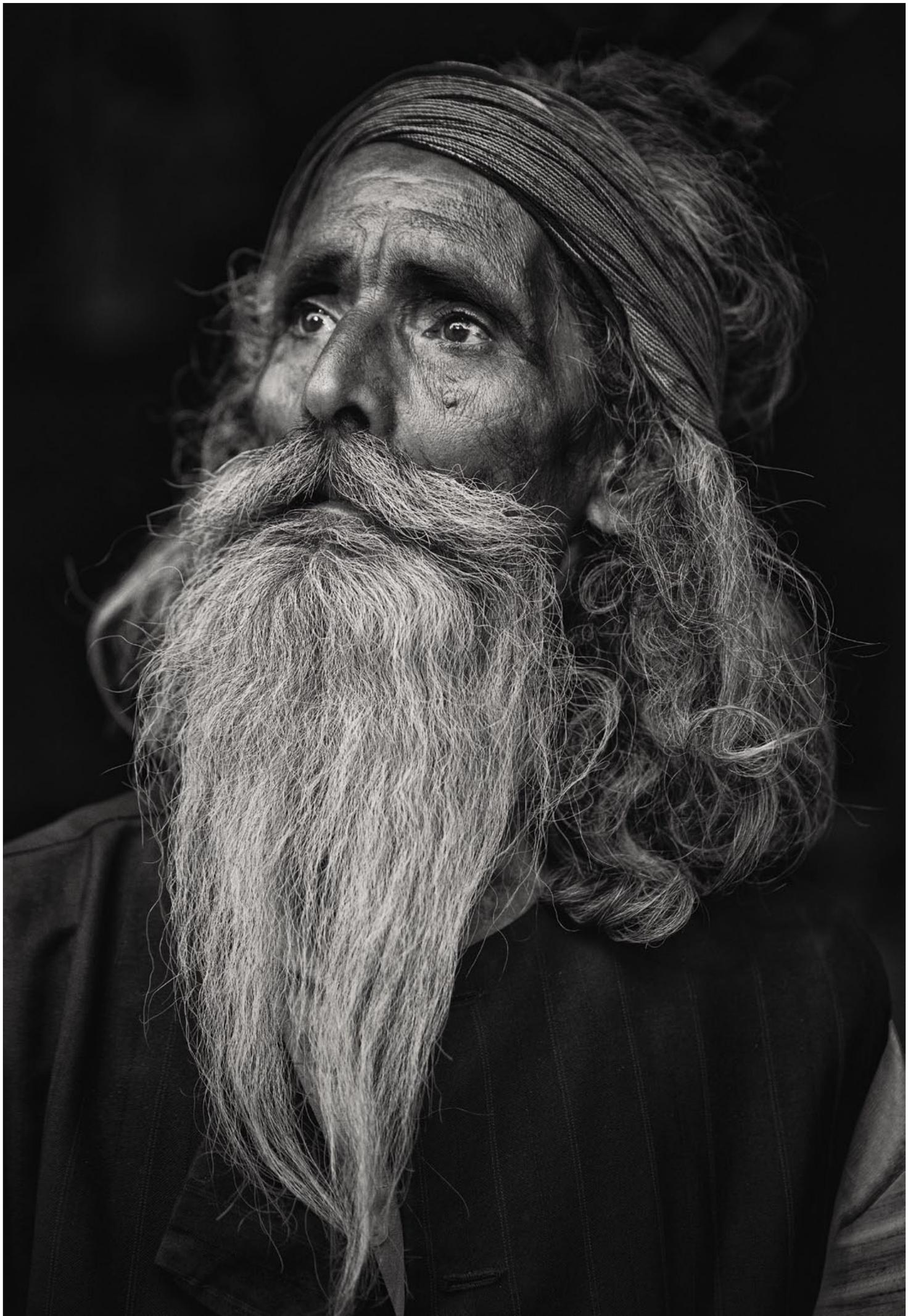
The easiest and quickest light source to use is natural light because it is already in our scene and so there is no need to carry around additional lighting gear. However, as with the landscape shooter, you get what you get and you don't get upset. Our role as a photographer is to observe light, how it falls on our subject and also how it interacts with the background and surroundings. We also need to understand that natural light changes throughout the day and will also vary depending on the season.

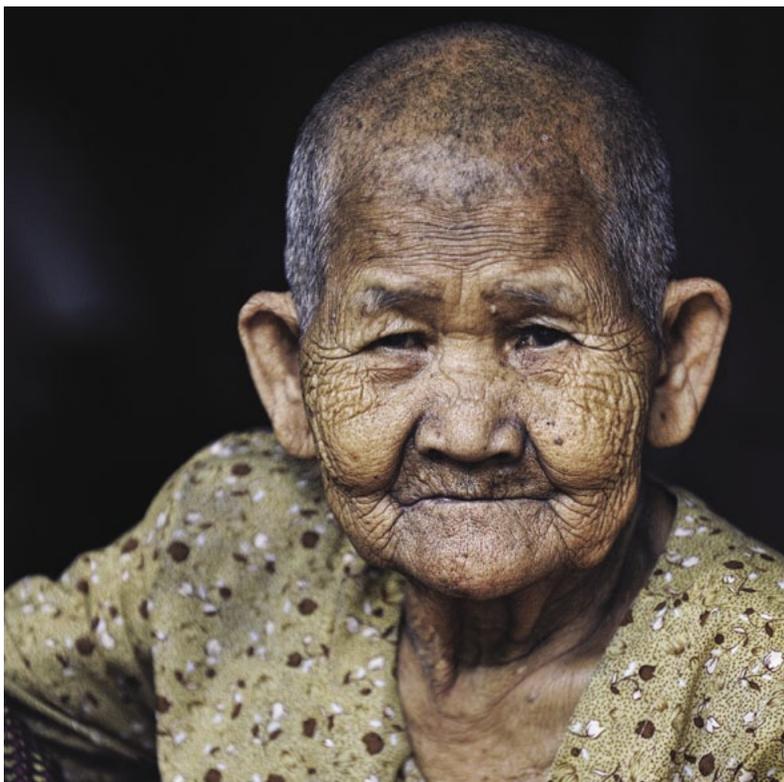
If the day is overcast, you have soft, diffused light resembling that of a giant softbox. If it's blazing sun, then you



Tuscany, Italy. Photo: Malcolm Fackender

Right: The Man from Varanasi, India. Photo: Glynn Lavender.





Cambodian woman in soft light. Photo: Glynn Lavender.

have hard, dramatic light with harsh shadows. These are the cards you have been dealt and therefore you have to work within the constraints you are given, but it doesn't mean you are restricted completely. There are almost always choices we can make that allow us to work with the light we are given and give us some control over how the image is going to look.

One advantage of photographing people is you can ask them to move. To move into better light or at least to a better area where we can control what the light is doing.

It's okay to be a control freak and ask to move people to where they are going to look better in the shot. They may even thank you for making the effort to create the best shot possible.

Shooting on overcast/cloudy days is a relatively easy way to achieve nice portraits, but they can be somewhat flat in comparison with images taken in stronger ambient light situations. The more even light provided by the cloudy sky assists in managing exposure and will also reduce specular highlights. Colours may seem duller or less contrasty in comparison and one must be mindful of the background, particularly avoiding the sky.

The Cambodian woman (shown above) was sitting in the front of her home. The cloudy sky provided soft light on her face, with the added advantage of not illuminating the background. In these situations, it's preferable to have the person face the brightest part of the sky, helping to fill shadows and lift the image. A challenge with shooting in soft diffused light is that eyes may be dark and lifeless.

Many of the negative results of shooting in overcast light can be rectified in post-processing, but there are far less time-consuming ways of improving your light and images at the time of capture.

The portrait of a man in Varanasi, India (previous page) is a good case in point. We were walking down a street, bedazzled by strong afternoon light and surrounded by incredible faces, when, with the help of our guide, we convinced a local to not only have his photograph taken by our group, but also to follow us up an alleyway to an area where we could control the light more.

Moving Locations

The location was chosen because it gave us a darker background to work with.

The advantage of that darker background is twofold. Firstly, it takes away the distraction of busy backgrounds by the virtue of their simply not being any background. Secondly, the darker background actually allows the light on our subject to be more noticeable as it becomes one of the brightest elements in the scene and is not competing with bright skies or objects in the background. By doing this we achieve good separation between the subject and background.

In this case, the darker background was simply a tent and the harsh light from the main street was being funnelled down into the alleyway from above, giving it some direction that we could work our posing towards. The looking up and out of frame is not necessarily an artifice to produce a thoughtful look, but to have our subject's face lit the way we wanted, with the light coming down into the alley.

There are many ways we can control light if we can move our subject to where we want. Moving our subject in this instance took him out of a very busy, noisy and distracting environment and allowed us to put him in an area that makes him the central character of the shot.

Working with Difficult Light

Now, that's all well and good if your subject lets you move him to somewhere more complimentary, but if he won't, or can't move or there simply isn't anywhere better to move to, then we have to work with what we can in that location.

It may be as simple as turning his back to the hard light to create rim light. This is one of the easiest ways to control harsh light if there are no other options to move to better lighting. The rim light creates a strong, dramatic look, but the photographer needs to be very mindful of the exposure. The camera's meter may be significantly influenced by the bright background and without any exposure adjustment, the subject will typically be underexposed. Depending on how bright the backlight is, the photographer may just choose to meter off the face (use spot metering), or apply some positive exposure compensation (e.g. +1 or +2 EV).

Alternatively, the photographer may use a reflector to kick in sufficient light to increase the light on the face.

In the image of the Indian girl with rim lighting (next page), backlight with a tight crop allowed me to easily control the exposure, resulting in an image with a nice halo around the hair, lovely eye contact and a clean background.

Next is a 'behind the scenes' shot of a camel trader in the deserts of Rajasthan, India. We have positioned our trader so the light is coming slightly over his right shoulder, to not only deal with the harsh light, but also to create a highlight on the side of his face.



Indian girl with rim lighting. Photo: Malcolm Fackender.



Behind the scenes set-up. Photo: Glynn Lavender.

We borrowed a hessian sack from one of the camels to use as a reflector and bounce some light onto the shadow side of his face, to create an image that shows the character of our subject.

As you can see in the “behind the scenes” shot, there is very little in the way of background to work with, so we have placed him in front of a small scrubby area that allows us to have a more solid backdrop, rather than what a bright blue sky would have given us.

A reflector is a great, but simple tool to include in your kit and a ‘5-in-1’ reflector offers a number of options. White produces soft/subtle results, silver will have more punch and gold will add some warmth. What is often overlooked is that the central part of a “5-in-1” reflector can be used as a diffuser. Taking the time to work through the problems of a shot is a



Camel Trader, Rajasthan, India. Photo: Malcolm Fackender.

GLYNN LAVENDER'S NATURAL LIGHT SHOOTING TIPS:

- Light before location
- Learn to use the right light for the mood you want to create
- Use shadows to give depth, character and mood to a shot
- Know what you want (or fake it until it starts happening)

key element to capturing great portraits consistently. It's one thing to tame hard light, it's a very different problem when you are presented with soft, flat light and need to get something a little punchier to create a more interesting image.

Introducing Light

An analogy I like to use for flat, directionless days is to imagine water coming out of a garden hose without much volume; it falls straight to the ground. It doesn't shoot out and hit things at a distance. There are two ways to change the way the water comes out. One way is to increase the volume of water coming out of the hose, the other is to reduce the size of the opening that the water is coming out of.

If we put this thought process to work for dealing with light on a dull flat light day, we have light that is mostly directionless and insipid, but our shot calls for something with a little more punch to make it interesting. With the garden hose scenario, we could simply increase the volume of water coming out of the hose, but that obviously isn't possible with the natural light we are given, but we *can* reduce the size of the opening that the light is coming through.

How? Well, we look for places where light is being squeezed. This can be through a doorway, a window, between buildings, literally anywhere where light stops being everywhere and starts being directed or funnelled through an opening. Unlike flat light achieved on an overcast day, this light has direction and, more importantly, shadow. Shadows in natural light portraits are equally as important as the light itself, as they create mood and dimension.

On a bright sunny day, I sought out the dappled shade of a tree to photograph this Vietnamese girl wearing traditional



Vietnamese Girl with umbrella. Photo: Malcolm Fackender.



Red Dao woman. Photo: Malcolm Fackender.

MALCOLM FACKENDER'S NATURAL LIGHT SHOOTING TIPS:

- Understand light – back light, side light, front light and the temperature of the light
- Learn how to control or modify the light
- Get your exposure right, shoot in manual where possible for consistency
- Learn how to pose a subject for the light

clothes. The gaps in the foliage were acting as a funnel and directing patches of light down onto the surroundings. Through careful placement of the subject, I was able to use the funnelled light to my advantage.

In the above image, I asked the Red Dao woman of Ta Phin village in North Vietnam to sit beside a doorway. The doorway funnelled the light into the room producing a moody result. I was also able to control the amount of funnelled light by opening and closing the door. This was a situation where I had one single light source, but what happens when we are presented with situations with multiple light sources?

On the next page is a "behind the scenes" shot of a location I used in Delhi, India where light was being funnelled through arches. The light outside was filtered through a dense bank of pollution, making it look like you are photographing in a thick fog, so the light was very dull and uninteresting. However, where it is squeezed through the arches, it actually becomes an interesting two light source location (two arches, two light



The portrait between the arches, Delhi, India. Photo: Glynn Lavender.

sources) and gives us a far greater chance of capturing an interesting natural light portrait than we would have been able to do outside.

The portrait above clearly shows the effect the two light sources are having on the subject and, once again, the darker background allows the light to shine.

The building actually had four arches, but the other two were far enough away to not add any significant light to the subject, but one did add an extra catch light in the eye to create a little more interest.

If we look at these examples, there is one key element in common with them all. We haven't settled for the situation we have been given.

Only rarely will all the elements necessary for a good image come together naturally: the person we want to shoot is standing in great light, looking towards it with a great expression on his or her face and the background is the perfect balance of interest and good lighting.

We are far more likely to strike one or two of those elements and the rest is up to us.

Awareness of what we find striking about the situation we want to photograph, and an understanding of what can actually be produced by our cameras, is a crucial first step in working out how to make the image work.

This will immediately determine if you shoot the subject where they are and what tools and tricks you may need to make the shot work better. And like most things in life, once you've solved a problem, then that issue will never be a problem again because you know how to deal with it.

Most accomplished photographers have simply worked

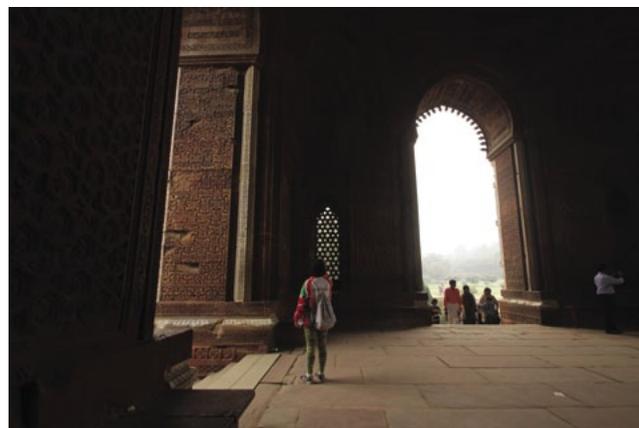


Photo: Glynn Lavender.

through, or been shown how to solve more problems and therefore have more opportunities in difficult situations.

For me, this epitomises the learning curve of photography, being faced with a problem, learning the solution and then looking for the next problem. If we are not facing problems, then we are not growing as photographers.

However, there will be situations where ambient light will need to be supplemented or replaced with artificial light and this will be the subject of our next article.

Glynn Lavender and Malcolm Fackender run workshops and photo tours – visit www.creativephotoworkshops.com.au and www.malcolmfackender.com