

TIPS AND HINTS

by Lee Agnew

We see a lot of photographs that appear "flat", almost colorless. They just don't have any punch, or excitement. Most of the time the reason has to do with the light itself, and not necessarily the exposure. A picture can be perfectly exposed, yet lack drama. The focus can be needle sharp, but the picture is dull and fails to develop an emotional response from the viewer. Look at the picture closely. Where are the shadows? Can you see where the sun is in relation to the subject?

Too often we trust our automatic exposure system to create something that doesn't exist. We expect the camera to make a poorly planned photograph better than it can possibly be. Forget it. The camera is nothing more than an instrument to record what you see. You can manipulate exposures and adjust the depth of field, but you cannot push the sun around. You've heard the stories about actors and actresses getting up in the wee hours of the morning to catch a ride to the location for a shoot. There's a very good reason for it. The director knows that his best light is shortly after dawn. When the sun is high in the sky it's time to rest. Shooting will resume after the sun starts to descend again. At high noon, there is no way a camera can do justice to a scenic picture, or a portrait.

It isn't the bright light that makes a picture dramatic. It's the contrast between light and shadow that make a photograph great. Actually, it is the contrast between light and dark that make a photograph. Even under perfect lighting conditions you can still mess up a great opportunity though. If you are still shooting by the standards set by the Eastman Kodak Company in 1927 in which you are instructed to stand with the sun over your shoulder and aim the camera at your subject. Two things happen. The subject squints and the shadows are eliminated, except for your own shadow, of course.

Pictures are best when they are side lit, so you can see the shadows. Anything from a 45 degree angle to a slightly backlit picture make dramatic pictures. If you are shooting pictures of people, use the fill light function on your camera to brighten the subject and reduce the dark shadow on their faces. The background won't be affected by the flash. All of a sudden you will discover texture and the separation of little things like leaves or blades of grass. Your pictures will appear sharper and much more dramatic.

Try it. Compare a shot of your back yard at high noon and another at five in the evening.



In the above pictures the sun is lighting one side of the object. Notice that in the lighthouse picture the little ripples in the water are distinct and the shadow is actually in front of the ripple. There is usually enough ambient light and reflections to fill in the shadow side sufficiently to make the picture work.

You can't always get the picture you want. For example, you are on a tour and the bus stops at a scenic location at a time of day when you can't possibly get a perfect picture. Don't pass up the opportunity to get a record shot of where you have been. Take the picture, but realize that just because it was taken in Outer Mongolia when the temperature was 40 degrees below zero, it still won't be a competitive photograph. Joni and I go on tours, but when we get home and

compare our shots you would think we were on different buses. None of our pictures are even similar. You see, when the light isn't quite right we look around for something better to shoot.