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Pentax 645 D, smc PENTAX-D FA645 25mm F4 AL [IF] SDM AW, f13, 13 secs, ISO 100,
tripod, no flash, no filters

The history behind the image that won the most important prize in my career

Introduction

This is the photograph that won first prize in the LUX awards in Spain last year. The LUX awards is the most important Professional Photography awards in Spain and so I am still on a high after receiving this prize and wanted to share more about how this photo came to be.



The Picture

This is a composite image. The top of the image that includes the 4WD and the mountains (Fisher Island) was taken at sunrise and the bottom part of the image with the typical Salt plain's hexagons was taken at sunset.

The reason why I had to do a composite image is because I only spent one night in Uyuni and that morning at sunrise I could not find the composition that I had in mind (with a strong marked hexagonal line following a diagonal).

That morning, there were also a lot of 4WD wheel marks on the salt hexagons in the area where we parked our car to take a few photos at sunrise. It was so dark that I could not see them but they ruined most of my photographs. In fact, there were so many 4WDs driving around Uyuni that it was very difficult to find a location without marks...and it would have been a very tedious task to clone them.

Because I wasn't completely happy with the shots I took in the morning I asked the driver to take me again for sunset. I was the only photographer on the tour keen enough to come back to the salt plains again for a sunset shot. We had to look for a while until I found what I wanted and then we waited for the sun to set...

But I haven't actually done a lot of post processing in this image, apart from saturating, slightly changing the color of the salt lake and highlighting the diagonal, I haven't touched this image very much.



Post-Processing

Technically this image is not perfect, as the foreground is a bit soft, but it was more important for me to get the composition right and to photograph it in good light.

So that afternoon, when I was photographing the hexagons I did not actually think of doing "focus stacking", and because I was shooting at f13, some of the lines at the corners (which were pretty close to the camera) are a bit soft and I just realised about this when I printed the image at home. As a result, I had to sharpen those lines at the bottom a bit more than the rest of the image using smart the Sharpen tool and masks. And with some other techniques in Photoshop (curve adjustment) I also marked the diagonal line a bit more than the rest of the lines.

Despite that, this image did not do too badly in the NSW and Australian National Photography (APPA) awards this year. It won two silver awards in each competition.

In the State awards no one mentioned the issue with the softness I was worried about. However, one of the judges did not like how the clouds on the right hand side were sitting on the image and at that time I got a bit disappointed that the image did not score higher than a silver.

The funny thing is that I kind of agree with that comment and I would have normally cloned or used a Gaussian filter in Photoshop to clean and improve the sky but in this particular image I decided not to touch it. And that is the way I sent it to the LUX awards in Spain...

It is also funny because when I was taking the photograph at sunrise, my driver took off and parked the 4WD a few hundred meters in front of us. I wasn't happy with that as I just wanted to photograph the pure environment without human elements. I thought that the car would

ruin the shot and I would have to clone it in Photoshop. But when I opened the image at home, I thought it was an important element of the image and I decided to leave it. It provides depth to the image and actually makes the shot and was one of the points mentioned by the judges in the LUX awards.



Hints

So a few lessons learned here.

- If you like your photograph, it does not matter what judges think, don't get disappointed because art is subject to different interpretations and in other competitions you might get different results. When I started to use Photoshop, I worried too much about noise and sharpness etc but the key is composition, subject matter and good light. As you can see, even technique and camera equipment is not that important sometimes. And if I had to choose one among technique, composition or light composition for me is the most important.
- Work hard and take your chances. If you have a photograph in mind, go and get it. You might not be able to have another opportunity to go back to that particular place. Also, elements that could annoy you at the time of taking the photograph might actually play to your advantage.
- There have been a few posts recently in Facebook questioning why photographers should enter competitions. For me, when I started to enter competitions it was more about growing and learning from others and comparing my work with my peers. In Australian competitions I have learned so much from the whole process of going through and selecting images, processing and then printing.
- Come back to the same location again and again to experiment and find different compositions and different light
- Once you have retouched the image, give it a rest and come back to it after a while to check it out, you might decide to do more (or less)
- Don't be afraid to play with Photoshop or other editing programs, they are great tools to experiment with your creativity.

Bio

I am originally from Spain but I normally live in Sydney when I am not traveling. I have been continuously travelling around the world since 1998 but since I came to Australia in 2008, I have focused on photographing landscapes and using digital imaging techniques to produce more creative and fine art work.

For me travelling is a lifelong passion for seeking adventure, discovering new places and collecting new experiences. Like many other photographers, what began as a hobby has finally turned into a profession. It all started back in 1998 when I went travelling to North America. That was an amazing experience that changed my life forever but it was during my second long trip around the Middle East that I realized that I loved travelling just as much as I loved photography. I was hooked from the first roll of film but in this trip I also realized that I had a lot to learn and that the world was such a huge and beautiful place that it would take me a considerable amount of time to travel and photograph it. I was not quite ready to take the final step to become a travel photographer, but in May 2007 following a number of trips to Europe and three consecutive trips to India, I went travelling around the world for nearly two years in Asia, Australasia, North America and Africa.

It was during this first round the world trip, and particularly in India where I learned to watch and wait for life. All good photos start with a great journey, and journeys, open the heart, the mind and the eyes. During this fourth trip to India I got really inspired and made the decision to pursue a career as a travel photographer and follow in the footsteps of three generations of photographers in my family. Since that trip, I have been drawn back to Asia again and again, lured by its people, architecture, temples, ceremonies, festivals, its colours and smells.

I enjoy simply spending time at a beautiful location, among the local people. I believe that there are many different ways of experiencing a place and photography is one of them. Every time I travel, in every single moment, I look for possible pictures opportunities. This passion to photograph the world makes me focus on details that I was not aware of before.

My images have been published in international hundreds of photographic magazines and books all over the world including National Geographic, Australian Geographic and Lonely Planet Guides.

I have sold limited edition prints in exhibitions in selected galleries around Australia including some award winning images of Karijini National Park and from my latest project: Sydney Rock Pools. I have been a finalist and highly commended in important competitions such as the Head On landscape prize, Australian Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year, National Geographic Traveller, the Veolia Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Travel Photographer of the Year and the NSW AIPP Epson Awards.

In 2014 he won a LUX Gold (Spanish Professional Photography Awards) in the landscape and nature category in Spain.