

# Shoot It!

TIPS & TRICKS FOR TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

## Festivals & Spectacles

BY TEWFICEL-SAWY

### + *Post-processing*

BY IAN SELDRUP

Chiayi City, Taiwan:  
Thick smoke from  
firecrackers adds  
to the drama as an  
elaborately made-up  
performer contributes  
to the spectacle during  
a Taoist ceremony at  
Ann-sel-gjung Temple.

Settings: 60mm focal  
length, 1/500s at f/7.1  
(ISO200).

Photo: Lin Ying Zhou

TEXT TEWFIC EL-SAWY

## *Festivals & Spectacles*

“I find it very rewarding, intellectually and visually, when I am able to immerse myself in a religious ritual or festival, documenting it and sharing my sensations with others. It is religious rituals and ceremonies that attract me the most in my photographic work, because people are at their most authentic; there are no artifices, no hypocrisies and no make-believe. It is at these events that one connects with humanity at its basic denominator, and with the nobility of the human spirit.

It cannot be stressed enough that thorough research into the origins, etiquette, sensitivities and history of these sacred events is the first port of call of any photographer interested in documenting them. Technically, using wide-angle lenses (16–35mm or 24–70mm) is preferable since they allow me to get closer to my subjects in order to better reflect their emotions. That said, I always carry a longer focal length, such as a 70–200mm, in the event I sense that I mustn't intrude in devotees' moments of introspection. With experience, I've learned to become as 'invisible' and self-effacing as possible. If I find myself in a position where I feel I am interfering with a ritual, I leave it and find another.”

► **Kasaragod, Kerala, India:** A Theyyam performer, elaborately dressed and artfully made up, cuts an impressive figure. Coming in close to fill the frame gives maximum impact.

**Settings:** 100mm focal length, 1/250s at f/4 (ISO100)

**Photo:** Tewfic El-Sawy



TEXT IAN SELDRUP

## \* CHOOSE YOUR SUBJECT

**PROCESSIONS AND PARADES:** With big festivals and processions come big crowds, so your ability to roam around freely will probably be restricted. Stay in one spot only if you have to, and if possible, walk with the parade. Arrive in good time so you know the routes being taken and look out for good shooting positions. As the crowd swells, pay close attention to the safety of your equipment – and yourself.

**PERFORMANCES AND CULTURAL SHOWS:** Capturing flamboyant costumes and traditional dress is the order of the day here, and it shouldn't be too difficult to find people in the mood to be photographed. A performer on stage will typically be brightly lit by a spotlight and your camera's meter could easily overexpose unless you use spot-metering carefully.

**RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS:** Activities staged for tourists have very different rules of etiquette to sober religious ceremonies. Even an apparently celebratory religious occasion can be a serious matter for those involved. Don't make a nuisance of yourself: come properly informed about what you should and should not be photographing. Always ask permission if in doubt.

**ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAITS:** Dressed in their best, locals tend to be in high spirits for the occasion, so getting successful people shots should be less of a challenge than usual. Arriving early or staying back after an event is a great way of getting more informal "behind-the-scenes" pictures of performers and festival-goers.

**DETAILS:** Whether it's hooks sinking into devotees' flesh or the exquisite pearl inlay on a performer's ancient instrument, the detail matters just as much as any subject. A long zoom lens (70–200mm) can often capture such elements discreetly.



◀ **Davao City, Philippines:** A costumed reveller gives a spirited performance at the annual Kadayawan Festival. A game face and a ready smile are assets when shooting performers. A fast shutter speed and quick trigger finger do the rest.

**Settings:** 55mm focal length, 1/350s at f/5.6 (ISO100).

**Photo:** Lester V. Ledesma



◀ **Jakar, Bhutan:** A lone performer is captured in a candid moment following a dance ritual during the Tsechu religious festival. Going "backstage" at festivals can produce images of a different, but revealing, nature. **Settings:** 60mm focal length, 1/125s at f/4 (ISO100).

**Photo:** Tewfic El-Sawy



◀ **Jogjakarta, Indonesia:** A craftsman puts the final touches to an Ogoh-ogoh, a papier-mâché effigy used by Balinese Hindus to represent the passing year's evil deeds on the eve of the new year. The gloomy sky is an ideal backdrop for the creature's menacing appearance, lit with an off-camera flash.

**Settings:** 10mm focal length, 1/125s at f/4.5 (ISO400).

**Photo:** Lester V. Ledesma

TEXT IAN SELDRUP

## \* GEAR TIPS

### CAMERA

Crowded festivals, vibrant processions, spot-lit indoor cultural events: they are all challenging subjects captured best with high-quality gear. A camera body with built-in image stabilisation can be very handy, as then any lens you attach will benefit from the improved low-light handling; Olympus, Pentax and Sony all produce DSLR bodies with this feature. Since festivals can be very tiring, a vertical grip can also be a real blessing.

### LENSES

In Canon and Nikon systems, image stabilisation (or vibration reduction, as the latter terms it) is a feature of the lens—certain lenses anyway. For the reasons above, they're good lenses to have for handheld shooting in low light. Despite their bulk, lenses in the 150-200mm range are going to be very useful, assuming that you can't always get close to the action. Otherwise, a medium zoom (28-105mm) will get the job done.

### MEMORY

A good spectacle can consume memory cards faster than a fire-eater swallows his flame! Have plenty on hand so you don't run out just as the action is hotting up.

### BAG

Crowded events can put your gear in jeopardy, so having some sort of practical padded bag is essential. Get a shoulder bag that is comfortably worn across your body or a backpack-style bag that you can also wear in front of you.

### FLASH

Bring a good flash unit so you can experiment with the flash-blur technique in low light (see *Hot Tip: Blurry yet flashy*), though only if you anticipate getting close enough to your subjects to use it properly (so no trying to use flash with fireworks!). On the other hand, if there is midday sun to contend with, consider using flash to "fill in" the shadows and reduce harsh contrast.

### TRIPOD

Unless you know you'll be shooting from one spot (like a numbered seat), leave your tripod at the hotel; handheld is the way to go for most situations. A smaller, lighter option, a monopod can be a good compromise, especially if your stamina is an issue.

► **General Santos City, Philippines:** The bright colours found in most festivals can end up in a confusing mass of hues, and it often helps to focus closely on details, thereby isolating small, organised patches of colour. This smiling street performer at the Kalilangan Festival was just a tiny part of a scene bursting with colourfully garbed locals.

**Settings:** 100mm focal length, 1/400s at f/5.6 (ISO100).

**Photo:** Lester V. Ledesma



◄ **Prakhar, Bhutan:** Performers prepare for the Dance of the Stags and Hounds, a popular tale of a yogi who converts a hunter to Buddhism.

**Settings:** 120mm focal length, 1/60s at f/9 (ISO100).

**Photo:** Tewfic El-Sawy

### HOT TIP BLURRY YET FLASHY

Low-light situations get can be frustrating when you know that cranking up ISO or using direct flash will produce nasty results. The solution? The "flash-blur" technique: a little flash and a little available light combined.

In normal flash mode, the camera chooses a short shutter speed (typically 1/60s), which freezes the action, but the flash completely overpowers the available light. The result is "nasty" because there is no balance: the subject is well lit but the background is very dark, virtually black.

The flash-blur technique relies on slow sync flash, a function found on every DSLR camera (and appearing as a shooting mode, often called "night mode", on compact cameras) that allows shooting with flash at longer shutter speeds. With this technique, you get the best of both worlds: a sharp, frozen subject and a properly exposed, blurry — often colourfully and artistically smeared — background. It's very easy to give it a go. From your camera's flash menu:

- Turn on **Slow Sync** (or Slow Synchro) flash.
- Select **Rear Curtain** (or 2nd Curtain) sync.

Try it the next time you go to a low-light or nighttime event!

By Ian Selldrup

TEXT IAN SELDRUP

## \* SHOOTING TIPS

**WHEN:** Scheduled events outdoors limit your flexibility, so come prepared to shoot in low light as necessary. Otherwise, if you can, shoot at the beginning and end of the day, when the quality of light is best, especially for portraits.

**FOCAL LENGTH:** Make use of a variety of focal lengths or your festival shots may get monotonous. Use wide angles (35mm or under) to capture the atmosphere of the event, short telephoto lenses (60–85mm) for portraiture, and longer focal lengths (100–200mm) to shoot frame-filling festival colours and patterns. For sports and games, you'll likely need at least a 300mm lens.

**APERTURE:** With portrait lenses, isolating the subject by blurring the background can be done with apertures in the range f/1.8–f/5.6. Otherwise, if light permits, use narrower apertures, f/8 or smaller, to keep everything in the scene sharp, front to back.

**SHUTTER SPEED:** In many low-light situations, selecting ISO400 or ISO800 will allow you to use your camera handheld at 1/60s or even 1/30s, especially at moderate focal lengths and using image stabilisation.

► **Phuket, Thailand:** Capturing the explosive conclusion to this nine-day Taoist celebration requires a gutsy photographer not afraid to risk equipment. A fast shutter freezes the action.

**Settings:** 17mm focal length, 1/250s at f/5.6 (ISO200).

**Photo:** Soopphareok Teepapan



◄ **Phuket, Thailand:** Roadside spectators shower cart carriers with firecrackers as the Vegetarian Festival comes to a climax in a procession to send the deities back home.

**Settings:** 17mm focal length, 1/1000s at f/5.6 (ISO320).

**Photo:** Soopphareok Teepapan

### HOT TIP LIGHT MY FIRE

When your chosen spectacle is a fireworks display, finding a good vantage point is only part of your problem. The rest involves using the proper set-up, dialling in the best settings and getting lucky. Here's how to get the technical side right:

- Mount your camera on a sturdy tripod and make sure other spectators aren't going to get in the way.
- Set an aperture of f/16, switch focus to manual and focus on infinity. Make sure the built-in flash is disabled.
- Switch to the "bulb" setting or set a shutter speed of 20 or 30 seconds; use a shutter release.
- Take a test frame so you're confident about the composition and don't feel the need to waste time reviewing shots on the LCD in the middle of the action.
- Compose for a portion of sky where you think the fireworks will burst. Give yourself a wide latitude, as you don't want to miss the action because you're fiddling to readjust. Include the travel element in the frame: illuminated buildings and cityscapes – and water, so you get some reflected light as well.

By Ian Selstrup

TEXT & PHOTOS IAN SELDRUP

# Post-processing

Festivals can be a real spectacle, but they often do not present the easiest photographic situations. If the light isn't ideal, your images might turn out less vibrant than you remember, and if low-light conditions were the problem, you might find your pictures not only a bit washed out but also rather "noisy". Above all else, you'll need two important post-processing techniques to make those ho-hum shots really pop.

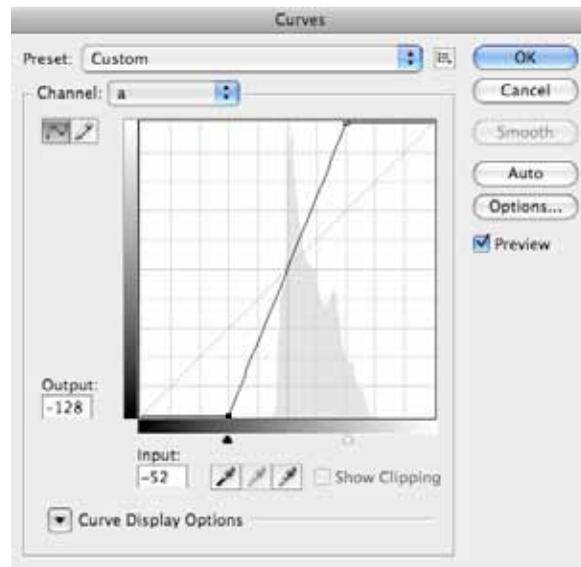
## Saturating colours in Lab mode

The little-used Lab Color mode in Adobe Photoshop is designed to model the human perception of colour. Lab describes how a colour looks rather than how much of a particular colour is needed for a certain device, like a printer or a monitor. As such, it's a natural "colour space" to adjust when enhancing photographs. Here's how to use Lab to improve colour saturation:

- ▶ Open your image in Photoshop and select Lab Color mode (**Image > Mode > Lab Color**)
- ▶ Duplicate the image's background layer (**right-click > Duplicate Layer**), and with

- the newly copied layer selected, go to **Image > Adjustments > Curves**.
- ▶ The **Channel** dropdown menu shows the three channels: **L**, **a**, **b**. The **L** channel just adjusts lightness without affecting colour, while the **a** and **b** channels control the colour. First select **a** (the green-red curve). Drag the top edge of the curve inwards horizontally by 2 or 3 squares; then drag the bottom edge inwards by the same number of squares (see screenshot above).
- ▶ Follow the same procedure for the **b** channel (blue-yellow curve) and hit the "OK" button. You now have one

- very horrible-looking oversaturated layer above the layer containing your original image.
- ▶ To create a desirable end result, you need to blend the two layers together. Select the oversaturated layer and click the **Opacity** slider. Drag the slider to zero first and then slowly increase the value until you get the perfect saturation in your image. (Return to **RGB Color** mode when you've finished.)



Before



After

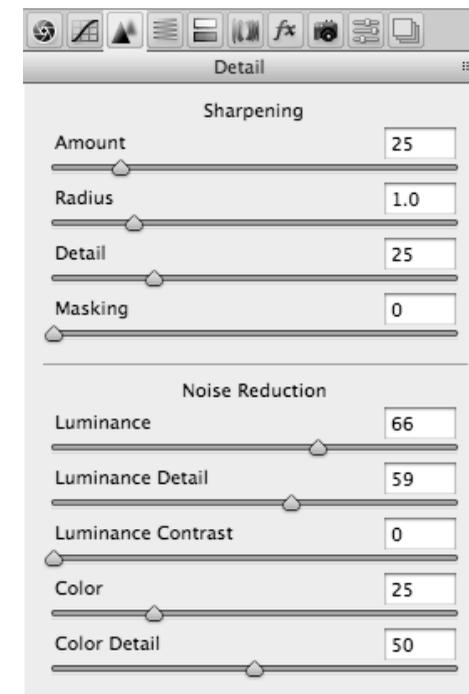


## Reducing noise in RAW images

Photographing in low light can mean the need for high ISO values (ISO400, ISO800), which results in images with more "noise" – the equivalent of grain in the old days. Unlike film grain, however, sensor noise is never desirable, and "noise reduction" technology, such as that in the latest version of Photoshop, tries to do away with this unpleasant artefact. Here's how:

- ▶ In Photoshop CS5, open your RAW image, and you'll see the preview window of the Camera Raw plug-in. From the **Basic** tab, first make any needed adjustments (white balance, exposure, saturation, etc.).
- ▶ Click on the **Detail** tab, and you'll see the **Noise Reduction** sliders in the bottom half of the pane. Zoom in to 100% or more so you can see the effect.

- ▶ Drag the **Luminance** slider to the right and watch how the noise starts to disappear. A value between 50 and 70 should be about right, but toggle **Preview** to check you're not losing too much detail.
- ▶ If you feel detail is being lost, experiment with **Luminance Detail** and **Luminance Contrast** (values of 50 and up) to find a desirable result.



Before



After

