

Shoot It!

TIPS & TRICKS FOR TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

Religions & Spirituality

BY MICHAEL LISMAN

+ *Post-processing*

BY ANG SIANG LEE

Jerusalem, Israel: A young orthodox Jew, artfully rendered in black and white, offers up a prayer at the Western Wall, one of the most sacred sites in Judaism.

Settings: 112mm focal length, 1/1000s at f/5.6 (ISO800).

Photo: Michael Lisman

והיה כי הלכתי והכינותי לכם מקום
שוב אשוב ולקחתי אתכם אלי למען
באשר אהיה שם תהיו גם אתם:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will
come again, and receive you unto myself; that
where I am, there you may be also.

John 14:3, Tanakh, Hebrew Bible

TEXT MICHAEL LISMAN

Religions & Spirituality

“Like so many historically and religiously significant sites that attract travellers and photographers alike, Jerusalem is a special place for me. Exploring the Old City is like going back in time. Conquered, destroyed, rebuilt, overthrown and rebuilt again, over and over, Jerusalem has layer upon layer of history that melds seamlessly with today’s living, breathing holy city.

Photographing here, like many spiritual places, should be simple enough, but it is often difficult: simple, because you are surrounded by so many impressive structures and interesting characters constantly coming and going; difficult, because doing justice to these captivating subjects in a unique and inspiring way requires great patience, humility and perseverance.

I find I get many of my most satisfying pictures by merely wandering through the narrow backstreets and taking the time to observe. Only by devoting time can you hope to study, unobtrusively and respectfully, the natures of people as they go about their spiritual lives – only then can you translate the magic of a city like Jerusalem to a photograph.”



By Ian Seldrup

HOT TIP

PUTTING IT IN PERSPECTIVE

Religious buildings are usually big – sometimes very big. If you stand in front of the Taj Mahal with a wide-angle lens, you’ll be tilting your camera upwards so much that the famous monument of love will appear to be falling backwards. On the other hand, if you happen to find too high a vantage point to photograph a particular building, it will seem to be leaning towards you. This kind of exaggerated perspective can be used to good creative effect of course, but if you really want to capture a building faithfully, you need to consider the following:

- ▶ Get as far away from the building as you can and use a telephoto lens. ▶ Switch to the “bulb” setting or set a shutter speed of 20 or 30 seconds; use a shutter release.
- ▶ Try and find a shooting position that is half the height of the building, so you don’t have to angle your camera either up or down.
- ▶ Use a tripod with two spirit levels to ensure you get your sensor plane perfectly parallel to the verticals of the building.
- ▶ Apply some post-processing to improve your converging verticals; see *Post-processing: Perspective and lens distortion* at the end of this section.

▶ Jerusalem, Israel: Nine images were stitched together to create this shot of the “Wailing Wall”, so called because for centuries Jews have gathered here to lament the destruction of their temple.

Settings: 11mm focal length, 1/640s at f/7.1 (ISO640).

Photo: Michael Lisman



TEXT IAN SELDRUP

* CHOOSE YOUR SUBJECT

ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAITS: Capturing a pilgrim or devotee as they go about their religious business requires more sensitivity than usual, but there's still every possibility to get strong and rewarding portraits in these situations. The most flattering light, at the start and end of the day, often coincides with times when such activity is taking place. Developing a human connection by showing genuine interest in what is going on will often put your subject at ease and allow you to come away with both posed and candid shots that are compelling and authentic.

MOSQUES, TEMPLES AND CHURCHES: Many of the world's most photogenic buildings have a connection to religion. They're also some of the most photographed subjects, so portraying them in a fresh way is always challenging. Do some advance planning and research; find out what the "classic" shots are so that you can get those out of the way first to allow you to concentrate on more creative angles. Include people or other elements in the frame to add scale and context.

INTERIORS OF PLACES OF WORSHIP: Using your puny built-in flash with a cavernous cathedral interior is pointless, and even if you could illuminate it with flash, you'd lose a lot of the ambience and atmosphere. A tripod is often the best way to go, but make sure you're not making a nuisance of yourself, or worse, offending anyone. (If in doubt, ask.) Switch to a silent operating mode if your camera allows it.

HOLY FESTIVALS: A full-blown religious ceremony will often present you with excellent photographic opportunities, but worshippers won't take kindly to you behaving like an egotistical camera-toting tourist. Dress conservatively and keep a low profile while you're working. Put your respect for the ceremony first and your desire for the shot second. Trying to sneak pictures when you've been told you can't photograph will not win you any friends.

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS: Good light, late afternoon and early morning, brings out texture and detail that you shouldn't neglect to capture. Such detail shots are an important complement to your grand architectural images, and they can often be more surprising, and therefore satisfying, than the iconic pictures that everyone's seen before.

◀ **Jerusalem, Israel:** The antiquity of the place where the portrait of this elderly Jew was taken defines the moody style of post-processing.

Settings: 50mm focal length, 1/500s at f/5.6 (ISO100).

Photo: Michael Lisman

TEXT IAN SELDRUP

* GEAR TIPS

CAMERA: A DSLR (and lenses) with good low-light performance will make your life easier, as working handheld is always less troublesome than setting up a tripod. At higher ISO values (ISO800 or even ISO1600), full format DSLR sensors typically maintain colour vibrancy, sharpness and low sensor noise better than smaller sensors do.

LENSES: Image stabilisation, which is built in to some higher-end lenses, allows you to shoot handheld at slower shutter speeds in low-light conditions. A medium zoom (28–105mm) is ideal for most subjects, but a telephoto zoom (80–200mm) will be useful to shoot buildings faithfully from a distance. If you're really serious about shooting buildings with perfect parallel verticals, a specialist wide-angle (24mm) tilt-shift lens will do the job, but it will set you back about US\$2,000.

BAG: A backpack-style bag (worn in front of you for security and easy access) is ideal. A shoulder bag worn across the body is also a possibility. Having a compartment free for a water bottle could be a lifesaver when spending long periods shooting.

FLASH: A decent dedicated flash is good to have, though not a necessity. It should at least have the ability to be used at various angles, so that the light can be “bounced” to produce diffuse, flattering illumination for portraits. If you are forced to shoot in contrasty midday sun (a religious procession, say), flash can be used to “fill in” shadows, smoothing out the harsh natural light.

TRIPOD: For carefully considered architectural shots, a tripod is essential. Buy the best you can afford, ideally the light and strong carbon fibre type, and get a tripod head with two spirit levels, which will be helpful when shooting buildings. Set out with your tripod only when you've properly planned to use it; otherwise, leave it in your hotel room.



► **Kolkata, India:** At the river Ganges, devotees engage in a ritual locally known as Chhath, or prayers to the Sun God.

Settings: 85mm focal length, 1/160s at f/6.3 (ISO200).

Photo: Sudipto Das



▲ **Varanasi, India:** A *sadhu*, an Indian holy man, performs his morning ritual at the banks of the Ganges, India's great sacred river.

Settings: 105mm focal length, 1/180s at f/8 (ISO250).

Photo: Sudipto Das



▲ **Qinghai, China:** As Muslims gather for prayer in front of the province's famous Dongguan Mosque, the streets are closed for miles in either direction to accommodate worshippers.

Settings: 50mm focal length, 1/160s at f/9 (ISO200).

Photo: Brian Hirschy

► **Samarkand, Uzbekistan:** A solitary worker, and the early morning light, lends the necessary atmosphere to the Tilla Kari Madrasa at Registan Square.

Settings: 17mm focal length, 1/250s at f/8 (ISO400).

Photo: Ang Siang Lee

TEXT IAN SELDRUP

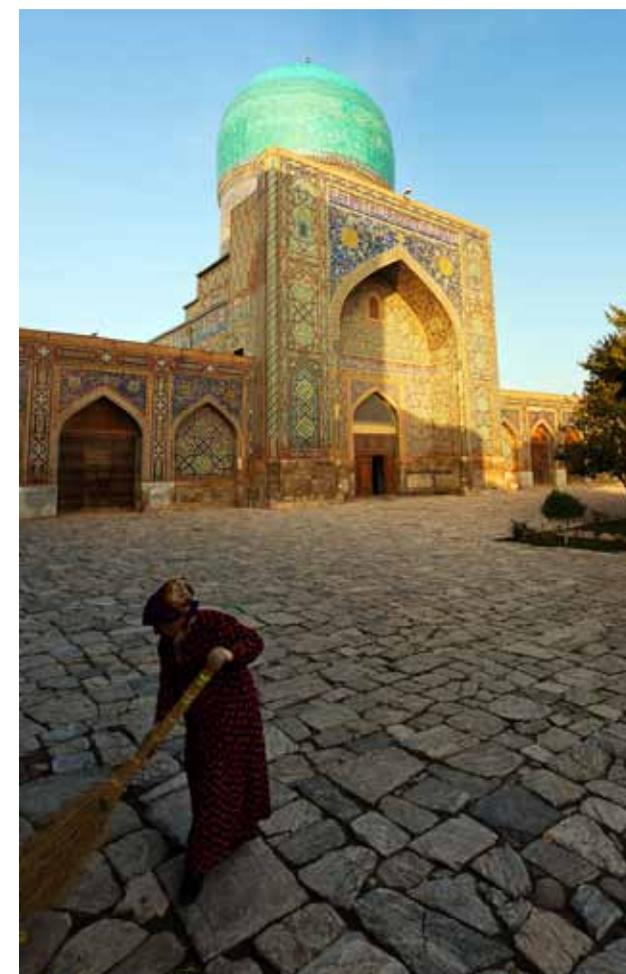
* SHOOTING TIPS

WHEN: Always try taking pictures during the "blue hour", in the morning and evening twilight. Overcast skies can create diffuse light that is potentially flattering for portraits at any time of day. A cloudy sky makes a most interesting, more dramatic backdrop for a spectacular synagogue or a magnificent mosque.

FOCAL LENGTH: Variety is key, so use wide angles (35mm or under), short telephoto lenses (60-85mm), and longer focal lengths (100-200mm) for various subjects. The wider the angle, the more exaggerated the perspective, so avoid using a wide-angle lens for every shot of a building; make a point of using a perspective-flattening telephoto from further away.

APERTURE: As architectural photography normally demands front to back sharpness, choose narrower apertures such as f/8 or f/11, which may well require you to use a tripod. For portraits, apertures of f/1.8-f/5.6 will put the background out of focus so that your subject is attractively isolated.

SHUTTER SPEED: With your camera on a tripod, shutter speed will be less of an issue, but exposures of 0.5s, 1s or longer will result in moving foreground elements being creatively blurred. Otherwise, you should be able to use your camera handheld at 1/60s or 1/30s in low light as long as you select sensitivities of ISO400 or ISO800.



HOT TIP FLASHY PORTRAITS

A portrait taken with direct flash will never be flattering. Much better results can be obtained with a dedicated, hot shoe-mounted flash unit that can be angled to "bounce" the light off something, producing softer, more diffuse lighting. There are two main scenarios:

(1) Bounce off the ceiling or a wall

► Swivel the flash upwards (from forward facing) 45 degrees or more and bounce off the ceiling. You can even swivel the flash backwards, more than 90 degrees, so that the light bounces off a wall behind you.

► With the flash facing directly forwards, rotate it 90 degrees to bounce the light off a side wall. This can give a natural side-lit portrait.

(2) Bounce off a "bounce card"

► A flash bounce card attaches to a flash unit that is angled directly upwards. Because it's no longer direct flash, the light bounced off the card is soft and diffuse and much nicer for lighting human subjects.

► You don't have to buy a pricey accessory: any white card, paper or plastic, securely fixed to your flash with rubber bands will do the job. DIY!

By Ian Selstrup

TEXT & PHOTOS ANG SIANG LEE

Post-processing

Religious subjects are often either people or buildings, and both can benefit from some judicious post-processing. We look at a few techniques in Adobe Photoshop that should make your spiritual images better.

(A) PERSPECTIVE AND LENS DISTORTION

Ever shot a building and find that your image appears to bend slightly or “lean inwards”? The former, where straight lines bend away from the centre of the image, is “built in” to your lens: barrel distortion. Photoshop allows you to correct for this:

- ▶ Open your image and go to **Filter > Distort > Lens Correction** in CS3 and CS4 (or in CS5 **Filter > Lens Correction**).
- ▶ In CS5 the correction happens automatically, under the **Auto Correction** tab. CS5 automatically reads the image metadata and applies the right amount of

correction for the lens you used.

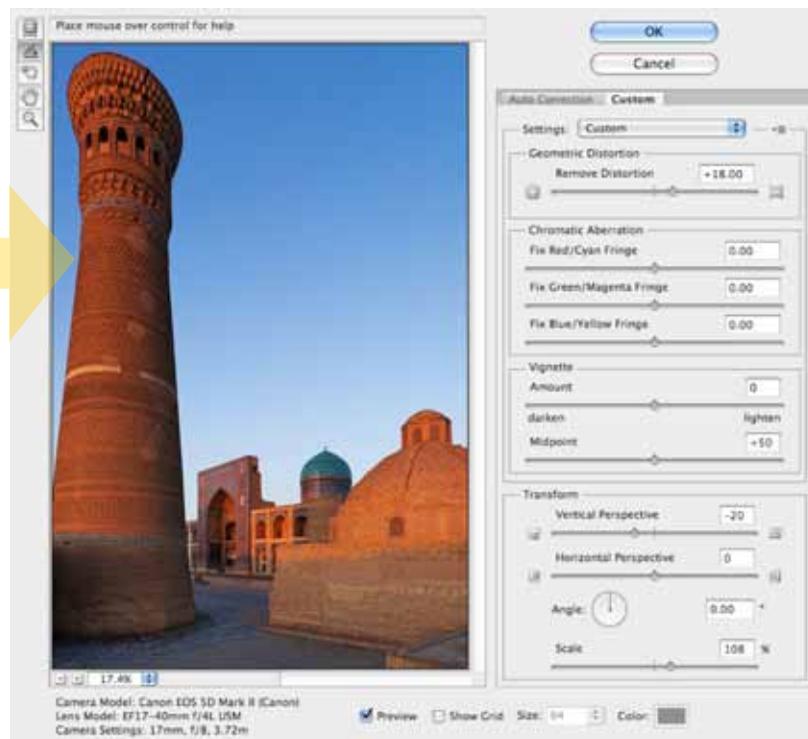
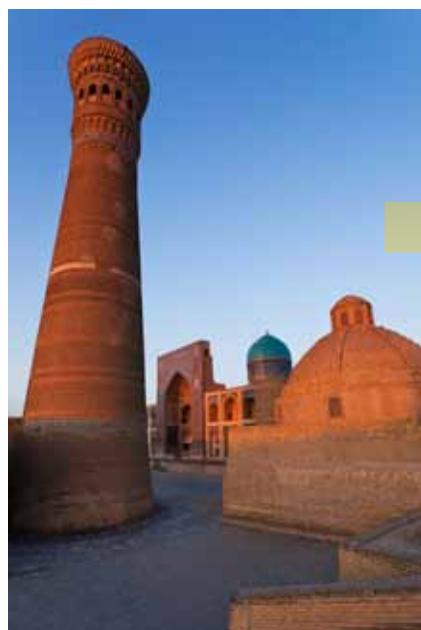
- ▶ In CS3 and CS4 you have to make the correction manually. Simply drag the **Remove Distortion** slider (usually) to the right (positive values) until the building looks straight. Trying using the grid as a guide.

The other kind of distortion is due to perspective. It's caused by tilting the camera up or down, like when you angle your camera up at a tall church towering above you. This can also be remedied:

- ▶ Go to **Filter > Distort > Lens Correction** in CS3 and CS4 (or in CS5 **Filter > Lens Correction** and click the **Custom** tab).

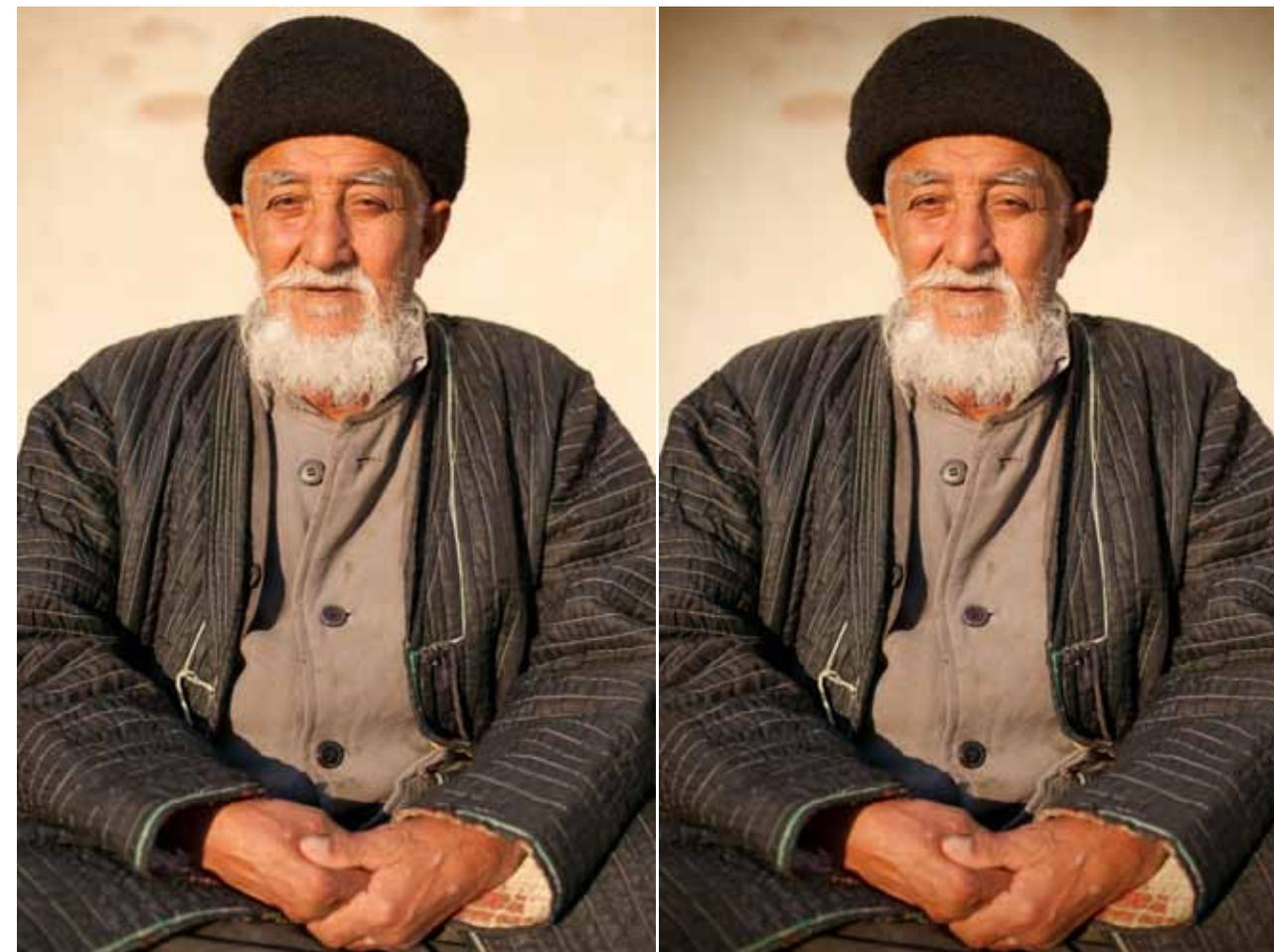
- ▶ First use the straighten tool in the top-left corner of the window to straighten any horizon in your image.
- ▶ Under **Transform**, drag the **Vertical Perspective** slider to the left (negative values) and watch the building straighten.
- ▶ Adjust the **Scale** slider to position the transformed image in the frame.

As some resolution and sharpness is lost when images are transformed, use such software corrections sparingly.



Before

After



Before

After

(B) VIGNETTING EFFECT

Although the darkening of an image's corners and edges can be an undesirable side effect caused by your lens or camera settings, this vignetting can also be used for creative effect to “frame” the central portion of a portrait. Here's how to add a vignette in Photoshop:

- ▶ Go to **Filter > Distort > Lens Correction** in CS3 and CS4 (or in CS5 **Filter > Lens Correction** and click the **Custom** tab).



- ▶ Under **Vignette**, drag the **Amount** slider to the left (negative values) to darken the edges around your image. For a start, try a value of -50.

- ▶ Adjust the **Midpoint** according to taste, depending on how “focused” you want your image to be. Click **OK** when you're done.

- ▶ As a finishing touch, consider selectively “burning” (darkening) certain edges of your image using the Burn tool.

(C) COLOUR CAST

Photos taken inside buildings and museums often seem too yellow or orange because interiors are typically lit by tungsten bulbs that give a yellow/orange cast to your images. There are lots of ways to solve this, but here's one of the quickest fixes:

- ▶ Go to **Image > Adjustments > Photo Filter**.
- ▶ In the **Filter** dropdown, select “Cooling Filter (82)”.
- ▶ Go to **Edit > Fade Photo Filter** to adjust the filter according to how much yellow/orange you need to remove.

