

CHECKING EXPOSURE – Shadows.

We have dealt with what beautifully exposed highlights should look like in the earlier article.

The way shadows are exposed and captured is equally important, if not more so.

Look at an Ansel Adams photograph. You will find that he has meticulously contrived to capture detail throughout the tonal range. The shadows, although dark, contain visible detail. Looking at the darker areas gives one the impression of transparent depth; like looking into the deep, crystal clear water of a lake and being able to see what is growing in its depths.

It is this transparency of the shadows that is so difficult to capture. As soon as shadows look muddy the quality of your image drops from potentially beautiful to squalid in one disastrous step. Only a perfect exposure will get you there.

What are you looking for? Firstly, there should be small areas of shadow that are jet black. These may be thin areas of shadow cast along sharp or rough edges. It is these that reveal texture. Small areas of hard black shadow are as important as specular highlights. It is the presence of both of these that make an image look “crisp”

However, larger shadow zones, whilst dark, need to display detail, cleanly and visibly. Have a good look at these shadows, important details should be displayed, in photographic terms about one stop brighter than the blacks. You should be able to discern the colours and they should be cleanly rendered. Reds should be dark red, not brown with a red tint. Greens should be dark green, not brown with a green tint.

Set very high standards for yourself and be critical. Be easily dissatisfied. This will drive you to make great photographs.

Being able to render shadow detail properly is what you are buying when you pay extra for professional film. It is the most difficult part of digital imaging and is almost universally ignored and therefore messed up by amateurs and a good number of professionals as well.

EXPOSE FOR THE HIGHLIGHTS BUT WORRY ABOUT THE SHADOWS!