Creative Stretch: Nikon Ambassador Marsel van Oosten shares what keeps him inspired

15 Apr 2020 Nikon Pro 10 min read

Facebook Twitter Email WhatsApp Tumblr Messenger LinkedIn

Nikon Ambassador Marsel van Oosten

We asked Nikon Ambassador and wildlife and landscape photographer Marsel van Oosten to share how he keeps himself inspired and his photography fresh. He responded with four powerful images and the stories and techniques behind them, so you can take a behind-the-scenes look at the making of an iconic shot.

Macaca Fuscata Illuminata | Nikon D3x | AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8E FL ED VR | 160mm | f/11 | 1/125s | ISO 200 | SB-800 | handheld | © Marsel van Oosten

Macaca Fuscata Illuminata – Jigokudani, Japan

"One of my biggest concerns in wildlife photography is that most subjects have been photographed to death. The images all look alike and what constitutes a good photograph seems to be limited to the technical aspects – better exposure, technique, focus or processing. But strong composition is a more creative aspect of photography that will create more original images.

I've visited Japan for a decade to photograph snow monkeys, cranes, swans and eagles, and I have many images of those subjects. My standard preparation is to find out what photographs already exist of the subjects I'm planning to photograph – to see what's already been done and where the possibilities lie to create something different. Composition and viewpoint are usually good starting points, but with many subjects, most of the compositions and viewpoints have all been tried before."

The Technique

"In an effort to create more original images, with more room for creativity, I decided to experiment with a technique that macro photographers use all the time, but which was uncommon in mammal photography: off-camera flash. And by off-camera, I don't mean having the flash on a bracket, but at least three metres away from the camera.

Light is the very essence of photography, and as photographers we depend on the quality of the light for the photograph to work. Instead of waiting for the perfect light – and hoping that the subject will be there when it happens, preferably with the perfect pose – I decided to take matters into my own hands and create the light myself. Here's one where I used off-camera flash in an unconventional way on a Japanese macaque. I positioned the flash behind the subject to emphasise the steam rising from the natural hot spring, and used some major underexposure to render the monkey as a silhouette with a nice rim light. The result is a snow monkey image that is completely different from any other, which for me is the highest form of artistic satisfaction."

Resurrection | Nikon D4 | AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8E ED VR | 28mm | f/8 | 15 s | ISO 400 | Surefire UB3T Invictus flashlight | © Marsel van Oosten

Resurrection – Deadvlei, Namibia

"As I've mentioned, I always research what's been shot before, so I don't run the risk of shooting exactly the same thing in exactly the same way. That's essential for me from an artistic perspective – there's no creativity in copying the images of others. And from a commercial point of view it is important to create original work, as not a single publisher would be interested in more of the same.

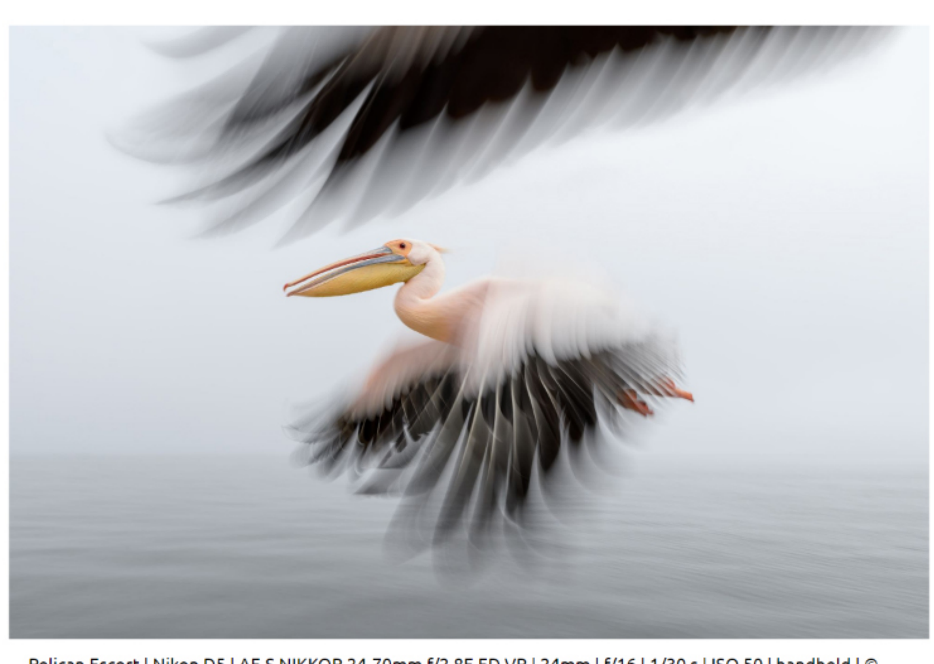
On my first visit to Namibia many years ago, it wasn't difficult to create original images. The images I shot of the surreal landscapes were mostly viewed with disbelief, with many commenting they must have been Photoshopped. My photographs back then were original, because the subjects were, at that time, original. After my first visit, I moved onto night photography there, because the dry desert air and the lack of light pollution are perfect for it. Those pictures became very popular, and night photography has since become an integral part of my annual Namibia Untamed photo tour, with Milky Way shots, static stars and star trails. The result was that more and more photographers visited Namibia, more night images were shot, and after a few years the novelty wore off. It was time for something new.

I had seen pictures of Deadvlei in fog, and came up with the idea to try to combine fog and night photography in one shot. It was easier said than done, because fog only appears four or five times a year in this desert area. My idea was that fog looks at its best when shot against the light, for example around sunrise. A fog picture of Baobab trees that I shot in Madagascar – and was published in National Geographic – was based on that very principle. But when it's dark there's no backlight, so I had to create the light myself."

The Technique

"Using a powerful flashlight, I wanted to light one of the trees in Deadvlei from behind, so that the branches would create shadow beams in the diffused light. I selected the perfect tree – the one with the densest and most upward-pointing branches – and chose the ideal composition for the shot. On every Namibia tour, I brought my big flashlight and kept a close eye on the weather forecast, waiting for that one chance. But whenever I was there, the fog was not. Until that one magic day in June. The weather forecasts indicated that there was a chance of fog, so we decided to visit Deadvlei earlier than usual. In total darkness we walked across the dunes towards Deadvlei, and when we got to the top of the last dune, I saw this was the moment I had been waiting for, for years.

I set up my tripod as fast as I could, as there was no way of knowing how long the fog was going to stay, and I didn't want to miss the opportunity. It was still dark, so focusing and framing was difficult. My partner Daniella hid behind the main tree and set the flashlight to the highest output so I could get my focus and composition. I then took a test shot to make sure everything was sharp and that the composition worked. For the final image I had very little time. Shooting too early would mean the trees in the background would not be visible, and waiting too long would mean it would be too bright to see the effect of the flashlight. I decided to start shooting continuously as soon as I could see the trees in the background, and constantly asked Daniella to try different output levels on the flashlight, based on the results I saw on the camera. It was a very special moment to see the end result on my LCD screen. The picture that had only existed in my head for so long had finally turned into reality. It was totally unique and exactly as I had visualised. Images like this are the ones I'm most proud of, because you can clearly see the creative vision of the photographer. A year later this image was awarded in the Creative Visions category of Wildlife Photographer of the Year."



Pelican Escort | Nikon D5 | AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8E ED VR | 24mm | f/16 | 1/30 s | ISO 50 | handheld | © Marsel van Oosten

Pelican Escort – Walvis Bay, Namibia

"Walvis Bay is Namibia's biggest harbour. The fishing vessels there are very popular amongst the sea birds, because of the fish thrown overboard – an easy meal. The fishing industry is big in Namibia, but so is tourism. You can take a boat cruise to photograph seals, whales, and dolphins, as well as sea birds like flamingos and pelicans. The tour boats usually bring a bucket of fish to attract sea birds to the boat, mostly gulls and pelicans. This image was shot on my Namibia Untamed photo tour from one of those boats. The conditions on that morning could not have been better: fog! The result was a massive soft box – soft, low-contrast light, and an invisible horizon. Usually you get a bright, blue sky at that time of year, and I find blue can be very overpowering, especially with birds like pelicans. The fog was perfect.

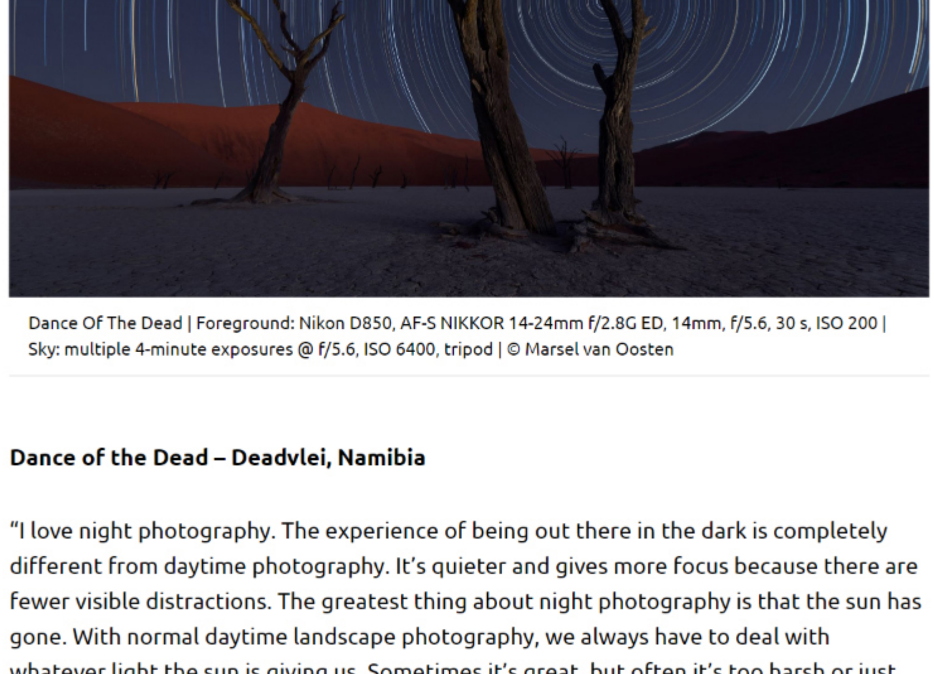
Photography is strange in the sense that it freezes motion. This seems to be something that photographers really like, because most will choose a high shutter speed to do exactly that. The result is always an animal that is frozen in time, quite the opposite of what we see with our eyes. But there is a way to convey a sense of motion when taking photographs: intentional motion blur. Although this also results in something we never see with our eyes, it does convey the sense of motion much better than a high shutter speed image."

The Technique

"I prefer to use a technique that renders the head and the eyes of the animal in focus and blurs the parts that are moving the most. It's a fun technique, but not an easy one to master. I always shoot in manual metering (spot), using continuous autofocus. In this case I also stuck to manual metering, but you can also select shutter speed priority. The trick is to set a shutter speed that is too slow to get the moving parts sharp. The challenge is to figure out what that shutter speed is, as it depends on several variables. A subject that moves very fast – like a running cheetah – will show motion blur at a relatively fast shutter speed, and a subject that moves slowly will need a very slow shutter speed for the same effect. Motion blur effect is also affected by the focal length. The longer the focal length, the more motion blur you will see at any given shutter speed. If you photograph a walking bear at 1/60 s with a 14mm lens, it will probably look tack sharp. Shoot the same bear at 1/60 s with a 600mm, and you will clearly see motion blur.

The pelicans came very close to our boat and I wanted to photograph them at 24mm in an effort to get more than one of them in the frame. Pelicans have large wings that move slowly, so I ended up using a shutter speed of 1/30 s to get the right amount of wing blur. To drop your shutter speed that much, you may need to stop down to a very small aperture and choose a very low ISO. If your images are still overexposed, you can try a polariser or an ND filter to cut down the light. For focusing I set the camera to continuous, and tried to keep the focus sensor aimed at the head of the pelican – if the head is sharp, everything else can be blurred or out of focus. Shots like this are mostly done handheld, and 1/30 s is not an ideal shutter speed for handholding a camera, especially not when you're shooting from a boat.

To get the head of the animal sharp, it's critical that you move the camera at exactly the same speed as the subject. If you move faster or slower, the head will be out of focus. You also have to make sure you don't make any upward or downward movements, because that will also result in unwanted blur. This technique is a lot of fun, because you never know what you're going to get. There's a lot of trial and error involved, and I often throw away 95% of these kinds of shots. In this image it all came together: great soft light, a subtle backdrop, the head sharp, and the perfect amount of motion blur of the wings. The top wing is from another pelican that was flying just above my head – actually hitting me in the face with its wings."



Dance Of The Dead | Foreground: Nikon D850, AF-S NIKKOR 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, 14mm, f/5.6, 30 s, ISO 200 | Sky: multiple 4-minute exposures @ f/5.6, ISO 6400, tripod | © Marsel van Oosten

Dance of the Dead – Deadvlei, Namibia

"I love night photography. The experience of being out there in the dark is completely different from daytime photography. It's quieter and gives more focus because there are fewer visible distractions. The greatest thing about night photography is that the sun has gone. With normal daytime landscape photography, we always have to deal with whatever light the sun is giving us. Sometimes it's great, but often it's too harsh or just not interesting. We have little influence on that, so we just have to deal with it. At night, and especially a moonless one, it's different. There's basically no ambient light, so you have to bring your own. This means that you're suddenly in total control of the light in your image, quite the opposite of shooting during the day. You can create light in whatever quality or angle – pretty cool!

This is a shot I took in Deadvlei, Namibia. The atmospheric conditions and total lack of light pollution are ideal for night photography, and the iconic dead trees make perfect subjects. This composition is one that I later used for the *Hercules Rising* night time-lapse video shot for the global introduction campaign for the Nikon D850. What you see here is a so-called star trail image. Every line in this image is a star. The earth rotates, and a long shutter speed creates a light trail of the stars."

The Technique

"Generally speaking, if you limit your shutter speed to maximum 20-25 seconds on a wide-angle lens, stars will look like sharp points. If you go longer than that, your stars will start trailing. The longer the shutter speed, the longer the trail. This is the result of a shutter speed of over 8 hours, but not as a single exposure. We all know that a high ISO will create more noise than a low one. A long shutter speed combined with a high ISO will create even more noise. The high ISO performance of Nikon sensors is amazing, but a single 8-hour exposure at 6400 ISO is going to result in a ton of noise. So instead, I shot this image in two stages: the foreground with the trees and the dunes in the background when there was still a little bit of ambient light left, and the stars when all ambient light was gone.

To keep the noise levels down to a minimum, I shot multiple 4-minute exposures for as long as the battery lasted. Later, I combined the star images in Photoshop and turned them into a single layer, which I then combined with the foreground. There are many tutorials out there explaining this technique in detail. If you like this kind of image, I recommend you give it a try yourself. To bring out the texture in the trees and create better separation from the background, I used a small headlight to light the trees from an angle. As you're using a high ISO, you don't need a very powerful light for this. Chances are that it's going to be too bright, so if that's the case, move the light further away from your subject."

See more of Marsel's work at www.squiver.com.

Copyright © 2021, Nikon Europe Blog. All Right Reserved.