

A Lucky Shot

What makes a great photograph? **Ian Middleton** lets us in on the secrets of how skill, experience and knowledge, plus a little bit of luck, play crucial roles





I took this picture on a hill in the Ljubljana Moors, just outside the capital of Slovenia. It wasn't planned. I hadn't even gone up there to take pictures, just on a walk with my family. However, when I got to the top of the hill and looked out, I saw the sun bursting through the clouds and rays spreading out, illuminating the frosty landscape. I also noticed the direction in

which the clouds were heading. I couldn't see the church in the distance, but I knew it was there and anticipated that it would fall upon this nearby hill and church.

Instantly I ran off over the fields, my two-year-old son chasing after me shouting "daddy, daddy!" I got into position, pulled out my camera from my backpack and got to work. For the next ten minutes I captured

this and a number of other images.

I came back grinning. My wife by now is used to this crazy behaviour and was smiling this time. I thought to myself, 'that was lucky.'

But was it? As I was processing the images later that evening and reflecting on my good fortune, I started to think about how luck plays a part in photography.

I remembered another time when I had captured a picture of Lake Bled, with the sun's rays bursting through the clouds and falling right on the island's church. When I posted it on social media, one person commented, "lucky shot". When I replied saying that I had been walking around the lake watching the light, anticipated this and moved myself into position, his answer was, "still a lucky shot".

So, how much does luck play a part in the great moments we capture?

Let's go back to the first image of the church over the Ljubljana Moors. While I hadn't planned that picture, or gone up there to take pictures, a number of other factors contributed to that picture being so good:

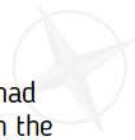
Knowledge of the location

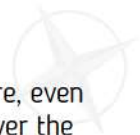
I have, and still do, visit this location and photograph from there all the time.

I already knew this view and have composed it on many occasions in different conditions and lighting. So, although I couldn't see the church, I knew it was there. When I saw the sun bursting through the clouds and where it was heading, this picture instantly came into my head. I also knew exactly where to go to get it, hence the reason I darted off immediately.

The golden rule

Never leave home without your camera. Although this was a family outing and not a planned photo shoot, I still had my camera and some equipment in my backpack. There has been the odd occasion when I left my camera at home, because it is so heavy to carry in my backpack. But on one occasion I was to regret it. I missed a stunning moment just before a storm hit. Had I left my camera at home on this frosty day, >>





around me and visualised this picture, even hoping for the splash of the wave over the rock.

Knowing your equipment, and setting defaults

When these moments occur, we need to work fast. So, knowing your equipment is essential. After any photo shoot I always set my camera to my preferred default settings, which are: ISO 200, aperture f/16 and aperture priority mode. I also make sure my exposure compensation is set back to zero (a costly mistake in the past enforced this rule). ISO is also critical. There is nothing worse than rushing to take a picture and afterwards realising that you still had your ISO set to 6000 from the night before!

As I know what my camera will be set to, it is easy to quickly make adjustments when necessary. In Scotland that time, I also had to quickly set up my tripod, so years of practice helped there. It may seem like a daft idea, but it is good to practice so you can set it up like a Formula One pit-stop engineer. Trust me, you will need to one day.

Trust your skill and experience as a photographer

When these lucky moments occur, none of the above will matter if you don't have the skill to capture it. In my early days as a photographer I had many lucky moments appear in front of me, but I messed up the picture because I wasn't skilled enough in any of the above, and also in the technicalities of photography. I still mess it up sometimes, but not so often.

Don't shoot until you are ready

In the heat of the moment, when things are moving fast, it is easy to panic, rush and shoot before you are ready because you >>

>> I would have regretted it for the rest of my life.

Compositional skill

I have been taking pictures seriously for 20 years now, and in that time I have developed my own eye for an image, honed my compositional skills and my ability to quickly visualise an image when needed. While it is best to take your time to think

and plan a good composition, sometimes moments are fleeting and you need to react quickly. While the Ljubljana Moors picture was composed quickly because of my experience shooting at that location, that is not always the case.

A picture I took at Portlethen in Scotland was completely unexpected, and it was my first and only ever time there. I had driven up from England, checked into a hotel in

Aberdeen and rushed down to this place for the sunset. I had picked out this location from a scan of Google Maps and from a quick look at a few pictures on the Internet. I was exhausted, as I had been driving since early morning. So, after sunset I packed up and headed off. I was walking back across the rocks, when looked out and saw the full moon starting to rise over the horizon. I quickly took in the scene and the area



» think you are going to miss it. Well, if you are not ready then you are going to miss it, because the picture will be rubbish.

While you need to work fast and think fast, it is critical that you make sure everything is set up correctly. With a tripod, make sure everything is tightened up properly and that you also allow some time for the camera to become still enough for

the shutter speed you are going to use.

When shooting handheld, like I was on the moors, you also have to calm yourself down from the excitement of the moment, and not only compose the picture, but compose yourself and think. With the moors picture I didn't have my tripod, and I was damn sure I wasn't going to screw it up, so I took a moment to meter the scene.

Shooting handheld meant that I risked camera shake, especially as I had to move fast. So, I switched to full manual, ramped up my ISO to 400 and set an aperture of f/13 so I could get a faster shutter speed of 1/160sec. This would eliminate any possible camera shake. Also, setting to full manual would ensure that the shutter speed wasn't compromised by the high contrast scene,

and I could keep control of it. After each picture I took a quick look at the histogram to ensure the exposure was still right.

Take time to survey the scene and anticipate what will happen

While many lucky moments are fleeting and you have to work fast, some are not. At Durdle Door in England one July evening I was again thinking about going home after sunset as there were no clouds and the blue hour would be rubbish as a result. However, I suddenly noticed the full moon rising just beside the arch. Now, the moon doesn't move fast so I had plenty of time to watch and think. As the moon moved higher, I moved along the beach taking pictures and watching its direction. It soon became apparent that from a certain viewpoint it would rise over the top of the arch, so I moved into position. As it started to appear, I also had time to make some



As the moon moved higher, I moved along the beach taking pictures and watching its direction

fine adjustments to my location to ensure it appeared inside that little dip in the top of the rock.

Another time, I was taking pictures on a hill beside a church near Ljubljana; again a place I often photograph. This evening was a double whammy of luck, because at sunset I was treated to some beautiful Cumulonimbus with Mammatus clouds. But, as the dusk ensued, I turned for a look at the church and was surprised to see the moon rising beside it. This wasn't any old moon, it was the night before the »

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» 2013 super-moon. Again I had time to study its movements, move myself around and anticipate a picture, since at dusk churches are often lit up. As such, I was able to position myself perfectly to capture the moon right behind the spire. Mother Nature also gave me a helping hand by drifting some nice clouds over to diffuse the intensity of the moon and bring it more into balance with the ambient light and the artificial light of the church. This meant that I could capture it in a single exposure.

Again, knowledge and skill came into play. I knew that the best white balance setting when mixing moonlight with artificial light is fluorescent (3900k), so I took time to set that.



Conclusion

So, there you have it, luck only plays a small part. Without all the above you will likely miss the chance to make the best of those lucky moments. But don't worry if you do miss it. Learn from the experience. Think about what you did wrong. Practice all these things and hone your skills. In time, you will find that you are able to make the best of that luck.

So, next time someone tells you that it was a "lucky shot", you can confidently reply, "Yes, 10% luck, 90% skill". ↩



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IAN MIDDLETON

Ian Middleton is a professional writer, photographer and author of several travel and photography books. He divides his time between his homes in the UK and Slovenia where he runs regular workshops and tours. He started out in photography back in 1997 when backpacking around the world.



www.ianmiddletonphotography.com