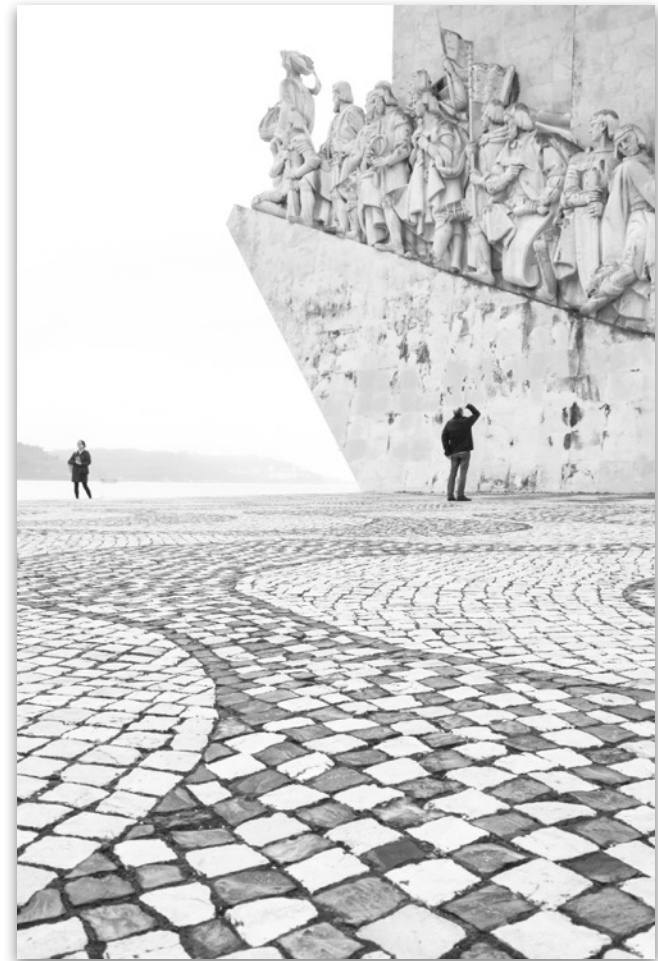


## White Light

Wet cobblestones have a tendency to be both wonderfully textural and positively lethal. Lisbon is full of them; the most beautiful weave narrow corridors through the old district of Alfama and beyond to the mosaics below Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument to the Discoveries) on the northern bank of the Tagus estuary. I am allowing myself a short break over New Year and even manage a first - to travel hand luggage - one camera, one lens. It hasn't stopped raining. Cloud and mist hover below the knee giving everything a veneer of monotone which is pretty hard to achieve in this colourful city.

Undeterred, I catch a bus west out of the city to the wooded slopes of Serra de Sintra. Trees sag dolefully under the weight of the persistent drizzle and even at the entrance to the fabled Pena Palace, I can barely see any of its outrageous palette of multicoloured turrets and towers. Fortunately the rain dies away leaving a white sky which serves perfectly to isolate the flamboyance of the palace architecture. Last winter a similar fate awaited me at Jökulsárlón and its accompanying flotsam and jetsam of carved ice on Iceland's southern coast. The road to the Lagoon was caked in snow and ice but for the first time in three days it wasn't the kind which judders under the wheels as if you are sliding down a cheese grater.





No, that morning it was pure slush on the cambered surface offering the prospect of a graceful sideways slither into a bottomless irrigation ditch.

Mountains surrounding the vast Vatnajökull ice field had disappeared except for a few low lying ridges. Visitors wandered tentatively along the pebbled shoreline and bluffs, a scene L. S. Lowry would have appreciated. Seals popped up onto the ice floes looking bored, maybe hoping for a break in the cloud base.

Reindeer scratched at the soft snow in search of lichens unaware of their usefulness as foreground interest in this increasingly atmospheric white light.

We often tell ourselves that light is the key ingredient in the mix of essentials which makes for an exceptional image. And the rewards are obvious for many photographers who wait patiently or scamper high to capture that exquisite light at the beginning and end of the day. The American cartoonist and playwright, James Thurber observed that .... “There are two kinds of light – the glow that illuminates, and the glare that obscures.” I suspect that he was looking at light on a level way beyond its physical nature but for me it sums up the fact that often we ignore much of what huge

range light has to offer, especially at its dull and brightest. Film directors and cinematographers pay particular attention to the quality of light - good and bad, in their quest to express emotion and tension. In 'Traffic', a millennial take on the Mexican/US drug wars, film director, Steven Soderbergh deliberately overexposes his sequences to highlight the oppressive, glaring, dusty desert heat to great effect. Mexican cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki employed a similar idea for The Revenant. Shot almost entirely with the very short available winter light at dawn and dusk in northern Canada, it perfectly reflects the freezing conditions and desperate storyline.

There was a time not so long ago when the discerning landscape photographer would not dream of going 'out in the midday sun'. The whole idea of brilliant blue skies was positive abhorrent. Grey days and drizzle also appeared to illicit the same response but given the characteristics of our British climate and the increasing popularity of wild and unpredictable weather in Scandinavian realms, we seem to have woken up to the idea and potential of what they can offer. Mark Littlejohn's, Cloudburst in Glencoe and sublime interpretations of wildlife by Vincent Munier amongst others should be enough to convince sceptics.



The Golden hour, the magic hour ... this is all well and good and provides us with some of the most memorable experiences and images and I am certainly not suggesting abandoning a great traditional timezone. But it is in danger of becoming formulaic and commonplace. While I am not a great fan of tropical heat and humidity, I am inexorably drawn to the glare, contrast and sheer dazzle it provides. In the same way as a dull day with all its monochromatic stillness requires you to look deeper into a scene for something to latch onto, overpowering brightness gives you the opportunity to be selective and adventurous. Forget the grads, ignore your histogram (god forbid), step out of the shadow and follow a maxim the venerable photographer, Alfred Stieglitz favoured, "Wherever there is light, one can photograph."

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