

What I Saw vs Captured

In this lesson I'll show you how I pick out areas to shoot. For each example you'll see the overall scene as I saw it when I first thought to capture a shot, and then the shot I actually captured, along with what caught my eye and what I did to turn an ordinary scene into a more interesting image.

Key Concepts

1. **Abstract Reflections at the Airport** (00:39)
2. **Underexposing for Graphic Shadows** (02:27)
3. **Combining Shape and Color** (03:41)
4. **Eliminating Recognizable Clutter** (04:24)
5. **Repetition with Simple Edges** (05:14)
6. **Reflections in Wet Streets** (07:22)
7. **Working a Viewpoint** (09:15)
8. **Using Distance to Control Size** (10:53)
9. **An Image in Progress** (13:21)
10. **Simplifying a Busy Street** (17:06)
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12. **Isolating Details in Tourist Areas** (20:28)
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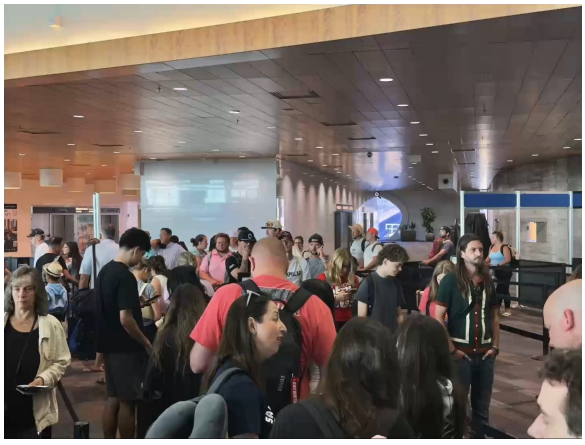
Abstract Reflections at the Airport (00:39)

I was in the security line at the Tampa airport, which looks like a boring place to take pictures. But light from a window was reflecting on the wall, repeating the window's shape on the other side. I walked until there was an opening between the people and zoomed in on that area. In the distance you can see the track for the tram that runs from the main terminal to the concourse, and the same railing shows up in the reflection, going the other direction.



What I saw

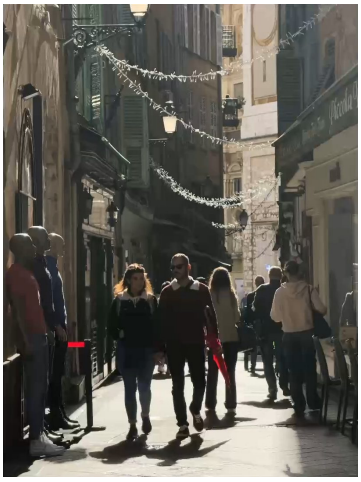


What I captured

I underexposed so the interior of the building went solid black or close to it, keeping the detail outside. What I like is that the reflected shape isn't exactly the same on both sides, which adds mystery to an abstract shot.

Underexposing for Graphic Shadows (02:27)

With the sun low in the sky, people were casting long shadows. A standard exposure (what you get if you just pick up the camera and press the button) shows the people and nearly blows out the sunlit ground. I liked the shapes of the shadows, so I underexposed until the brightest part of the picture was properly exposed and let everything else go to solid black. The people become graphic shapes with highlights around their edges, and you can't recognize them.



Standard exposure



Underexposed

Combining Shape and Color (03:41)

Walking by, I liked the green and yellowish gold of the colorful building in the distance, and I was also attracted to the graphic quality of the sculptures and how much they contrasted with the background. So I combined the two to create a more abstract image that's about graphic shape, contrast, color and a little mystery.



What I saw



What I captured

Eliminating Recognizable Clutter (04:24)

This fountain was surrounded by sculptures, but there were also people's heads, text and other things that just weren't exciting. I cropped in, mainly by zooming my lens, to eliminate everything recognizable except the rooftops and create a slightly weird, mysterious image.



What I saw



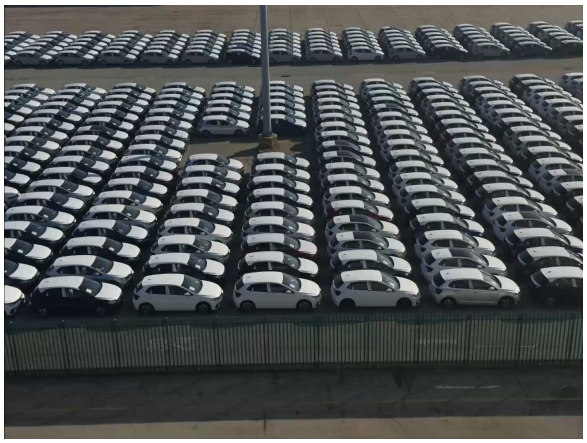
What I captured

Repetition with Simple Edges (05:14)

From the deck of a cruise ship I noticed new cars being delivered to the port and staged before going to dealers. I liked the repetition of the same pickup truck over and over, but there was no structure or design to it. Walking around the deck, I found an area where cars were wrapped in thin white film, so their positions, shapes and colors were much more similar.

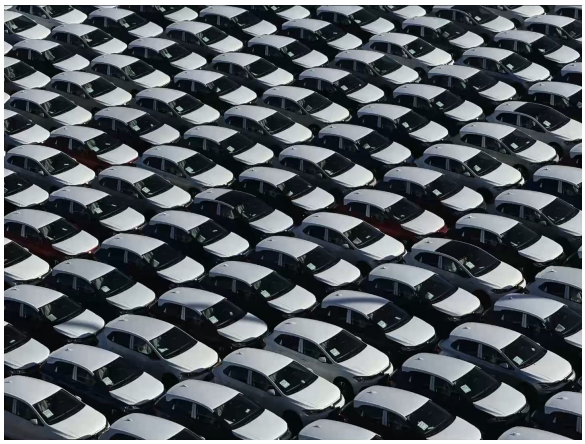


The first view



The wrapped cars

The key is the edge of the picture. There's nothing pulling your eye to any particular area or to the edge, so your eye can ping-pong around the image and explore it. A few red cars stand out a little, but I kept the edges as simple as I possibly could.



Captured



A second version

Reflections in Wet Streets (07:22)

Any time it's raining or has recently rained, you get wet streets. Once the rain stops and the water is still, it acts like a big mirror, reflecting the colorful tower in the distance.

1. **Focus First:** Focus on the faraway subject and lock the focus before you kneel down. Otherwise the camera may focus on the nearby tiles and the building will be out of focus.
2. **Get Down Low:** Get very close to the ground and point the camera at an angle down into the water until you get the reflection.
3. **Flip It:** I rotated the result 180 degrees so it's upright, which makes it more interesting, with the people on the street reflected too.



What I saw



The reflection, flipped

A little kid looked at me weirdly while I was doing this, so afterward I showed the kid how to get the exact same shot. Here they are lining it up (I asked their mom first, and she thought it was fun).



Working a Viewpoint (09:15)

In Malta, many buildings have colorful, enclosed balconies, and I wanted to use those along with the church tower in the distance. I walked down the steps to see how the viewpoint changed, which brought the balconies closer to the tower in the frame.

If you want an element in the distance to be prominent, shoot from as far away as you practically can. On the steps I was limited: walking farther away would take me higher, and getting closer would take me lower. Framing up from there gave me the signature balconies together with the spire.



Initial view



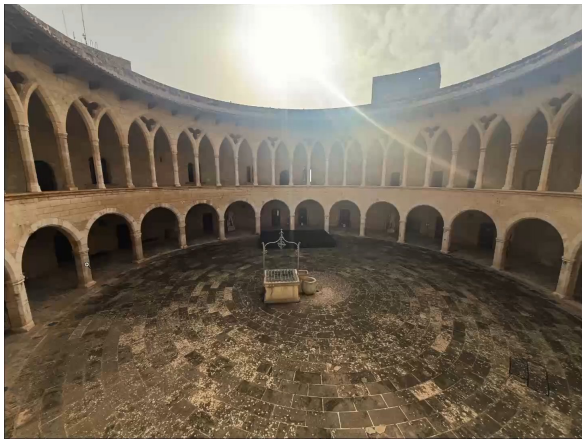
A few steps down



What I captured

Using Distance to Control Size (10:53)

Here I was shooting straight into the sun, and the longer you stand there, the more tour groups flood in and leave, so you have to be patient (on some of these I retouched out people). I noticed the nicely curved arches at the bottom, walked into one of them, and used it as a frame looking across to the tower.



The scene



Framed by an arch

I also noticed a cross on top of a nearby element and imagined it lining up with the shapes in the distance. From far away the cross looks tiny, because when you're far from things, the distant things dominate.

The farther you move from the nearby object, the larger the background appears compared with it, because the foreground gets smaller while the background barely changes. To make the nearby object bigger, get closer. By moving near and far, you can get it to exactly the size you want.



An Image in Progress (13:21)

I'm not done processing this one. This is what you get if you don't wait for the place to clear out; we were in a hurry to get back.

1. **Remove the People:** I used the Remove tool in Lightroom Classic with **Use Generative AI** turned on and painted over all of them.
2. **Straighten the Verticals:** With the camera tilted up, the top of the image looked smaller than the bottom. In **Transform**, I used **Guided Upright** and dragged along a column on each side so they're straight up and down.
3. **Convert to Black and White:** When I darkened the bright area, it turned a weird orange, and I didn't like the sky, so I converted to black and white.



The original capture



Where I am so far

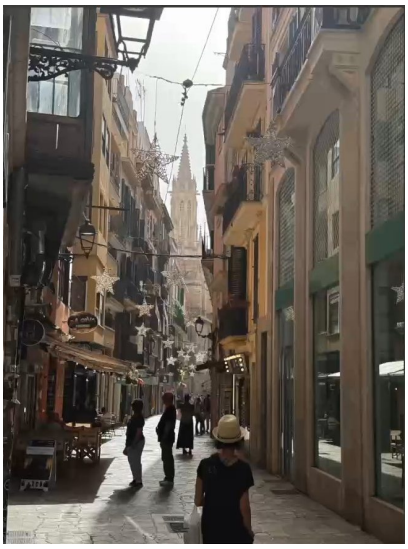
The Guided Upright correction left gaps in the lower left and a sliver in the lower right. Adobe Camera Raw can now retouch beyond the bounds of the picture, so I'm waiting for that feature in Lightroom Classic. I don't want to open it in Photoshop, because I'd end up with a second, much larger file and lose the ability to keep processing it as a raw file.

I chose to keep the nearby columns dark so your eye goes through them to what's in the distance. The alternative, using the **Adaptive** profile and lowering Highlights to brighten that area, didn't give me color I liked, and it lets your eye go all over the place without anything pulling it like a magnet. The sky and overall contrast still need a good amount of tweaking.



Simplifying a Busy Street (17:06)

That's my wife Karen in the street. I was attracted to the stars hanging down the street and the cathedral in the distance. The farther away you stand from the stars, the larger the background appears; the closer you get, the more the stars dominate. I found a star I could place where there was a good amount of contrast, so the sky wasn't just empty, with some repeats at the bottom, and I simplified the rest. In color there wasn't much going on and it pulled my eye to one side, so I went with black and white.



What I saw



What I captured

Backing Up to Enlarge the Background (18:28)

I liked these towers and the tower in the distance, but the distant one looked way too small and inconsequential. As you move farther from an area, the nearby things appear smaller compared with the background. Walking 20 feet back barely changes the faraway tower but radically shrinks the nearby ones. Then I zoom in, and the towers look like they belong together.



Up close



Backed up



What I captured

I didn't like the clutter of people. To keep them, I'd usually use a long exposure to blur the ones in motion; here I removed them to concentrate on the towers. The farther away I stand, the bigger the distant tower appears compared with the side towers. It feels unnatural to think through until you're used to it, and then it becomes automatic. It's my biggest trick in photography.

Isolating Details in Tourist Areas (20:28)

Whenever I'm in a mega-touristy, cluttered area, I switch to longer lenses and pick off small, isolated areas. Here I liked the sunlit building on the right and the contrast of the sculpture against it, so I got in close.



What I saw



What I captured

In the next scene I liked the horse framed by the building in the background and the repeating lamps leading toward it. I didn't like the construction on the right, the thing on the left or all the people, so I zoomed in and framed a tighter shot.



What I saw



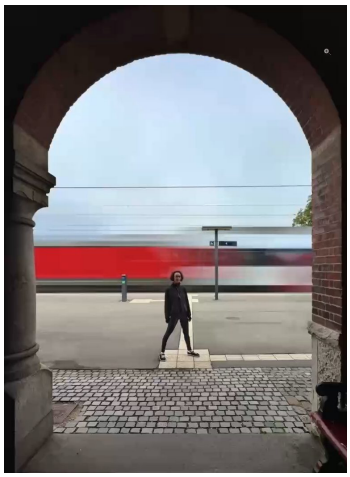
What I captured

Waiting for the Moment (21:19)

I was in a relatively dark area, it was brighter where Karen was standing, and the train in the background had vivid color. I asked Karen to hold still and waited, probably about a minute, until the train started moving.



What I saw



What I captured

In processing, I darkened the upper left and upper right, where you could easily see detail, so your eye wouldn't explore up there. I also darkened the brighter area at the base to match the area between it and Karen, and retouched out two drains.

Should I Shoot Video Next Time? (22:57)

I've been thinking a lot about what my eye sees when I first decide to take a shot, and what I get out of it, so I can share it with you. Would it be more useful if Karen recorded video on her phone while I talk through what I'm doing (using my earbuds as a microphone), showing the whole scene and then how I frame it up? We're going to the Mediterranean in September, so let me know in the comments if you'd like that and whether you enjoy this kind of lesson.