Technique - ND filters

getting closer to that dream-like world

I'm sure we've all played with long exposures of waterfalls. Or we've tried to.

The problem with trying to get long silky smooth waterfalls is often that it's not possible to get the shutter to stay open for long enough. The usual trick of making the aperture as small as possible only works to a point. We need to avoid setting the aperture too small otherwise we will get diffraction. The image will become soft. Test your lenses and you fill find they have a drop off point. It's usually around the f8, f11 area. Any aperture smaller than this (f22 for example) will render a soft image.

Additionally, if the light is really bright, you could still end up with a shutter speed that is too fast. Hardly what we need to blur water or fast moving clouds.

I think this is perhaps another reason why I love to shoot in low light. The less light I have, the longer the shutter speed and the more blur I encounter in anything that's moving. Skies, oceans, streams....

But sometimes, even in low light, I still want to make the exposures a lot longer. We may have a situation whereby the light is really nice, and although it's low, it's not that low. So how do we get a two minute exposure when the camera is telling us that 4 seconds is about right for the smallest aperture we've set?

El Arbol de Piedra, Bolivian Altiplano

I avoided using any ND gradation with this image. It was clear that the stone tree sculpture would poke into the gradation area of the filter and be distractingly darkened as a result. Being aware of when to use gradation is, of course, paramount and a matter of experience.

I use ND filters for this. They come as either full ND's (completely dark across the entire filter) and graduated. Graduated filters allow me to control the exposure difference between sky and ground, while full ND filters allow me to increase the exposure time.

Full ND's are basically used to reduce the amount of light getting into your camera. They make the scene look a lot darker than it really is. They come in different strengths. I have 1, 2 and 3 stop strengths in full and graduated variants.

Regarding grads, avoid the soft ones. I find them useless on anything less than a large format camera. Hard grads have a more sudden graduation. You may feel it's too sudden, but consider that it is placed in front of the focus point of the lens. If you put one up to your eye, it starts to get diffused. So hard grads are what you need.

Test out the ND filters you get. If you combine more than one of them together in the same scene, you may find a colour cast becomes evident.

Not all ND filters are created equal, and you tend to get what you pay for. Don't skimp on them.

1, 2 and 3 stop 'Hard' Graduated ND filters

1, 2 and 3 stop full ND filters