



Smog was my savior

when presented with a gift, embrace it

Since I was a child, it seems that there has never been a time when I didn't know about the Taj Mahal. Iconic structures have a way of pervading our daily lives. Their images are repeatedly published throughout the media and reinforced in our minds.

As a creative person, I like to set myself free. I can't wait to see what will happen with my photography when I engage with a location and respond to it. The final images can often be quite different from what I visualized before turning up. But what happens when we are constrained by an image that is so engrained into our mind that we can't see it any other way? When I arrived at the gates of the Taj Mahal, I was already having to deal with that burden.

As much as I convey this as a problem, I wasn't aware of it at the time. I'd had visions of soft early morning hues playing on the Taj's marble exterior, of calm reflections in the numerous fountains to be found within the gardens. All of this is pretty standard stuff really and wouldn't have been out of place on many a postcard.

You may be thinking that I'm against this, but pre-visualisation of a location or subject is no bad thing. I use this technique all the time in my photography as it allows me to enter into a creative area in my own mind. It also allows me to gain ownership. Although countless others may have stood in the same spot, the 'vision' I have created in my own mind is mine and I have established my own unique relationship with the location as a result.

But the Taj Mahal suffers from over-exposure to the point that it was hard for me to pre-visualize it in a fresh and exciting way. As photographers we must

learn when to use pre-visualization and when to avoid it.

On entering the complex, I had my tripod taken from me. Already constrained, imagine how I felt when I discovered that the dense smog, a result of all the pollution being pumped out by Agra's factories, had mostly hidden the Taj Mahal from view?

At first I was deeply disappointed. What I had been presented with, didn't live up to my expectations. Without really knowing it, I was forcing my will upon the scene, trying to make it fit my mind's eye. It would have been easy to have written the morning off as a waste of time but in retrospect, I was given a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge was to make some images of the Taj Mahal through dense smog while the opportunity was to do something a little bit different from the hundreds of similar shots I'd seen of the building.

I'd been presented with a gift and it had been up to me to recognize that and run with it. The smog was not a barrier - it was my savior.

As photographers, we have to keep our hearts and our minds open. We may talk about a location not working for us, but what we are often describing is our inability to mould our minds to it. We have to think laterally at times.

I now have a little mantra which goes 'work with what is presented to you, embrace it'.