

An expert's opinion - A Day in the Life a 6 X 17 Expert, Hervé Sentucq

extract from the book "Panoramic photography" by Arnaud Frich – Eyrolles/Focal Press (2004) (Translated by Alan Greene)



Before starting a photographic project in the field, a large part of the work takes place indoors. Long periods of research in the library and on the Internet, concerning the subjects in question, result in note cards, maps, and a travel plan.

Arriving at the site, often in the middle of the day and therefore under harsh lighting, I am still a long way from the moment of clicking the shutter. The first question relates to the light, the season, the state of the place (e.g., the condition of the pathways), and so on. Is it better to return another time? If I think that the necessary conditions for showing this landscape to its best possible advantage are present, I then begin a long period of visual observation.

Locating the vantage point or points requires exploring the landscape thoroughly. While doing this, I carry only the detachable viewfinders that correspond to my lenses. In this way, the search for original compositions is done while traveling light. Gradually, I obtain a mental or interior vision of the landscape. And once the framing has been settled upon, I return to the place in question with the camera and the right kind of lens

For the magic light, the one that really exalts a landscape, it is necessary to wait hours, even days, for something that often lasts only a few seconds! It is capricious, unpredictable, and ephemeral, often forcing me to return several times to the same place over the course of a few days. I give myself about 24 hours to observe a site under different lighting, weather, and coloration, preferring evening and just before dawn. With only four shots per roll of film, I want to have at least one good one, so it is not advisable to hurry things.

After long periods of waiting, one becomes aware of every variation of light, and one tries to anticipate them.

During the day, I mostly prefer turbulent skies and storms. And with the goal of obtaining a highly nuanced illumination, I watch for the precise moment when the sun hides behind a cloud and the moment when it reappears. This trapped light enlivens the scene by casting more pronounced shadows. The landscape transformed into two dimensions, maintains all of its three dimensionality.

To profit from all the lighting variations at dawn and dusk, I have to sleep on the spot, in my vehicle. In other words, I force myself to be present at the place of exposure an hour before sunrise (which is around 5 A.M. in summer!). And to reach this place sometimes requires an hour of walking beforehand, using a flashlight so as to be able to move, in the darkness. So it is not desirable to add driving in a car (e.g. from a hotel) to this, since it would only reduce my sleep that much more.

The equipment is heavy: nearly 45 pounds for the tripod (stable and sturdy) and the bag containing the panoramic equipment (consisting of the Fuji GX 617 camera, 90 mm, 180 mm and 300 mm lenses, and rolls of Fuji Provia 100F films). The completely manual ritual of setting up the tripod and camera takes several minutes and puts me in a good mood. And while putting the finishing touches on my framing, my critical sense sharpens, preventing me from forgetting the constituent elements of a successful panoramic image. I seek only places that can be seen and visited by everyone, without having to pay a fee or be a top-level athlete to reach it. Everything is manual: installation of the viewfinder and cable release, various adjustments, focusing, setting the shutter speed and aperture, incident light-meter readings, cocking the shutter, advancing the film after every exposure, switching lenses in a changing bag, and so on. I generally seek to create an image with depth, profiting from the first significant foreground subject and an elevated point of view.

Large-format panoramic photography is costly and therefore reserved for exceptional photographs of refined subjects, both well-composed and lit. Often, one brings back only one photo after a whole day of work. The size of a 6x17 color transparency allows for very fine details and giant enlargements without seeing the grain of the film.

I took up photography in 1988 and became a panoramist toward the end of 1997. I also set up the first panoramic photo archive of artistic images of France and Scotland. My graphic string is fully calibrated and I digitize and process my photos myself. My activity as a photographer-author is oriented mostly toward advertising and illustrating themes dealing with tourism and the environment. To find out more about my exhibits and publications, visit the following Web site: www.panoram-art.com