

COASTAL PHOTOGRAPHY

When it comes to drama, natural beauty and sheer variety, the coastline is hard to beat as a photographic location. **Lee Frost** heads for the sea

All pictures © Lee Frost

The sea has always held a special place in my heart. I still have fond memories of childhood holidays on the Lincolnshire coast, building fortresses in the sand, searching for crabs in shallow rock pools, flying flapping kites on the breeze and listening to the gentle lapping of waves on the beach.

It was the sound of the sea that captivated me most of all back then, and almost 40 years later it still does – nothing beats a brisk beach walk to clear writer's block and get the creative juices flowing.

The coast is also the place where I was to cut my teeth as a photographer. As a teenager I patrolled Torquay seafront in search of candid subjects – pensioners snoozing in deckchairs, funny drunks

posing for the camera, kids splashing in the sea. I also discovered the joys of night and low-light photography, shooting floodlit fountains, illuminations on the pier and neon signs outside bars and clubs. I had a particular penchant for seaside resorts out of season, boarded-up, deserted and slightly depressing – and still find inspiration in them today.

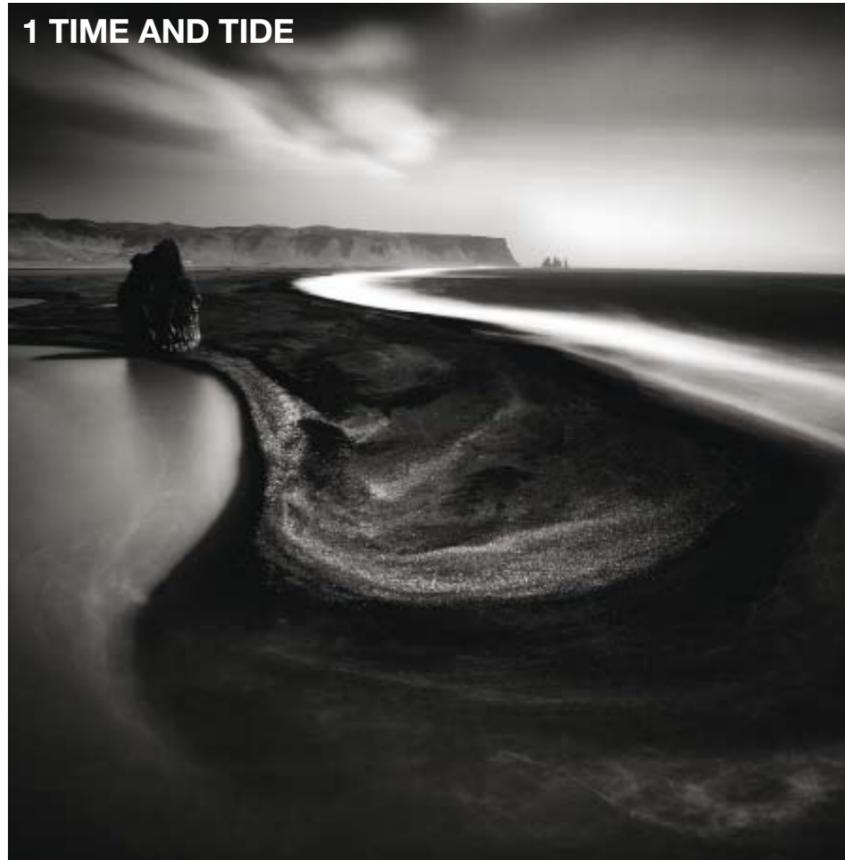
For the last decade I've lived by the sea in Northumberland, honing my craft as a coastal landscape photographer in its beautiful bays, rocky inlets and tranquil estuaries. When you live somewhere for long enough you get under its skin, tune in to its moods and feel like you belong.

The ebb and flow of the tide, changing seasons and weather patterns become

a natural part of daily life and outings with a camera are dictated by these factors – as well as the images that result. Familiar locations are like old friends; I feel comfortable around them, embrace their quirks and foibles and accept that what I get out of the relationship is directly proportional to what I put in. I'm rarely disappointed. What keeps me inspired more than anything, though, is the variety of subject matter that the coastline presents. From dramatic views to small details, busy harbours to sandy beaches, natural beauty to man-made wonders, come rain or shine you will always find something interesting to photograph and it's almost impossible to return home without at least a few great shots in the bag.

HERE ARE MY 10 TOP TIPS TO MAKING THE MOST OF THE COASTLINE

1 TIME AND TIDE



A technique I fall back on time and time again when photographing the coastline is to use long exposures to record motion, not only in the sea, but any other moving elements in the scene, such as clouds in the sky.

To achieve this I rely on a Lee Big Stopper neutral density filter, which artificially reduces light levels by around 10 stops so that exposure of minutes rather than seconds can be used, even in the middle of the day. The images that result have a surreal quality about them. The sea is smoothed out, clouds record as delicate streaks of tone and static elements such as piers, jetties and rocks stand out starkly.

A 10-stop ND filter is almost impossible to see through, so compose the shot before fitting it to your lens, focus the lens manually as AF won't work once the filter is in place, and set the shutter to Bulb so you can time the exposure. If the correct exposure without a 10-stop ND filter in place is 1/30sec, the exposure you need to use is 30 seconds, 1/15sec becomes 1 minute, 1/8sec becomes 2 minutes and so on.

1 DYRHOLAHEY, ICELAND

A 10-stop ND filter allows you to record motion in the sea and sky and add a creative twist to your coastal images

Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 17-40mm lens, ISO 100, 3 minutes at f/11, 0.6ND hard grad

2 ON THE ROCKS

To the casual observer, rocks are just rocks, but to photographers they're fascinating subjects and I find it almost impossible to walk past a stretch of rocky shoreline without stopping and searching for photo opportunities. It's the patterns and textures that I find most interesting, formed not only when the rocks were created millions of years ago but also by the action of the sea and the elements. Look for sedimentary swirls and soft curves in rocks that live below the high tide mark and courses textures in those that stay above water but receive a pounding from the elements.

Pebble beaches are another great source of patterns – look for groups in different sizes and colours and capture them in the soft light of an overcast day.

I find a 24-70mm is ideal for rock details as it allows me to focus close and fill the frame with small areas. Where access is restricted, a 70-200mm telezoom does the trick.

3 CLASSIC VIEWS

The most dramatic coastal images tend to be those that adhere to the traditional principles of landscape photography – wideangle lens, foreground interest to add depth and lead the eye into the scene, front-to-back sharpness, a focal point to give a sense of scale and good light to bring out the character of the scene.

The quality of light isn't quite as important for black & white images as it is for colour because the actual colour of the light is irrelevant – so if a sunrise or sunset is muted, for example, it doesn't matter. The soft light of a dull day can also work



2

2 STRANDED PEBBLES, TARANSAY

Pebbles in different shapes and sizes make great 'found' still lifes. If you're lucky you'll find interesting natural arrangements. If not, create your own!

Holga 120GN toy camera with fixed 60mm lens, 1/100sec at f/11, Ilford XP2 Super

brilliantly in black & white if you match it to the right subject. That said, nothing beats sharp sunlight early or late in the day, when the low sun casts long, raking shadows.

I shoot most of my coastal landscapes at focal lengths (on full frame) of 24mm or

wider, though I find the wide end of a 17-40mm zoom is ideal for emphasising near foreground and creating a dramatic sense of perspective and depth.

3 BAMBURGH BEACH, NORTHUMBERLAND

The distinctive silhouette of Bamburgh Castle says exactly where this shot was taken while the dramatic sky and wideangle view help to capture the character of the scene and reveal the castle in its environment

Canon EOS 5D MKII with 17-40mm lens, ISO 50, 1sec at f/16, 0.8ND hard grad



3

4 WEATHER OR NOT



◀ The coastline tends to have its own weather, so what's happening a few miles inland may not be the case by the sea.

I have a particular penchant for stormy weather – it reveals the raw power of nature as waves explode against the shore and streams of airborne sand race across the beach, while overhead, black clouds swirl and boil. There's always the risk of a soaking when you venture

out in such conditions, from both falling rain and pounding seas, but it's exhilarating to experience wild coastal weather first hand, and the images can be truly magnificent.

Use a waterproof cover to keep rain and sea spray off your camera, and fit an ND grad to the lens to darken the sky. Be aware of the dangers too and avoid getting too close to the sea in stormy weather.

4 HALSINEFS HELLIR BEACH, ICELAND
The power of the sea is best revealed on a stormy day when giant waves pound the shore. Use a telezoom lens to home-in on crashing waves and set a fast shutter speed to freeze the flying spray
Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 70-200mm lens, ISO 100, 1/1000sec at f/4

5 THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Coastal scenes often lack scale because there's nothing in them of familiar size, but that's easily remedied by including a person in your shots, and as people love being by the sea, it's rarely a problem finding a figure.

Look for lone dog walkers, kids skimming stones, loving couples enjoying the view, families or groups of friends in silhouette. Those people don't need to be big and dominant in the compositions. In fact, if you keep them nice and small the effect is often better because it helps to emphasise the grandeur of the scene and the scale of big open spaces.

5 VIK I MYRDAL, ICELAND
The addition of a figure in this scene not only adds scale and human interest but also a much-needed focal point. Cover the person with your thumb and see how empty the composition looks
Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 70-200mm lens, ISO 200, 1/2000sec at f/4

5



6 CLOSED FOR WINTER

'The cafes are all deserted, the streets are wet again. There's nothing quite like an out of season holiday town in the rain.' So sang Irish crooner Chris de Burgh – and he was right.

There's a quaint sadness about seaside towns in the winter, boarded-up and abandoned to the ravages of the weather. Drained of colour, noise and laughter they have the air of a ghost town, frequented only by stray dogs and screeching seagulls. But it's for all these reasons that I love holiday resorts out of season.

I lived in Torquay for several years and witnessed first hand the transformation as summer came to an end, but photographically I found the place much more inspiring, looking slightly forlorn and rough around the edges. Its true character began to show when all the glitter and glitz were removed, and I spent many rewarding hours wandering around on drab winter days, shooting mono images of the deserted pier, empty beaches, chained-up deckchairs, tatty posters and 'closed for winter' signs.

The same story is repeated all around the British coast every year and the more downmarket the resort, the more potential it offers. I won't mention names – you know the kind of places I'm talking about! So don't limit your seaside visits to the middle months – get some dates in your diary for December, January and February.

7 LIFE'S A BEACH

I love wandering along beaches, enjoying the view, looking for things to shoot. Any beach, anywhere. If I'm driving by the coast and I spot a great beach I have to stop and check it out, if only to admire its scenery, listen to the sea and fill my lungs with the salty air. There's nothing like it.

Living close to the sea means I get to the beach more than most (much to the chagrin of my commuter friends), and it's such a joy to have that opportunity, even if the only camera that accompanies me is my iPhone.

I keep tabs on the tide times because that makes a difference. Ripples in the sand are a constant source of monochrome inspiration simply because they come in so many shapes and form. I love the play of light on wet ripples, it adds a silvery sheen that contrasts with the darkness of the sand to create amazing patterns. Ripples also make great foreground in broader views and by getting low and close with a wideangle lens you can really emphasise the shapes on the ripples nearest to the camera so they add scale and lead the eye into the scene.

On stormy days, use a slow shutter speed to capture waves washing down the beach in streaks of milky foam. The retreat



6



7

'Ripples in the sand are a constant source of monochrome inspiration simply because they come in so many shapes and form'

always works better than the advance and on shingle beaches the accompanying sound is amazing. Other things to look out for? Reflections in rock pools; flotsam and jetsam for interesting detail shots – driftwood is always a good bet – lone boulders being washed by the incoming tide (dig out your Big Stopper for that one); beached starfish; the skeletal remains of dead fish, love hearts drawn in the sand by courting couples. I challenge anyone to go for a beach walk and not find something interesting to photograph!

6 SCARBOROUGH, YORKSHIRE
The drab, deserted feel of seaside resorts in the winter provides a great source of inspiration for monochrome photography – and you don't have to worry about tourists getting in your way!
Holga 120GN toy camera with fixed 60mm lens, 1/100sec at f/11, Ilford XP2 Super

7 ALNMOUTH, NORTHUMBERLAND
Changes in the tide and weather create an ever-changing stage on which to work
Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with 24-70mm lens, ISO 50, 3 minutes at f/16, 10-stop ND filter, 0.9ND hard grad ▶



8 INSPIRING HARBOURS

If beaches don't do it for you, grab your gear and head for the nearest harbour. No matter what the weather's doing you can always find things to shoot, and even on the dullest, drabest days a quaint old harbour will keep you busy. Piles of rope, fishing nets, lobster pots, peeling paint, rusty chains, old boats, painted signs, reflections – there are endless subjects to choose from and all can be the source of great monochrome images.

Sometimes I don't even bother to use a 'real' camera – my iPhone is ideal when I'm wandering around, snapping away, and apps like Hipstamatic give the images a fantastic fine art feel. You could even shoot a series of images then create a montage in Photoshop.

8 ULLAPOOL, SCOTLAND

Fishing harbours are packed with photo opportunities and an hour or two spent wandering with a camera will always be rewarded with interesting images

Apple iPhone 4s, Hipstamatic App, John S Lens, Blackkeys Ultrachrome

9 PIERS OF THE REALM

There's something quintessentially British about the traditional seaside pier, stretching gracefully into the sea and providing both a romantic promenade and a source of entertainment for those who visit it.

Photographically, piers make great subjects too, and offer lots of potential. How about standing underneath the boardwalk so you can capture the legs and struts criss-crossing in silhouette with the sea and sky in the background, or shooting from one side to reveal the pier's ornate structure in profile?

In both cases, a long exposure can be used to blur the sea and sky so the pier stands out (*see Time and Tide*). On the pier itself, stand in the centre of the boardwalk at one end and shoot towards the other, using the converging lines to create a strong composition that carries the eye through the scene.

As well as wideangle views, piers are also ideal for detail shots of the fancy ironwork, the stalls and rides, muted views through the old, scratched panes of glass and candid of the characters you encounter.

9 SWANAGE PIER, DORSET

This shot was taken on a grey, drizzly day, but the soft light suits the scene perfectly and bad weather meant tourists were few and far between
Canon EOS 1DS MKIII with Zeiss 21mm lens, ISO 100, 2 minutes at f/16, 10-stop ND filter, 0.6ND hard grad



10 I'LL BE BACK

Although we have thousands of miles of coastline around Britain, there's a lot to be said for returning to the same location time and time again so you get to know it intimately and can really make the most of its photographic potential.

Andrew Nadolski did this by visiting and photographing Porth Nanven beach in Cornwall over a 10 year period and published a fantastic book of his work, *The End of the Land*. Although the images are in colour they're well worth checking out either in the book, if you can get hold of a copy, or on Nadolski's website (nadolski.com), as they provide a fascinating insight into what can be achieved on one tiny beach.

I've never invested that amount of time in photographing one location, but I've lived very close to Alnmouth beach on the Northumberland coast for over a decade and find it incredibly satisfying simply to go for a wander with a camera – any camera – and take photographs of anything that catches my eye.

10 ALNMOUTH BEACH, NORTHUMBERLAND

Returning to the same coastal location over a period of time is a great way to document change, as well as providing you with a purpose to head out with your camera
Canon EOS 1000D with 18-55mm lens, ISO 100, 1/160sec at f/8

CHECK THE TIDE TIMES

Knowing the state of the tide when you intend to visit a location can make a big difference to the photographs you take, so either get hold of a tide table for the area or check a website such as bbc.co.uk/weather/coast/tides/.

If you want to capture ripples on a sandy beach at dawn or dusk, for example, the tide needs to be receding so the sand's still wet and the ripples are fresh, but for waves crashing against the shore high tide tends to be more dramatic.

There are also serious safety implications – you don't want to find yourself cut off by an incoming tide.