Digital Photographer Supplement

Practical advice for enthusiasts and pros

The Photography & Video Show

TIPS & TRICKS TO CAPTURE THE BEST SHOTS OF A GREAT CITY

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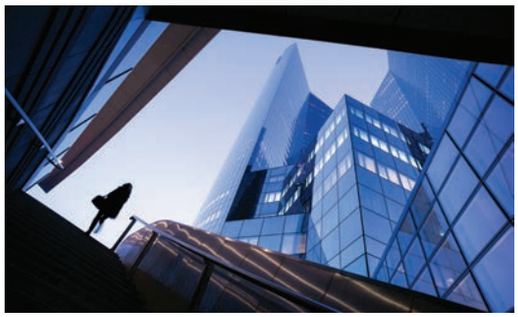
THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S GUIDE TO LONDON



TOP LOCATIONS · TECHNIQUES · GETTING AROUND

Digital Photographer

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Main cover image
Getty Images
Inset images: © Marek Neumann, Getty Images, Peter Fenech

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Printed by Buxton Press Limited, Palace Rd, Buxton, SK17 6AE

Distributed by Marketforce UK Limited, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6JR www.marketforce.co.uk

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Digital Photographer (ISSN 1477-6650) is published monthly with an extra issue in March by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK

The US annual subscription price is $175.37 Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA
Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Digital Photographer, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA

Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH. UK

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BAR rate subscription prices: UK £77.87, Europe €163, USA $185, Rest of World £142

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WELCOME

Hello and welcome to *The Photographer's Guide to London*. The UK capital is a hive of activity, packed full of interesting buildings, colours, textures, sights and sounds. The flow of people is constant and the energy is unique – London is indeed a true global metropolis.

All these aspects make it a playground for photographers. Regardless of what type of camera you own or which genre of photography is your speciality, there is something for everyone to enjoy. From the hum of the markets to the bright lights of Piccadilly Circus, the post-industrial style of the East End or the stately neighbourhoods of South Kensington and Knightsbridge, you'll find no end of photo opportunities.

While you're in town for The Photography & Video Show at ExCeL in March, this is the perfect chance to get out and explore. In this handy survival guide, we break down the main ways to get around, the key sights to seek out through your lens and the extra attractions that simply can't be missed.

If you are a passionate photographer, you won't be disappointed with everything that London has to offer. We'll see you there!

Peter Fenech, Editor
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WHERE TO SHOOT
LONDON'S 11 BEST LOCATIONS

In such a varied city, it's hard to know where to start! So, we've narrowed it down to these 11 places to begin your photographic journey around the capital

Marek Neumann

Inspired by a passion for the geometry of urban structures, London-based Marek Neumann specialises in interior, architectural and fashion photography. He has been represented by Gabriel Fine Arts gallery, published in *The Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, *London Informer*, *Grazia France* and *The Rough Guide*, and worked with corporations such as Serrano Evans Architects, RLG designed by Zaha Hadid and Google.
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1 The Shard, London Bridge and Southbank, Southwark

An architectural photographer's dream

Nearest station: London Bridge

The area around The Shard, London Bridge and the Southbank offers breathtaking opportunities for urban photography, combining modern architecture with historic landmarks. At 310m, The Shard is the UK's tallest building and its sleek, futuristic shape is a striking focal point.

Capture the iconic tower and reflections of city lights on the River Thames during the blue hour for dramatic compositions. The nearby London Bridge area, with its bustling streets around Borough Market and views of the river, adds depth to your shots. Walk along the river towards the Southbank for unique perspectives and a chance to incorporate historic structures alongside the contemporary skyline. Within an easy walk from London Bridge station, this area offers endless inspiration for architectural and cityscape photography.

2 Tower Bridge, City of London
An iconic London symbol

Nearest station: Tower Hill

Constructed in 1894 and part of the City of London Corporation, Tower Bridge is an iconic symbol of London and a must-visit for photographers. The Victorian Gothic architecture and stunning views over the River Thames offer endless opportunities for creative shots, especially at sunrise and sunset.

The contrast between the bridge's historic structure and the modern cityscape is perfect for dynamic compositions. For a unique photo opportunity, check when the next scheduled bridge lift is so you can capture the dramatic moment when the bridge is raised. Whether you're focusing on wide cityscapes or architectural details, Tower Bridge offers unforgettable photography potential.

3 Brick Lane, Spitalfields
A street art wonderland

Nearest stations: Aldgate East, Shoreditch High Street

Brick Lane, in the east London district of Spitalfields, is a dynamic and colourful canvas of street art and graffiti, making it a fascinating and colourful spot for photographers. Renowned for its ever-changing urban art, the area features works by acclaimed artists such as Banksy, alongside fresh, emerging talents. Explore the alleyways, walls and corners of Brick Lane to discover a kaleidoscope of colours, elaborate murals and thought-provoking designs. The contrast between gritty, industrial backdrops and the vivid artwork creates compelling compositions. Accessible from Shoreditch High Street or Aldgate East stations, Brick Lane is a feast for the creative eye and an endless source of inspiration for photographers. Morning visits provide soft, natural light, while the afternoons bring a lively atmosphere with food markets and street performers.

4 Buckingham Palace and The Mall, Westminster
A place to photograph regal history

Nearest stations: Green Park, St James's Park, Victoria

Buckingham Palace, the official London residence of the monarch, is a must-visit for photographers seeking regal splendour. The grandeur of the palace, with its iconic façade and surrounding gardens, provides an elegant backdrop for photography. However, for many, the highlight is the Changing of the Guard ceremony, a timeless tradition featuring precision, vibrant uniforms and pageantry. Arrive early to secure a good vantage point on The Mall – popular spots include the Victoria Memorial and the front gates of the palace.

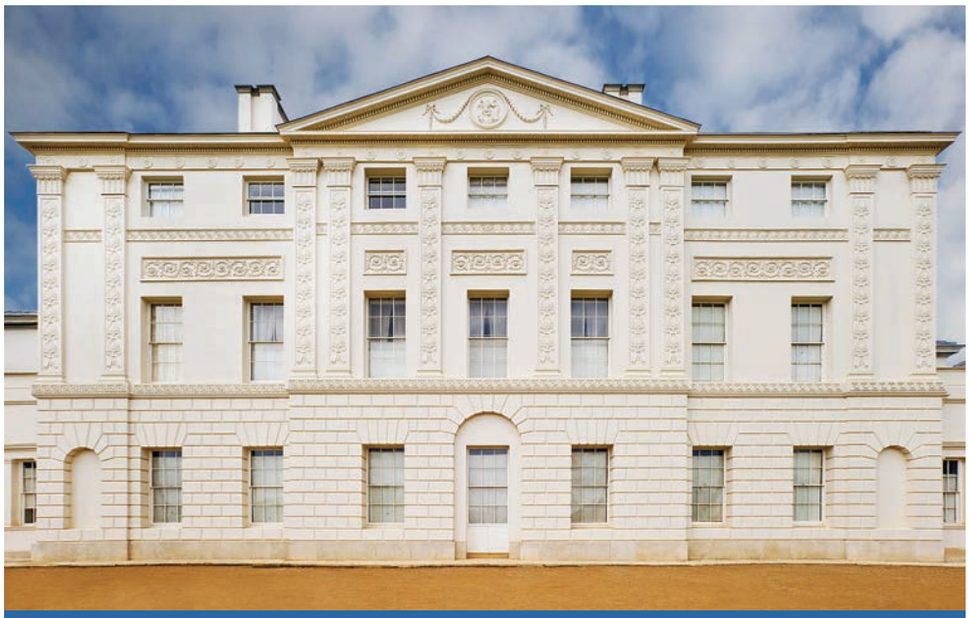
Located near Green Park, St James's Park and Victoria stations, the area around Buckingham Palace also features some of London's best parks for varied compositions, wildlife or just people-watching. Whether you focus on architecture or the movements of the guards, you're sure to get some royal inspiration here.

5 Regent's Canal, Hackney
A tranquil waterside escape

Nearest stations: London Fields, Cambridge Heath

The stretch of Regent's Canal near Broadway Market in east London is a hidden gem for photographers, offering a mix of urban charm and natural serenity. The canal's calm waters are lined with colourful narrowboats, historic bridges and post-industrial buildings that provide a unique blend of textures and tones.

The adjacent paths are perfect for capturing reflections in the water, vibrant street art and the play of light on the canal. As you approach Broadway Market, the transition from quiet waterways to lively urban scenes adds depth to your compositions, while the busy market itself and the nearby park at London Fields are also worth a visit. Reached from London Fields or Cambridge Heath Overground stations, this area is a versatile and inspiring spot for both scenic and urban photography.



6 Kenwood House, Hampstead
A hidden gem of a stately home

Nearest stations: Hampstead, Highgate

Kenwood House, an elegant 17th-century stately home located on the northern edge of Hampstead Heath, is a dream destination for photographers. Surrounded by lush greenery and scenic landscapes, this historic house boasts stunning neoclassical architecture and a serene setting perfect for capturing timeless shots.

Managed by English Heritage, the house is easily reachable from either Hampstead or Highgate stations. The interiors offer rich details, while the expansive gardens provide opportunities for breathtaking compositions. Visit during spring or autumn for vibrant natural colours, or explore the grounds at sunrise for soft, golden light. Kenwood House is a must for those seeking a touch of 'rural' charm in their urban landscape images.

7 Tottenham Court Road, Bloomsbury A symphony of colours at Central Saint Giles

Nearest station: Tottenham Court Road

Between Soho and Bloomsbury is a bustling area where modern design meets artistic flair, making it a unique spot for photographers. The highlight is Central Saint Giles, a striking collection of multi-coloured buildings designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano.

These structures create a playful yet sophisticated urban aesthetic. The bold geometry and vivid hues of these buildings provide endless opportunities for creative compositions, whether you focus on wide shots or close-ups of individual elements. Visit during the golden hour to see the colours come alive in natural light or experiment with reflections in nearby glass façades.

A short walk from Tottenham Court Road station, this area offers an unexpected burst of colour in the heart of the city, perfect for architectural and abstract photography enthusiasts.

8 St Katharine Docks Marina, City of London: A maritime haven

Nearest stations: Tower Hill, Tower Gateway

St Katharine Docks Marina, nestled near the Tower of London, is a picturesque and tranquil spot offering a blend of history and modernity. Once a bustling trade hub, the marina now features luxury yachts, historic boats and charming waterside views that photographers will find captivating. A short walk from Tower Hill station, the marina is located next to Tower Bridge, making it a convenient location for a photography session. Early mornings provide soft lighting and fewer crowds, while evenings bring reflections of city lights on the water and the lure of one of London's most photogenic pubs, The Dickens Inn. With its vibrant atmosphere and unique maritime charm, St Katharine Docks Marina is a hidden treasure for both urban and waterfront photography.

9 Shoreditch High Street and surroundings, Shoreditch

Street photography paradise

Nearest station: Shoreditch High Street

Known for its rich cultural scene, the east London neighbourhood of Shoreditch is a hotspot for street photographers. Filled with bustling streets and a blend of historic and modern architecture, the walls and buildings here are covered with striking graffiti, making an excellent backdrop for street photography. Capture candid moments of pedestrians set against a canvas of bold murals and street art.

The recent gentrification of the area has also produced some stark contrasts, most notably between its post-industrial architecture and the modern skyscrapers. Shoot these and you can add depth to your shots and create a unique narrative of life in a rapidly changing part of the city. Easily accessible from Shoreditch High Street Overground station, this area – like neighbouring Brick Lane – is a must-see for those seeking to document the pulse of the city through street photography.

10 Piccadilly Circus, West End Experience the best of London at night

Nearest stations: Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square

Piccadilly Circus, located in London's West End, transforms into a mesmerising scene at night, offering fantastic opportunities for photographers. The iconic illuminated advertising screens bathe the area in vibrant colours, contrasting beautifully with the historic architecture. The ornate, vintage railings and signage at the entrances to the Piccadilly Circus Underground station make for striking foreground elements in your compositions.

Easily accessible via the station itself, this location is perfect for capturing long-exposure shots of the bustling nightlife, with streaking car lights and the constant flow of London's red buses. The lively atmosphere, combined with the vibrant neon glow, creates a dynamic backdrop for your photographs. For unique shots, explore various vantage points around the square and the streets of Soho nearby. Piccadilly Circus is a treasure for urban night photography, offering endless possibilities for creative exploration.

11 Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Stratford A modern icon

Nearest station: Stratford

Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in east London offers a blend of striking modern architecture and green landscapes, making it a versatile location for photographers. Alight at Stratford station and you'll arrive at the Aquatics Centre, designed by renowned architect Zaha Hadid. One of the park's highlights, its sweeping roof creates dynamic lines and a futuristic aesthetic that's ideal for architectural photography. Visit during twilight for soft lighting that enhances the sleek lines of the building and reflections on its glass façade.

At the centre of the park is the London Stadium, the venue of the 2012 Olympics (and now West Ham games), but there are plenty of paths and viewpoints to explore. Combined with its open spaces and artistic installations, the Olympic Park offers plenty of opportunities for creative shots.

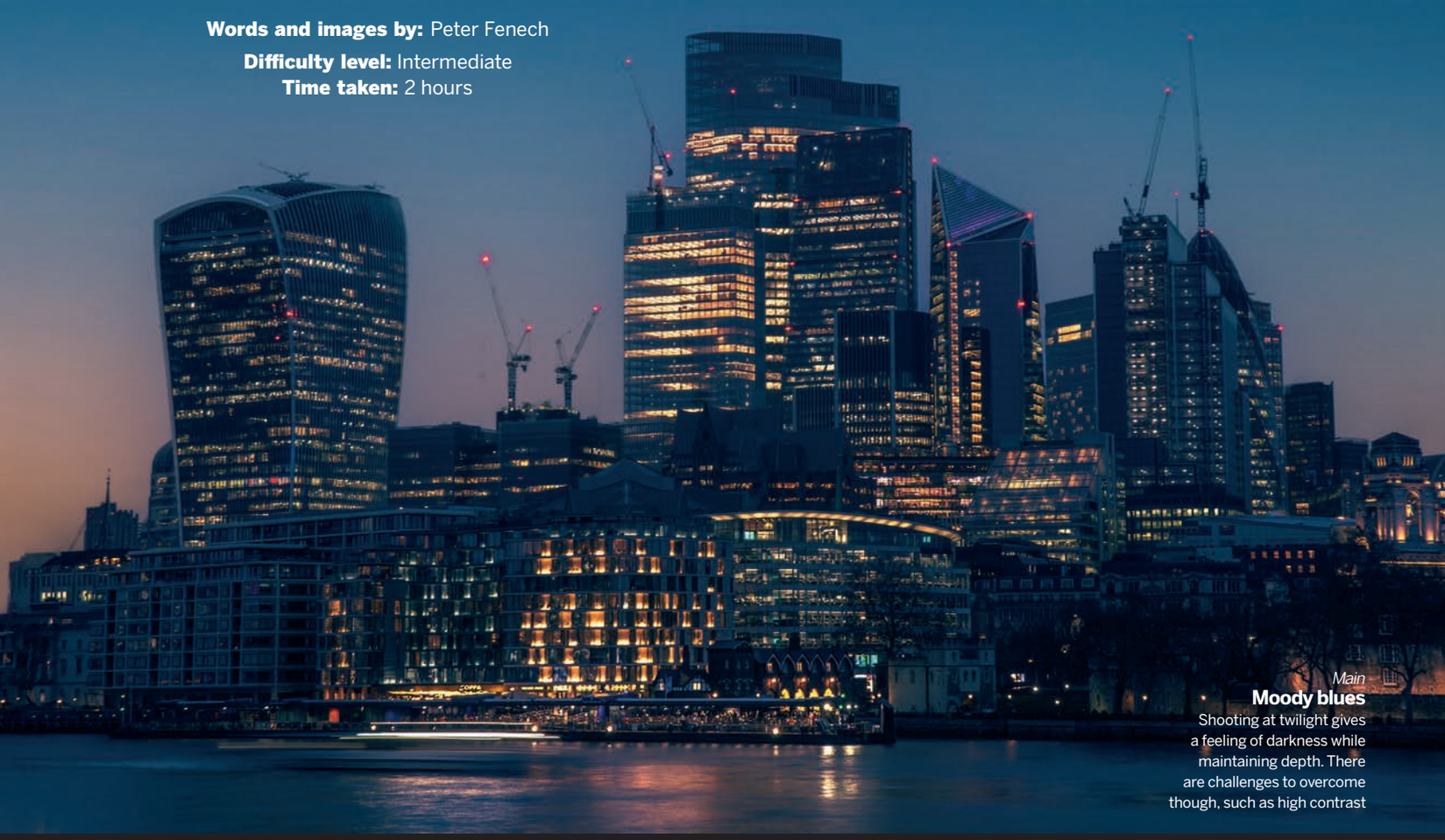
SHOOTING SKILLS

NIGHT LIGHTS

For the best night-time urban landscape shots, capture twilight images and balance challenging colour, detail and exposure effects in post-processing

Words and images by: Peter Fenech

Difficulty level: Intermediate
Time taken: 2 hours



Main
Moody blues
Shooting at twilight gives a feeling of darkness while maintaining depth. There are challenges to overcome though, such as high contrast

It is hardly surprising that cities are popular subjects for photography. Many of us live in or close to metropolitan areas, meaning that we spend a large portion of our lives surrounded by buildings, street lights and vehicles. It is a surprise, therefore, when we discover just how complex the urban environment is when capturing accurate colour and exposures, leading to many disappointing shots.

One missing element in many images is active sky colour. Most pro urban night shots aren't, in fact, shot at night at all, instead, they are created during the golden or blue hours. At these times, it's possible to create a feeling of darkness while minimising areas of empty black sky at the top of the image frame. Capturing accurate exposures of subjects illuminated from within and controlling the white balance of natural and artificial light, represents the need for careful use of metering and being a deft hand at targeted editing during the post-processing stage.

Add to this the need to shoot handheld in places where tripods are impractical and, even for an experienced photographer, it can be challenging to produce consistency in our night cityscapes. So, let's look at how we can best manage extreme contrast of colour and tone while battling blustery conditions after a rain shower on an evening shoot in the big city.

What you'll need

- Partial metering mode
- Medium telephoto lens
- Camera support
- RAW editor

Pro tip: check your histograms

Remember to hold detail in all colour channels

With city shots, the range of colour temperature and tonal values can make micro-exposure management challenging. Check the RGB histograms to get an idea of how close each colour channel is to clipping, and be especially mindful of the red channel. In other areas, don't worry too much about clipping – in the brightest areas, such as small office windows or light bulbs themselves, loss of detail is to be expected and, in this context, is not especially problematic. A preferred option might be to use highlight clipping alerts, as these will tell you where general clipping is located in the image. You can then refer to RGB histograms to decide whether or not this is an issue for your image.

The setup

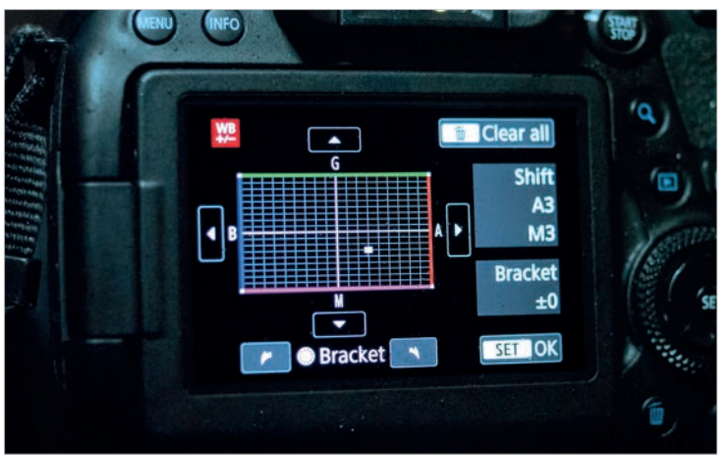
ZOOM LENS
While a prime would certainly work, this standard zoom comes with useful image stabilisation

QUALITY UV FILTER
A UV filter helps repel water droplets and also cuts down on haze in urban environments

SUPPORT
We used a tripod with a removable centre column, which can be used as a monopod

1 Secure the camera Shooting from a busy walkway on the famous London landmark of Tower Bridge made using a tripod impossible, so we set the camera up on a monopod, which offered a balance of steadiness and safety in blustery conditions. Secure any loose camera straps to reduce the possibility of vibrations.

2 Choose Partial metering Spot or Evaluative metering will give overly specific and general exposure calculations respectively. Partial metering helps target readings from more localised areas of contrast without being confused by extreme brightness or darkness. Take readings from near to, but not over, the building's internal lights.



3 Customise white balance Your camera's Auto WB is likely to be confused by the extreme colour contrast of natural and artificial light. Choose a manual Kelvin setting and then enter the White Balance Shift/Bracket menu. Shoot a test image and adjust the balance of colours until you achieve a natural result.

4 Rethink your aperture In landscape photography, we often stop down as a matter of habit, however, in night-time urban shots, light is at a premium. If there isn't much foreground in your composition, try shooting at f/4 or wider, prioritising gathering the available light over depth-of-field. Use the DOF preview to check coverage.

5 Engage burst mode There were lots of people around and the walkways on Tower Bridge were surprisingly unstable when large vehicles were passing by, so we used continuous shooting to capture a series of frames per second. This ensured at least one image had sufficient sharpness. Shoot several spaced bursts of five or six frames.

6 Overexpose Exposing to the right (ETTR) is tricky in low lighting conditions but it is better to raise the ISO slightly and capture as much light as possible in-camera than to have to brighten a dark and underexposed image later. Here, we used positive exposure compensation to capture the residual glow of the dusk sky.

Editing steps

1 Darken for drama Since we overexposed slightly for image quality considerations, reduce the exposure of the RAW file to reintroduce the feeling of darkness. The aim is to capture the atmosphere of the evening light while retaining some sky colour. We used Curves to darken the mid-tones specifically.

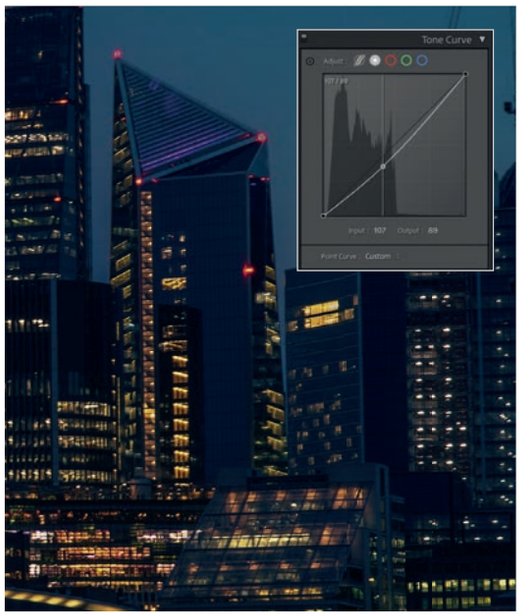
2 Split colour The colour blue is a major feature of this time of the day. Our custom white balance has preserved the warmth of the sunset, but we used Colour Grading to keep some of the blues in the shadows. We also added a range of other yellow shades to the highlights.

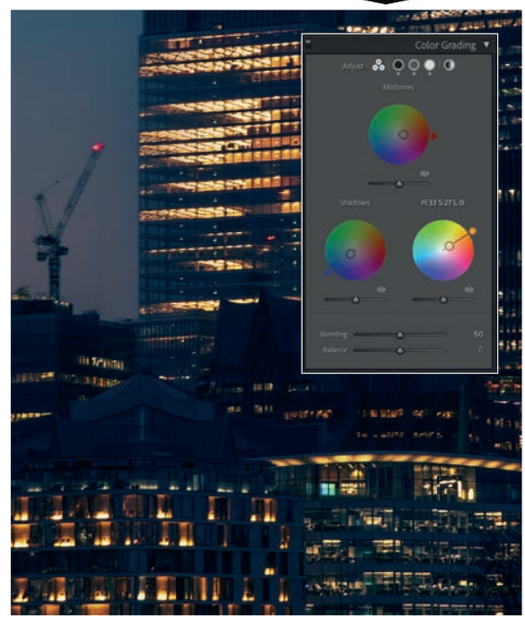
3 Control each channel The yellow saturation is now a little too high in the office windows, so we used the HSL panel to reduce this, with -50 Yellow and -14 Orange. We also reduced the brightness of the Reds, Oranges and Yellows using negative Luminance.

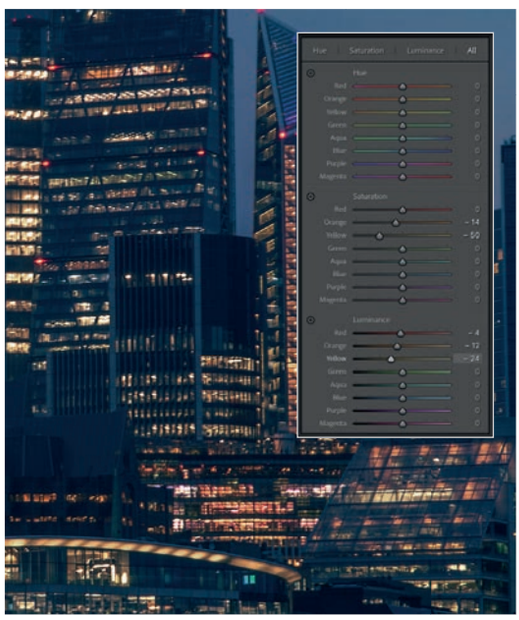
4 Reverse sky gradient We need to brighten the light at the horizon slightly so that the buildings stand out a little more against the flat tone. In Lightroom, select Tools > Create New Mask > Select Sky, and refine the mask where necessary. Then select Tools > Intersect Mask With > Linear Gradient, check the Invert box and pull up a Linear Gradient Mask behind the buildings.

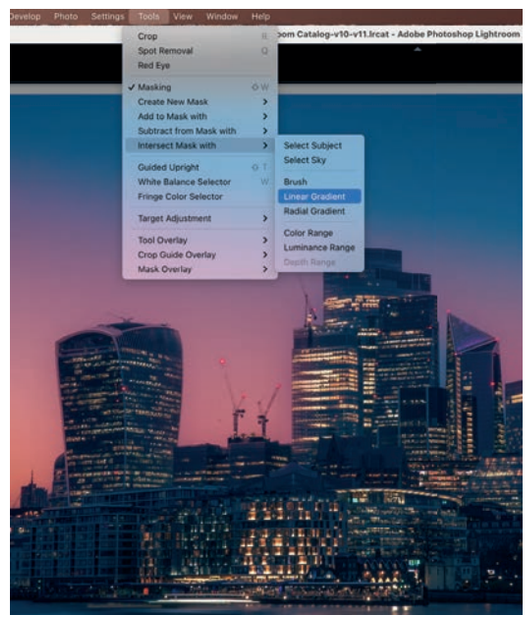
5 De-noise flat tones Empty blue skies display more noise than other tones. To reduce grain in the sky without reducing foreground texture, select the sky using a quick selection tool or intelligent sky-selection feature, check the mask, reduce Sharpness and Texture and apply moderate Noise Reduction.

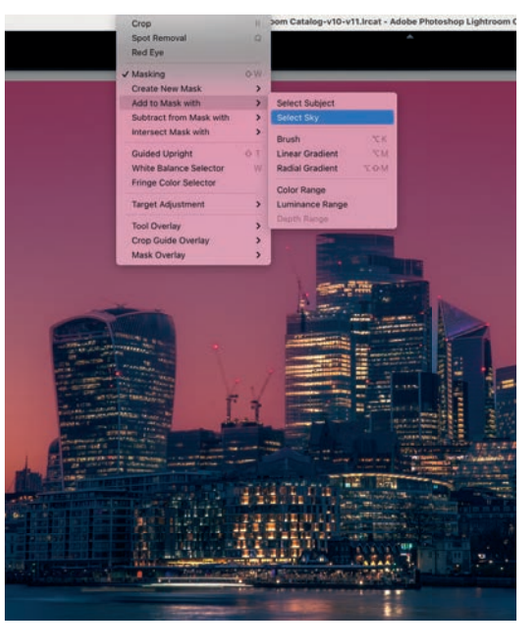
6 Reduce micro blur Even when using a monopod, some camera shake is visible at 100 per cent. To reduce this, we can apply Shake Reduction in our editing software. In Photoshop, go to Filter > Sharpen > Shake Reduction, move the Blur Trace over a soft target area, and adjust the sliders to avoid oversharpening.

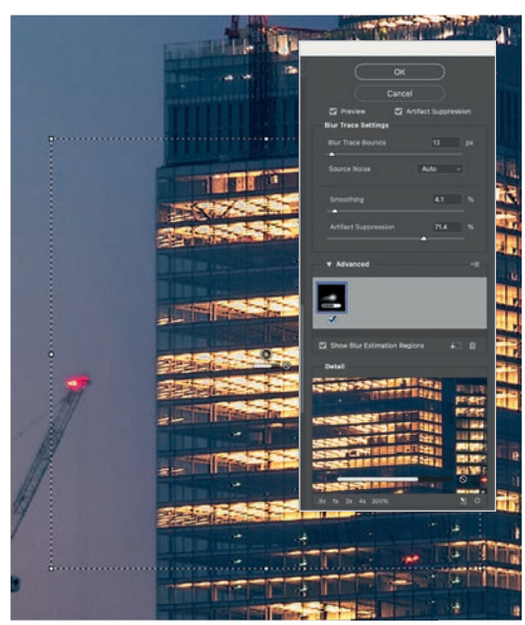












Pictured
Lost darkness
This image has avoided the issue of a solid black sky but the out-of-camera image is too bright, meaning the dusk atmosphere is diminished

BEFORE

Dusk atmosphere
Reducing the exposure produces a file with reduced noise and a more realistic blue-hour aesthetic. We also chose to crop tighter to minimise negative space

AFTER

10 TOP TECHNIQUES

London provides an almost endless variety of photo opportunities to hone your skills

Words by: Kim Bunermann

TECHNIQUE 1

Take a River Thames photo walk

Starting from Tower Bridge, embark on an inspirational walk along the Thames, where you'll encounter a variety of photographic subjects, including architecture and street musicians, perfect for street photography. Walking towards the Tate Modern, the Millennium Bridge, the National Theatre, Waterloo Bridge and the London Eye, eventually reaching Big Ben. This scenic walk takes about 30 minutes but allow yourself some time to pause and capture the breathtaking moments along the way.

© Rick Friedman via Getty Images

TECHNIQUE 2

Long exposures at Tower Bridge

Tower Bridge is magical at night, with its architectural features beautifully highlighted by lights. To add an artistic touch, capture light trails from passing cars and buses to emphasise the lines of the bridge. A challenge can be to create sharp shots when travelling light without a tripod, so look for support in your surroundings and activate image stabilisation in your camera and lens when photographing handheld, shooting at around 1/25 sec.

TECHNIQUE 3

Find a higher view

Search out high vantage points. This is one of London's most iconic views, from a window overlooking the great courtyard of the British Museum. Shot from street level, it can be difficult to show the scale of a place so shooting down on human figures gives a shot a unique quality. Try maximising the sense of the size of your location by shooting with a lens of 17mm or wider (on full-frame).

© Chris George

TECHNIQUE 4

Use natural frames

Photographing famous landmarks in a unique way is not only achievable but rewarding. Located by a walkway next to Westminster Bridge, this arch is a fantastic spot from which to capture Big Ben, using a frame-in-frame composition to add balance and intrigue. The challenge lies in managing your exposure settings, as this spot requires shooting from a dark area towards a brightly lit subject, so using spot metering will be key here.

© Westend61/Kerstin Bittner via Getty Images

TECHNIQUE 5

Manage reflections

Visit 'Horizon 22', Europe's highest viewing platform, where entry is free but prior booking is required. If you have the chance, visit both during the day and into the evening hours to showcase the city in various lights. Alternatively, explore the nearby Sky Garden, which is a little lower in height but also boasts stunning views. The main obstacle is managing reflections – get close to the window, use a short telephoto zoom with a lens hood and use an aperture of f/4 or wider to reveal framing possibilities while reducing the reflections in the glass.

TECHNIQUE 6

Distort reality

Many of London's modern buildings boast large windows that present ideal opportunities for creating distorted views of reality. Capture reflections to craft an intriguing, abstract representation of your subjects – experiment with shop windows, incorporating surrounding reflections for a compelling double-exposure effect that adds depth and complexity to your frame. Take things further by capturing reflections in metal railings, car bumpers and puddles on the ground for abstract shots.

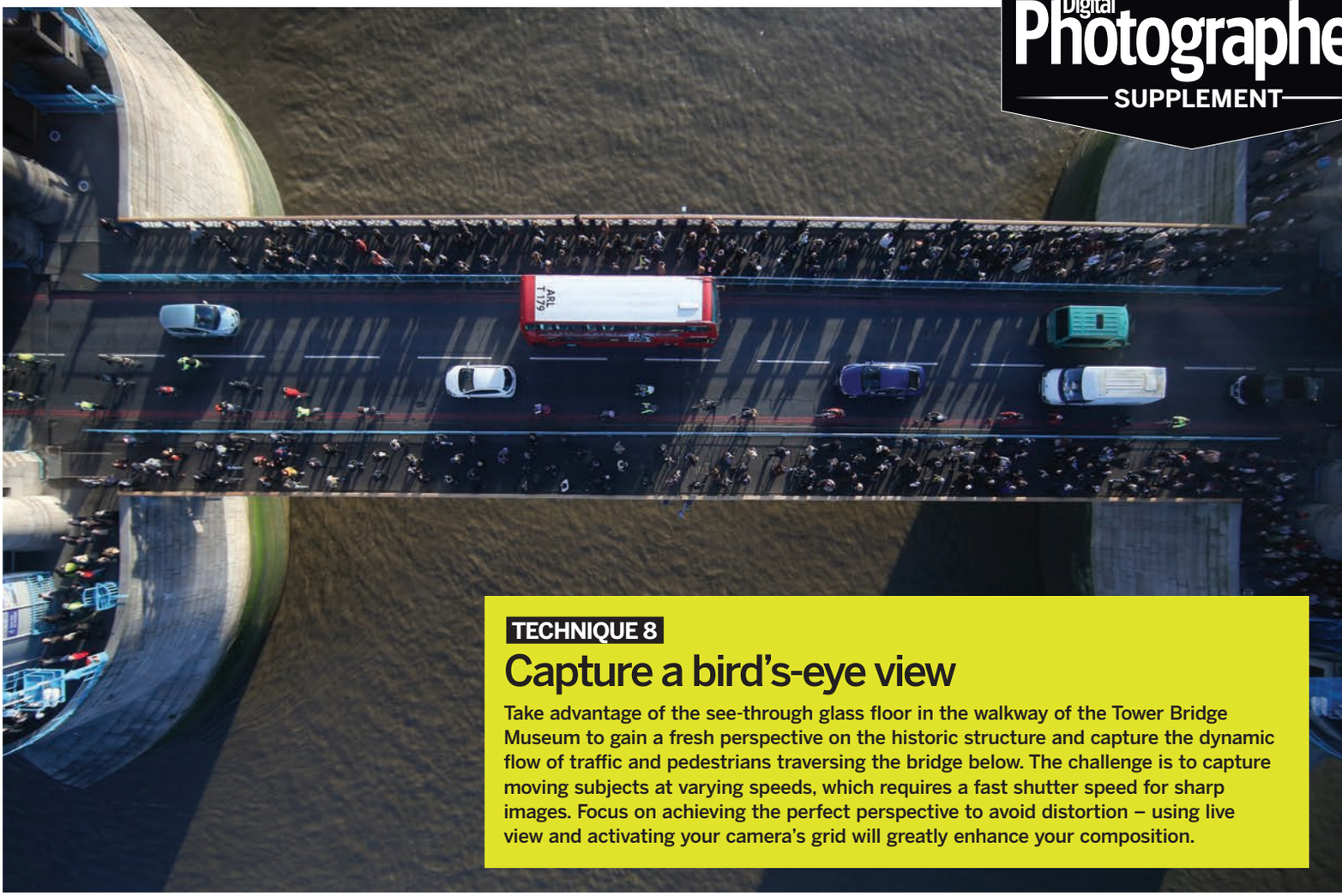
2x © Kim Bunermann

TECHNIQUE 7

Study old and new

London is a treasure trove of historical and contemporary architecture, so highlight the contrasts between timeless historical buildings and post-war industrial designs alongside modern marvels like The Shard. Seek out similarities or striking opposites to focus your photography. The challenge is framing straight lines in tight spaces. Elevate your position when necessary to reduce perspective distortion or creatively embrace skewed perspectives for a more dynamic look to your shots.

© Kim Bunermann



TECHNIQUE 8

Capture a bird's-eye view

Take advantage of the see-through glass floor in the walkway of the Tower Bridge Museum to gain a fresh perspective on the historic structure and capture the dynamic flow of traffic and pedestrians traversing the bridge below. The challenge is to capture moving subjects at varying speeds, which requires a fast shutter speed for sharp images. Focus on achieving the perfect perspective to avoid distortion – using live view and activating your camera's grid will greatly enhance your composition.

© Peter Macdiarmid via Getty Images

TECHNIQUE 9

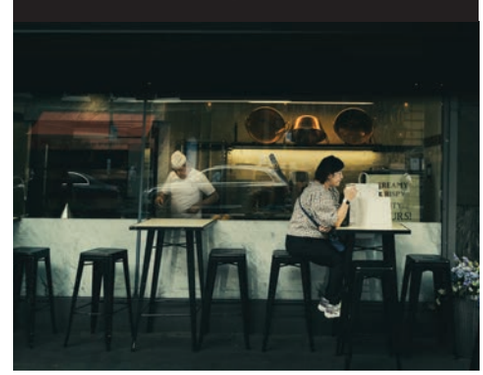
Shoot cinematic night scenes

Urban environments are great places to explore after dark. The contrasting artificial light from streetlamps, lit buildings and vehicle headlights can make for dazzling shots that offer a huge scope for exploring colour interactions. Using a tripod can be difficult in busy streets so increase your ISO to at least 800 and ensure your image stabilisation is turned on. Explore Piccadilly Circus for film-noir-esque shots of tourists back-lit by the iconic advertising billboards or rest your camera on a wall to capture light trails with a shutter speed of one second or more.

TECHNIQUE 10

Capture street scenes in Covent Garden

This bustling corner of central London is on the Underground's Piccadilly Line but is walkable from Soho, Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square. Filled with shoppers and theatre-goers, it's the perfect place to try street photography. Break out your 'nifty fifty' 50mm f/1.8 or a 35mm lens to follow in the footsteps of the top street photographers or pick out interesting details and funny moments with your superzoom lens. An 18-200mm or 24-240mm lens is perfect for this.



2x © Peter Fenech

CHOOSE YOUR GEAR

The best kit and camera features to capture stunning shots around London

Cities are extremely busy places by their very nature and this poses some challenges for the photographer. As well as the compositional difficulties of finding order in the chaos of a packed street, we also need to keep ourselves and our gear safe while exploring. Any kit that can easily be transported, while also being discreet, has the potential to open up more opportunities for great images.

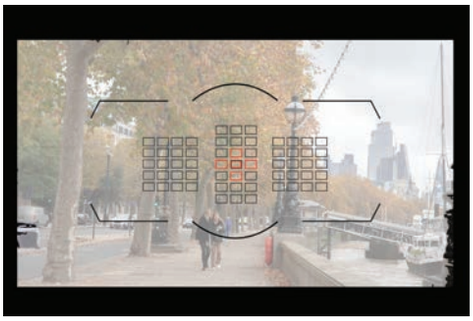
For urban photography, mirrorless cameras have a clear advantage over the DSLR – their smaller build and more compact lens systems make it easier to carry more kit for longer periods of time, while they also offer blistering frame rates and super-fast autofocus speeds. That said, the optical viewfinder of an SLR eats up less power so you can keep shooting for longer.

Meanwhile, a high-quality compact camera or smartphone will often be more than enough for shooting architecture and closer street scenes, while allowing you to shoot unnoticed. The only disadvantages are a more limited range of focal lengths and lower image quality once the light starts to fail.

So let's take a look at some of the main camera features to look out for if you're planning on buying a camera ahead of a trip to London – or, if you are already set for gear, which tools you should explore when shooting around the city.

Top camera features

Use these photo features to capture unique urban images



Subject recognition

When shooting on the street or in a crowded environment such as the Tube, your subjects are constantly moving and tend to overlap. This is where subject recognition autofocus can help you. It will automatically find faces in the frame or lock onto vehicles if that is what caught your attention.

IBIS

In-body Image Stabilisation on modern cameras is incredible and when combined with lens-based systems, you can often shoot at up to seven or eight stops slower handheld. This is massively helpful in the gloom of an Underground station or dark interiors like the wonderful Natural History Museum.

Articulated LCD

A fully articulated screen can be a big advantage when capturing dynamic angles or 'shooting from the hip'. By rotating your main LCD screen, you can shoot from ground level to show a unique perspective or capture documentary shots without putting the camera to your eye.

Gridlines

Activate the composition guides in your electronic viewfinder (EVF) and on your main LCD to help you capture straight lines in buildings. When shooting structures that are tall and wide, it is easy to become disorientated, resulting in wonky horizons. The gridlines will help you keep your shots level.

Burst mode

Put your camera into continuous shooting mode to capture a sequence of frames in quick succession, allowing you to nab the perfect photo of a fast moving subject. It will also allow you to shoot handheld HDR sequences in Auto Exposure Bracketing mode to capture sky detail without ND filters.

RAW pre-shot

Pre-shot mode is a relatively new feature on many modern cameras – half-press the shutter button and the camera captures a few frames before the shutter is fired manually. This ensures you miss fewer shots in a busy urban environment, with a greater selection of image choices of the perfect moment.

Choose your lenses

Take a range of focal lengths to cover the many colours of London

Nifty fifty

If you want to keep your kit to a minimum, a 50mm f/1.8 is small, lightweight and won't break the bank. It will also allow you to shoot in low light thanks to its fast maximum aperture.

Superzoom

If you can only pack one lens, make it a superzoom. The latest 24-200mm mirrorless optics are of a high quality and allow you to shoot both moderate wide and telephoto shots without changing lenses. This is useful around tourist hotspots like Covent Garden or Trafalgar Square.

Ultra-wide

Capture the glass towers of the City of London or stunning interiors in churches like St Clement Danes using an ultra-inclusive perspective. A 14-24mm lens on a full-frame camera or a 10-20mm on APS-C or Micro 4/3 will allow you to stretch perspective and make spaces look larger than life.

Tilt-shift

This is a highly specialist lens – and often has a price tag to match – but these days, it's possible to find more affordable third-party options from brands such as TT Artisan. A tilt function allows creative perspective control while shift prevents converging verticals in tall buildings.

Essential accessories

Extra kit to take with you on your London adventure

Polarising filter

A circular polariser will deepen colour in the sky and control reflections in modern buildings. If you want to capture detail through windows, this filter will cut out distracting reflected detail like cars or streetlights

Messenger bag

This style of camera bag makes it easier to reach for your gear quickly when a photo opportunity appears. While you have to take the backpack off to access your gear, a messenger bag goes over your shoulder, allowing quick access from the front

Monopod

While a travel tripod is a useful accessory too, a monopod is a better option for locations where setting up a tripod isn't allowed or practical. Add a ball head for rapid recomposition

Rain cover

Be prepared for those famous London downpours! No trip to the 'Big Smoke' is complete without protection from the elements for your camera and a rain sleeve will enable you to keep shooting in all weather

URBAN LANDSCAPES

Think outside the box to capture creative cityscapes with superior colour and energy

Pictured
Energetic environment
The urban landscape has many aspects vying for attention. Use a creative outlook to build a dynamic and balanced composition

© Yoss Cinematic/Moment via Getty Images

Cities are a never-ending source of photographic inspiration and excitement. A short city break can reveal unexpected opportunities to capture dynamic compositions and exotic-looking details. The best thing is that you don't have to travel far from home to find such material – even your nearest medium-sized city is likely to offer a great deal of colour contrast and photographic intrigue.

When you hear the phrase 'cityscape photography', it tends to conjure up images of distant ultra-modern metropolises, such as Shanghai or Dubai. While these locations certainly provide exciting shots and are a magnet for content creators, any city falls into the category of an urban landscape. The key pro skill as a photographer working in this genre is to make the location work for you, finding the beauty in the available scenery and applying an appropriate artistic style.

One frequent mistake that inexperienced image creators can make is to try and shoot every city location in the same way. In an older city, the stone walls tend to be less reflective and colourful than those featuring contemporary buildings, illuminated extensively from within. These two conditions require almost inverse technical approaches, so recognising how best to expose for each is the main way to unlock the best results.

Over the following pages, we will examine the urban environment and reveal the top pro techniques for shooting towns and cities. This will call on your eye for composition and creative thinking, in order to present any built-up area as a dynamic, energetic landscape.

Transferable skills

- Advanced composition
- Complex white balance control
- Handheld troubleshooting

Introduce movement

Contrast static buildings with moving elements

One of the most majestic aspects of urban environments is their air of stability and continuity. Not all buildings have equal longevity, but each is designed to withstand the elements and most will outlast their designers. This makes the movement around them all the more interesting and, in many cases, this contrast should be more of a focus than the buildings themselves, which may have been photographed many thousands of times.

Lengthening exposures to capture traffic moving around the base of a tower block can introduce a dynamic aspect to the frame, for example. Meanwhile, blurred shoppers seemingly flowing through the streets provide an energy that contradicts the stillness of the architecture.

Rather than simply being a record of a single moment, these images create a sense of the landscape moving through time, conveying a better story. Use a shutter speed of between 1/30 sec and 2 secs to maintain some detail in moving elements.

Above
City in motion
Slow shutter speed and in-camera stabilisation allow handheld capture of moving elements

© Peter Fenech

Use the Virtual Horizon

This common but underused tool can help with superior geometry

When shooting in the city, converging verticals can be unsightly, but they also have secondary impacts on image quality. With your eye to the viewfinder, it can be difficult to judge which lines should be straight, leading to slanting horizons. In turn, these angles may need complex geometric corrections in your editing software, which means cropping and a reduction in resolution.

Turn on the Electronic Virtual Horizon to display on the LCD and EVF, allowing you to align the shot in-camera. Use the pitch and yaw guides to reduce wonky frames, even when the horizon isn't visible.

Pictured
The human element
Experiment with capturing people in your shots at different distances to illustrate everyday life in your urban captures

© Esch Collection/Stone via Getty Images

Show human life

Focus on interactions with the landscape

Cities are more than a collection of pleasing buildings and sculptures, created for artistic purposes. They are the places we work, live, play and rest – and they are our homes.

Generally, when exploring a new city, it is the people we identify with and remember the most, so capturing human activity is a great lead-in for the audience of our cityscape images. Use lenses longer than 70mm to compress crowds and make them seem part of the urban scene. Alternatively, use a focal length of 14mm or wider to transport the viewer into the scene, making them feel like part of the throng.

Look for links between your subjects and their surroundings, a smartly dressed person in front of a glass façade in the financial district, for example, or a waiter backlit by the out-of-focus lights of a restaurant. Also, look for colour contrasts between clothing and architectural elements.

Contrast the lighting

Use the mixture of natural and artificial light to your advantage

Cityscapes have an abundance of light – during daylight hours, the light reflects off the buildings, and at night, they are lit up artificially. Natural light tends to be of a higher kelvin value than the type emitted by artificial bulbs, such as those found in household lamps and office lighting.

This means there is more blue and cyan in the twilight sky and plenty of yellow in the fluorescent glow of the windows of office buildings. This can be a challenge from a technical perspective but, when managed through strict white balance control, it can reveal excellent colour depth. The process starts with shooting in RAW file format so that you can make advanced software adjustments and use a custom kelvin value to render the optimal balance in-camera.

The aim is to capture a warm glow in the foreground structures and an opposing bias in the sky beyond. Shoot around 30 minutes after sunset for the best contrast.

Below
Hot and cold
In the twilight hour, cities offer an attractive contrast of natural and artificial lighting

© Peter Fenech

© Peter Fenech

Use seasonal colour

Capture the changing atmosphere over the year

For many types of outdoor photography, shooting the changing seasonal colours is almost instinctive – it's one of the main reasons to take our camera out into the landscape. However, when shooting city locations, this can be easily forgotten in favour of neutral architectural shots, especially in the era of Instagram filters and with lots of newer glass buildings.

Capturing the city as it changes over the year is an ideal way of transporting the viewer into the location and communicating the atmosphere the place is known for.

For a less conventional shot, try shooting reflected colour in windows or filtered lighting on walls and pathways. Use a shutter speed of 1/50 sec or slower to capture falling leaves and focus on layers of colour to contrast against grey concrete or glass.

Above
Seasons in the city
Changing colour throughout the year can transform the urban landscape. Use foliage and characteristic weather to encapsulate the 'mood' of a city location

Use high speed continuous mode

Tripods aren't convenient everywhere in cities and they can attract unwanted attention from security and thieves alike. To ensure you can still capture longer exposures while maintaining sharpness, switch to high-speed burst mode to use your camera's maximum frame rate. This will give you a sequence of shots, from which you can select the sharpest option.

© Peter Fenech

Include nature

Natural elements convey the sense of a living city

Any large metropolis can gain the reputation of being a concrete jungle, noisy, dirty, polluted and devoid of natural life. Urban sprawl can be an excellent subject for your photos in its own right, but defying expectations is a great way to draw in your viewers and encourage them to explore your composition.

Focus on showing how nature finds a way to thrive in the urban landscape, establishing itself as an everyday component of a mainly human-made location. City parks or tree-lined streets are almost set up for this purpose. Use a telephoto lens of no less than 85mm equivalent to compress the scene and bring building details and the detail in bark and leaves together in the frame. This gives the feeling of vegetation climbing the side of structures and reclaiming the urban space.

For the opposite theme, make natural objects smaller in the frame to convey the impression that nature is being overwhelmed by human activity.

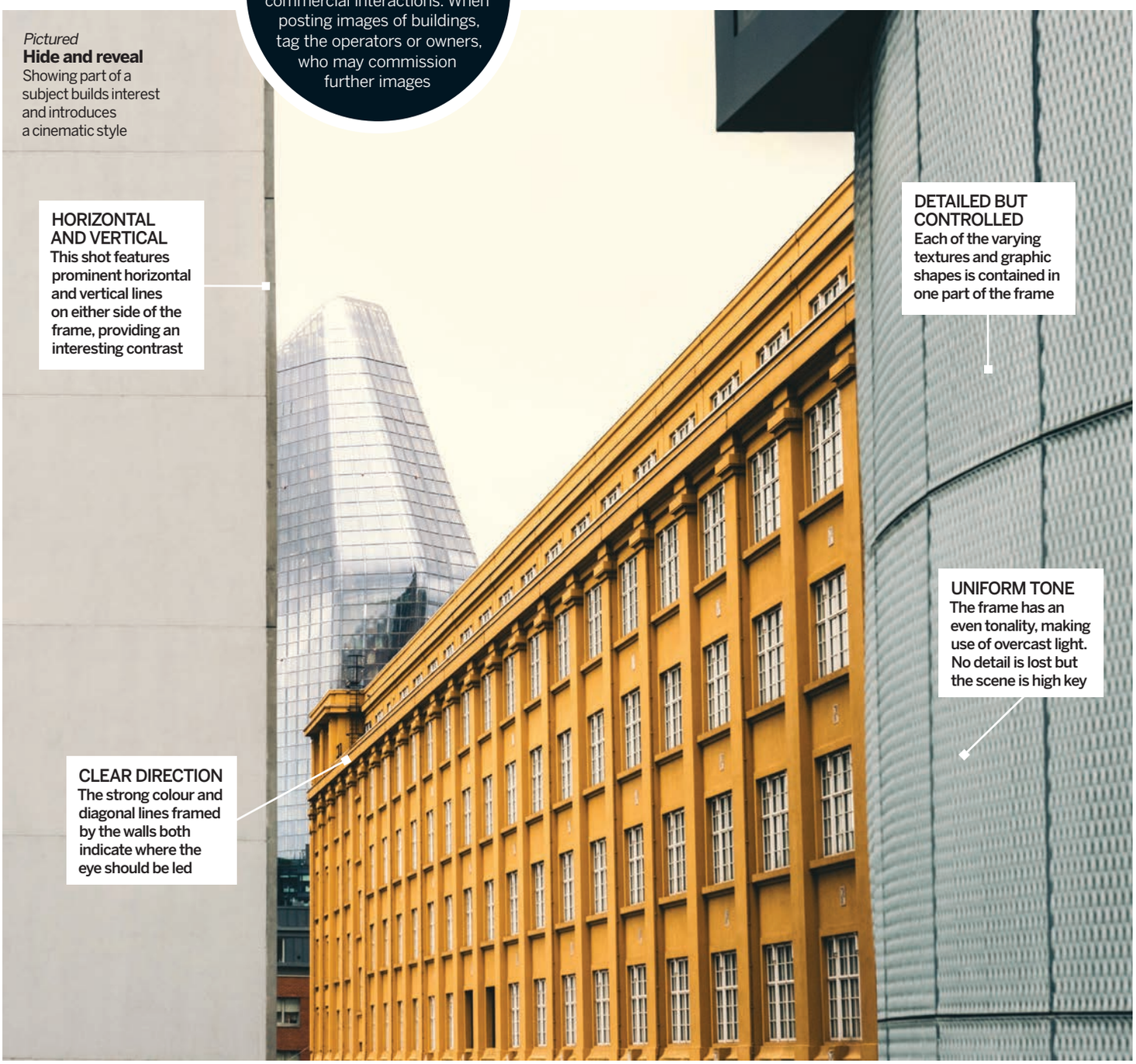
Frame your subject

Use the features of the urban landscape for creative compositions

City environments can be crowded and overpowering when seen through a viewfinder and in the resulting image frame. Structures of different styles, ages and shapes all compete for attention, so it's important to make sense of it by arranging every element so that they complement each other instead. We're accustomed to looking for natural frames in the landscape and urban areas are no different. The core skill is being able to recognise which surfaces work well in unison and when textures are going to contradict the overall theme of the picture.

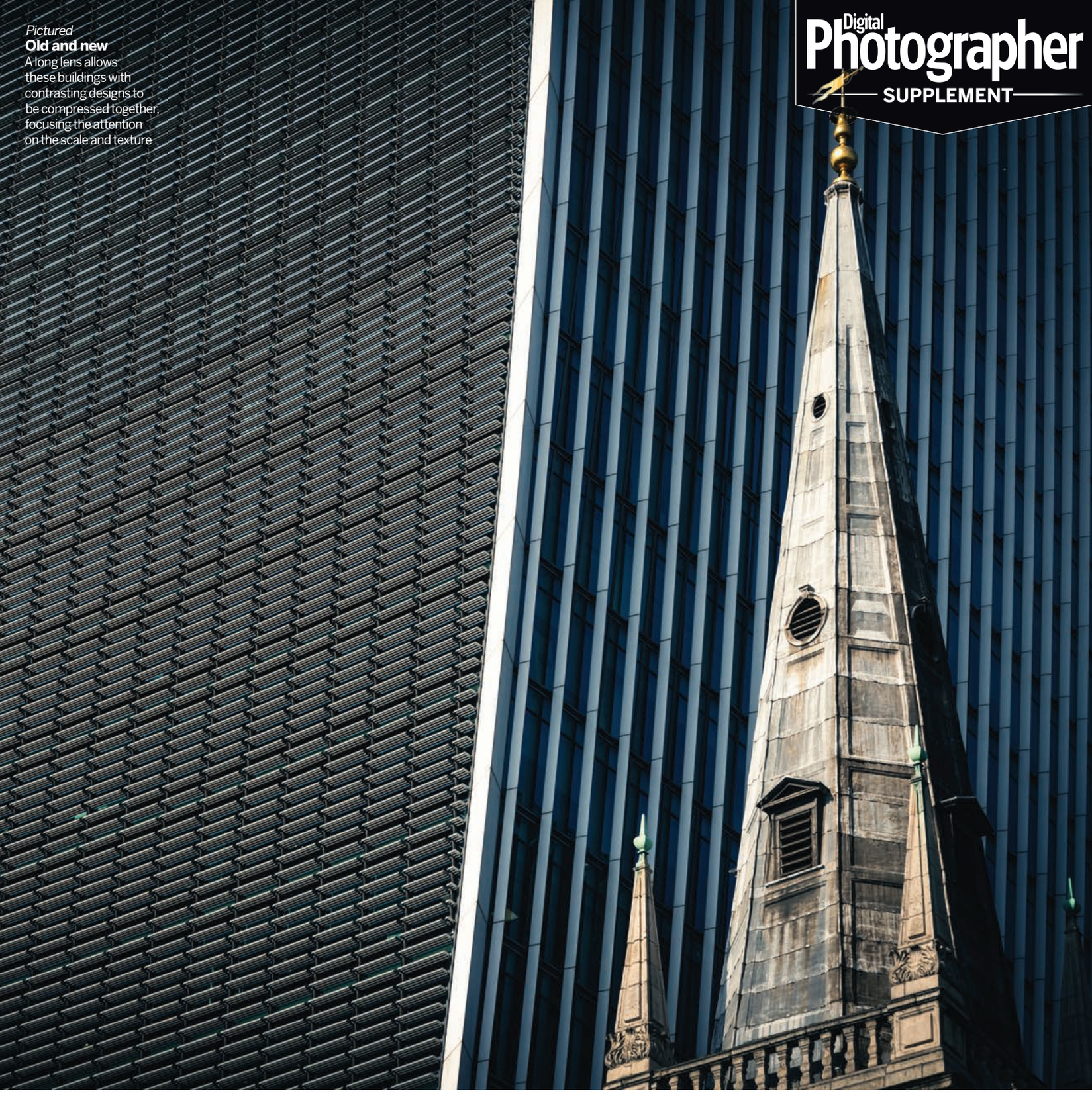
Avoid too much texture in the foreground or in the objects you are using to create your frame-within-a-frame. Also, make sure any textures match or clearly oppose those in other areas of the photo, for a sense of continuity. It's also important to be mindful of exposure. The framing element shouldn't be brighter than the subject as this will prevent the eye from easily moving past it, into the background. Instead, make brightness uniform across the shot or underexpose foreground areas by around 1/3 stop.

MONETISE THE CITYSCAPE
While copyright infringement is something to be aware of, cities offer opportunities for commercial interactions. When posting images of buildings, tag the operators or owners, who may commission further images



Pictured
Hide and reveal
Showing part of a subject builds interest and introduces a cinematic style

© Peter Fenech



Pictured
Old and new
A long lens allows these buildings with contrasting designs to be compressed together, focusing the attention on the scale and texture

Focus on texture

Highlight the contrasts between old and new

In a natural setting, you might choose to introduce contrast of detail by using long exposures to blur flowing water, bringing softer texture into harsher, rocky surroundings.

In an urban landscape, the same effect can be achieved by capturing both old and new structures in the same shot. Buildings constructed in the previous century are likely to be dominated by brick and stone, bringing some more random textures into the frame.

Modern structures made of concrete, steel and glass are generally smoother, more uniform and reflect light with a higher colour temperature. Juxtapose this in the frame to produce a narrative of evolution while, less conceptually, producing an engaging aesthetic.

Know the law

When shooting in cities, it is important to know who owns the land you are on. In the UK, you don't always need a property release if a building is shot from public land and for personal or editorial use but you must be sure before using your work commercially. If no single structure is the main subject, this may negate the need for a release but, if in doubt, contact the landlord before using the image as stock.

Make landmarks secondary

Sometimes the interest lies in the negative space around an object

Most cities have one or two instantly recognisable buildings or features. These are the most often photographed aspects and the 'wish list' shots that most photographers feel they can't return home without having captured in some form.

However, if we are thinking in terms of shooting an urban landscape, rather than a city, travel or architectural image in a broader sense, we can place these objects in a wider context. After all, when shooting a famous tree in a wild landscape, you wouldn't fill the frame with just the tree, you'd show the subject in the context of the surroundings, studying how it fits into the scene and reacts to the colour and light of the environment. In this shot below, the line of trees on the embankment works as a leading line to the city skyline.

Above
Distant skyline
People are used to seeing frame-filling shots of landmarks, so defy expectations by restructuring the shot to show more context

© Peter Fenech

THINGS TO SEE FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

Top 10 inspirations in London, featuring must-see exhibitions, galleries and tours that offer fresh insights and perspectives on the art of photography

1 The Photographers' Gallery

Nearest station: Oxford Circus

The Photographers' Gallery offers a vibrant exploration of photography, with exhibitions, talks and workshops. Don't miss the retrospective of Peter Mitchell, showcasing his poignant exploration of Leeds in the 1970s. On at the same time as The Photography & Video Show in London, the 'Nothing Lasts Forever' exhibition runs from 7 March to 15 June.

2 The Natural History Museum

Nearest stations: South Kensington/ Knightsbridge

Experience the 60th Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition at the Natural History Museum until 29 June. This extraordinary showcase presents breathtaking wildlife photography that powerfully captures the essence of diverse ecosystems and their inhabitants. Get inspired by compelling visual narratives and expert insights that highlight the urgent need for conservation.

3 Rocket Gallery

Nearest stations: Bethnal Green/ London Fields

Established in 1994, the Rocket Gallery is a hub for art and photography, showcasing innovative works that bridge multiple creative disciplines. Don't miss Martin Parr's 'No Smoking' exhibition, running until 31 May, which showcases Parr's exploration of smoking culture through photographs spanning 1970 to 2019.

© Pawel Libera via Getty Images

4 V&A South Kensington

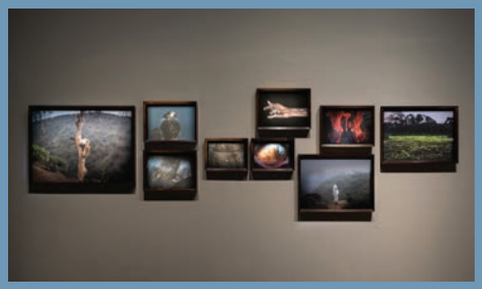
Nearest station: South Kensington

Founded in 1852, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is the largest decorative arts and design museum, housing over 2.3 million objects. It is currently featuring an exhibition called 'Nature Study: Ecology and the Contemporary Photobook', which highlights contemporary artists' reflections on environmental challenges and runs until 18 May.

5 Autograph

Nearest stations: Old Street/ Shoreditch High Street

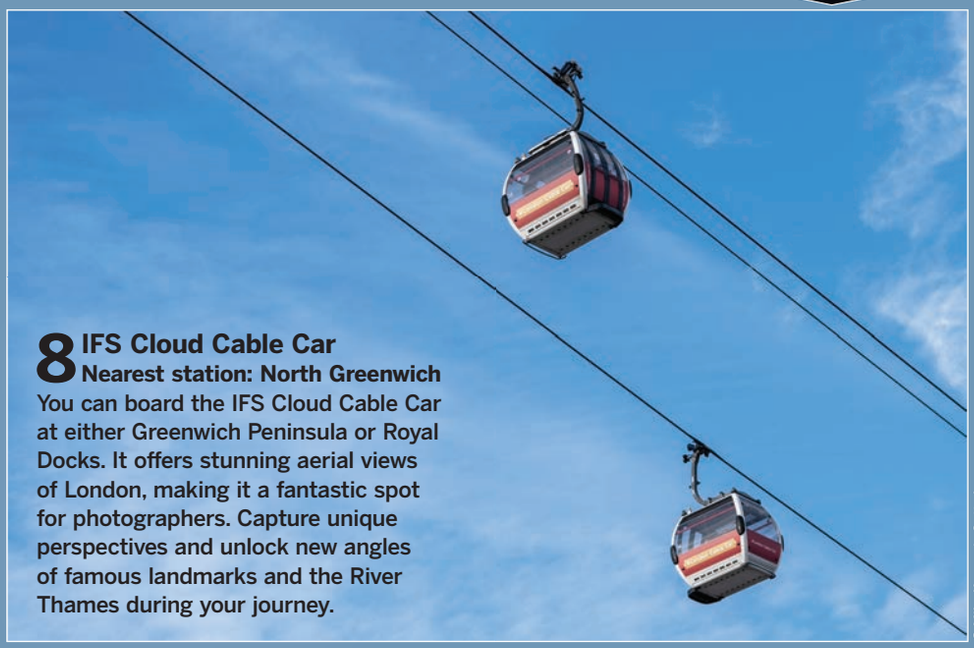
Dive into the transformative power of photography at Autograph's gallery in London, showcasing the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode until 22 March. The exhibition 'The Studio – Staging Desire' shows never-before-seen works by the influential black British artist, exploring race, identity and intimacy through staged photography.



6 Wellcome Collection

Nearest stations: Euston Square/ Warren Street/Euston

Discover the Wellcome Collection, a free museum exploring the intersection of health and human experience. Running until 27 April, the 'Hard Graft: Work, Health and Rights' exhibition unveils the stories of underrepresented workers, featuring over 150 items including contemporary artworks and films.



8 IFS Cloud Cable Car

Nearest station: North Greenwich

You can board the IFS Cloud Cable Car at either Greenwich Peninsula or Royal Docks. It offers stunning aerial views of London, making it a fantastic spot for photographers. Capture unique perspectives and unlock new angles of famous landmarks and the River Thames during your journey.

© Mike Kemp via Getty Images

9 Frameless

Nearest station: Marble Arch

Step into Frameless, where famous paintings come alive through stunning projections that fill the room with vibrant colour. This immersive experience offers endless photographic opportunities, inviting you to explore art in a completely new light. Let the magic of movement and creativity transform the way you perceive these masterpieces.

10 River Thames cruise

A boat trip on the Thames offers photographers stunning views of London's iconic landmarks, including the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London. With flexible timing and easy access to attractions, you can capture sweeping cityscapes and candid moments from a unique waterfront perspective.

7 Night photo tour

Capture the beauty of London at night, when the city reveals a different charm with its illuminated landmarks. Be sure to pack your tripod to capture long-exposure shots, using the River Thames to reflect light and enhance the low-light conditions. Consider booking a guided tour through platforms such as GetYourGuide (getyourguide.com) to enrich your understanding of the locations while you photograph this stunning city.

GETTING AROUND

Our quick reference guide to navigating London with your camera

Arriving by air

London has six airports from which to choose. Heathrow is the largest and is well-connected to central London by the Piccadilly and Elizabeth lines (to multiple stations) and Heathrow Express (to Paddington). We would recommend the Elizabeth line for a balance of speed, price and security for your camera kit. British Airways is the biggest inhabitant here, offering a sizable luggage allowance – pack your clothing in your large carry-on and keep all of your camera gear in your small carry-on bag, in case the former is checked at the gate.

Gatwick Airport is located to the south and is easily reached from multiple major rail stations across London, including Victoria (Gatwick Express), St Pancras, Farringdon and Blackfriars (Thameslink). Luton and Stansted to the north are served by Thameslink to St Pancras and Stansted Express to Liverpool Street respectively. City Airport is ideally located for The Photography & Video Show at ExCeL, accessible via the DLR in under five minutes. Finally, Southend is the smallest option but can be accessed via trains from Liverpool Street.

© Richard l'Anson via Getty Images

King's Cross & St Pancras stations

King's Cross, the terminus of the East Coast Mainline, will be your entry point to London if you're travelling from northern England or Scotland. Directly adjacent to it is St Pancras station, a busy transit hub with connections to the East Midlands and mainland Europe via the Eurostar. For local services, Thameslink and six lines of the London Underground all converge here. Euston station, the entry point for visitors from the northwest and Scotland, is a 10-minute walk away.
Photo tips: King's Cross station has been transformed over the past decade and its concourse roof is worth shooting. Don't miss the details of nearby St Pancras. Use a long lens to pick out the ornate windows of the iconic building made world-famous by the *Harry Potter* film franchise.

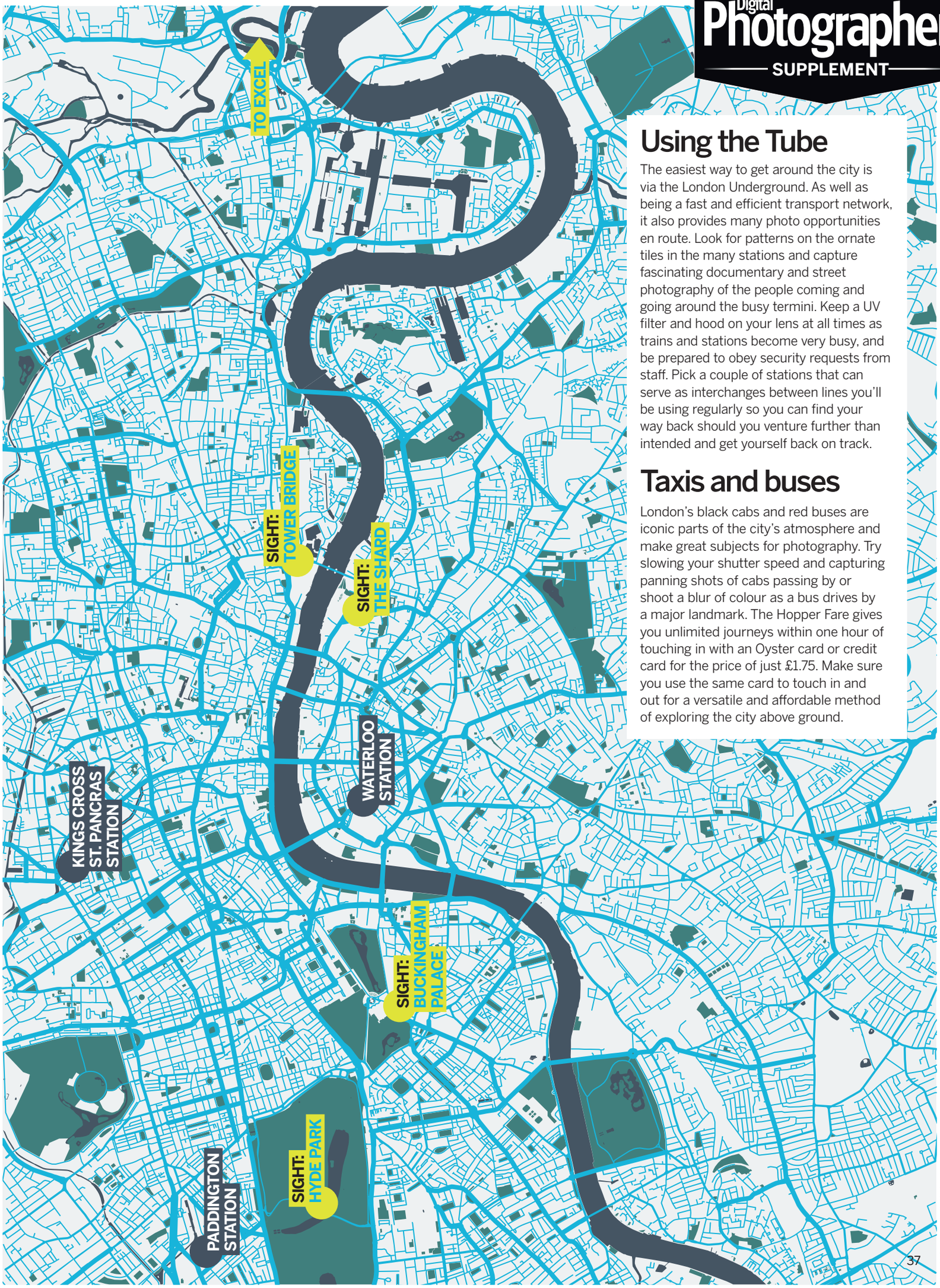
Waterloo station

Your entry point when travelling to London from south and southwest England, including destinations like Southampton, Bournemouth and Exeter. From here, you can connect to the Northern, Bakerloo, Jubilee and Waterloo & City Lines. Take the latter and change at Bank station to access the DLR to ExCeL. This is Britain's busiest station by several metrics, so keep an eye on your camera gear and don't take photos on a large camera without permission from security.
Photo tips: Alight here and walk across Waterloo Bridge to discover many icons of the London skyline – the Houses of Parliament and Elizabeth Tower (Big Ben), London Eye, Westminster Abbey, Southbank, Whitehall and more. Keep a standard lens on your camera for varied subject matter.

© Simon Bradfield via Getty Images

Paddington station

The transit hub for visitors arriving from Wales and the west of England, you can pick up the Elizabeth line here and travel directly to ExCeL London for The Photography & Video Show. The Bakerloo line will take you straight into central London or you can skirt around some of those crowds using the Circle and District lines.
Photo tips: If you fancy a walk, this is the station for a stroll down to Hyde Park. Cross the park to see the famous Albert Memorial and Royal Albert Hall. Shoot at ground level when shooting both of these and aim your lens up to eliminate tourists from your frame.



Using the Tube

The easiest way to get around the city is via the London Underground. As well as being a fast and efficient transport network, it also provides many photo opportunities en route. Look for patterns on the ornate tiles in the many stations and capture fascinating documentary and street photography of the people coming and going around the busy termini. Keep a UV filter and hood on your lens at all times as trains and stations become very busy, and be prepared to obey security requests from staff. Pick a couple of stations that can serve as interchanges between lines you'll be using regularly so you can find your way back should you venture further than intended and get yourself back on track.

Taxis and buses

London's black cabs and red buses are iconic parts of the city's atmosphere and make great subjects for photography. Try slowing your shutter speed and capturing panning shots of cabs passing by or shoot a blur of colour as a bus drives by a major landmark. The Hopper Fare gives you unlimited journeys within one hour of touching in with an Oyster card or credit card for the price of just £1.75. Make sure you use the same card to touch in and out for a versatile and affordable method of exploring the city above ground.

© Matt Jeacock via Getty Images

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MASTERCLASS

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