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# Newsletter from Kim Westerskov

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## Newsletter #80 – August-September 2019

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*This newsletter goes out to many photographers in New Zealand and overseas - and to anybody who asks to go onto the mailing list. If you know anybody who would like to be on the mailing list, please get them to email me. It's free and they can unsubscribe at any time, of course.*



## 1. Kim tip: part 1 – tame your backgrounds for great photos

**Executive summary:** A good background enhances a photo. A bad background can easily ruin it.

**The detail:** Most photos are of SUBJECTS, of someone or something - the reason we're taking the photo. The subject can be a person or group of people, an animal, a flower, a building, the Great Pyramid of Giza or the Eiffel Tower... whatever. Cameras nowadays are so clever that all you really need to do is point your camera in the general direction of the subject, let the camera sort out the focus and exposure, and presto .... a technically reasonable photo of whatever it was you pointed the camera at. But if you're reading this, then you're almost certainly a "real photographer" [as different from a "snapper"] who knows that there's a lot more to getting good photos than that.

Letting your camera deal with focus and exposure is usually a good idea, one that I covered in the last newsletter. If you let the camera do that, then your part of the bargain is the creative bit: figuring out where best to stand, the best angle, the best focal length [Telephoto? Wide-angle?], getting a good composition, and choosing the best moment to press the shutter.

Our eyes and brain are designed to visually take in everything in front of us but to only "see" what is most important. A saber-toothed tiger coming towards us is much more important than the nice landscape behind it. We see the saber-toothed tiger. It matters. The landscape behind it doesn't matter, so we don't see it.

We've run out of saber-toothed tigers [they died out about 10,000 years ago], but our eyes and brain still work the same way, essentially keeping us safe and alive. Whatever our eyes visually see, the brain decides what's important and that's what we "see". What's important is primarily other human beings or animals, especially if they are close and/or coming towards us. Or other kinds of potential danger. Nice landscapes don't really count.

Knowing this can help us take better photos. We need to continue putting most of our effort into getting the subject as right as possible, but we also need to consider the background seriously. Far too often, photographers don't really notice the background at the time - it's just the background, the surrounding environment. Much more important was getting that shot of your grandkids or of that amazing modern-day relative of the saber-toothed tiger you've travelled to Africa to see. The background was just whatever the background was.

Yes, but the background can be what elevates your photo to the next level if you get it right. From OK to good. From good to great. Bad backgrounds ruin countless photos. Many [most?] of us never notice that lamp post sticking up out of Linda's or Justin's head until we're looking at the photo later.



Photo 1: 24mm f22



Photo 2: 105mm f4

The subject [your partner, friend, family, lion, seagull, rose, car ...] is the reason you took the photo, but if you look at the photo you've just taken, you'll see that the background often takes up more space in the photo than the subject itself. More of the real estate. And this matters. Backgrounds that detract from – or even ruin – otherwise good photos I call "Rogue Backgrounds". This article is about eliminating them and replacing them with good backgrounds. Backgrounds that make your subject shine.

Let's look at this series of photos I took of Alyssa during some workshops I ran for homeschoolers. I had divided the students into pairs, tasking them with photographing each other outside. While they were doing that I thought I'd take a series of photos showing the importance of background, focal length, and point of view.

Alyssa looks good in all the photos, but note that some photos are messy and unsatisfying, while others are simpler, tidier and better. Much, much better. A number of factors contribute to this: the background, the focal length, the position I'm photographing Alyssa from, and how tightly or otherwise I'm composing the photo.



Photo 3: 50mm f22

**Photo 1.** Using wide-angle [24mm] and a wide depth of field [f22] we get a good look at lots of things: our flowering cherry tree with its autumn leaves, the front fence, Vivienne's car, the houses across the street, a young avocado tree... and Alyssa.

**Photo 2.** I haven't moved and Alyssa hasn't moved. I've just zoomed in to 105mm and changed the aperture to f4. The short telephoto [105mm] and wide-open aperture have combined forces to blur the background reasonably well, but it's still somewhat distracting.



Photo 4: 105mm f4

**Photo 3** is a good example of how to ruin a photo with a distracting background. If I'd used an aperture of f4 the background would have been somewhat blurred but would still have been highly distracting.

**Photo 4.** I've now zoomed my 24-105mm lens in to 105mm and opened up the aperture to f4. So – we're starting to get somewhere, with a reasonably nice portrait of Alyssa. But we can do better. Alyssa is standing quite close to our pohutukawa and so even at f4 its leaves are quite distinct and a bit distracting as far as backgrounds go.

**Photo 5.** Background wise, this is better. I've put my 70-200mm lens on and shot this at 200mm and f4. Even though Alyssa is still standing close to the pohutukawa, the combination of telephoto and wide-open aperture have blurred the background nicely, separating Alyssa from the background



Photo 5: 200mm f4

**Photo 6.** To illustrate what happens if you use a wide-angle lens to take a portrait close up, I shot this at 35mm. So I got the same result as the billions of cellphone photos of people close up where their faces are distorted and look, well, “seriously sub-optimal” [modern CEO speak]. Whatever is closest to the lens looks bigger than it should. All the proportions are wrong.

Photo 6: 35mm f9



**Photo 7.** I’ve now moved further away from Alyssa, zoomed in to 105mm [good] but shot it at f8 – OK but not great, as the background maybe isn’t blurred enough. The red-brown fence is distracting too.



Photo 7: 105mm f8

**Photos 8 and 9.** So far I’ve tried using the pohutukawa as a nice natural background and it’s worked pretty well – as long as Alyssa isn’t standing too close to the tree and I’m using a long focal length [100-200mm] and shooting “wide open” at f4. Even f5.6 would have been fine with telephoto. Let’s now try using the overcast grey sky as the background. Later in Photoshop, I’ll lighten the sky to white or near white. So I’ve knelt on the ground close to Alyssa [who is still chatting to her homeschooler friends] and use a short telephoto [90-105mm] and f8 or f9 to get enough depth of field. This upward angle gives us a lovely clear background and a nice clean photo. [But note that though Alyssa looks great at this angle, it is often not a kind angle to shoot older people from]. Thanks, Alyssa, you were great!



Photo 8: 105mm, f8

Photo 9: 90mm f9



## 2. Kim tip: part 2 – tame your backgrounds with depth of field

Two of the very best ways of making your subject shine are using a long focal length [telephoto] and shooting “wide open”. As long as there is a reasonable gap between your subject and whatever is behind it, then the longer your focal length [the bigger your telephoto] the narrower will be your depth of field = the more out-of-focus will be your background. Which is good. And secondly, the bigger your aperture [the smaller the “f” number], again the narrower will be your depth of field = the more out of focus = good.

So a winning combination for wonderfully out-of-focus backgrounds [the kind that make your subject stand out] is a telephoto lens used wide open [f2.8 or f4].

To date, I’ve yet to be commissioned to photograph models looking gorgeous on a beach at sunset, but if I ever was, I’d do what the pros in this area do: bring a 300mm or 400mm lens and shoot wide open at F2.8 or f4 or f5.6.

It works just as well for people in general [not just young models], also wildlife and flowers... and any other subject you want to stand out from the background.

The only difference between the two rose photos [both taken with a 200mm lens] is that the top photo was shot at f32 and the bottom photo at f4. Using a telephoto lens meant that even though I closed the aperture down to f32 the background was still somewhat blurred. Opening the aperture up to f4 blurred it wonderfully to a pleasant, natural-looking “nothing much” background so that the photo becomes just about the rose. The viewer’s eye does not wander to the background.

Ditto for the two photos of the red flower whose name I forget. Both were taken with my 24-105mm lens at 105mm. The top photo was taken at f22, and the bottom photo at f4.



### 3. “PEOPLE: kids, families, portraits, travel, events, weddings” workshop 7<sup>th</sup> September

What are the most important photos you take? My answer would be people. Definitely. Even the ones we just “snapped” of family and friends take on more and more importance as the years go by. If I was heading off to Mars and could only take a few photos [there’s not much room on those spaceships] – most would be of Anne, Gareth, and Vivienne. Perhaps one or two of wider family & friends, plus a few hero photos from my long career out in nature.

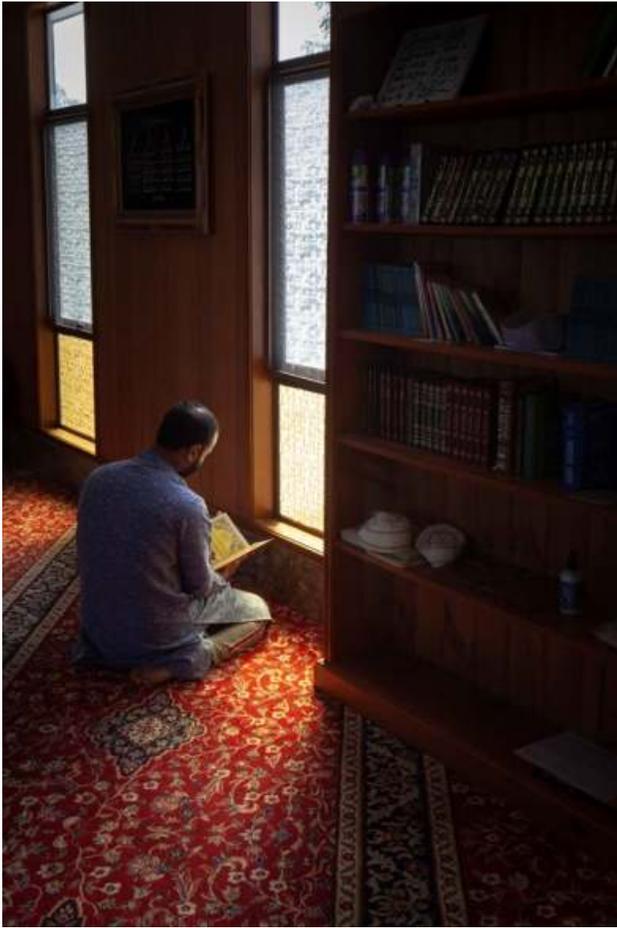
There are many genres of people photography, and we’ll look at each of these in turn: candid, family, children, portraits, events, street photography, travel [with particular emphasis on how to photograph people you’ve never met before] and weddings.

In this workshop, we’ll cover the gear, settings, approaches, and techniques needed for great people photos. There will be some good handouts, including “cheat sheets” showing many different ways to pose people – poses that have been tried, tested, and always work well.

In the afternoon we’ll put into practice what we learned in the morning – photographing real people. It should be a great day. Care to join us?

**Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> September. 9.00am – 5.00pm** plus assignment and follow-up evening 2-3 weeks later for assignment evaluation [at a time that suits everyone]. The follow-up can be by email.  
**Cost:** Full course fee [which includes tuition, follow-up, hand-outs & Vivienne’s yummy catering **\$295** - or **\$245** for Early Birds [if you register by 30<sup>th</sup> August]. Fulltime students with ID **\$145**.







#### 4. NZ Geographic “Photographer of the Year” competition

Got some recent photos taken in New Zealand you're rather proud of? Entries are now open for the annual New Zealand Geographic Photographer of the Year competition, now in its 11<sup>th</sup> year. This is New Zealand's biggest and most prestigious photography competition. And the richest. There's \$5,000 in real hard cash up for grabs, as well as a 30 day \$34,000 voyage to Antarctica with Heritage Expeditions.

**Entries close 27<sup>th</sup> August.**

<https://www.nzgeo.com/photography/entry/>

#### 5. QUOTE OF THE MONTH

The romantic notion of inspiration striking like a bolt of lightning is just that – a romantic notion. From my experience and research, great work comes from a hearty work ethic. But we passionate photographers shoot because we have and want to, so it rarely feels like work.

Steve Simon

#### 6. KIM'S “PHOTOS & COFFEE” EVENINGS

We meet on the first Tuesday of each month [except January], chat about photography, and view some of the recent photos we've taken. It's **free [no charge], supper is served**, and there's no obligation of any kind. **Please email me if you'd like to come** [it's not a big room so I need to keep an eye on numbers]. These evenings are always fun and friendly - there's usually many smiles and laughs. It's a great way of meeting up with like-minded people, **being inspired by the creativity of our group of photographers, and coming away with new ideas and tips**. There's a wide range of interests and abilities – so you're very unlikely to feel out of your depth. Bring photos if you wish, but there's no obligation to. Some people do, some don't. **The next one is on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September**, starting 7.00pm. 18 Greerton Road, Gate Pa, Tauranga.

#### 7. PROGRAMME for rest of 2019

##### SEPTEMBER

- Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September. “Photos & Coffee” informal meeting. 7.00 – 10.00pm. Free.
- **Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> September. “People” workshop.** Portraits, kids, families, candid, travel, events, weddings. Full day plus follow-up.

##### OCTOBER

- Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> October. “Photos & Coffee” informal meeting. 7.00 – 10.00pm. Free.
- **Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> October. “Good photos, great photos – anytime, anywhere”** workshop. Full day plus follow-up.

## NOVEMBER

- Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> November. “Photos & Coffee” informal meeting. 7.00 – 10.00pm. Free.

## DECEMBER

- Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> December. “Photos & Coffee” informal meeting. 7.00 – 10.00pm. Free.

Full-day workshops 9.00am – 5.00pm

**COST:** Course fees **include tuition, detailed hand-outs, yummy catering, plus [for most full-day workshops] an assignment and follow-up evening.**

- **One day workshops:** \$295 – or \$245 for Early Birds if you register by 10 days before the workshop. Fulltime students with ID \$150.

## 8. PRIVATE TUITION

Yes, like you I’m usually busy doing “other stuff” too, but I can nearly always fit private tuition in, and am very happy to do so. First 2 hours: \$80 per hour, after that \$70 per hour. If you come again, it’s \$70 per hour right from the first hour. Think not just about cost, but “value” – it’s one-on-one with an experienced photographer and teacher and we cover a lot each hour. Bring a friend if you wish - no extra charge.

Or – for just the cost of a full-day workshop [with Early Bird discount] - \$245 – you get my full attention - one-on-one - for 4 hours. This can be out in the field or at my studio, looking at your photos on my computer, going over your camera functions, looking into specific techniques, or all of the above and more – whatever you want to do. I’m here for you. For only \$475 I’m yours for the whole day.

## 9. FAMILY PORTRAITS BY KIM

Yes, I’m happy to photograph you [by yourself or with a partner or friend] or your family. I make the session as relaxed and fun as possible, and I’m confident you’ll be happy with the results. Ring or email me if you’re interested.

## 10. PHOTOGRAPHING ARTWORKS PHOTOSHOPPING PHOTO RESTORATION

As well as teaching photography and mentoring a number of photographers, I also offer photo restoration, Photoshopping, and “Photographing your Artworks” services. \$50 per hour [we get a lot done each hour].

## 11. INVITATION TO CAMERA CLUBS & GROUPS

If your club or group might be interested in hosting one of my presentations - or workshops - or "Field Trip + Photo Critique" days, please get in touch.

## 12. "MENTORING BY KIM"

Mentoring individual photographers to the best of my ability is time-intensive, so I'm only able to mentor a few photographers at any one time.

"Mentoring by Kim" is for serious photographers who want to get better, much better, to make more compelling images, and who realize that great photography is not something that you can spend a few hours on and "have it sorted" by 7 pm tonight.

How good do you have to be to be mentored? It absolutely doesn't matter, truly. I'm just as happy mentoring keen beginners who know nothing much more than where the "Auto" button is as I am mentoring successful professionals. The kind of camera and lenses you have don't matter either. All that matters is that you are keen and willing to put in some effort learning and trying. It's a journey, and for that reason "Mentoring by Kim" is for a minimum of 6 months. After that, you can choose to finish or to carry on.

So what happens during that time? Whatever is needed to make you a better - and happier - photographer. "Mentoring" is the ongoing process of inspiring, advising, guiding, teaching, critiquing ... whatever is needed for your ongoing development as a photographer. It's one-on-one, so it's different for each person. One day it may be about equipment or Photoshop, next week it may be "I just want my photos to have more 'Wow' in them", the following month it may be about exhibitions or "Should I go pro?"

Do you need to live in Tauranga or travel to Tauranga for mentoring? No. Face-to-face time every now and then is great, but most mentoring can be done by email or over the phone [or Skype]. One photographer I've mentored for some years lives in Dunedin and although we're in contact often, I see him only once every few years. Another photographer lives an hour's drive from Tauranga and comes over for a full day with me once every month or so. Between visits, we're regularly in contact, often daily. For a very reasonable \$450 per month you get access to me pretty much whenever you want, daily if need be. But most importantly, it's whatever works best for you. I take the mentoring seriously and I'm there for you. I want you to succeed.



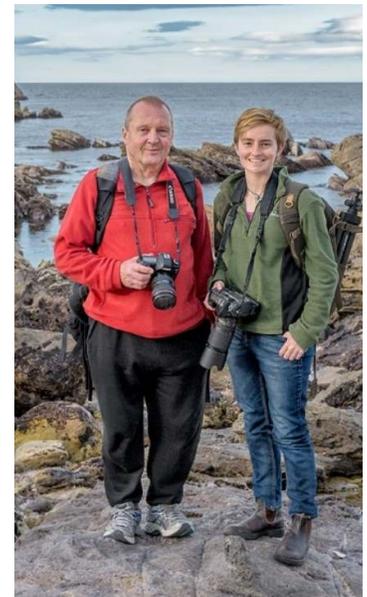
If you don't need the full mentoring program, a second option is "Mentoring Lite". For \$225 per month, you get a "light" version of the mentoring program.

Here's what two of the photographers I've been mentoring have said:

**Pam Thomson [Te Awamutu]:** "I have been mentored by Kim for about 5 months now, and have wanted to do it for a couple of years. I wish I had done it sooner. Kim is a wonderful Mentor, gives great encouragement, and has so much knowledge to share... He gives very honest, thoughtful, critique. The Mentoring is led by you".

**Derek Morrison [Dunedin], 2018 New Zealand Geographic Photographer of the Year:** "Kim is, without doubt, one of the best – he is proactive, really knows his stuff and genuinely drills into the creative process, pain and dreams... I wanted a raw and unfiltered appraisal of where I was at and where I wanted to go. I got that with Kim". Was there any connection between the mentoring and your NZ Geographic Photographer of the Year win? "Of course".

Photos of Kim by Tony Whitehead, James Frankham, Malcolm Macfarlane. & I'm afraid I don't remember who took the photo at McLaren Falls.



## ABOUT KIM

- Passionate about photography and passionate about inspiring, guiding, and supporting photographers.
- Over 30 years as a professional photographer and teaching photography for 12 years now
- Five First Prizes in the BBC "Wildlife Photographer of the Year" competition, the Olympics of nature photography worldwide.
- 18 books published [international distributions] – written and photographed by Kim.