



On location in Chamonix at last summer's adventure festival



## Training Days

**Name of course:** Adventure Photo School

**Venue:** Chamonix

**Price:** 290 Euros

**Dates:** 16-17 July, 2013

**Contact:** [www.chamonixadventurefestival.com](http://www.chamonixadventurefestival.com)

# Catching the Action

Katy Dartford aims to improve her camera skills at the Chamonix Adventure Festival Film and Photo School...

**“A**dventure photography is about working the scene – what techniques can I pull out of my bag of tips and tricks to show what I want to show? So, you need to improve your bag of tricks, and this is what I am here to help you do.”

Excellent, I think as I listen to our tutor, adventure photographer Tristan Shu. I could do with a big, new bag of ideas as my tools are pretty limited. I have a decent DSLR body (a Fujifilm finepix S5 Pro camera) but a broken Nikon 28-70mm lens which no longer zooms, so effectively has to be used as a prime.

I'm in the adventure sports mecca of Chamonix, having signed up to the two-day Adventure Photo School, part of the Chamonix Adventure Festival. Having spent a fair amount of time trail running, mountain biking, hiking and rock climbing I felt it was time to get behind a 'proper' lens (other than my iPhone) and learn how to take better photos of the sports I enjoy. I ask Tristan how one knows when they go from being an amateur to a pro; "Pro's don't show their bad photos!" says Tristan. Very useful advice for me, I think to myself.

He explains what he loves about adventure photography; "As we are outdoors we cannot control everything – we need to watch the light and be more aware. That's what's so great about outdoor photography; it's the intellectual challenge... what will the light do?" Tristan continues: "There were two revelations in my career – Lightroom and off-camera flashes". The modern process thrills him; "It's a journey into your mind and soul, and I have more passion for it now than when I started."

## IN THE CLASSROOM

We spend about an hour of the first day at the Majestic Congress looking at our equipment. I'm worried because my kit is very basic, but while the other boys bring out their 'big toys', Tristan reassures me with some sage advice; "From constraints comes creatively".

"When I go on a shoot", says Tristan, "I try to slim down my kit to as little as possible, as I've been getting a bad back from carrying it all". He ditches all his filters, except

his polariser, as he says everything else can be done in the photo editing system, Lightroom. "I usually take a wide angle lens, 28mm-300mm, 85 prime and a 35 prime. I really like primes at the moment"

"More important than gear", continues Tristan, "is composition and light, so we need to master ISO (*how readily the sensor acts to light*), aperture (*which dictates how wide the lens opening will be*) and shutter speeds" (*which determines how long it will stay open*).

Tristan uses Aperture Priority (AP) 90 per cent of the time (a semi-automatic mode where you select the aperture and the camera automatically selects the appropriate shutter speed) and Manual mode 10 per cent of the time, (you set both the AP and the Shutter Speed) but never uses Shutter Speed Priority (you set the shutter speed and the camera selects the appropriate aperture). With AP you can control the depth of field – the area behind and in front of the point of focus – considered one of the most creative controls available to the photographer. The smaller the aperture the greater the depth of field i.e. an aperture of f16 will give a large depth of field, while f2 will give a small depth of field. For adventure photos Tristan often starts with f7/f8.

His key message to us is to 'expose to the right' i.e. over-expose a little rather than under-expose, which

Checking the kit before heading out to start shooting







## TOP TIPS SHOOTING OUTDOORS

Advice for photographing outdoor sports

**1** Always shoot in RAW (image files that record the raw data from the camera's sensor and require further processing on the computer before you can do anything with them) and once in Lightroom convert to JPEG. If you shoot straight to JPEG the camera processes the image so it's ready to use, but it means you can't do so much with it later when editing).

**2** Zooms v Primes: primes are cheaper, and Tristan says are usually better quality. With primes you have to 'work the scene' more by composing better, walking around and reading the light better, therefore your technique should improve.

**3** Composition: this is the one thing you can't change in the digital darkroom. A key point to remember is the 'rule of thirds': as you look through your viewfinder, or study the LCD screen, imagine two vertical and two horizontal lines spaced evenly creating a grid of nine rectangular boxes. Place the point of interest or other important elements on or near the points where the lines intersect, e.g. a person's eyes or a boat on a lake or other detail.

**4** Point of reference: when shooting action, you always need a reference point i.e. if someone is jumping, where does it start or end? Try to get the person in the sky or with a clean, dark background where the subject is in the light – a difference in contrast helps tell the story.

**5** Don't cut anything off: especially when shooting running or climbing, we need to see both hands and feet, all the limbs, the fingers and so on –

small details make all the difference.

**6** "Don't go where the other photographers are", says Tristan, "as you will just come out with the same photo... get excited and find somewhere new".

**7** Models are better in bright colours if possible, as black sucks out the light.

**8** A good bag is vital, and one that people don't know is a photography bag is best, especially in unusual locations where it could get stolen. Tristan uses F stop bags (fstogear.com) as they don't look like camera bags.

you can monitor by keeping a histogram on display. This will show you if it's a 'technically' good photo. "You can't trust the LCD screen... you could be in the bright sun and not be able to see the screen properly – but you *can* trust the histogram". Exposing 'to the right' allows you to maximise the amount of data the camera records, then on the computer you can bring the detail back again. But if it's too far to the right it clips and there's nothing left. When on your shoot, take some test shots, check the histogram, then 'dial up or down' to get the right exposure – you can also do this by increasing the ISO.

### SHOOTING – DAY ONE

We head off to the paraglider landing spot near the centre of town to put into practice the tips Tristan has given us. Shooting paragliding is a good way to practise as it's a slow sport and there's lots of time to move and see where they are landing. The first thing to do when arriving at a scene is ask if it's okay to shoot and to check out where it's safe to shoot from. Tristan advises us to get a shutter speed of about 1000 or 1500: "take a few test shots and alter the ISO to get the shutter speed right".

After circling the field, I'm still not happy with my shots as my lens means I can't get in close, so it feels like my



Shooting a climber at different angles and with different depths of field



Using a silver reflector to highlight specific details on the model

pictures are quite dull. Tristan says that shots that work well are "the ones where you can get in close to the ground, as the wings appear bigger; shots of the paragliders above Mont Blanc, and shots which capture the emotion on their faces as they land... if the shots aren't perfect, then move on".

We then head off to the Col des Montets to shoot trail running. Our first mission is to scout out some locations, such as places near water, with a good background and a leading line, such as a trail path. We are told to look at the surrounding nature, the flowers, their colours, and for something that can frame the subject.

Once we've all selected a few locations we get our model to run along the trail. Tristan says it's really important to keep interacting with the model, to stop her and yourself getting bored and to coordinate the scene. Tristan points out that she looks better when she is launching into the air, and warns us to look out for cutting off any limbs by having them hidden behind another leg, or at an angle where the muscle doesn't look so good.

We change our cameras from single-shot mode to three-shot bursts and check where the sun is. Although it's generally best to shoot with the sun behind you, you can still get good shots with it in front if you expose for it, then fix it in Lightroom. As we are shooting in the middle of the day with the sun directly above us, the light is harsh, so a polariser is good to use and a lens shade to help prevent too much contrast being lost. Tristan also suggests shutting down the aperture to F11-F16 to create a 'starry'

sun effect.

We change the ISO to at least 400 to increase the shutter speed for a shaper shot (or 800 with a polariser) then take four shots to get the exposure right. With the sun being so bright in the middle of the day, finally we head to the shade of the trees to take some portraits in soft light. Tristan says this is really important and advises us to use an 80/85mm prime lens and an ISO of 200.

### SHOOTING – DAY TWO

The next day we head to the Argentiere side of the bouldering area around the Col des Montets. We'd already scouted it out as a stunning setting, with Mont Blanc in the background and by a stream. It was too busy to shoot there the previous day so we moved on but now, early in the day, we have the place to ourselves.

First we experiment with bouncing light with a silver reflector. This stops there being too much shade on one side and highlights an area such as the boulder on the rock and gives shape to the body, sculpting it. You can also use it to create a rim light, a kind of 'halo' around the climber. We then all choose a scene in which to shoot our model, Ben Tibbets, in. Some shoot from underneath him climbing, others from on top of the boulder or from a distance. We seem to be interacting better with Ben today, instructing him how to pose, where to freeze motion, paying more attention to composition and working the scene. We shoot from different, more interesting angles, as well as focusing on different details such as





## USING LIGHTROOM

Top tips on using Adobe's editing software

Back in the Majestic it was time to play around with Lightroom. It seems on some photos I'd taken Tristan *too* much on his word and exposed way too much to the right, creating some very washed-out shots, but he managed to "bring them back from hell!" thanks to Lightroom.

Generally in the mountains, you end up with burnt highlights and too much shadow so you need to bring the shadow and highlights down. Once you've corrected one photo, you can save the settings as a preset and apply it to all the others, saving time. Here's Tristan's typical routine:

- 1. Boost the sharpness and get rid of any dust spots (I had quite a few!)
- 2. Bring down any light areas/ burning and get rid of any flare. Make the exposure correct on the

subject, then play with the rest of the scene

- 3. Bump up the vibrancy – when light is harsh the clarity is dull, so increase the vibrancy
- 4. Use the crop tool to make sure the photo sticks to the rules of thirds
- 5. Saturate the greens and blues and boost the luminance
- 6. Add clarity and add any gradual filters – but be careful on the skin as clarity doesn't work well here, so brush it out

- 7. For portraits it's also nice to add vignetting

Ultimately, says Tristan, "a good retouch is something you can't see, and you can't correct bad composition".

blowing of the chalk from his hands, or simply a hand on a rock. We also try to capture his reflection in the water and bounced light onto his muscles.

## PROMOTING YOUR PHOTOS

We head back to the Majestic for some quick tips on using Lightroom (see boxout, left) but I also take the opportunity to ask Tristan how he goes about promoting his work. He replies that he's a big believer in going online – even if it risks someone stealing a photo. He watermarks all his work and puts in all the metadata via Lightroom. He then posts a photo a day on his Facebook page, on 500px, Twitter, Google Plus and Flickr then, finally, on 1x.com, a curating website with a jury who decide if it's worth publishing. Tristan has a special folder in Lightroom for portfolios to publish 10-50 of his best photos, but he warns us not to use more than 10 different pages, or it will look like spam. He also suggests keeping a website simple, with just a home page, portfolio, prints and contact information.

So now, with my heavier bag of tools and tricks, it's time to head out into the hills and prove that, despite my limited gear, I can take great adventure sports shots. After all, as Tristan says, 'from constraints comes creativity'. T&M



When shooting action, try to find a point of reference



Depth of field is one of the photographer's most creative tools