

How to achieve the best results when shooting snow-scapes

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During the last ten years I've travelled the globe extensively photographing intriguing places and people. On several occasions this quest has presented me with the possibility of shooting snow-scapes - whether in Greenland, The Rockies, Himalayas, the Andes or on the Arctic Islands of Svalbard.

How snow-scapes differ from other photographical subjects

Snow-scapes possess options and challenges slightly different from those of traditional landscape photography. On a sunny day a snow-scape will display a very wide dynamic range from the black colours of rocks to the highlights on snowy ridges, but between these you'll often find the most delicate shades of bluish-white hues, and very often it's these subtle colour transitions that really make a snow-scape special. This means that exposure is very important – perhaps more so in snow-scapes than in traditional landscape photography.



Barents burg Range, Spit Bergen, Svalbard.

The challenges

Most snow-scapes display a dynamic range well beyond most cameras capabilities, which is why you need to make the first critical decision at the time of exposure: Can you accept to loose underexposed dark areas, or rather a few blown highlights - or is it the hues in between that are particularly important to your photo? It really comes down to what sort of experience you want to convey to the viewer.

Exposing right?

Having tried to maximize the output from your digital files you'll most likely know that exposing to the right – overexposing without losing information - is often better. An older and common rule is to slightly overexpose scenes in bright circumstances as snow and beach scenes to prevent darker subjects - typically people - from becoming underexposed. But in snow-scapes when the landscape is your main subject you'll need to be very careful with these two advises of overexposure, losing an essential part of the scene to empty highlights is more than easy and won't work.

Processing

You've made your decision, found the right scene, a nice composition, checked your histograms and you've got a photo. Now the real challenge lies in the processing of the RAW-file.

Snow-scapes can often display an almost surreal smooth and glowing surface particularly when sun, frost and wind shape snow dunes into glazed mountains. Bringing out the subtle blues hues of this glazing is easily done by opening the shades carefully with the exposure tool in Capture One.

Is it the light that makes a photo?

Usually – and overcast days aren't a landscape photographer's cup of tea, but the soft box effect of clouds actually helps bringing the dynamic range of a snow-scape within the range of today's sensors. So assuming you really did have time to peek at your histogram while shooting away, you should've been able to create a photo fitting the sensors slot between blown highlights and empty blacks and you'll have a very flexible photo.

On the right hand side the "Atomic Winter" photo shows how an overcast day can help getting the most from the glowing blue hues. Output the original RAW-file as is and it won't look too impressive, but by controlling the contrast with the exposure tool you maximise the dynamic range of the colours you like without losing detail or deteriorating your file in any way. You simply pull the outer levers towards the base of the histogram hill and tweak the middle lever under the histogram to open up shadows.



Atomic winter, the Ice fiord, Svalbard. Default.



Atomic winter, the Ice fiord, Svalbard. Edited.

White balance before RAW

In the days before RAW-files shooting snow-scapes was even more difficult since another very tricky part was getting the white balance right. Snow scenes consist of white, blue shadows and darker areas like rock, trees or overcast sky. To ensure a representation that looked like what you saw out in the snow or at least looked right to you, you had to choose your film carefully. Fuji, Kodak or Agfa all came out different – a reddish snow surface or greenish shadows just doesn't look right and sometimes you'd have to choose different films for overcast or sunlit scenes.

Colours with RAW

Now you've got RAW and this gives you great flexibility tuning colours using the powerful colour balance tools found in Capture One. Without loss you can simply choose a colour setting that'll make the snow-scape feel right to you. DSLRs today are only moderately successful in choosing the right white balance for you, so don't do JPEGs in snow-scapes. Don't count on simple methods either as setting the white point from an apparently white point in the snow-scape. Snow - whether on account of pollution or crystalline structure is never white. Finally you need to tweak the white balance on a calibrated monitor to achieve your goal.

When shooting several gigs of files in a snow-scape another feature that comes in very handy is bulk processing the white balance of your files. If your work will somehow be displayed side by side controlling the white balance from shot to shot becomes essential to lend a similar feel between the various frames. Here the Capture One tool "Apply this White Balance to the current selection of captures" comes in extremely handy.



Spit Bergen, Svalbard. Default.



Spit Bergen, Svalbard. Edited

The default image displays the original exposure and white balance of the RAW-file. The original white balance is way off what a snow-scape really is, or at least way off the way I remember the heavy thunder clouds hanging above the ridges. The exposure and not least the white balance of the last image have been corrected to resemble the way I saw it.

Surviving the algorithms

When opening shadows and maximizing the dynamic of a RAW file you can end up deliberately blowing the highlights in the image. Small reflections from snowy ridges or sunlit patches of snow will lose information - which can be acceptable to achieve a better overall appearance.



Chacaltaya, Bolivia.

The photo above is shot at an altitude of 16.000ft. Near the base camp of Hyuana Potosí, Bolivia. It's freezing, you're out of breath, a headache signals lack of oxygen. Do you feel like wading around with a tripod doing multiple exposures for a high dynamic range – or do you make up your mind, set the exposure and shoot? Simply put this is an example of a situation where you need to trust your RAW-converter.

When deliberately introducing these blown highlights you're very dependent on the algorithm used by your RAW-conversion program, as each RAW-converter turns out slightly different results. You don't want artefacts clinging to highlights and sharpened mountain ridges. The photo above has some much contrasted filled transition around mountain ridges and quite a few deliberately blown highlights. It's converted using Capture One and no unwanted effects are introduced.

Stiff fingers and award winners

Shooting snow-scapes and ice sculptures presents several other challenges – such as travelling in snowy terrain, bringing the right clothes, dealing with frost bites, fumbling with camera settings while wearing gloves etc. But when you return from a snow-scape shoot and find that it has yielded those keepers, they'll feel like hard-earned prizes, and it's pivotal that you've got a RAW-conversion program that lets you get the most from your photos.



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