

**Kelp detail****Isle of Muck,  
Small Isles,  
Inner Hebrides**Camera:  
Canon 1D's Mark IILens:  
TS-E 90mm f2.8

ISO: 100

Look for images within the landscape – explore the relationship between natural objects, in colour, shape or texture. Make order from chaos – it's challenging and great fun.



## Soft Light

**By Colin Prior**

In last month's issue I talked about the 'magic hours' – the hour that follows sunrise and precedes sunset and where there exists the best opportunities for landscape photography. But what happens when it's overcast and there is little chance of that magic light? The most positive way to view the situation is to change your expectations and not as many photographers do, put their camera away - with no light, the chances of shooting that big picture are severely diminished but a highly diffused sun can be ideal for other types of photography, namely working within the landscape.

Soft light has many qualities and an even luminance means that areas of landscape are not subjected to the contrast, which

direct sunlight creates with 'hot spots' and deep pools of shadow. Exposing in direct sunlight means that the highlights must be held in order to prevent the pixels 'blowing out' and by successfully achieving this means that other areas within the image which are in deep shadow will hold little in the way of information. With soft light the whole canopy of the atmosphere acts as a giant reflector and ensures that all areas of the landscape are well within the limits of a sensor or film emulsion.

Working more intimately on close-up subjects such as this seaweed detail is enhanced by soft light – direct sunlight on this subject would have simply complicated it by adding a further tier of graphics created by

shadows and would have worked against the image. Instead this soft luminance has enveloped the subject and revealed the natural beauty that lies within. There were periods, as I was setting up this photograph, where the sun did appear and I had to wait until cloud cover returned to achieve the visualised image. Photographs such as these are achieved by a combination of a macro lens, tripod mounted and a small aperture – f32 at 1/2s in this case. The mirror was also locked up to prevent camera shake through mirror slap and I used an electronic cable release to eradicate shake. I experienced as much pleasure taking this image, as I would shooting the classic landscape shot.



### Beech Forest

Fiordland National Park,  
New Zealand

Camera: Fuji GX617  
Lens: SWD90mm f5.6  
Film: Velvia 50

Southwest New Zealand is one of the great wilderness areas of the Southern Hemisphere. It is an area where snow-capped mountains, rivers of ice, deep lakes, unbroken forests and tussock grasslands produce a landscape of exceptional beauty. Recognition of the areas outstanding natural values was granted by UNESCO in 1990, with the formation of the Southwest New Zealand World Heritage Area.

One of the other often overlooked qualities of the bright diffused light source found under cloudy skies is that colours are reproduced more faithfully than on clear days. Compared with light reflected from a clear blue sky, colours are clean, neutral and even and for those working with Velvia, the saturation particularly after a rain shower can be particularly vivid. Soft white light can also be caused by mist, fog, light showers or snow and work in the same was by creating nature's soft-box.

Under cloudy skies, searching for subject matter takes on a different approach and the key is to look more closely into the landscape for contrasts, colour harmonies or juxtapositions; for detail and essentially to avoid compositions where skies will be rendered as grey monotonous. It's often a good idea to minimise sky areas under such conditions and concentrate on subject matter within the landscape.

In the forest image, the soft light is directly attributable to its success – had this enveloping light been substituted with a bright sky full of specular highlights, the forest would have been a tapestry of foliage with pools of bright spots and areas of deep shadow, essential a scene well beyond the contrast range of a sensor.

Soft light has ensured that the essential essence and mood of this location been retained and has communicated effectively the experience of being there at that moment. At a recent exhibition in London where an enlargement of this image was hanging, prompted a conversation between two women and I overheard one woman exclaim 'I'm sure fairies live in this forest' - perhaps she was right but one thing's for certain, they don't like bright sunlight.

For more information about Colin, courses and photographic trips please visit [www.colinprior.co.uk](http://www.colinprior.co.uk)