

LIGHT TOUCH

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A day drenched with sunshine is not necessarily the best time to dash out with your camera. If you wait for a drizzly day, colors are more brilliant and raindrops dangle everywhere, making it appear as if the whole scene is dripping with jewels. So suggests Vermont photographer David Middleton in his new book "The Photographer's Guide to Vermont" (The Countryman Press, \$16.95).

I was hoping for at least an artful fog when I met Middleton on his home turf for a day of roaming the forests and back roads where he captures the eloquently simple and intimate photographs that fill the book. Instead, we are cursed with brilliant, blue skies with puffy clouds and a smugly shining sun. But there are ways of dealing with such hardships.

"When you're shooting the cultural landscape with buildings, you often want to include sky," Middleton says reassuringly. "Especially with these classic, white, Vermont buildings. Blue sky looks great behind them."

So we head for the town of Grafton, a sleeping beauty west of Bellows Falls. We stand in the middle of Main Street, ignoring the picture-postcard trees and historic buildings, and stare instead at the asphalt for a lesson in shadow and light.

"There, see how when the sun is out, our shadows are sharp and deep," says Middleton. "There's a big difference between the intensity of light in full sun and the intensity here in our shadows. If we wait for a cloud to cover the sun, the light will even out and you'll get a better photograph."

As if on cue, a thin cloud drifts across the sun, blurring our shadows. "Now the film won't block up the shadows the way it will in bright light. Your eye may be able to see detail in both deep shadow and in bright sunlight, but you'll end up with a mediocre shot. I sure don't need another mediocre shot. I have plenty already."

That's hard to believe. The poetic grace of the images in Middleton's books belies the notion that he has produced a mediocre shot since he wound the last roll in his Brownie. His guide is the result of two decades of photography workshop students asking him to tell them where he finds those great shots. It is part mini-workshop, part travel guide, and filled with inspiration and advice written with the same simplicity, humor, and in-depth knowledge he captures in his viewfinder. Aimed at professional as well as casual photographers (like most of us with low-end equipment), the book describes when to go where, and how to get the best shots in some of his favorite spots.

"I'd say about 95 percent of the shots were taken within sight of my car," Middleton confesses, dispelling the myth that you have to bushwhack deep into the jungles of Vermont, laden with the latest gadgets to get great nature shots. "People see a professional shot and think it must be the film, equipment, or some special access we are given," says Middleton. Instead, he suggests that something as simple as getting closer to the ground can make a huge difference.

"Bend your knees. That's the best thing most people can do to start adding to their technique. People don't get close enough to the ground to create nice foregrounds and interesting perspectives."

Also, he says, pay close attention to eliminating distractions in the background, and take the time to see what's going on with the light. "Light changes everything," he says. "Dramatic light will make me stop anytime, anywhere, no matter what the subject is. Clearing storms, light coming through fog -- with a long exposure, even in fading light, you can make an image look brighter and more magical."

Middleton's idea of a good time for shooting is when most of us are just tucking into a stack of pancakes or licking our dinner plates, which is when the light is more interesting. On sunny days, you will usually find him in his office. He loves it when there's drizzle, fog, dewy mornings, hard frosts, and snowstorms.

While drizzly days can even out the light and make colors more vivid, we're now grateful for the blue-sky backdrop for these historic, white buildings here in Grafton. And the way to get the best photographs? Put the camera away and go for a stroll. "When I come into town to shoot, the first thing I do is put my hands in my pockets and just walk," he says, doing just that.

All around us are the great icons of Vermont's cultural landscape: white buildings against blue sky, a woman rocking on a porch in the sun, American flags billowing in the breeze -- the list goes on, yet Middleton continues to walk. "A cliché is someone else's best shot, the one you see over and over," he says. "Sometimes a pattern or a texture or a combination of colors will tell more about your unique experience."

Besides, what is the reason we travel if not to gain a little insight into a new place, to get out of our everyday experience and absorb fresh sensations and perspectives? Many tourists sacrifice this aspect of travel by cramming too much into their brief itineraries. "Most people start taking pictures the minute they get out of their cars," Middleton says. "But I like to see what the light is doing. Maybe in an hour a certain shot will work better." We end up at the White Church on Main Street, where the sun has covered one side of the church with dark, splotchy shadows from surrounding trees.

"It's hard to make a shot like this interesting in this light," Middleton says. "A straight-on shot looks like any church anywhere in New England." He stares at the scene for a while. "What keeps catching my eye are those geraniums."

Behind a ground-floor window sits a row of potted geraniums in bloom, gently favored by the sunlight. They provide the only bright color in the scene. Middleton snaps open his tripod, sets it up just a few feet away from the window, and begins framing the shot. He chooses a long lens (80-200mm zoom) to focus in on the pots and increase his control over the background, eliminating anything that would distract from the flowers themselves.

The rippled windowpane suggests the long history of the building, and the flowers hint at the caring and nurturing one would hope has been dispensed here over the ages, resulting in a more intimate view than a straight-on shot would have allowed. "Part of what I love about photography is the moment of discovery, finding something beautiful and capturing its magic," he says as he packs up his tripod and we head for the car.

Middleton keeps his equipment list simple and utilitarian, eschewing colored filters and rarely using a flash. One essential tool is a tripod tall enough to position the camera at eye level ("It's tiring to bend over all the time") or within inches of the ground. It takes more time when you set up a tripod, but the time spent framing the shot pays off in more beautifully composed photographs.

Where strong sun may wash detail out of a close-up shot, Middleton brings his own cloud cover: A translucent circle of white nylon called a diffuser. This 36-inch portable cloud folds down to the size of a Frisbee for easy packing. Held close to a subject, it lets through plenty of light, yet calms the intensity, providing that ideal, cloud-thinned glow.

Middleton keeps a polarizing filter in a pouch on his belt so he can quickly assess the light. He'll attach it to the lens if he needs it. While this filter helps remove the sheen that strong sunshine can scatter distractingly over a scene, it can also require a longer exposure, as it cuts out a bit of the light available to the lens.

On the banks of the West River in Jamaica State Park, he takes the polarizer and squints through it. "You're not photographing the river, you're photographing light," he says. "You have to ask yourself, how is the light?" The light and shadows are still too harsh, even with the polarizer, so he looks elsewhere for a shot. A lone, red sapling growing on a boulder is spotlighted by the sun and stands out brilliantly against a shadowy background of trees. "You have to work with what the light gives you. I might focus on that maple, where we can make the shadows work with us," Middleton says. "In an hour that shot won't work. When the light is not working, I'll do close-ups on something like these leaves with dewdrops, or use this rock with ferns growing on it as a foreground, and let the river lead more deeply into the picture."

If it's the season that is eluding you more than the light, Middleton suggests heading farther north or higher in altitude if you have arrived too early, and just the opposite if you find you have missed the peak and need to turn back the clock by a few days or weeks.

We end the day at Roaring Brook in the Green Mountain National Forest. Kelly Stand Road (closed to automobile traffic in the winter) is a rough dirt track that runs from West Wardsboro to East Arlington, hugging the brook for much of its wild and winding passage. "Kelly Stand is my favorite road," says Middleton. "I visit this river more often than anywhere else except for my own backyard." Little wonder: The brook roars, trickles, and pools beautifully through the forest on its way to the Battenkill River, and hiking trails radiate into the surrounding mountains at every turn. The Long and Appalachian trails cross the road as well.

"This stream is one of the reasons I moved into the area," Middleton says. "I saw it from a plane as I was heading for Maine. I saw this road that cut through the trees and knew I had to find it. I memorized the shape of a nearby reservoir, and found it on a map." And that's how he finds most of his favorite spots. "Willy-Nilly is my navigator," he says with a grin as we rumble along the road. "I may say I'm going to one spot, but I may never get there. I'll get distracted by a road I've never been on before and get lost and get some good shots."

Throughout the day, Middleton returns to one of his dictums, that good photography is less about the equipment than it is about the person taking the picture. "We all get into photography because it's fun," he says. "You'll get your best pictures when you photograph something you're

passionate about. Ask yourself what it is that you like about a certain scene, and answer in a phrase. Then frame your photograph to express that phrase. I think of myself as a storyteller, and I am photographing little phrases. It's all about putting yourself your heart -- into whatever it is you're doing."

SIDEBAR: IF YOU GO. . . . Information

The Countryman Press

800-245-4151

www.countrymanpress.com

"The Photographer's Guide to Vermont" (\$16.95) as well as the new, poetic coffee-table collection "The Nature of Vermont" (\$35) by David Middleton are available at bookstores or through the Countryman Press.

www.davidmiddletonphoto.com

Information on photography workshops with Middleton can be found at his website.

Maine Photographic Workshops

2 Central St., Rockport, ME 04856

877-577-7700

www.theworkshops.com

Nature and landscape photography courses, some taught by Middleton, are among the offerings.

Where to stay

The Old Tavern at Grafton

92 Main St., Grafton

800-843-1801

oldtavern@vermontel.net

www.old-tavern.com

A 202-year-old, four-star inn and tavern with a porchful of rockers that look out on historic Main Street. Rooms \$135-\$390. Breakfast, \$14, and dinner, \$22-\$34, available.

Where to eat

Daniels House Cafe

56 Townshend Road, Grafton

802-843-2255

www.thedanielshouse.com/oldtavern/gifts/index.html

Pack a lunch for your meanderings at this small lunch spot in a circa 1800 farmhouse that features fresh, homemade soups, sandwiches, and salads. \$6-\$7.50. Open 11 a.m.-6:30 p.m.

What to do

Jamaica State Park

285 Salmon Hole Lane, Jamaica

802-874-4600

www.vtstateparks.com/htm/jamaica.cfm

The West River flows through the woods here, hugged closely by a trail much of the way; great for photo opportunities. The 756-acre park is open through Oct. 15, and reopens the last Friday in April.

Kelly Stand Road

From East Arlington to West

Wardsboro, Vt.

A wonderfully rough and lonely road through stunning hill country, this is Middleton's favorite hangout. Closed to autos in winter.

Horses for Hire

Diers Road, Route 30, Bondville

Mountain Road

802-297-1468

www.horsesforhire.net

Reservations are recommended for all rides, especially when winter sleigh rides start up. One- and two-hour group rides: \$30 an hour. One- and two-hour private rides: \$60 an hour.

Bromley Mountain

Route 11, Manchester/Peru, Vt.

802-824-5522

www.bromley.com

Saturdays only, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Through Oct. 19, take the Alpine or Sun Mountain Express up the mountain and hike among the trees for \$5. Ride the Alpine Slide down for \$7.50.