

Isle of Skye

Melvin Nicholson started his love affair with the island of Skye in Scotland 14 years ago. As his passion for the place has grown, so too has his love of Canon's camera features which make bringing Skye to life through his images so pleasurable.

From the first moment I set eyes upon the Isle of Skye in Scotland at the end of 2008, I was captivated. My first trip to Skye was extremely fortuitous, as no planning or research was done whatsoever. I had visited Glencoe a few days before and decided to drive the three hour journey to Skye on a bit of a whim. Armed with my trusty camera, which at that time was a Canon EOS 40D, I drove around Skye photographing and getting to know this incredible landscape. Fast forward fourteen-and-a-half years, and a couple of dozen visits later, I returned in the spring of this year with my fourteenth Canon camera, the magnificent EOS R5, a camera that I have owned since August 2020.

One of the most memorable moments I can recall even now, is that from the roadside five miles away, the iconic view of the Old Man of Storr was one of the most awe-inspiring sights I can remember seeing in 2008. It stopped me in my tracks as I pulled up to photograph it. Already I was hooked by the charm of Skye and I knew there and then I would be returning repeatedly.

It soon became clear to me that Skye had incredible diversity where landscape and seascape subjects are concerned. The towering and dominant Munros of the Black Cuillins contrast with the mystical charm of the Fairy Pools on the River Brittle that nestles in the valley below it, complete with its underwater arches, emerald green plunge pools and numerous waterfalls. The isolated beauty of Elgol in the southwest corner

of the island has some of Europe's oldest rock formations. On Skye's eastern coastline several 170 million year-old dinosaur footprints are located on the beach at Staffin, which are simply magical to witness first-hand. Finally, the gigantic landslips of the Quiraing and Skye's most iconic location, the Old Man of Storr, all show that Skye really does have everything that the landscape photographer could wish for.

► The Old Man of Storr reflected in Loch Fada. EOS 7D, EF 100-400mm f4.5-5.6L IS lens at 100mm, 1/25 second at f14, ISO 100.

▼ The Isle of Skye bridge. EOS R5, RF 100-500mm f4.5-7.1L IS USM lens at 500mm, 1/40 second at f14, ISO 100.

Using long zoom lenses for landscapes

One of the things I love to do most in landscape photography is to use a long zoom lens. Quite often from experience in teaching other photographers on workshops, I am constantly surprised to discover that many do not even consider using their long lens to pick out compositions. For me, it is all about the compression perspective you get from using a lens with a longer focal length.

For instance, I was shooting the Old Man of Storr from an extremely popular viewpoint at the head of Loch Fada on Skye. I opted to shoot at 100mm on a cropped sensor Canon EOS 7D and in portrait orientation. This had the effect of the Old Man of Storr having more impact than normal, shortening the distance between the tree island on the loch and the rock of the Old Man and bringing them much closer together. This certainly helps to create a more dynamic image.

The image (right) was taken in July 2016, although I am rarely to be found roaming the highlands and islands of Scotland these days in the summer months as I prefer shooting in the autumn and winter periods. For one, the sunrise and sunset times are much more convivial during these months, but also the light is much kinder and more interesting too (plus the lack of midges in the colder seasons is a huge bonus).

Lens choice

I currently own four Canon lenses: the RF 14-35mm f4, RF 24-70mm f2.8, RF 100-500mm f4.5-7.1 and the TS-E24 tilt-and-shift lens.

Although my wide-angle lens is used to capture subjects that dominate the image up close, occasionally I will use it to capture wide open scenes, of which on Skye there are plenty. However, my medium zoom lens, the Canon RF 24-70mm f2.8, is used on around 90% of my images. This lens is so versatile that it is attached to my camera most of the time. Occasionally, however, I require a long lens to isolate parts of a scene from a distance and for those scenes I rely on my Canon RF 100-500mm lens. This is an incredibly sharp lens that is also relatively lightweight and compact, but it delivers outstanding images. It is so good that I often look specifically for subjects to shoot with it, such as this image of the Skye Bridge.



Camera features

My history of Canon camera ownership spans fourteen years. It has taken me through most of the crop sensor and full-frame DSLRs available since 2008 to my current mirrorless EOS R5. There are many reasons why I continue to shoot with Canon cameras, and that is partly down to their numerous in-built features as well as the legendary colour science that captures such beautifully rich and accurate colours.

The transition from DSLR to mirrorless has become evident not only to me, but also to others. I have noticed that many of my photography workshop clients are making the transition too, as mirrorless offers numerous improvements in both features and usability when compared to DSLRs. For me personally, the main advantages are a more compact, lighter body, an illuminated electronic viewfinder, silent shooting (on the odd occasion when I need that feature), focus peaking and focus guide arrows which really make focusing on my subjects much easier when focusing manually, and vastly improved



▲ My first EOS camera, the 40D, was one of the initial models that offered Live View mode with a live histogram that simulated image exposure. I'm always keen to embrace new technology on my Canon cameras, making sure I use what's available to full advantage in my landscape photography.

My first full-frame camera was in 2012 – the EOS 5D Mark II. The next two EOS 5D-series cameras – Mark III and 5D S – met with watery ends! Thank goodness for insurance!

autofocusing options including Canon's latest eye tracking. There are several which I use frequently.

Aspect ratios

Firstly, there are the various aspect ratios in the menu system, from the standard 3:2 ratio right through to 16:9 panorama, 4:3 and – my favourite – the 1:1 square option. Selecting the aspect ratio in-camera allows me to compose my shot in the field exactly as I visualise. However, when sitting at my computer, should I change my mind and prefer the full size 3:2 image instead, I can simply extend the crop to show the full image again, as when shooting in RAW the camera always captures the whole 3:2 frame.

Histogram

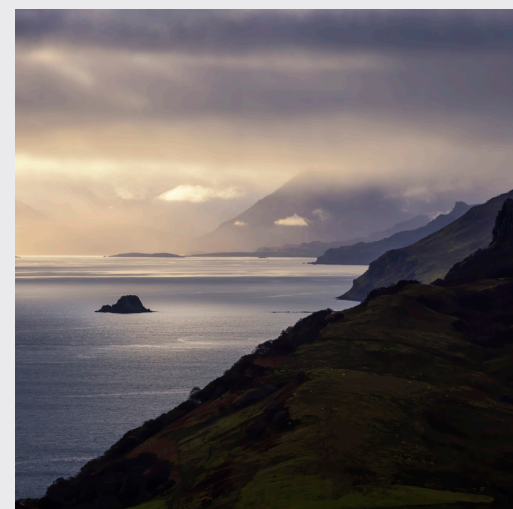
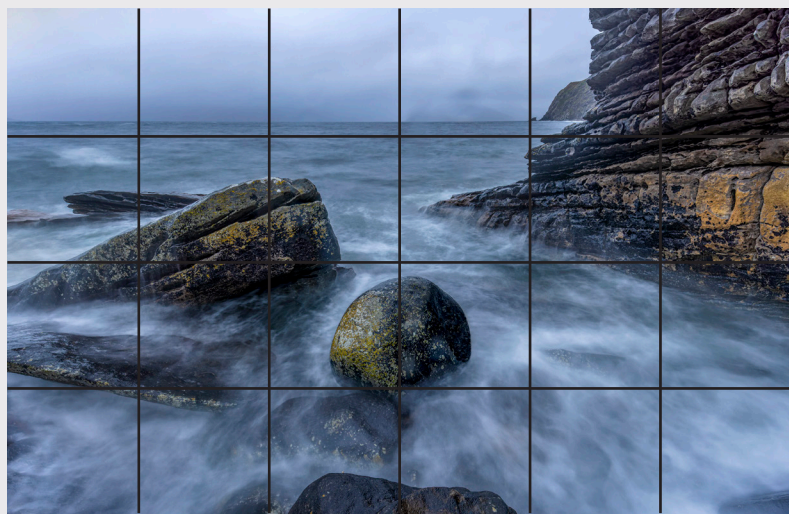
While it is a common feature in modern day cameras, the ability to be able to see the histogram before you take your image has been invaluable to me. This feature has been on a vast range of Canon cameras for many years now.

Grids

The stunning Skye coastline offers so many opportunities for capturing amazing seascapes. This is where the grid feature really comes in useful. I can often be found constantly flicking between the 3x3 and 6x4 grids.

When composing shots that have elements that I want positioned in the centre of the frame, getting the symmetry right is critical. Here, I will opt to use the 6x4 grid as this grid has a centrally positioned line running both horizontally and vertically through the screen. The 6x4 grid is essential in helping me to perfectly position my camera.

For general scenes that do not have a symmetrical element to them, the usual 3x3 grid is more than fine. If, however you have a shot where the subject is positioned in the centre of the frame, you could opt to use the 3x3+diag grid option which overlays a pair of diagonal lines over the 3x3 grid. The lines meet in the centre, allowing you to perfectly position the subject in the very centre of the frame.



▲ The Sound of Raasay and the Skyline of Skye. Square crop using the 1:1 aspect ratio option in-camera. EOS R5, RF 100-400mm f5.6-8 IS USM lens at 165mm, 1/60 second at f14, ISO 100.

◀ In this image, I wanted the spherical rock in the centre of the frame and the 6x4 grid allowed me to perfectly position it as such. EOS R5, EF 16-35mm f4L IS USM lens at 16mm, 3.2 seconds at f16, ISO 250, Kase K9 Circular Polariser Filter, Kase 10 Stop ND Filter.

Vari-angle screen

One feature that I wish I'd had on my previous full frame DSLRs was a tiltable LCD screen. This has since proven invaluable at times. My EOS R5 and the EOS R before that have allowed me to capture images from difficult positions, simply by rotating the screen. One such image was this one (right) of a lone Rowan tree that stubbornly clings onto the edge of a clifftop on the Quiraing. To capture the tree above the horizon, the camera must sit three inches off the ground and in this instance, over a stream coupled with a severe hundred foot drop directly below.

Being able to place my EOS R camera low enough and rotate the screen, allowing me easy viewing, was an absolute joy. That's because three and half years previously I'd had to lie down in the water to be able to see the composition on my Canon EOS 5D Mark III.

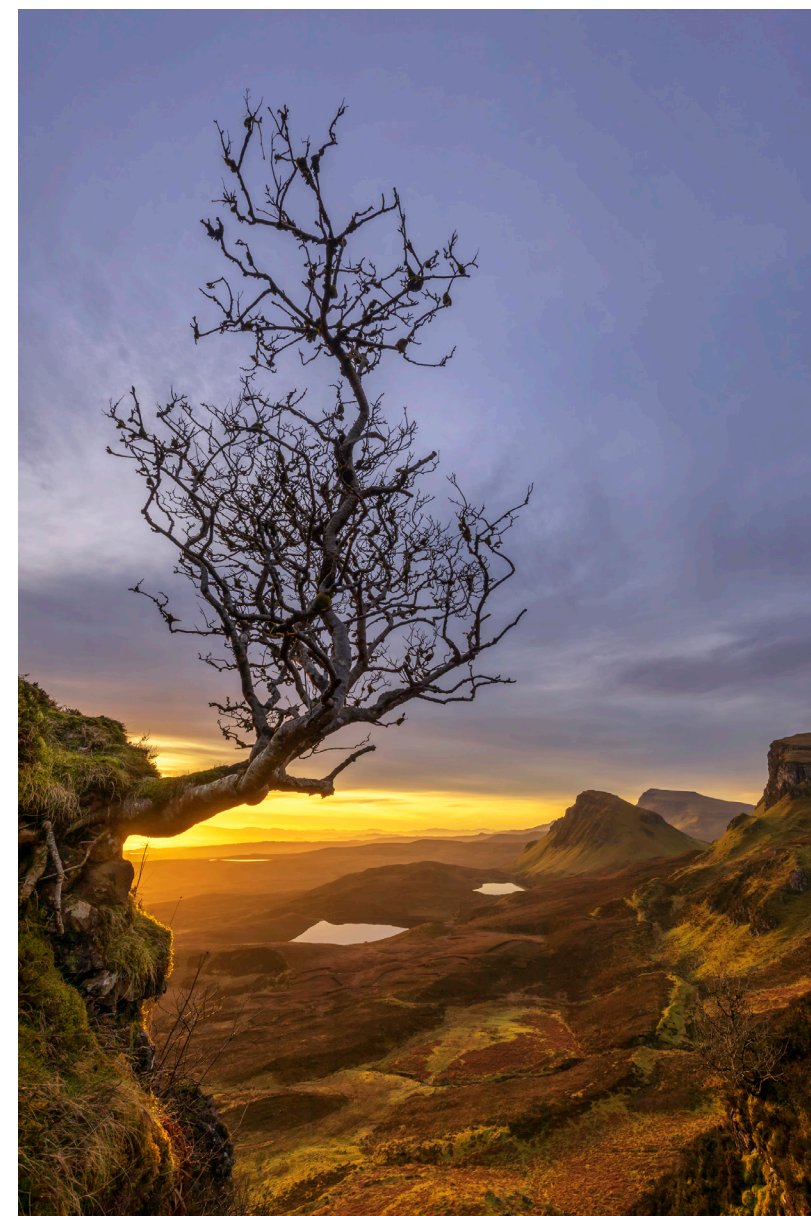
Modern features such as Live View and adjustable viewing screens have been helpful for perfectly lining up these kinds of tricky compositions. Crouching or lying down and trying to do all this through the viewfinder or a fixed LCD screen as I used to do was hard enough then, so as I get older, these modern features are a godsend and can potentially save a lot of work in post-processing.

Exposure simulation

The exposure simulation feature at this Quiraing location was also invaluable when determining how the image was going to look before I had captured it. This ensured that the display on-screen fully represented the scene in front of me, particularly where the light was concerned. So, when setting the perfect composition, you can also ensure the perfect exposure.

Live View is one of the most underrated features of modern day Canon cameras. This is a feature that I have enjoyed dating back to the 40D which was the first Canon camera that I owned.

You can also use this feature to check the edges of your composition, especially useful in



dark scenes or for dark areas. Looking through the viewfinder it can difficult sometimes to see any unwanted objects around the edges of the frame. By dialling up the exposure compensation you can overexpose the simulated image on-screen and ensure the edges are clean, then reset the exposure compensation and take the photo.

▲ Lone Rowan tree at the Quiraing was captured using the vari-angle screen that I tilted horizontally. EOS R, EF 16-35mm f4L IS USM lens at 16mm, 1/25 second at f16, ISO 100, Nisi 0.6 Medium ND Grad Filter.

Kit bag essentials

I keep assorted items in my camera bag including a first aid kit, an extra large shower cap that is big enough to cover my camera and medium lens should an impromptu shower arrive, Allen keys for tripods and loosening L brackets, as well as loose change for the car parks and gel packs/sweets to sustain your energy during those extra-long days, across some challenging terrain.

Camera settings

I shoot in manual mode. I usually opt for an aperture somewhere between f8 and f14, ISO 100, then the shutter speed obviously depends on the available light. I let the camera look after the colour with Auto white balance, knowing that I can adjust in post-processing, and use the Neutral Picture Style which doesn't apply any sharpening to my images. I can then selectively sharpen as needed during post-processing. Shooting in RAW gives me maximum flexibility (see page 34).

Short and long exposures

One of my favourite subjects to photograph is seascapes. Having been born and raised in Blackpool, my childhood involved trips to the beach and so it will come as no surprise that I should naturally gravitate towards the ocean. Pleasingly, the ocean provides me with endless opportunities to capture it in a variety of ways, including using short and long exposure techniques.

The Isle of Skye is a seascape photographer's dream with its incredibly diverse coastline, offering a range of pristine sandy beaches (including the coral beach at Claigan) to the amazing rocky coastline complete with its towering sea stacks and vertical cliffs.

I have used a variety of filter manufacturers over the years, ranging from Cokin when I first started out in 2007, closely followed by several years using Lee, before switching to Haida for a short while, then Nisi for a couple of years. Now I exclusively use Kase filters and have done so since April 2019. Having a wide range of quality, durable and easy-to-use filters which are free from colour cast in my camera bag is essential. I tend to divide them into two categories: capture filters and creative filters.

The capture filters incorporate my 2- and 3-stop neutral density graduated filters that help darken the sky to balance out the light on harshly lit days.

The creative filters are my 3-, 6-, 10- and 16-stop neutral density filters. These filters help me to shoot long exposure images whatever the time of day or the intensity of light on offer.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of my Kase neutral density 'creative' filters, this image sequence of the double sea arch at Ardmore Bay were all taken at different shutter speeds, ranging from between 0.5 second to 30 seconds. All three images were taken within one minute, ensuring that the light was as consistent as possible. The scene was in dark shade and the images have been lightened by a reasonable amount in Photoshop CC.

I opted to shoot the three images without a polarising filter as I wanted the water to remain as bright as possible. Using a polariser would have cut through the white light that is reflected on the water's surface.

The first image was taken using no filter; the second with my Kase 6-stop ND filter; the third with my Kase 10-Stop ND filter. The difference in how the water looks in the three images is very evident. However, these days I find that I prefer to retain some detail in the water and therefore opt to shoot with a shutter speed between 2 and 5 seconds at most.



▲ Double Sea Arch, Ardmore Bay, Skye. All images: *EOS R5, RF 24-70mm f2.8L IS lens at 46mm, f14, ISO 100.*
From top to bottom: 0.5 second, no filter; 4 seconds, Kase 6-stop ND filter; 10 seconds, Kase 10-stop ND filter.

Tripod

Purchase a decent tripod to house your camera. Too light and it will fail you in reasonable wind, too heavy and you will not want to carry it too far. I suggest a tripod no heavier than 2.5kg.

I use two geared heads on my tripods: a Benro GD3WH, below right, and an Arca Swiss D4. A geared head allows for precise adjustment in three directions, which not only improves the experience and enjoyment in composing an image, but also allows the camera to be solidly locked into place.

◀ Fairy Pools, River Brittle, Isle of Skye. One of my favourite shots – the cloud above is so dramatic. *EOS R, EF 24-70mm f4 IS USM lens at 24mm, 1/5 second at f14, ISO 100.*

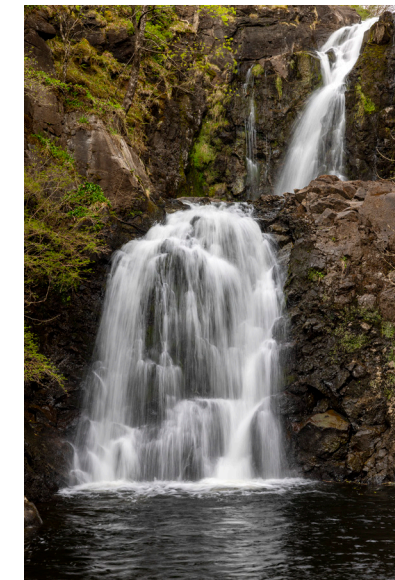


Blending multiple exposures

One of the most recent Canon features that I have discovered is the multiple exposure function. This is a superb feature that, in its simplest terms, allows you to capture between two and nine frames (RAW and JPEG) and merge them together to create a single file.

One advantage of this is that you can duplicate yourself several times standing in various positions within the frame and blend them all in camera without the need for Photoshop. Alternatively, you can artificially produce a long exposure effect, which is especially relevant when shooting running water.

I used this technique to create this long exposure image of Rha Falls recently on Skye. I captured nine frames of the falls with a shutter speed of 1/6 second each and blended them together to create an image of one-and-a-half seconds. The advantage of using the multi-exposure function is that you are not confined to using dark neutral density (ND) filters, such as a 6- or 10-stop, to create a long exposure image. However, I would still recommend using a polarising filter if shooting water.

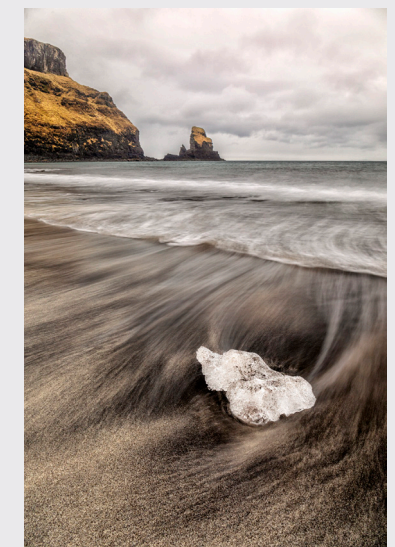


▲ One of the nine RAW files captured using the Multi Exposure feature.

◀ The final in-camera image merged from all nine of the RAW files captured using the Multi Exposure feature giving an exposure time equivalent of 1.5 seconds. Both images *EOS R5, RF 24-70mm f2.8L IS lens at 59mm, 1/6 second at f11, ISO 100, Kase K9 circular polariser filter.*

Blending vs. filters

I have a full set of filters available for every occasion. Using these is still my preferred way of shooting long exposure images, but it is excellent to know that alternative options are at my disposal.



▲ Ice Beach, Talisker Bay, Skye. *EOS 5D Mark IV, EF 24-70mm f4 IS USM lens at 24mm, 1.6 seconds at f13, ISO 200.*

Post-production



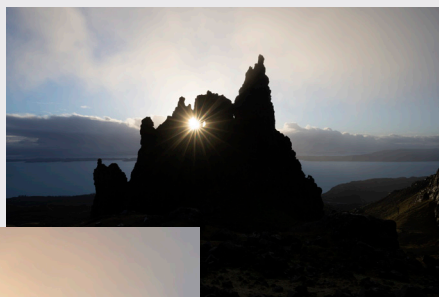
My camera is set to shoot the largest RAW file and the smallest JPEG files (the S2 size). The reason I shoot both formats is that the small JPEGs give me the freedom and convenience to scan through the JPEG images quickly and without fuss on my computer. Once the desired file has been selected for editing, the RAW file is opened and duly edited. I feel so much more at ease knowing that my camera has two memory card slots and the ability to write both RAW and JPEG files simultaneously to both. Therefore, should I experience a memory card failure, I always have the second card to rely on – this is so comforting to know, especially when I am away on long trips.

My choice of colour space is Adobe RGB. It is said this has around 35% more colour range than sRGB and is better suited to printing, but for displaying your images on social media etc, I would recommend converting the colour space to sRGB in post-processing.

RAW benefits

Shooting in RAW format allows me maximum capability and flexibility when editing my images to an extremely high standard. It also allows me to adjust the white balance to my desired level, as well as being able to return detail in my highlights and recover detail in the shadows much more effectively.

However, large JPEG files can also allow you to produce high-quality work, and I know many who still prefer to shoot this way. Personally though, I would recommend shooting in RAW.



◀ Sunrise through Needle Rock, Old Man of Storr, Skye (image edited from a single RAW file, shown above). EOS R5, RF 14-35mm f4 L IS USM lens at 21mm, 1/80 second at f16, ISO 100. Kase K9 0.6 Medium Graduated Filter.

Challenges

Weather

Unsurprisingly, the biggest challenge in shooting landscape photography is the weather. So much is dictated by the weather that it can make or break a day's session or a trip away. The weather can totally dominate the decision in which location to shoot, with which lens, subject matter, shooting direction, techniques used such as long exposure or not if there is rain present. However, for all the challenges that the weather can throw at you, it can also present some amazing opportunities to capture some incredible images, if you have the right equipment, experience and determination.

Switching from DSLR to mirrorless

Admittedly, there were a couple of challenges or adjustments to make when switching from DSLR to mirrorless. That was more to do with purchasing the Canon EOS R, though. A couple of the features that I came to use and love on my previous EOS 5D Mark IV – such as the toggle button and the rotation jog wheel (which I call the polo mint) – were lacking on the EOS R. This was a complete departure for Canon and it was one that I never really got used to. Thankfully the EOS R5 saw these two features return.

Battery life is also not as good as a DSLR, in part because it must power the electronic viewfinder. However, the latest batteries that come with the R5 are around 20% more powerful to help balance things out in that department.

One advantage that mirrorless cameras offer me is the ability to use the viewfinder much more, especially during bright light as it is reactive to the same exposure simulation features that the LCD screen enjoys. Also, mirrorless cameras tend to feel more modern and capable while maintaining quality and weather sealing. My EOS R was exposed to winter temperatures of -40°C for sixteen days solid in the Canadian Rockies during a trip in January 2020. It never skipped a beat once. I was incredibly impressed by its stamina, durability and reliability.

Overall, having the right equipment and knowing how to use it is key in giving yourself the best possible chance of capturing the perfect shot – the Isle of Skye provides some of the most stunning scenery that you will find not only in the UK, but I would say also in Europe. It is why I love to return year after year and even now there are parts of Skye that I have yet to discover. Skye really is the gift that keeps on giving.

▼ **Opposite page, top:** Dramatic Skies Over the Black Cuillin at Elgol. EOS 5D Mark IV, EF 16-35mm f4L IS USM lens at 16mm, 2.5 seconds at f13, ISO 100, Nisi 6 Stop ND Filter, Nisi 0.6 Medium Grad ND Filter.



▲▲ Stormy Skies at Talisker Bay. EOS 5DS, EF 16-35mm f4L IS USM lens at 35mm, 1.6 seconds at f8, ISO 200, Lee 6 Stop ND Filter.

▲ The Sound of Raasay from Rigg Viewpoint, Isle of Skye. EOS R5, RF 100-400mm f5.6-8 IS USM lens at 100mm, 1/400 second at f14, ISO 100.

Melvin's top tips

- Do your research. Use apps like Google Maps to determine where and when you need to be to give yourself the best chance of capturing a stunning shot. I also use The Photographer's Ephemeris and Photo Pills apps to assist me in determining the direction of the sun.
- Buy yourself a loupe that positions over the LCD screen. It enables you to see the screen so much more easily during harsh bright light. I use the Hoodman Outdoor HoodLoupe H32MB which covers LCD screens up to 3.2 inches.
- Look at several weather apps and websites to gain an insight into how the weather is likely to play out. I regularly use Accu Weather, YR.com and XC Weather.
- Ensure that your equipment is fully charged, clean and in good working order, not to mention that it is in your camera bag. I recently had a client arrive on location...minus his camera. He had left it in his hotel room. It happens!

For more of Melvin's images, visit melvinnicholsonphotography.co.uk