

CLOSE-UP

TOM MACKIE

For years, Tom Mackie used a 4x5in plate camera to shoot landscapes. He tells Keith Wilson why he switched to digital, and how he combines large-format principles with digital advances

Growing up in the American Midwest, Tom Mackie dreamt of being a photojournalist, but ended up working as a studio photographer. In Los Angeles, he mastered the intricacies of working with sheet film and the 4x5in format. Today, a Nikon D800 is his camera of choice, and his studio is outdoors with just the sun for lighting. There have been many lessons along the way in this remarkable transformation...

What type of photographer did you dream of becoming at school?

I always planned to be a photojournalist. I went to the journalism conventions and got a few awards for sports photography and photojournalism, and began thinking, 'Yes, this is really what I want to do'. In the Midwest photojournalism is big, especially in Iowa. The University of Iowa sprouts a lot of great journalists and you have people like Bill Bryson coming from Iowa as well. Ironically, Bryson lives in Norfolk, England, like me. I don't know who's stalking who!

How old were you when you were first hooked by photography?

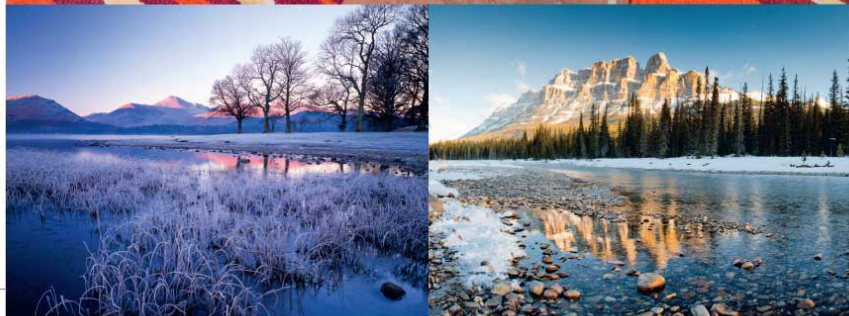
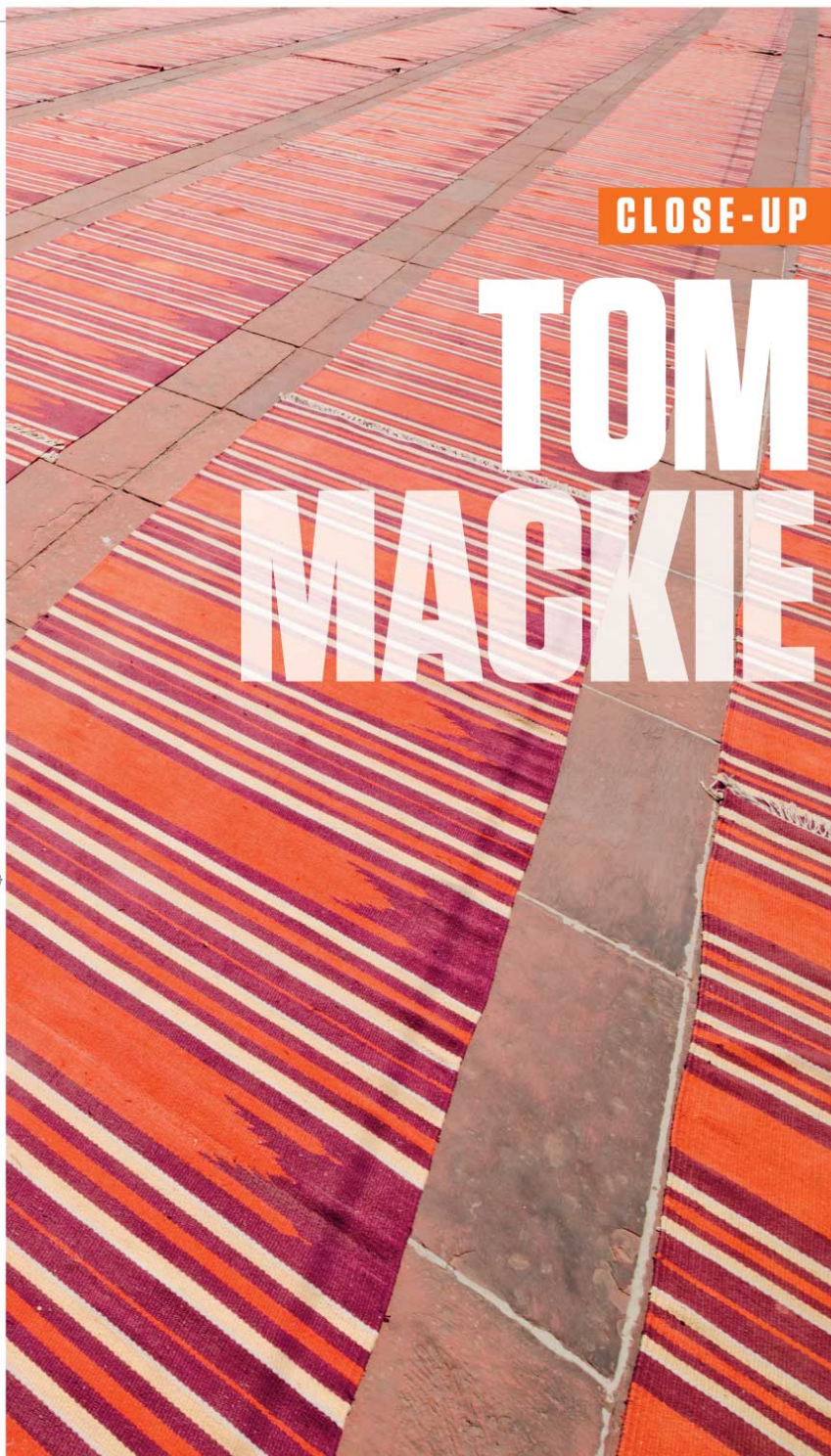
I was probably around eight to 10 years old. My parents gave me a Box Brownie.

Where did you gain your degree in commercial photography?

It was a place called the Hawkeye Institute of Technology – Iowa is known as the land of the Hawkeyes. The course was two years. I loved it so much I stayed over for a summer. I wanted to use the lab and keep building my portfolio.

Who gave you your first break?

I went to a convention of the Professional Photographers of America and the contacts I made there were indispensable. I met a woman who worked for Kodak and she said, 'What do you want to do?' I said, 'I want to learn more about fashion photography and keep within the commercial and fashion field.' She said, 'Well I have a friend who has worked as a fashion photographer for years in Los Angeles, Gary Bernstein.' And ▶





MAN PRAYING, OLD DELHI
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm
f/2.8G ED, 1/60 sec, f/16, ISO100





THE NORTHERN LIGHTS OVER JOKULSARLON (TOP)
Nikon D800, Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8G ED,
15 secs, f/5.6, ISO3200

MIST BELOW SAN MINIATO, TUSCANY (BELOW)
Fuji GX617, 90mm lens,
1/2 sec, f/22, Fuji Velvia 50 film

“Large format makes you slow down and look closer at the landscape and what you’re doing... I have a routine I go through when I’m setting up”

Tom Mackie Landscape photographer

I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I know this guy’s work, he’s phenomenal, he photographs for Max Factor and a lot of beauty ads.’ She got on the phone to him right then. So I worked for Gary for two or three years on and off.

What did you learn from him?

I learnt a lot about lighting. In school we were taught to light a set using maybe five lights and when I first went to set some lights up for Gary he said, ‘No, just one light and a reflector.’ Just the way he lit people, I learned so much about using big softboxes.

How did he influence your career?

I think the best thing I learnt from working with Gary was that this wasn’t the area I wanted to work in! It wasn’t so much the

photography aspect, it was dealing with egos and personalities that I didn’t enjoy.

So how did you change from commercial photographer to landscape photographer?

In LA, I was also working in a photo lab and a lot of our clients were landscape photographers. We were producing massive Cibachrome murals for them and I loved looking at the sharpness and quality. They were using large-format cameras, so I started doing landscapes at weekends. I’d do trips out to Colorado, or along the west coast. There was one photographer, James Randklev, and I just rang him up and said, ‘I print a lot of your work, I was wondering if you had a few minutes to have a chat?’ I went down to his apartment, got on really



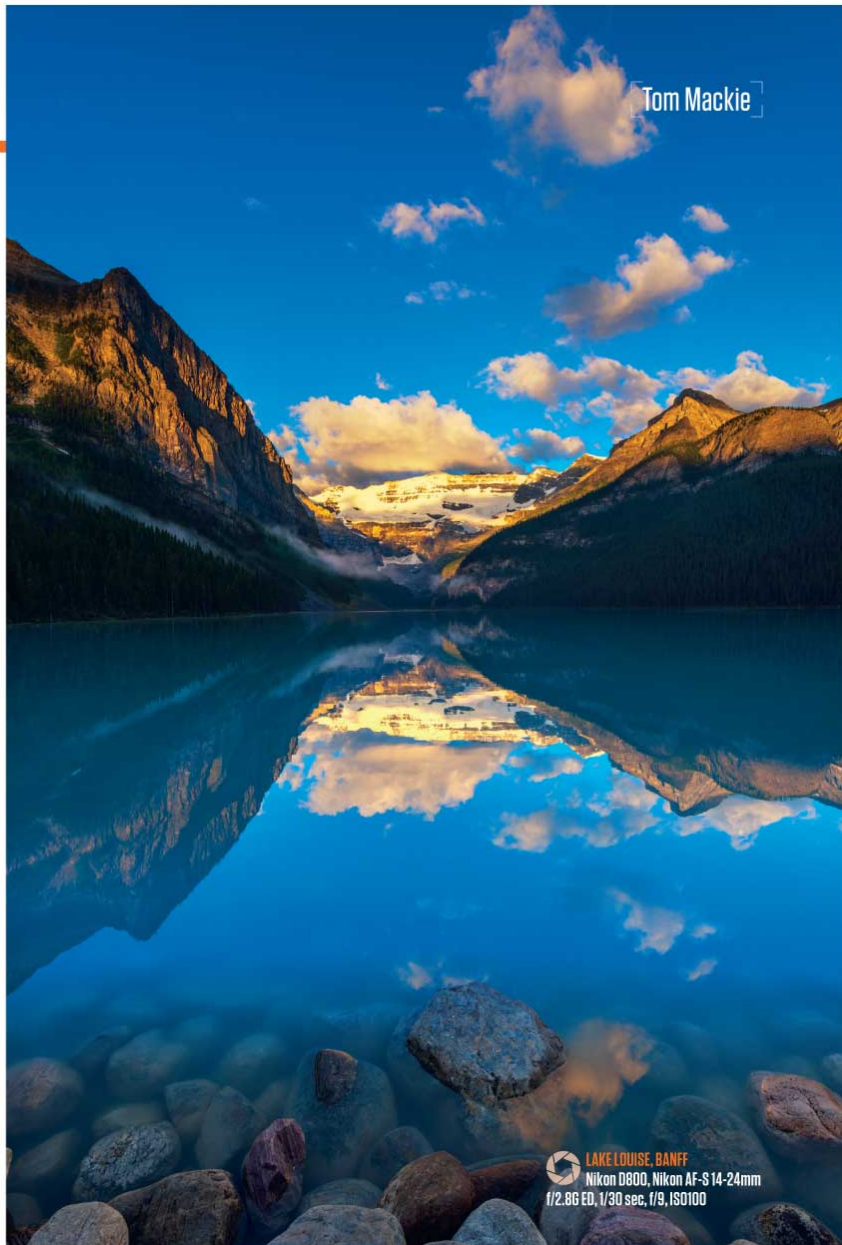
well and he's still a good friend today. He's a large-format photographer and he's gone to digital as well.

What is the benefit of using large format?

It makes you slow down and look closer at the landscape and what you're doing. You've got to be precise. You're checking the edges of your ground glass for sharpness, the focus, making sure you've got the lens tilts and swings right. I have a routine I go through when I'm setting up: composing, focusing and metering, then exposing. I've carried that over into my D-SLR usage.

Switching from 4x5 film to digital is a massive change, so why did you do it? I had friends saying, "When are you going ▶

www.nphotomag.com



LAKE LOUISE, BANFF
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S14-24mm
f/2.8G ED, 1/30 sec, f/9, ISO100

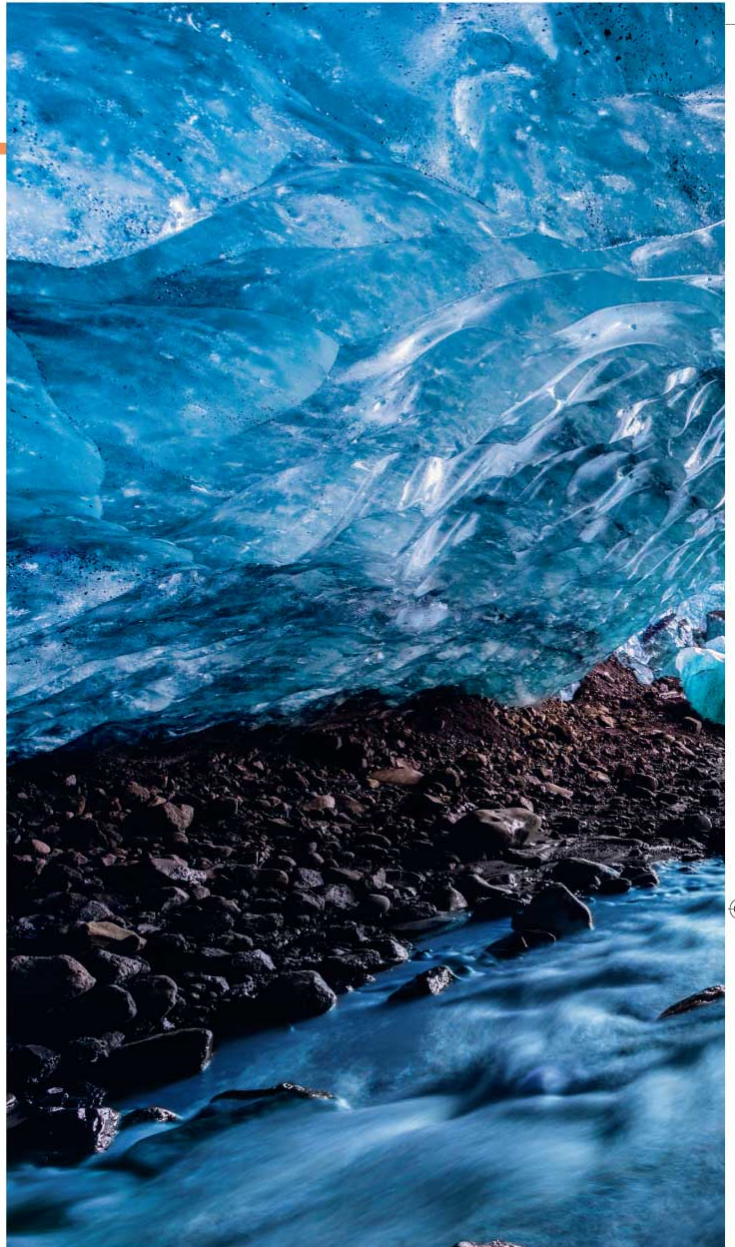
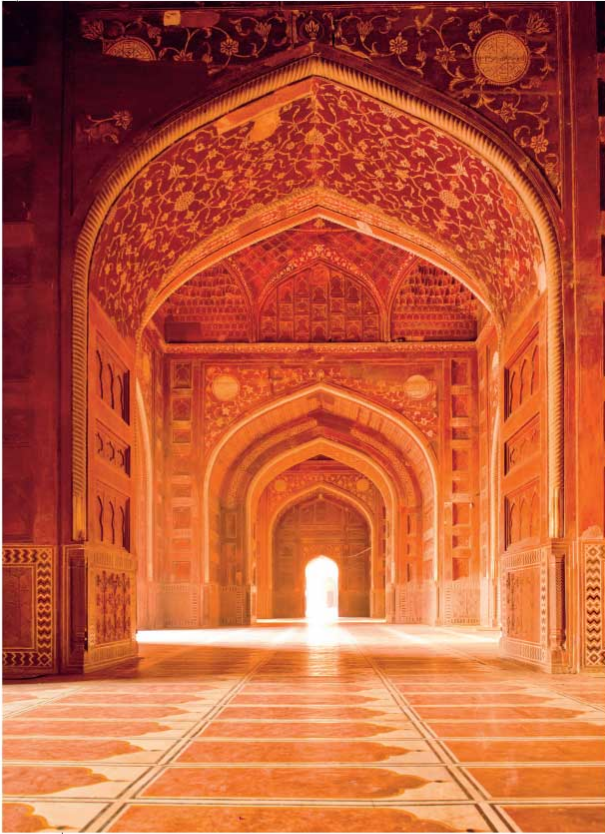
PROFILE

Over 25 years of solid experience have made Tom an acknowledged expert in landscape photography

- Tom Mackie has been a full-time landscape photographer since moving to the United Kingdom from America in 1985.
- Tom's images have won accolades from the Ilford Awards and the British Institute of Professional Photographers.
- After gaining a degree in commercial photography from the Hawkeye Institute of Technology he worked as an industrial and architectural photographer in Los Angeles for five years.
- He is the author of two best-selling books: *Tom Mackie's Landscape Photography Secrets* and *Photos with Impact*.

www.tommackie.com





ARCHES AT THE TAJ MAHAL, AGRA
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 24-70mm f/2.8G ED,
1/30 sec, f/5.6, ISO3200

ICE SCULPTURE ON JOKULSARLON BEACH
Nikon D800, Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8G ED,
1/4 sec, f/22, ISO100

to change to digital?" I said, "I'm shooting large format and I can't change until I get a 50Mb file and the quality is there." I resisted until 2006. I was shooting with Velvia and I wanted to replicate the style of shooting that I was getting with Velvia. Now, I feel I can get more out of digital than I could with large format. Because of the high ISO I can shoot for longer. With night shots where you had a short window of time, digital extends that time out.

Like many pro photographers, you have moved to Nikon because of the launch of the D800. Was it the right decision?

Oh, definitely. When the D800 came out I knew it had the resolution that I need, primarily for some of the mural clients I have in Germany. I lost a lot of business when I first switched to digital as I didn't have that pixel count – with large-format you can go as large as you like. But when I switched to the D800 I got an email from one of my mural clients who said, "I'm really glad you've gone over to the D800. We really want to see your work again."

What's your favourite country for photographing landscapes?

Italy, without a doubt. There's so much

diversity of landscape there, and it's not only the landscape, it encompasses the whole thing: the food and the people.

If I could have one wish come true, it would be to live one year in various locations: one year in New York, one year in Italy, one year in Australia, one year in New Zealand, so you could shoot through the seasons and see how it transforms.

So why did you move to England?

My ex-wife was from Norwich. The location is great for a landscape photographer. If I had to travel to all these locations from Los Angeles the distances and constant travelling would have been horrendous. Making the decision to move here was one of the best decisions of my career.



GLACIAL CAVE, ICELAND
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm
f/2.8G ED, 1/4000 sec, f/8, ISO1000

What are your golden rules for shooting landscape pictures?

Keep it simple. Most landscape photographers put too much into the composition. It's something I've learned from looking at other photographers' work. There's a guy called Pete Turner, and when you look at his work you ask yourself, "Why has he composed it like this?" Then it clicks: he composes so simply because it has such impact, whereas with other photographers there's too much to look at. Don't include things that shouldn't be there.

Do you have similar rules for buildings?

I think architecture has a more defined result because you are trying to portray what the architect's objectives were, but

THE OPTIMUM F-STOP

After decades of using lenses for large-format cameras, Tom discovered that the optimum f-stop was different with the smaller lenses of D-SLRs.

f/2.8 or f/8?

■ This is the strange thing about going from large format to digital. In my large format days I could tell you what f-stop I shot every image at – it was always f/22. In those days, we never tested lenses. Now with digital I test every lens.

Why do you test every lens?

■ To find out the optimal aperture for that lens.

I was doing a workshop last month and I noticed everyone was shooting a landscape that had no foreground at f/16 or f/22. I said, "Why are you shooting at those apertures? You're making that image softer". They're looking at me, "What? We were always taught to shoot at the smallest aperture". So I did a shot of the lighthouse at every aperture and showed them the results at 100% and you could see a massive difference from f/5.6 to f/22. Shoot at between f/5.6 and f/8, they are going to be your optimal apertures. If you don't need the depth of field you're making your images softer by shooting at f/16 or f/22.

www.nphotomag.com

October 2013 **NPhoto** 81



THE TAJ MAHAL AT SUNSET, AGRA
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 70-200mm
f/2.8G ED VR II, 1/8 sec, f/8, ISO100

“ I often tell workshop clients that if you strip away all the details in a landscape you end up with lines. That’s more evident in architecture ”

Tom Mackie *Landscape photographer*

in the most creative way possible, which means you’re dealing with lines, as you are with landscapes. I often tell workshop clients that if you strip away all the details in a landscape you end up with lines. That’s more evident in architecture.

Which other landscape photographers do you admire?

David Muench. He is one of America’s most influential photographers. David’s style was groundbreaking, because by including a big object in the foreground, whether it’s a rock or flowers, he gave you the sense that you could walk into the landscape. His father, Joseph Muench, was also a landscape photographer and was instrumental in getting Hollywood out to Monument Valley.

He was a good friend of John Ford, the film director, and he took a bunch of 8x10s in Monument Valley and convinced him to film *The Searchers* there. But there are so many photographers now whose work I notice. I think it’s because of digital. It’s increased the quality of the work that’s coming out.

What is your desert island lens?

I’m so impressed with the Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8. It is one of Nikon’s best lenses. The edge-to-edge sharpness is incredible. However, the 24-70mm f/2.8 is a good all-rounder because I can do wide-angle work with it and crop the image, which I can’t do with the 14-24mm. The 24-70mm is the one that I would shoot with for the majority of subjects.



TOPIARY HEDGE
Wistafield 4x5, Schneider 150mm
lens, 1 sec, f/22, Fuji Velvia 50 film



MANAROLA, LIGURIA
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 24-70mm
f/2.8G ED, 1/125 sec, f/8, ISO200

What is the weight of your kitbag?

Too much! I should know this now from going through all the airports. It's 23kg and that's without the laptop in the bag!

What's in it?

I only have three lenses: 14-24mm, 24-70mm and 70-200mm f/2.8 – that's a brilliant lens too – a 1.7x teleconverter, a D800 body, lots of accessories and filters. That 70-200mm is so heavy, that's why this pack weighs so much.

What is the most unusual thing in your camera bag?

Avon Skin So Soft. It's been proven to be the best insect repellent. It beats all these things that contain Deet. There's no

chemical in it and it smells great in the wild! I found it through a horse outfitter but I've heard fishermen use it too. It keeps the midges and mosquitoes away from you.

How many Gb of pictures do you shoot in a week?

I'm really selective with what I shoot. With the D800 I use 32Gb cards and on my most recent two-week shoot I shot two cards, so around 30Gb a week.

Do you delete many images?

If I shoot extras there's no point keeping them if I have the one that's great – unless, of course, I am preparing a series. There's no point saving them if I'm not going to be using them. I should probably delete more

THE SWITCH

Switching brands is a big decision for a pro – but an accident helped make Tom move to Nikon!

When Tom Mackie switched brands from Canon to Nikon last year, it wasn't just the impressive 36.3Mp CMOS sensor of the D800 that convinced him the time was right. While travelling in Canada he found himself taking the plunge in more ways than one...

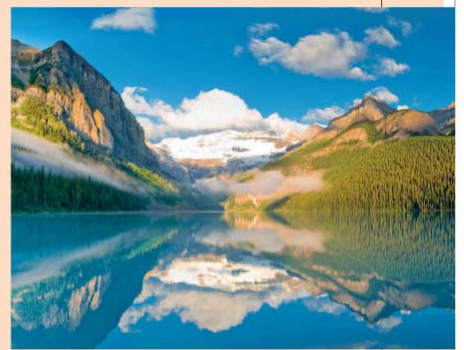
What has been your most embarrassing photographic moment?

■ Last year, I was literally pushed into going to Nikon sooner than I expected. I was canoeing with my kids on Moraine Lake in Canada. I was sitting in the back of the canoe, and my daughter was sitting in the front. She got out onto a rock. I had my Canon EOS 5D Mk II on my shoulder, pushed myself out of the canoe but went right over into the lake... as did the camera! It was a complete write off. They were creased up laughing at me sitting in the middle of the lake. This was two days into the trip. I was sitting in the hotel wondering, "What am I going to do?" So I got into a Wi-Fi area and Googled camera stores in Calgary, found two locations that had the D800 and most of the lenses, and said to my daughter, "We're going to have to drive two hours back to Calgary."

What did she say?

■ "How long are we going to be in this store?" Well, for me this is like being a kid in a candy shop. I said, "We'll be ages, bring a book!"

I got all the gear that I needed there. I'm glad I did because some of the images I shot on that trip I've already sold to those mural companies who need the higher pixel count, and I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't made the switch to the Nikon D800 then.



(ABOVE) LAKE LOUISE, BANFF NATIONAL PARK, CANADA
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 24-70mm f/2.8G ED,
1/15 sec, f/9, ISO100



LA PLACITA STAIRCASE, TUCSON, ARIZONA
Pentax 6x7, 75mm shift lens,
1/2 sec, f/22, Fuji Velvia 50 film

URBAN LIGHT SCULPTURE, LACMA, LOS ANGELES
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED,
2 secs, f/16, ISO100

“When I get out into the wilderness it inspires me... it's nice to be able to sit there and see what's going on”

Tom Mackie Landscape photographer

than I do, but I don't really have many to delete. In percentage terms it's minimal.

How do you stay on top of workflow?

I use Lightroom. I used to use Capture One Pro and my assistant was happy with that, but when she decided to do her own photography I could never find my files, so I decided to change. I must say, Lightroom is the best software for workflow, without doubt. For organising your images, for finding your images, working up images very quickly. It's mostly a three- or four-step process to work up an image.

Where do you find your inspiration?

In being outdoors. When I get out into the wilderness it inspires me. For example,

we went to a place called Ricketts Glen, in Pennsylvania, which is famed for its waterfalls. You take a seven-mile hike to get to the falls. At one waterfall there were a lot of tourists splashing in the water and there was this guy sitting against this big log and he had this big beard and this look on his face of complete calm. He was just drinking in the landscape and I thought, 'He's got the right idea'. While all these people came and went, he just sat there. For me, it's nice to be able to sit there and see what's going on. I get so much inspiration by doing that.

Where in the world that you haven't been would you most like to photograph?

Australia. I've never been there, and it's a



VAL D'ORCIA, TUSCANY
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 24-70mm
f/2.8G ED, 4 secs, f/8, ISO800

place where I know I need to spend at least a month at the very minimum. I want to do New Zealand as well. Again, it's one of those places I have to go to for a year and live there and really capture it at its best throughout the seasons. I think Australia would be incredible to photograph.

Where are you off to next?

I'm leaving tomorrow for Jersey, doing a masterclass. After that I've got the Isle of Skye, then I'm flying over to Aberdeen to go to the Lofoten Islands in Norway. It's like how Iceland used to be. I started on Iceland years ago when it was relatively quiet but everyone goes there now, to the point that you're running into other photographic groups all the time.

www.nphotomag.com

What's the best piece of advice you can give to someone who wants to start out as a professional landscape photographer?

Create a style of your own. Don't copy other people. Be persistent. In this business you have to be persistent. And I say business because photography for me is a business. I try to shoot what I enjoy most and if clients like it that's great, but I have to keep at the back of my mind: will the client want to use it? So, if you're going to make a business out of it, know what you're going to be shooting in order to provide the images for the clients to use. □

• To find out more about Tom's work, visit www.tommackie.com



SNOW-COVERED BOULDERS, JASPER NATIONAL PARK
Nikon D800, Nikon AF-S 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II,
1/250 sec, f/8, ISO100

October 2013 **NPhoto** 85