

# GOODBYE OLD LOVE, HELLO NEW

Landscape and travel expert TOM MACKIE mourns the loss of an old friend and creates a virtual Velvia replacement



**A**hh... the days of Velvia, when life was simple and you knew where you stood with film. Yes, I hear many of you newbies to the photography world ask, 'what is Velvia?' Even more astounding is, 'what is a transparency or an enlarger?' It even seems strange referring to it in the past tense. My, how time flies and technology evolves.

Velvia was an incredible transparency film adopted by many landscape photographers which produced very punchy, saturated images. Once you mastered how to expose Velvia, you could use it to your creative advantage to capture striking, colourful results – it was the ultimate film. I often have the urge to get a box out of the freezer to free it from its cryogenic state, but I realise that I must move with the times and expand my knowledge of a technology that is not just changing year to year, but almost by the day.

I have spent years honing my skills and trying to create a style that conveys the world the way I see it in my own way using vibrant, graphic elements in a subject. When Velvia came along in the early 1990s, I knew this is what I needed to accomplish the look I wanted to achieve. The colours were incredibly vibrant and packed a punch though some photographers slated it saying it was too unrealistic. But photography is all about creating an impression of reality, an interpretation. How the photographer sees an image, then by utilising various tools at hand, creates an image that conveys his or her impression of the subject. Take, Ansel Adams, for example. His images of 'Monolith, The Face of Half Dome Yosemite' or 'Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico' were not realistic views of those subjects, but it was how Adams visualised them as a final image. If you study his book *The Negative*, you will see the transition from the original



negative to end result – the print is vastly different.

Adams used the available tools that he had at the time, just as many photographers used Velvia to accomplish a particular look. So now that digital is here to stay, I for one am reluctant to discard the Velvia look like yesterday's newspaper chip wrappings.

#### HAVING A REFERENCE

One major difference between using film and digital is that digital removes the intermediary step between the camera and the final output, whether it is a print or to be published using an offset or digital press. We always had a transparency to refer to for colour and contrast, but now we only have a Raw file that comes out of the camera, flat and devoid of any colour saturation. Film was so easy, just press the shutter, process the film and look in amazement at the

transparencies on the light table. Now it is a challenge for me to bring the colours back to a point that I have become accustomed to with Velvia – add into this calibrating your camera LCD, then your pc monitor and then the printer... I want to have those incredibly intense blue Velvia skies, vibrant reds and oh those glowing greens, those luminous greens!

#### THE COMPLETE PACKAGE

There are many software plug-ins that can simulate the qualities of Velvia, such as Velvia Vision, but I have created my own presets in Lightroom – I feel this is the most powerful, sophisticated workflow software available to photographers at the moment. Photoshop was developed for designers whereas Lightroom was developed specifically with photographers in mind. I am able to import, edit, →



Lightroom Raw and Lightroom Cooked

→ develop, caption, keyword and output all in one place. During the develop procedure, if I want to make changes using another program, such as Photoshop, or any other program I can. I am able to make a User Preset that emulates the look of Velvia without the loss of shadow detail, when and if I choose to keep it. It gives the photographer immense control over their images, something that we didn't have with film.

In this series of pictures, you can see how the Raw file looks straight out of the camera. The contrast is flat and the colours are unsaturated. Any photographer that claims their images are perfect out of the camera and doesn't need any adjustments in curves,

saturation and contrast is living in a deluded and misguided world.

The one thing I have noticed with many digital images is that the skies tend to be a dusky blue instead of the strong saturated blue that we were used to with Velvia. How far you push the saturation is down to personal preference, but in this example I have tried to replicate the intense blue colour as much as possible. In the presets in Lightroom, there is the Direct Positive preset that comes close to the characteristics of a transparency. Unfortunately, it also has too much contrast and blocked up shadows, but I am able to recover any burnt out highlights and blocked up shadows using Highlight

Recovery and Shadow Fill (Version 3) and revised to just Highlight and Shadow in Version 4. Lightroom also has a Vibrancy slider that I find much better than the Saturation slider, which does an overall adjustment. The vibrancy only adjusts the least saturated pixels of an image so won't push already boosted colours over the top. I tend to mostly use Vibrancy with only a slight adjustment of the Saturation slider.

So using all of the powerful features of Lightroom, I can save it as a preset, or as many presets as I like, according to the characteristics of the scene and look I want to achieve which in this case comes as close to Velvia as possible.

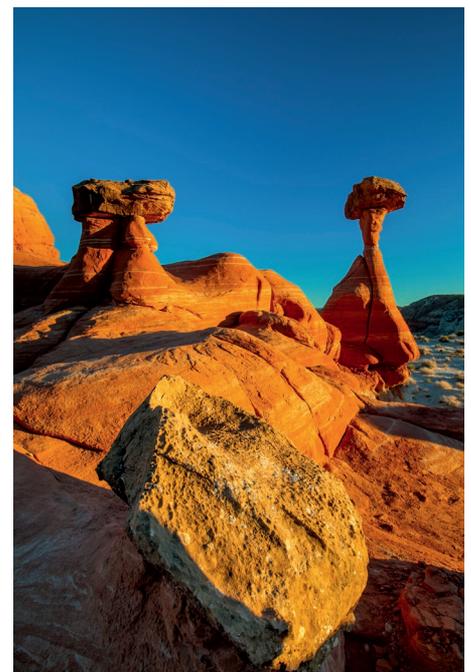


### THE REALITY DEBATE

There is no doubt that you need to have a certain amount of post-processing knowledge to get the most from digital photography in order to make your images the best they can be. How far do you push the boundaries? It is a personal preference, of course, but sometimes the image goes beyond reality. HDR is a perfect example. I've seen some HDR images that look very surreal, with so much shadow and highlight detail that the shot verges on the disturbing. A poorly executed HDR will stand out a mile. I feel the whole point about using HDR is to achieve an image that has a greater exposure latitude that can be achieved with one exposure, but keep it within the threshold of how our eyes perceive a scene. The human eye is capable of a dynamic range of nearly 24 f-stops when it is continually moving and adjusting to the light like a video camera. When fixed on one area like a still camera, the eye can see anywhere between 10-14 stops of dynamic range. That said, I often dial the density back into an HDR image because I feel it looks too unreal. The image above of the Cholla Cacti Garden in Joshua Tree National Park, California had far too much detail in the shadows when it was put through PhotoMatics Pro HDR software so I used the black point slider to put just a small

amount back into the scene giving it a more natural look.

With all of the wonderful technological tools that we have at our disposal with digital photography, it is unfortunate that its very existence has brought into question the validity of photography. How often have you seen a great image only to hear 'It must have been Photoshopped'. It shouldn't matter which tools or techniques are used to create an image, rather it should be the image itself that stands on its own merits, just as Ansel Adams used his skilled mastery of darkroom techniques to manipulate the image to accomplish his vision. Whether it is the look of Velvia or some other look created using a computer program, darkroom – or any other means for that matter – it's a style that defines us as photographers. Embrace it, don't criticise it. PM



### BIOGRAPHY

Tom Mackie is a landscape photographer whose work includes calendar, book, magazine, architectural and travel commissions. His work appears in the book *The World's Top Photographers: Landscape*, published by Rotovision. His latest book *Digital SLR Experts: Landscape* is a collaboration with four other photographers.

