

Jim Zuckerman's

PHOTO INSIGHTS

July 2026

Composition Tip
Problem Solving
Generative Fill
Photo Tours
Photography quiz
Ask Jim
Student Showcase
The Story Behind the Picture
Back issues





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On the cover: Jim's wife, Indiana, modeling the 'flying dress' in Dubai. *On this page:* Two cock of the rock birds in Peru.

You may download this issue [HERE](#).



When I suggest to clients in my tours and workshops to use a small lens aperture for maximum depth of field, most of the time someone inevitably reminds me that small apertures cause diffraction which, in turn, will reduce the quality of the image.

These clients go on to suggest an aperture like f/8 is sharper.

While that's true (f/8 is referred to as the 'sweet spot' of lenses), it doesn't have nearly as much depth of field compared to f/32. So, what to do?

If you compare the *background* in two images, one taken at f/8 and the other one at f/32, the smaller aperture obviously provides more definition, more depth of field, i.e., a sharper *background*.

On the other hand, if you compare the *subject* in the two pictures with all other things being equal, an f/8 aperture renders the *subject* with greater sharpness than f/32. It's not a big difference, but you can definitely see it. Depending on the focal distance, f/8 will most likely render the background blurred with little to no definition at all.

So, it's a tradeoff. If you want the background behind a subject to be sharply defined so we can appreciate what it is, don't complain about the slight loss of sharpness on the subject. The only way you can have both be as sharp as possible is to do focus stacking with an f/8 aperture. That works, but it's impractical for most photographic situations. Photography is all about compromise. Lenses simply have limitations.

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COMPOSITION

TIP

Backgrounds are just as important as subjects in making a picture work. If backgrounds are too busy, distracting, overexposed, too blurred or not blurred enough, the photo will most likely be less than ideal . . . or a downright failure.

One of the easily identifiable flaws seen in backgrounds is bold graphic lines that are not part of the subject. Most of the time, these lines are very distracting and they draw our attention away from the subject. This is the last thing you want.

For example, in the picture of the cheetah, below, the horizontal horizon line is sharply defined. Even though it is out of focus, the line is *not* part of the subject and therefore distracting. In fact, when you look at this shot, your attention is dragged away from the face of the cat to the horizon line. That's not how a successful image is supposed to work.

By comparison, I photographed the cheetah on the next page against a monochromatic sky devoid of distracting graphic lines. The differ-



ence is huge.

The rule is: *Don't include elements that have strong graphic lines behind a subject when those lines are not part of the subject.*

I know it's not possible sometimes to avoid unwanted graphic lines. In those instances, Photoshop is needed to replace or repair the unwanted background elements. Of course, there are times when this isn't easily done.

On the next page, I photographed a tribal woman in India with a similar issue. Out of focus people behind her were much darker than the sky, thus the demarcation line between those two areas created a distracting graphic line. In the comparison picture, I replaced the background with a dark and muted

out of focus image. Now our entire attention has nowhere else to go but to the woman's face.

Unwanted graphic lines come in many forms. For example, on page 7 the dead tree behind the great grey owl on the right side of the image is really distracting. It's problematic for two reasons: First, it's a graphic element not part of the bird and, second, it's very light in tone. Therefore, it's hard to look at anything else in the picture without being visually drawn to the dead tree. The only solution in this case is to clone it out or use Generative fill to eliminate it.

In the shot of the panther chameleon, also on page 7, the tree branches sticking out from behind the reptile's back are distracting. Again,



it's a situation where the graphic lines are not part of the subject. In addition, there is a small part of the lower portion of the tree extending down from one of the hind legs. That needs to be eliminated as well. Interestingly, the branch on which the chameleon is walking as well as the branch in the upper right corner of the frame are both graphic, but they are not distracting because they're part of the subject. That makes all the difference.

There are so many things to think about at the same time when taking pictures -- camera settings, exposure, composition, depth of field, subject matter, background, lens choice -- it's amazing we are able to take the good pictures we do. After exposure, the next most important aspect of picture taking is whether or not

the background is complimentary. It must make the subject look good and direct our attention to it without distraction.

As we all know, when things are happening fast -- a flying bird, a person moving through a crowded festival, a quickly changing perspective if you're in a moving vehicle -- it's just not feasible to concentrate on the background because it's constantly changing.

In this kind of scenario, you have to deal with the background in post-processing by either cloning out the unwanted graphic elements or replacing the background entirely.

With some pictures, like the cheetah portrait on page 4, there is nothing to be done. All of



the cat's fine hair and whiskers are almost impossible to separate from the background such that it looks real to a critical eye.

It takes mental discipline to focus on the background because



ground because we are programmed to concentrate on the subject. It's good to make yourself glance behind the subject, though, to make yourself aware of distracting elements. It takes just a fraction of a second, but it will make a huge difference in your images. §



Problem Solving

This is a rare shot of mating leopards at night. I went on a night drive in a private African reserve and came upon this scene in the dark. With a large flashlight, my guide illuminated the pair while I got off one shot. I took this image in 2000 when I was still shooting with a Mamiya RZ 67 -- a medium format film camera -- and everything was manual. Manual focus, manual film advance, and manual exposure. I couldn't shoot fast like I can today. By the time I took a single image, the leopards moved into the bushes out of sight. I

could hear them, but the photography was over.

I've had this picture for 26 years, and even though it was a remarkable experience to see and photograph, two things always bothered me about it.

First, the female's head was turned away from the camera. We can't even see her eyes or any meaningful part of her face.

And second, because I was shooting with a fixed focal length lens -- a 500mm RZ telephoto





(equivalent to a 300mm in the full frame digital format) -- I couldn't zoom back to include the haunches of the two cats. They were too close to my shooting position in the Land Rover for a full frame shot with the 500mm lens, and I didn't have time to change lenses. The 350mm would have been perfect, but I couldn't risk losing the shot.

If there was a third issue, the male leopard's eye reflected the light from the camera flash, and it turned solid green just like the eyes of people turn a ghostly red -- red eye -- from direct on-camera flash. That didn't look good to me.

So, I thought I'd give the new AI technology in Photoshop a try to address these problems. First, I applied Generative Expand to rebuild

the rear portions of the animals. In the image above, you can see it did a brilliant job. I was very happy.

Next, I circled the head of the female with the lasso tool, selected Generative > Fill, and in the instruction box wrote, "Turn the female leopard's face toward the camera somewhat." Much to my astonishment, the software created a new and realistic face exactly per my request.

Finally, I selected the male's eye, again with the lasso tool, and requested Generative > Fill to create a realistic eye illuminated by a flash light at night. And that's exactly what I got.

Pictures you took years ago that are less than perfect can very possibly be saved by using these techniques. What a great time to be a photographer! \$

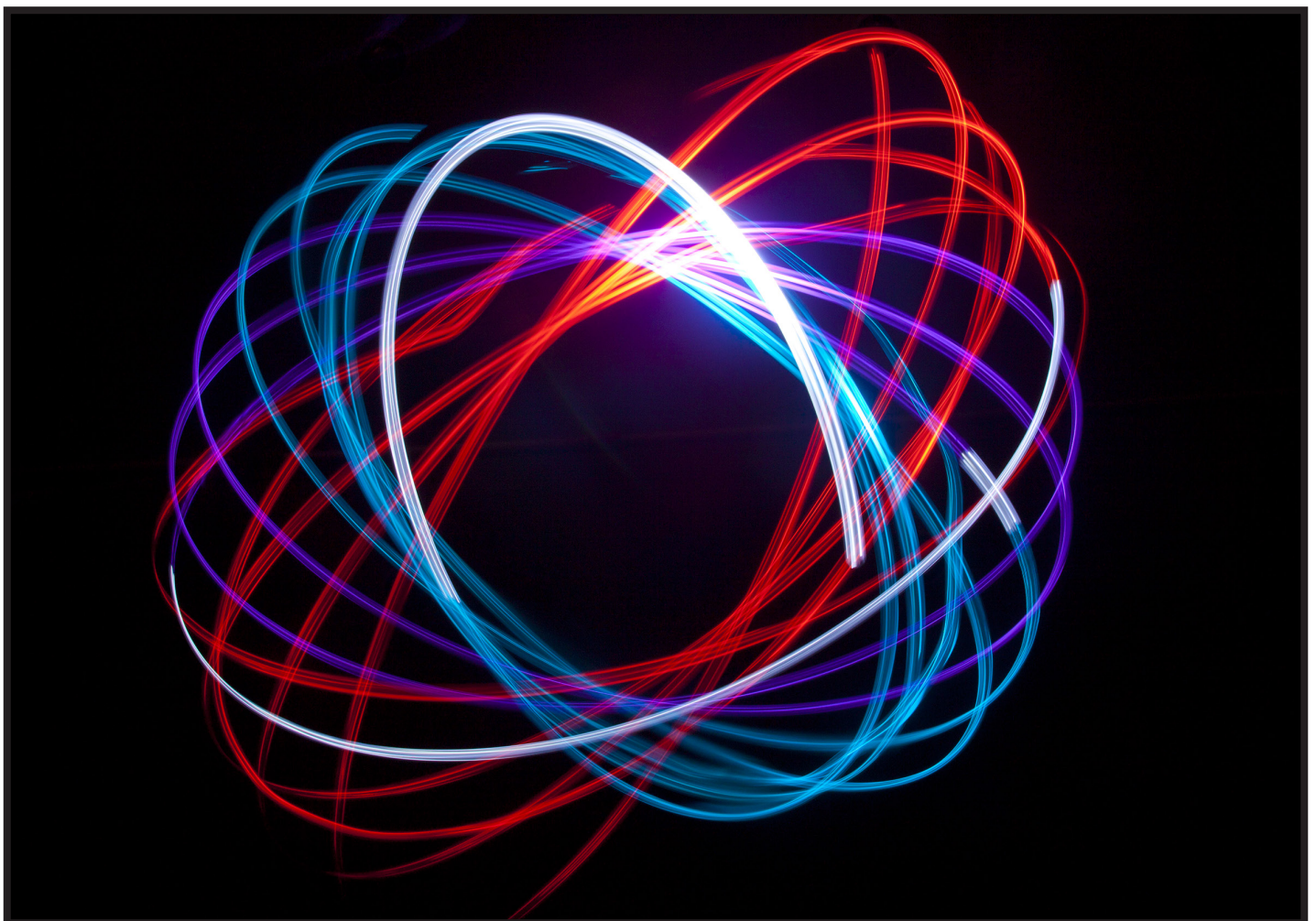
Something Fun to Try

One of the first experimental techniques I tried when I first discovered photography was this one. It reminds me of electron orbitals around the nucleus of an atom.

I created this abstraction using a small flashlight suspended from any kind of height. You could hang the flashlight from the ceiling, but that's not very convenient especially if you have high ceilings in your home.

Alternatively, place two 8 or 10 foot ladders about 5 or 6 feet apart, and then put any kind of wooden or aluminum dowl (like a broom handle or anything similar) between the ladders. You could even string an electrical cord between the ladders. Tie a string onto the flashlight and attach the other end of the string to the horizontal dowl or cord. The distance from the light to the floor should be about 4 or 5 feet.

Place your camera with a wide angle on the floor facing up toward the ceiling. Using the articu-

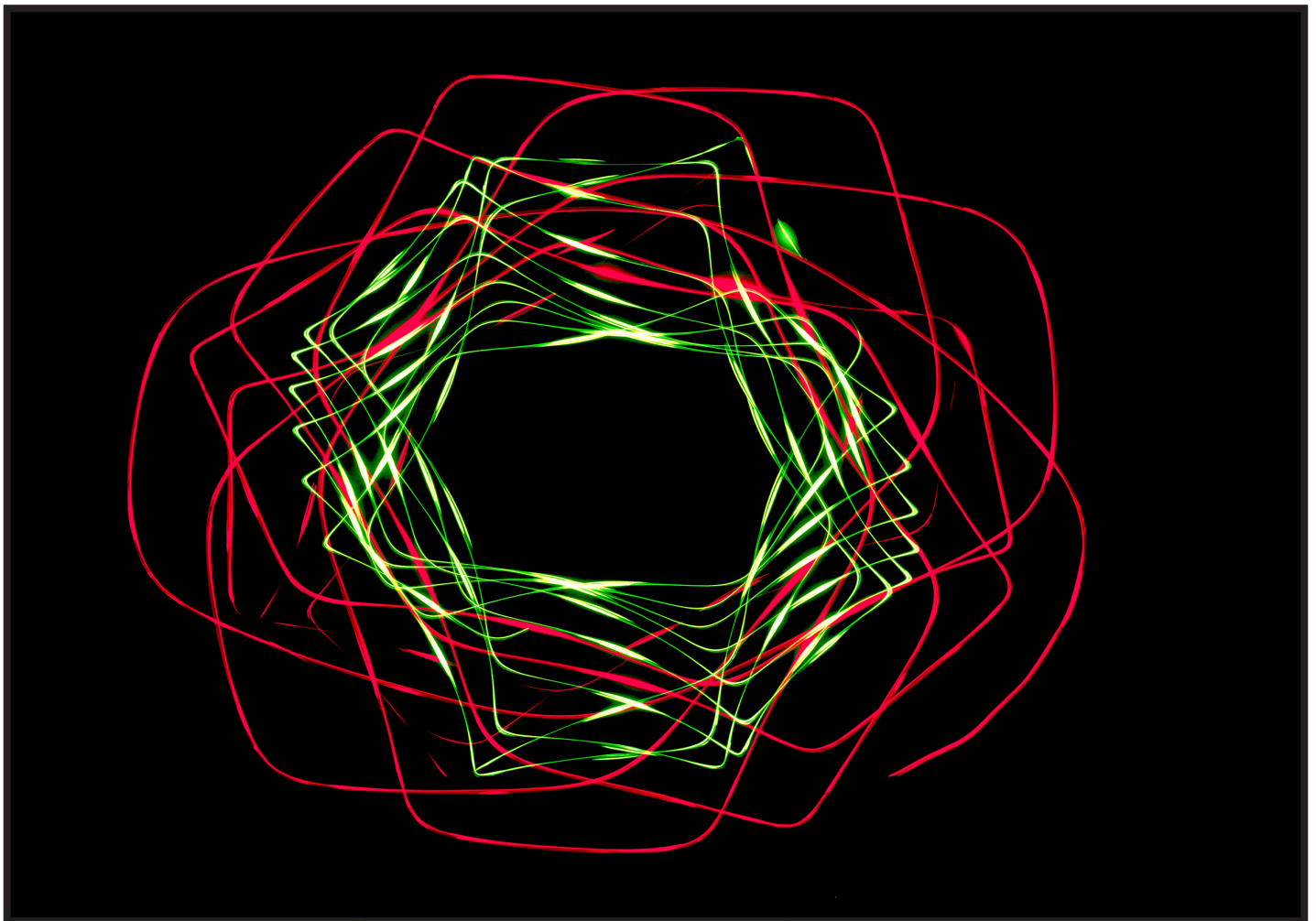


lating screen, focus on the flashlight as it is hanging down.

Have various gels available to use during the exposure. Turn the room lights off, turn the flashlight on, give it a twirl. Open the shutter and make the exposure. The image on the previous page was exposed at 25 seconds, f/11, and 200 ISO. As the flashlight spun and during the exposure, I changed the colored gels in front of the lens to inject color into the resulting abstraction.



It takes several tries to get it right, but with the immediate feedback on the LCD screen, it's easy to start producing very interesting images in a short time. §



Iceland Drone Tour

August 24 - September 2, 2026



Frog and Reptile Workshop

June 12 - 13, 2027



Exotic Birds of Colombia

Sept. 23 to Oct. 3, 2026



The Pantanal, Brazil

Nov. 11 - 19, 2027



Photography Quiz

1. Which has more depth of field if the subject is 20 feet from the lens: A 16mm lens at f/4 or a 500mm lens at f/32?
 - a. 16mm at f/4
 - b. 500mm at f/32
2. How many f/stops are lost in exposure when using a polarizing filter?
 - a. One
 - b. Two
 - c. Three
 - d. Four
3. Large softboxes in a photo studio are designed to simulate what kind of light?
 - a. Direct sunlight
 - b. A cloud cover
 - c. Sunset glow
 - d. All of the above
4. Shooting into the sun with a telephoto can damage your lens.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. You can hand hold a camera and lens to do a 5-frame HDR, but the lens used should be:
 - a. A wide angle
 - b. A telephoto
 - c. A macro
6. When photographing something with multiple planes of focus, like a lion in tall grass, the only sensible option is to:
 - a. Use autofocus
 - b. Change focus point arrangement
 - c. Switch to a telephoto
 - d. Use manual focus
7. In the darkest conditions, what is the last color you can see before you see nothing?
 - a. Green
 - b. Red
 - c. Yellow
 - d. Blue
8. Back in the day, color infrared film with a yellow filter turned vegetation what color?
 - a. Yellow
 - b. Blue
 - c. Magenta
 - d. Black
9. Which of the following film cameras were *not* medium format?
 - a. Rollei Rolliflex
 - b. Hasselblad
 - c. Mamiya 7
 - d. Topcon
10. Extension tubes allow any lens to focus closer, but the price you pay is:
 - a. Degradation in quality
 - b. A subtle shift in color
 - c. A loss of light
 - d. Increased noise

Answers on page 49

UPCOMING PHOTO WORKSHOPS



GREAT GRAY OWLS, CANADA

Get up close and personal with these spectacular birds flying with their magnificent wing spans. The slow flying owls are easy to photograph, even for beginners, and you will absolutely love your pictures!

February 13 - 18, 2027



TEXAS BIRDS

Get up close and personal to many species of exotic and colorful birds. We shoot from a blind and get frame-filling shots of cardinals, green jays, crested caracaras, painted buntings, and more. Based in McAllen, Texas.

May 12 -15, 2027



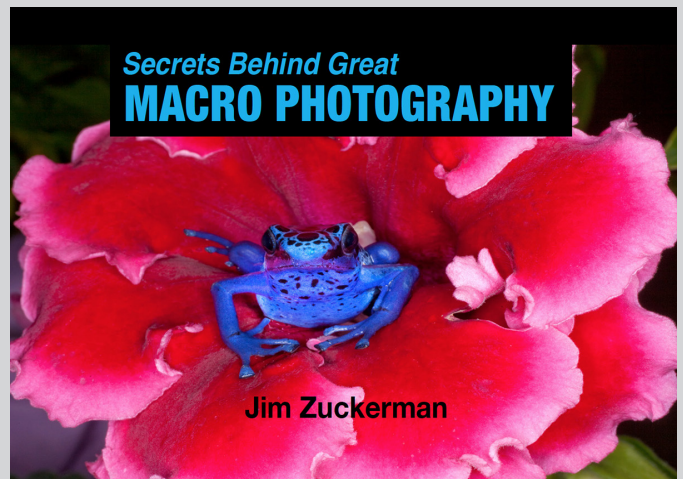
FROG & REPTILE WORKSHOP in Kansas City

This is an exciting macro workshop in which you will be able to photograph about 40 species of colorful dart frogs and exotic reptiles. Held in a hotel conference room, Jim sets up natural backgrounds for outstanding photos. The photo at left shows a Jackson chameleon with the background replaced in Photoshop.

June 12 - 13, 2027

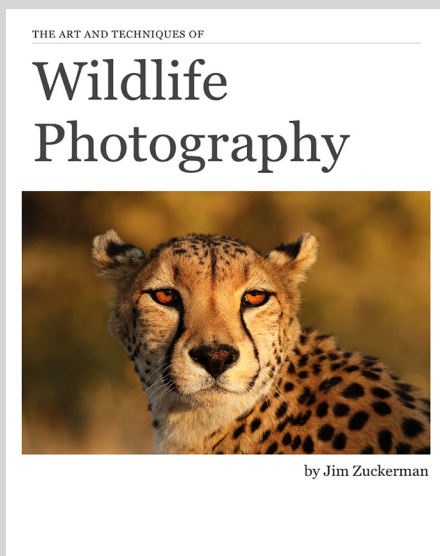
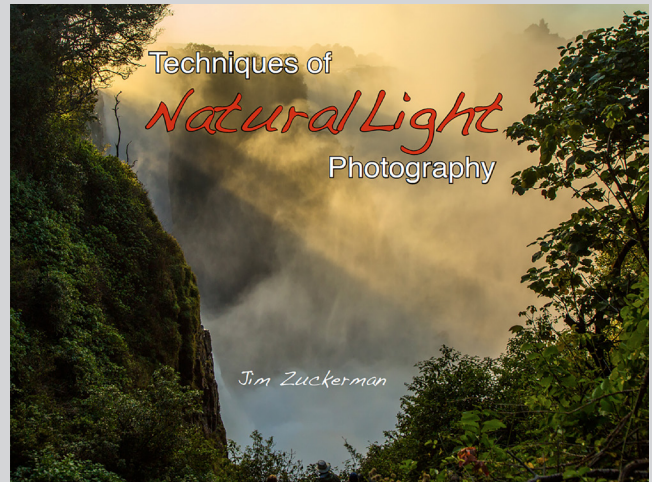
Expand your photographic artistry with *eBooks*

Click on any ebook to see inside



eBooks continued

Click on any ebook to see inside



Carnival in Venice

January 30 - February 5, 2027



What's Wrong with this Picture?



This is a crested gecko I photographed in my annual Frog and Reptile workshop held in Kansas City. There is one problem with this picture. Since diagonal lines are such a dynamic compositional element, and since large dark areas in a picture are often distracting if they are not part of the subject, the upper right section of this image is a bold and graphic part of the composition and, therefore, it's distracting from the subject.

The whole point of a photograph is to direct attention to the subject. You can do this several ways -- by making the background out of focus, by making the subject the lightest element in the shot, by strategic lighting, etc. Anything that detracts from the subject is usually not good. So, in this case, our eyes are diverted from the gecko to the black area too much.



In this image, where the gecko was repositioned on the rock surface thus eliminating the dark upper-right corner, nothing draws our eye away from the subject. This makes a big difference in the success of a picture.

Every shot you take should be evaluated in such a way as to determine whether or not there are distracting elements behind the subject. If so, maybe you can recompose the shot or, in post-processing, perhaps Photoshop can be used to clean up the background.

Can distracting elements ever work? Yes, they can. No rule or guideline is *always* true. There are always exceptions. For example, in the shot of the orangutan in Indonesian Borneo on the next page, the light tree on the right is somewhat distracting from the alpha male primate. In this case, though, I didn't remove it because orangs live in dense forests and that's what I wanted to convey. \$

Indonesia Wildlife

October 29 - November 8, 2027



SHORT AND SWEET

1. When you replace the sky, as I did behind these kudu, look carefully at the landscape. If DOF is fairly shallow and the land goes soft behind the subject(s), the sky must be out of focus, too. You can't have a sharp subject, a soft mid-area, and then a sharp sky. Make the sky out of focus with Filter > Blur Gallery > Field blur.



2. Photographically, both small and large animals as well as birds benefit from the lowest possible shooting angle. I took this picture of a roseate spoonbill in Florida where the camera was 2 feet above the ground. The lower the better -- it gives a more intimate view and increases the stature of the subject. I shot this in Myakka River State Park.



3. Notice two things about this image. First, the Cambodian dancer is very small in the frame. Second, the shot was taken with a wide angle lens -- a 24mm in this case. Don't be afraid to use wide angle lenses for portraits. It's a different kind of look. It can be very effective when including the environment.



4. When you use flash with animals, be prepared to have their eyes look ghostly if their heads are turned toward the camera and flash. This is similar to red-eye in people where the retina reflects the light back into the camera. These Verreaux eagle-owls in Africa were shot with on-camera flash. §



Ethiopia photo tour

Go back in time 20,000 years

January 5 - 18, 2027



Surma tribe



Dallol Depression

ASK JIM

Every month, Jim answers a question from his online students, from people who participate in his tours and workshops, or from subscribers to this magazine. If you have a question you'd like Jim to answer, please drop him a note at photos@jimzuckerman.com.

Q: Jim . . . I know you are conducting a photo tour to Spain next month for the eclipse. I'll be there, too. What settings would you suggest for shooting the eclipse during totality?
Jane Thornton, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

A: The eclipse on August 12 whose path goes through northern Spain is a sunset eclipse. That's what makes it so unique. The sun will be 8 degrees above the horizon. I've never photographed such an eclipse before, but the image below shows totality for the 2017 eclipse that passed through Nashville, Tennessee. My settings for this shot were 1/800, f/9, and 3200 ISO. I used a 500mm lens plus a 1.4x teleconverter giving me 700mm of focal length. This image is uncropped. I used manual exposure mode, and I did not use an ND filter or a tripod for this shot.

For the sunset eclipse, I'm expecting a 2 f/stop increase in exposure, but that's just a guess. I will use a tripod for this one. Totality is 1 minute and 44 seconds in Burgos, Spain, where I'll be with my group. That is enough to allow a photographer the time to adjust camera settings according to the image displayed on the LCD screen. §



Partial List of Photography Tours 2026 - 2027

EXOTIC COLOMBIA BIRDS
Sept/Oct 2026



DUBAI & ABU DHABI
Nov 2026



WINTER WILDLIFE WORKSHOP
Dec 2026



ETHIOPIA
Jan 2027



CARNIVAL in VENICE
Jan/Feb 2027



TEXAS BIRDS WORKSHOP
May 2027



LAVENDER FIELDS, FRANCE
July 2027



CHILE: THE DESERT to the SEA
Sep 2027



POLAR BEARS
Oct 2027



INDONESIA WILDLIFE
Oct/Nov 2027



THE PANTANAL, BRAZIL
Nov 2027



TUNISIA
April/May 2028



WINTER WILDLIFE WORKSHOP

December 16 - 20, 2026



Mountain lion



Arctic fox

STUDENT SHOWCASE

Each month, Jim features one student who took beautiful and inspiring images on one or more of his photography tours or workshops. It's really fascinating how photographers see and compose such different images even though we may go to the same places. Everyone takes great photographs on Jim's trips.

Cheryl Roth, Yorba Linda, California [Patagonia photo tour](#), [China photo tour](#), [Iceland drone tour](#), [Iceland winter tour](#), [Utah photo tour](#), [South Africa photo tour](#), [Snowy owls photo tour](#), [Frog and reptile workshop](#), [Bali photo tour](#), [Japan/Singapore photo tour](#), and [Montana wildlife](#).



© Cheryl Roth

Student Showcase, continued



© Cheryl Roth

Student Showcase, continued



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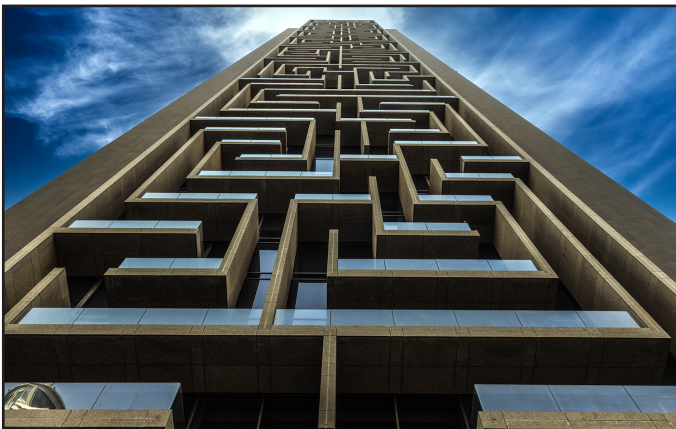




© Julia Sanderson

DUBAI & ABU DHABI TOUR

November 14 - 22, 2026



The Story Behi



nd the Picture



The first time I visited the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, I thought getting up early to photograph the beautiful tomb at sunrise would be devoid of people. Wrong was I! This is India, after all, with one and a half billion people, and it's also the most famous place in the entire country to photograph. I learned that there is a crowd here at sunrise every morning.

There were so many people waiting for the sunrise -- both photographers and non-photographers -- that it was literally impossible to get this shot without other tourists in the frame. This is the picture I had in mind, but with the crowd there was simply no way to do it.

So, there was only one solution. I had to piece it together. I took three separate shots: the archway, the model, and the Taj in sunrise light. I pasted them together in Photoshop later when I got back to my computer. \$

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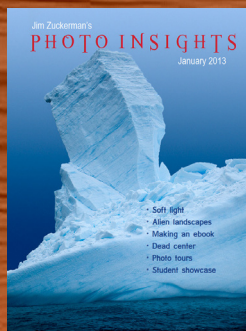
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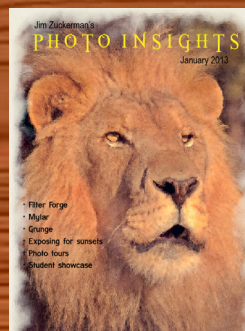
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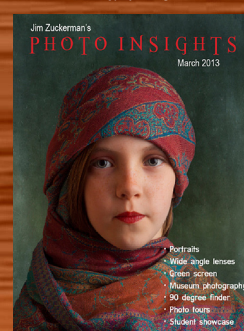
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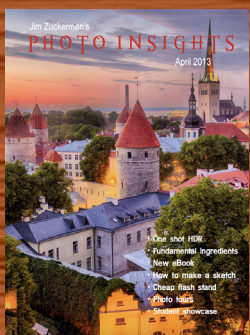
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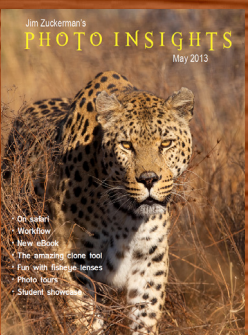
Mar. '13



Apr. '13



May '13



Jun. '13



Jul. '13



Aug. '13



Sept. '13



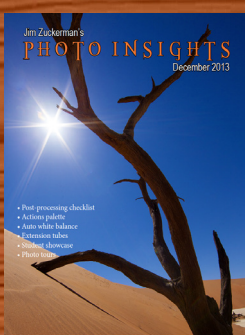
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Dec. '13



Jan. '14



Feb. '14



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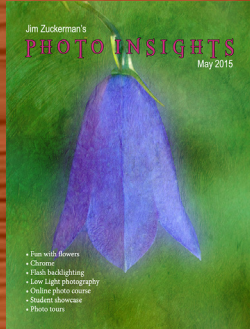


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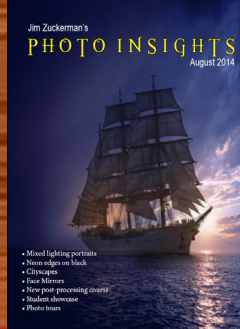


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Jul. '14



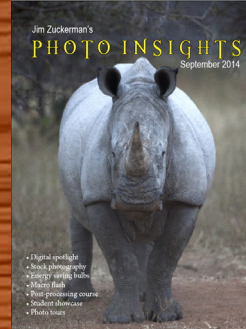
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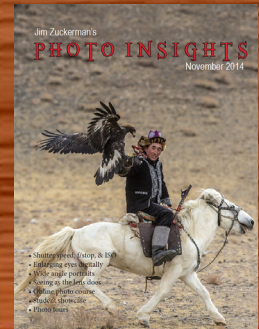
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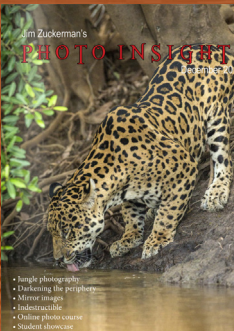
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Nov. '14



Dec. '14



Jan. '15



Feb. '15



Mar. '15



Apr. '15



May '15



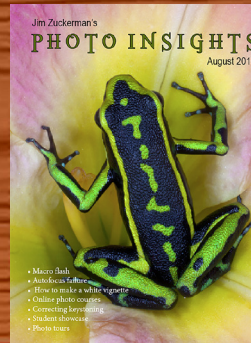
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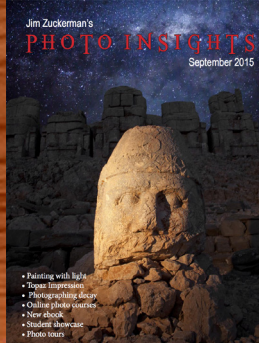
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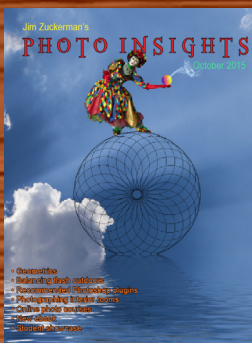
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Oct. '15



Nov. '15



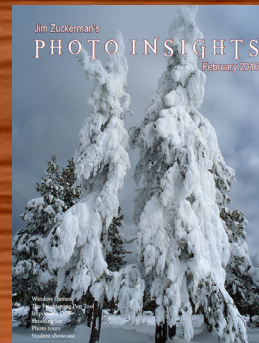
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Jan. '16



Feb. '16



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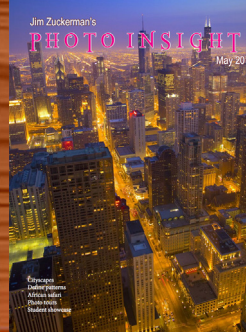
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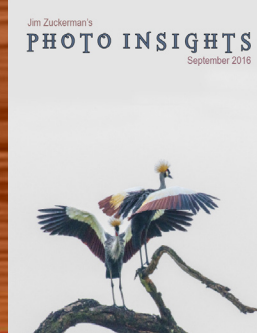
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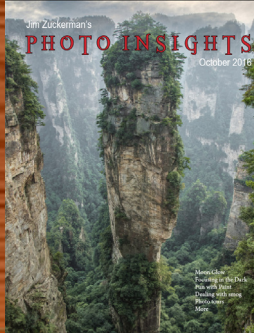
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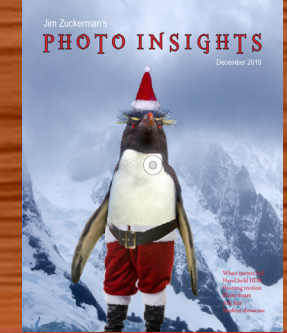
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Nov. '16



Dec. '16



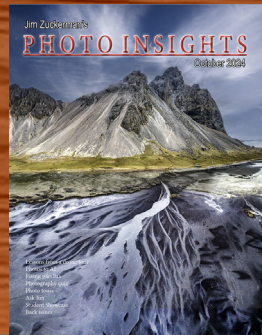
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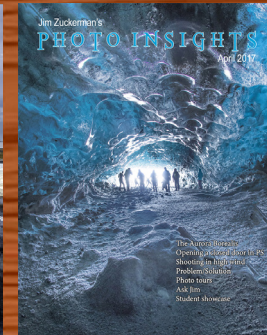
Feb. '17



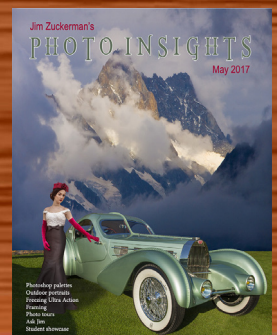
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Apr. '17



May '17



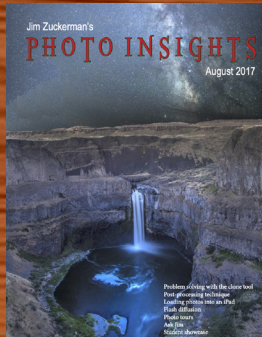
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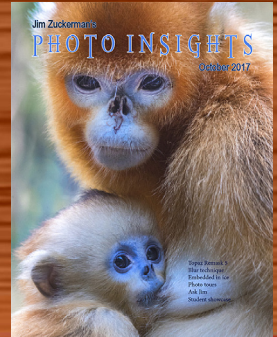
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Sept. '17

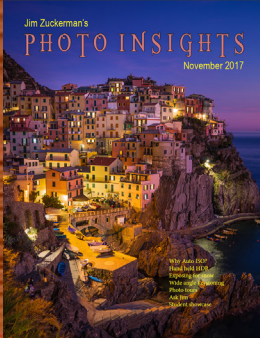


Oct. '17



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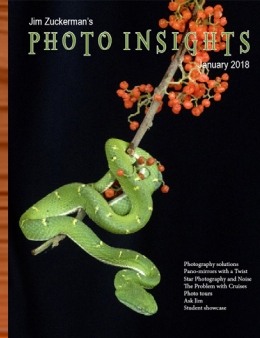
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Dec. '17



Jan. '18



Feb. '18



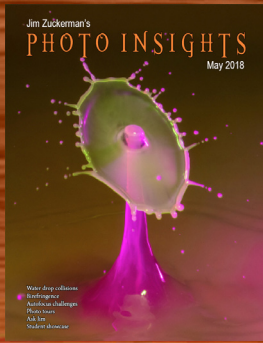
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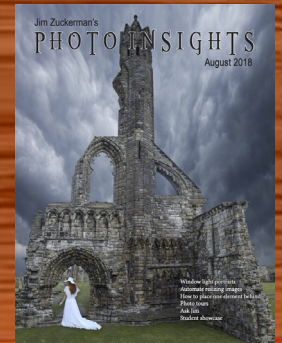
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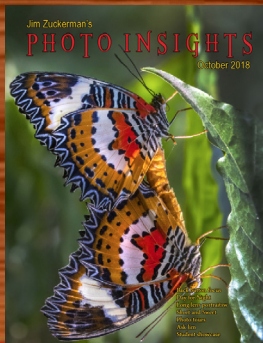
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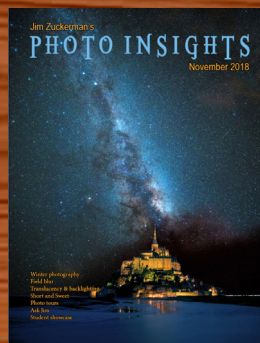
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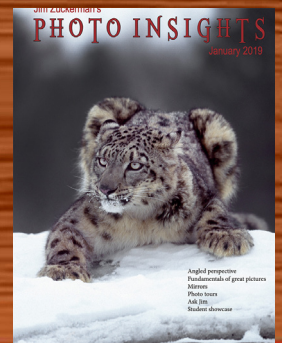
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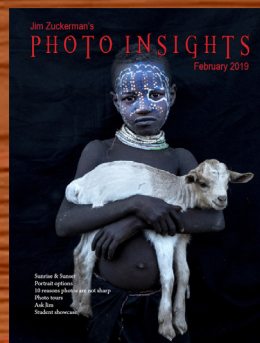
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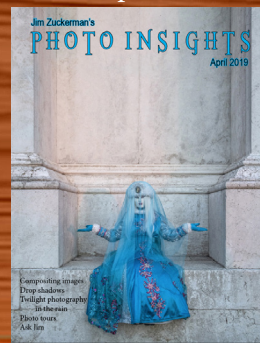
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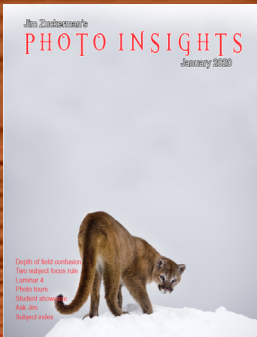
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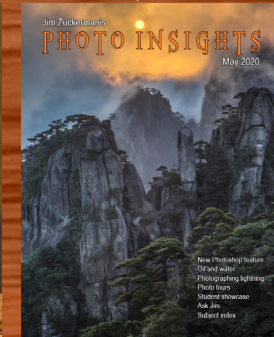
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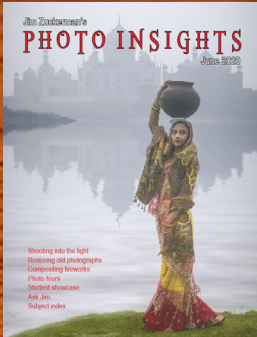
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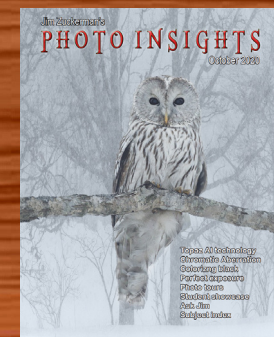
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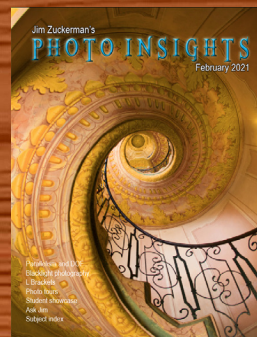
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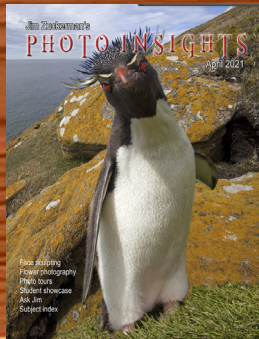
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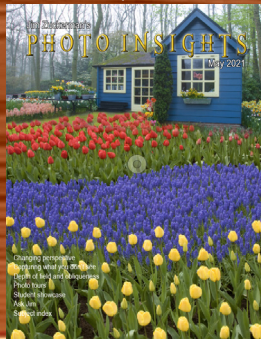
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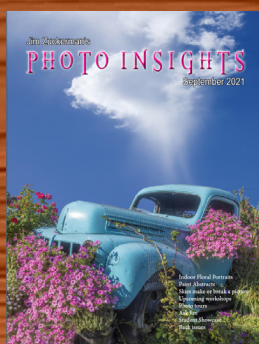
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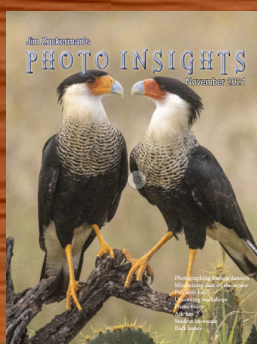
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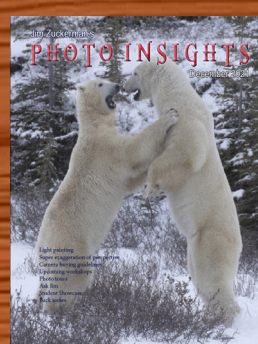
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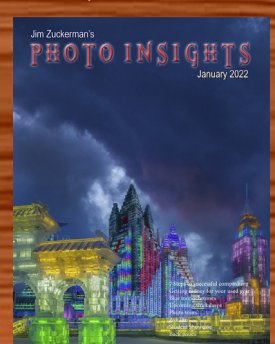
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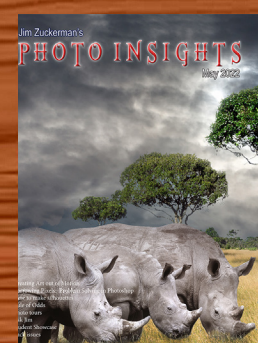
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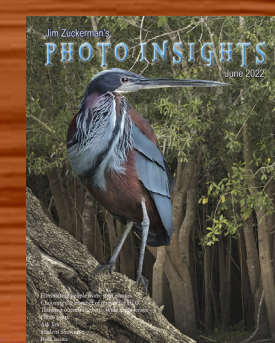
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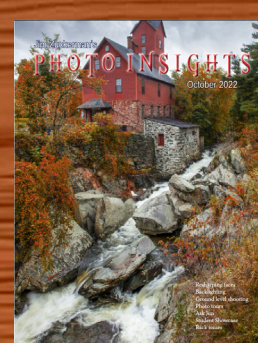
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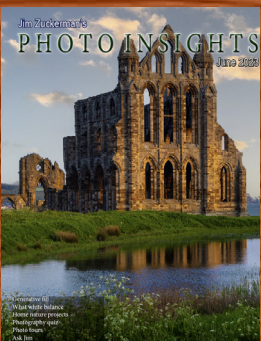
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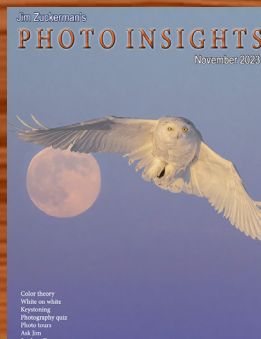
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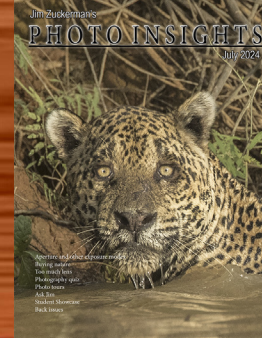
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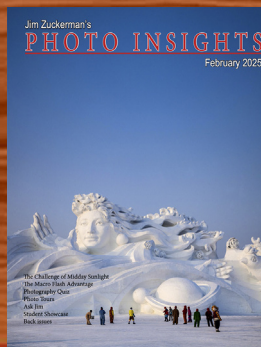
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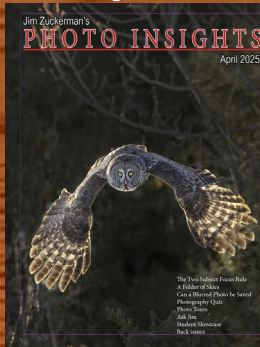
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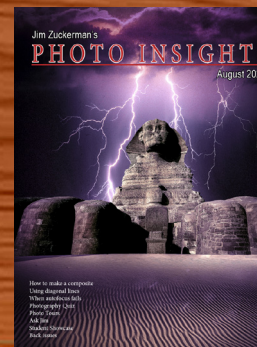
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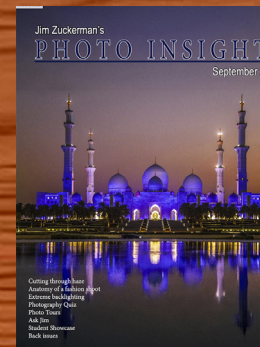
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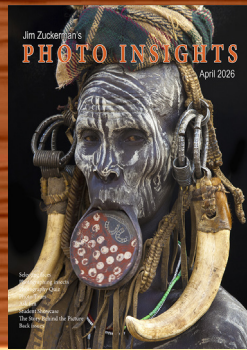
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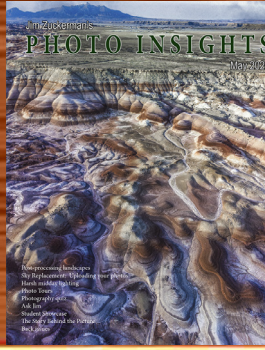
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Quiz answers

1. a
2. b
3. b
4. b
5. a
6. d
7. a
8. c
9. d
10. c

Your score

90% - 100%: You could have been a pro

80% - 89%: Your glasses probably need a new prescription

70% - 79%: Just don't quit your day job

< 70%: You should really be using an iPhone

CHILE: THE DESERT to the SEA

The Atacama and Beyond

SEPTEMBER 14 -24, 2027



Atacama Desert



Marble Caves



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Potash pools, Moab, Utah, from a DJI Air 3S drone