
USING PRIMARY COLORS FOR VISUAL IMPACT

Quick Guide
Written by Kevin Landwer-Johan



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How much attention do you pay to primary colors when taking photographs? Possibly not enough.


Primary colors are foundational to any visual art form. Be it a painting, package design, or photograph in any genre, primary colors are, well, primary! The better use you make of them in your compositions, the more powerful your pictures can be.

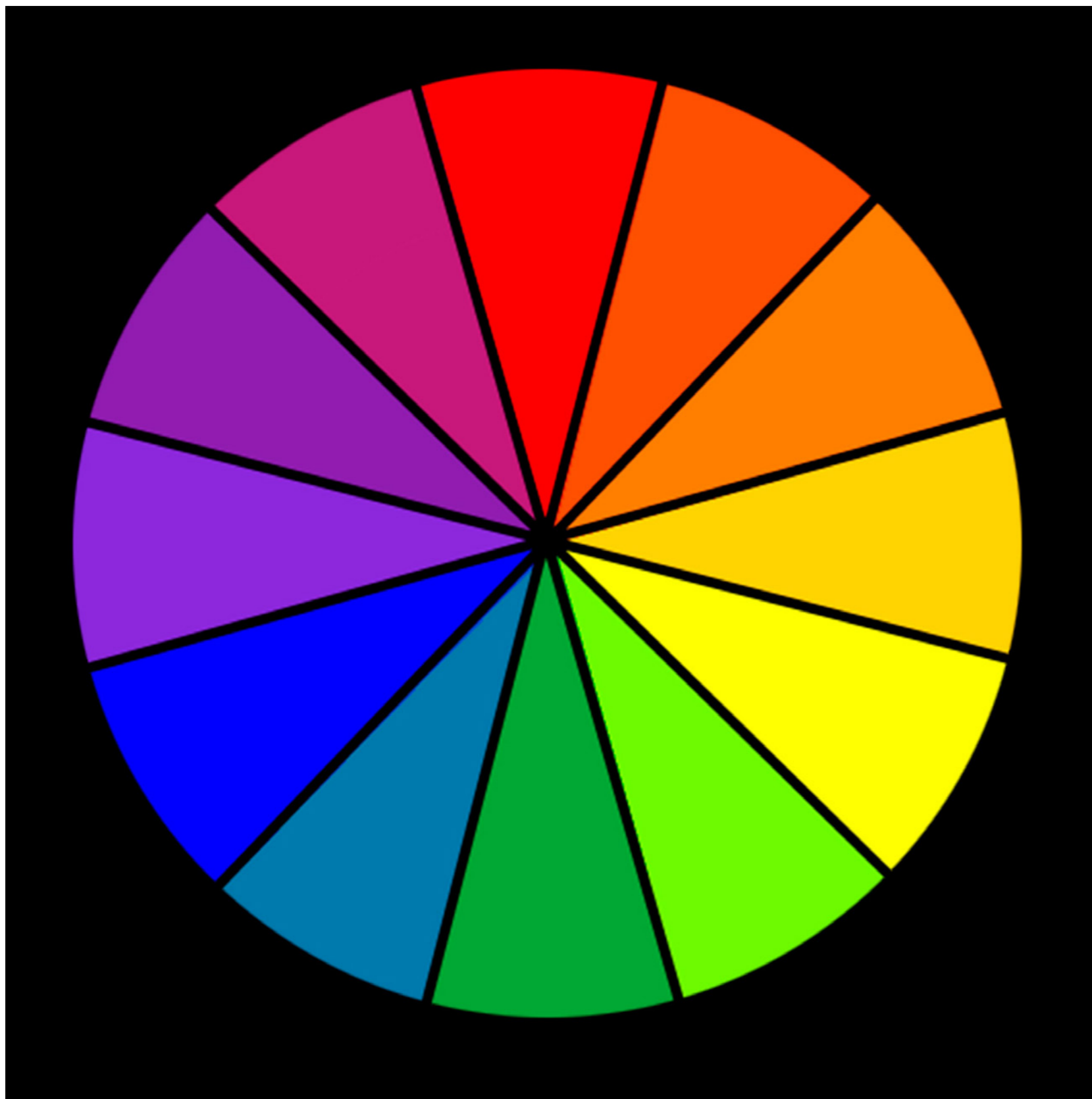
Whether you include one or more primary colors in your composition, you must frame them well. Careful consideration of how you use primary colors can help guide viewers through your photos.

Here is what you will learn in this guide:

- What are the primary colors?
- What are complementary colors?

- What is a color wheel?
- The impact of the color red
- How the color blue sets a mood
- Why the color yellow makes us happy
- The importance of paying attention to primary colors in a scene
- How to work with primary colors in a composition

 **Recommended Reading:** Want to create memorable, fascinating, and impressive color photographs? Grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [Rich and Vibrant Color Photography Volume 1.](#)



WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY COLORS?

The primary colors we see naturally are red, blue, and yellow. These are colors that cannot be mixed by adding two or more pigments together.

In this guide we are concentrating on red, blue, and yellow as the primary colors that we photograph. These are found as the basis for the common color wheel. This was first developed in 1666 by Sir Isaac Newton and now has numerous variations. Understanding this color wheel can help your understanding of how different colors relate to each other.

The colors associated with being primary colors in more recent times are in two different sets. These are red, green, and blue (RGB) and cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (CMYK). RGB are additive colors and are commonly associated with screens, monitors, and projection. CMYK are subtractive colors and is the standard color set used in offset printing.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Pure primary colors are the basis for all other colors, hues, shades, and tints. Red, yellow, and blue can be most effectively used to grab the viewer's eye. Used well, they are a very powerful compositional tool.

◆ **Key Lesson:** Spend a little time looking at the color wheel. Become familiar with the primary colors and those that sit next to them. See how they interact and also take note of the colors that are opposite the primary colors. These are called complementary colors.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

RED IS HOT

The color red stands out like no other. Using a single red object in a composition will often serve to captivate the viewer's attention.

The color red is associated with passion and love. It's used to convey power and playfulness. It's also the color of blood, which can draw a whole range of perceptions into a person's mind. In some cultures, red is used extensively as a ceremonial color and is considered a lucky color.

Using red in portraits adds drama and delight. Lipstick. Rouge. A hat, scarf, or handbag. A little red dress or a deep red smoking jacket. The redder the red, the more potent the manipulation of meaning. You have to ensure that when your subject wears red, they do so with a strong intention. By eliciting the right look, one that lives up to the color, you'll create a portrait with strength and depth.




Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

When photographing food, red stands alone. No other color has the same impact in culinary photography that the color red does. Strawberries, tomatoes, or cherries. A raw steak or a single chili. Even photographed on their own, each of these stands out purely because they are red. It's not uncommon when I take a workshop group into the markets that at least one of my students spends the most amount of time photographing the chilies!

Red can be used well in landscapes, in architecture pictures, abstractions, and every photographic field.

Photographing red at night stands out the most. Red taillights in traffic, and red neon lights and signs impact a photo like no other color. The warm glow reflecting in a window or puddle on a rainy night. Dozens of taillights illuminating the highway at rush hour. That one red stop light telling you to go no further. All these used well in a composition make it more dynamic and powerful.

 **Key Lesson:** Red is energetic and passionate. Be mindful and use it with purpose in your compositions. Ensure that this color in particular is not stealing attention from your main subject.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

BLUE IS COOL

In a photographic composition, blue is calming and cooling. Think of looking across the ocean on a clear day with cloudless skies. Blue is settling and encourages tranquility when used well in pictures. Associations with sadness and melancholy are common too. But, like blues music, the color does not have to hold you in a particular emotional space.

Use blue in your photos to create a peacefulness. Lighter blues with softer tones do this more readily than darker shades of blue. Make use of a blue sky to create a relaxing landscape or urban composition. Dress a portrait subject in soft blue tones to evoke feelings of rest and relaxation.


Choose a deeper, darker blue to enhance a heavier feeling. Like a storm cloud that threatens rain, darker blues tend to evoke more of a foreboding atmosphere.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Apart from the sky and sea, which are not actually blue, we don't see much blue in nature. A few birds and butterflies display spectacular blues, but aside from them, the color blue seldom occurs naturally. So, when you do find blue in the wild, photograph it carefully. Make the most of how you use it and where you position it within your frame.

Twice a day, photographers like to make use of the 'blue hour' - the period of time shortly before sunrise, and again in the evening a little after sunset. At these times the light takes on a blue hue and affects your photographs more or less depending on how you set your white balance.

 **Key Lesson:** To create melancholy images, take photos during the blue hour. Experiment with 'inaccurate' white balance settings. Use them to enhance the blueness and make more creative use of the light quality.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

YELLOW IS HAPPY

Yellow is bright, optimistic, and happy. When it's pure, it's powerful. Mixed with other colors, it has a significant effect on the results. Think of a cool or a warm green, for example. The more yellow added, the warmer the color and the more uplifting the feeling.

The warm tones of yellow draw in a viewer's attention when used well in a composition. Think of a bunch of flowers, a sunhat, or a book cover on a display stand. Any of these will grab your attention, especially when surrounded by contrasting colors.

Use yellow for impact. A brightly lit yellow object, even when a little underexposed, stands out dramatically against a dark background.

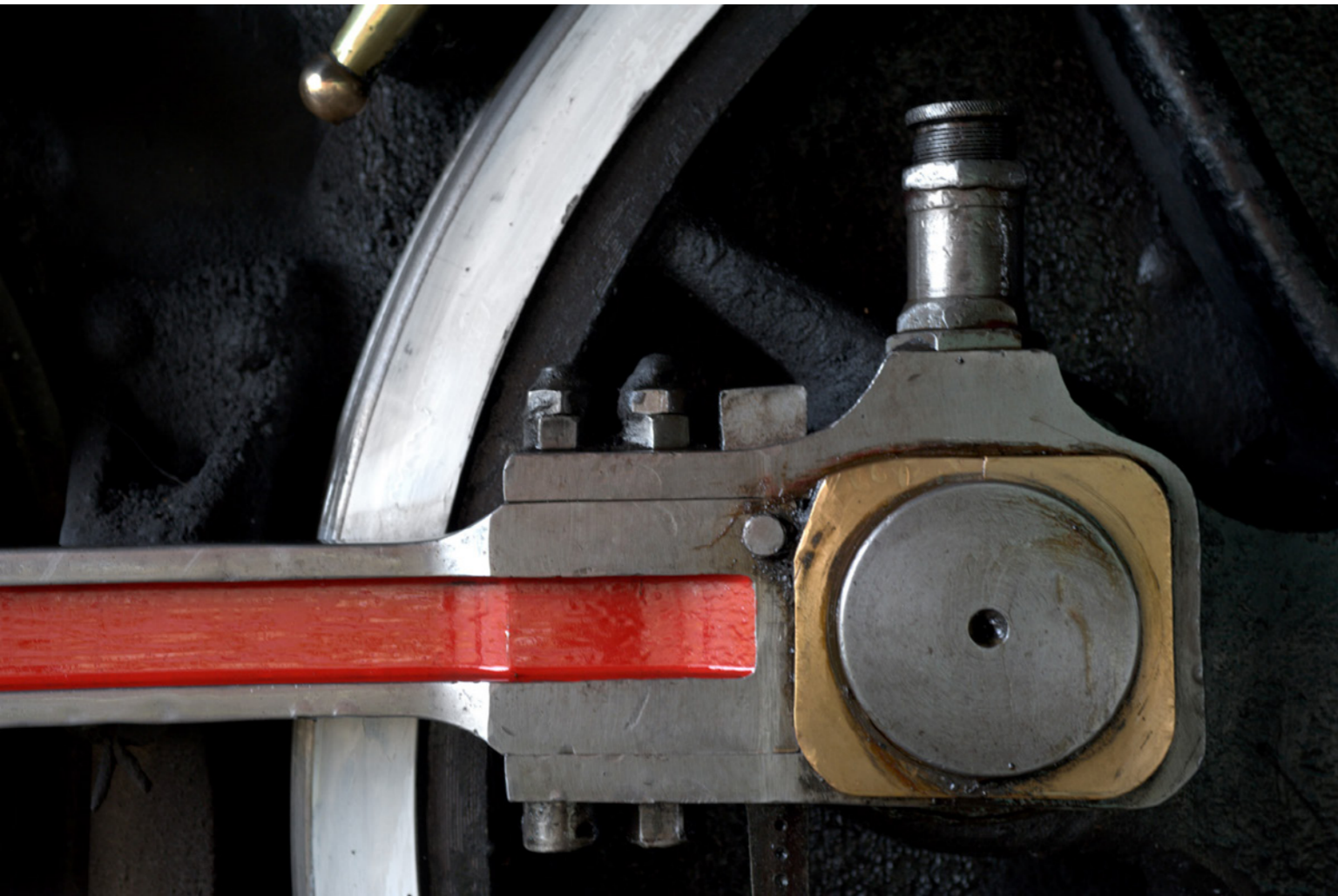
Designers use yellow cautiously. Too much will tire you out. They tell us that a little yellow goes a long way, especially when paired with a dark blue or with black. Nature does this well too. Think of bees and wasps, snakes, birds, and even frogs.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

When you're using yellow in your composition, position it well. Take note of other colors that are present and figure out how to allow yellow to influence your photographs to add a happy brightness.

Key Lesson: Harness the power of yellow to create positive, uplifting images. The brightness of yellow helps to contrast and draw attention away from cooler and darker hues.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan


PAYING MORE ATTENTION TO PRIMARY COLORS

Primary colors can tend to stand out more, so it should be easier to make use of them in your compositions. However, I'm often surprised at how many photographers miss opportunities to incorporate primary colors into their photographs in meaningful ways.

Take your time to include primary colors well in your pictures. Think about how a red, blue, or yellow element interacts with other colors within your frame. Use your skills to compose and expose the main color you are working with for maximum impact.

Use instances of color the same way you can use objects to create photos using the rule of odds or thirds. Even other composition rules or techniques can be applied to include primary colors in your photos.

Think in terms of color mainly, rather than subject matter. Try to understand the relationship between colors and how this affects the mood of your photograph.

 **Key Lesson:** Underexposing a little will enhance the color saturation in your photographs.

LEARN TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF PRIMARY COLORS

One of the best ways to learn to make the most of color is to look for specific colors and concentrate on them.

When you find a subject that's a primary color, take at least three different photos of it. Isolate them, contrast them, and blend them together.

Isolate it so there's no other significant color in your frame. Make it pop all on its own. Think about the mood this creates in each image. You might try this using lighting and exposure to highlight your colored subject and have the background underexposed. You can also use a shallow depth of field to lessen the intensity of colors in the background. Or you can compose your images in such a way that there's no other color visible in your frame.

Incorporate more than one color with your main primary colored subject. With red things, use green, blue, or yellow as a background color. For blue subjects, have an orange or yellow background. Yellow stands out well against any dark color and contrasts particularly well with purple.

Try finding other colors to use with a primary color that are closer in tone. Reds used with oranges or pinks create a different mood than when used with more contrasting colors. Blue, blue, and more blue, all of varying tones, can create interesting, tranquil scenes. Yellow with bright colors of similar hues will usually create an uplifting feeling.



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan




Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

CONCLUSION

Unless you photograph in grayscale only, color is one of the key aspects of any good photograph. The better you use color, especially primary colors, the more impact your photographs can have.

Be mindful of how you include elements of primary colors in your compositions. Think about where these things appear in your frame. How much of the composition do they take up? Does their color add to or detract from the mood you want to create?

We see color all around us, but we're often not acutely aware of the influence it has on our thoughts and feelings. The more appreciative you are of the colors around you, the better you'll be able to incorporate them into your pictures.

 **Recommended Reading:** Want to create memorable, fascinating, and impressive color photographs? Grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [Rich and Vibrant Color Photography Volume 1](#).



Photograph by Kevin Landwer-Johan

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What are the three primary colors?
- 2) What is the color red often associated with?
- 3) What effect does the color blue often have in a photograph?
- 4) What setting can you experiment with when taking photos during the blue hour to enhance blueness?
- 5) What are three things the color yellow can be associated with?
- 6) How can you adjust your camera settings to enhance color saturation?



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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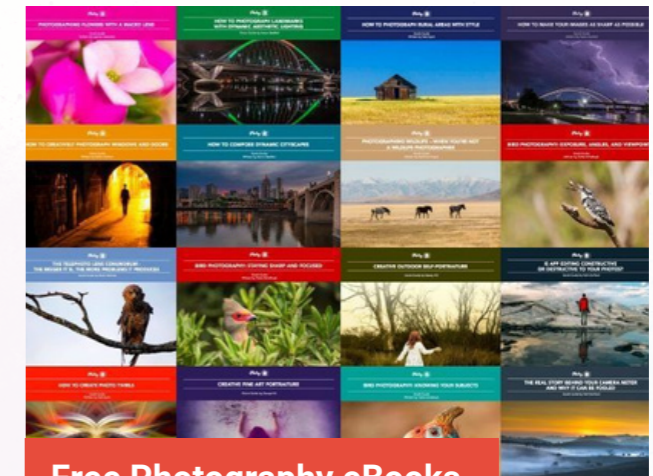
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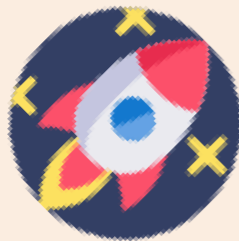
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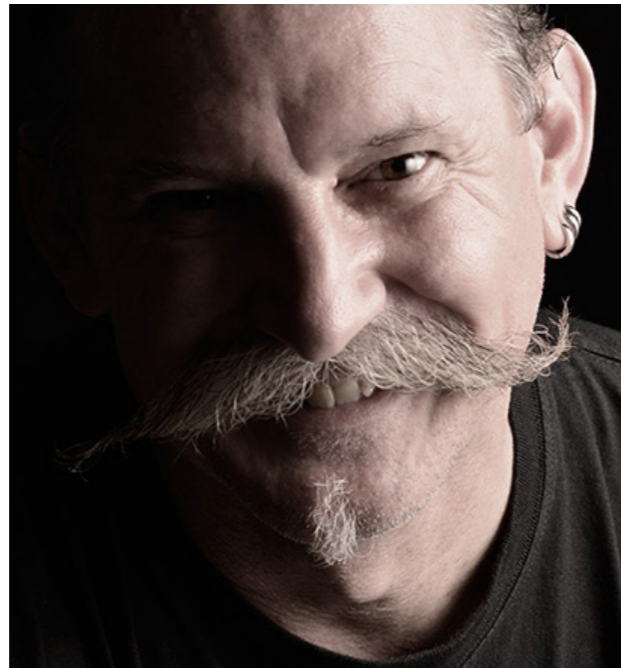
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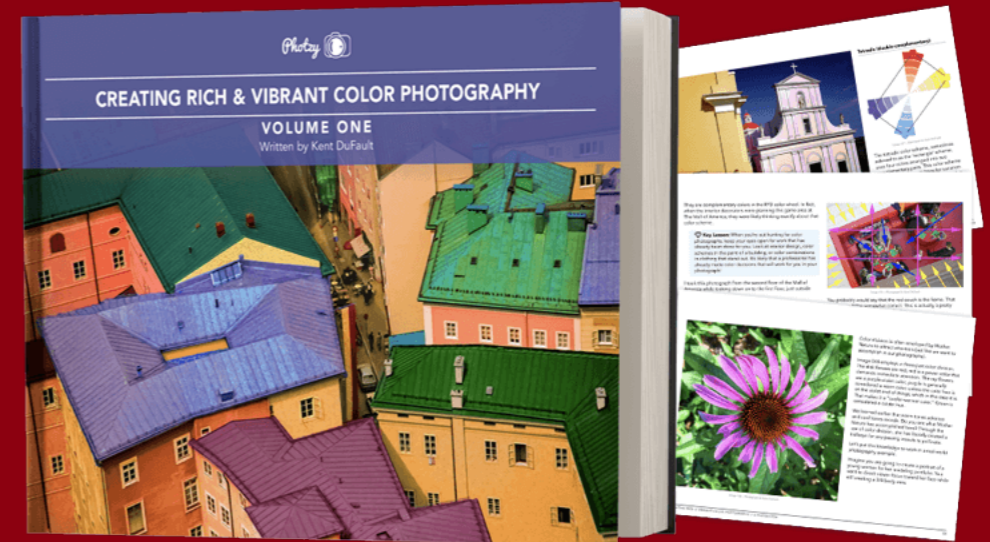
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kevin is a New Zealand professional photographer living in the north of Thailand since 2002. During his career he has worked in editorial, documentary, and commercial photography. He now also teaches photography workshops and writes books and articles. You can read his blog [here](#). He runs [photography workshops based at his home](#) in rural northern Thailand.

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