



HOW TO CREATIVELY PHOTOGRAPH WINDOWS AND DOORS

Quick Guide
Written by Robin Nichols



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Photograph by Robin Nichols

One of my favorite door shots in one of my favorite locations, Chefchaouen, Morocco. Everything in the old city is painted in exquisite tones of powder blue – and the color changes from dark to light, then back to dark again, through the day depending on where the sun is. The experience is as immersive as it is sensual.

Windows and doors make a great subject matter for many reasons.

Doors and windows are of particular interest to me because they can reflect the architectural fashions of a past time, furnish an insight into the heritage of a region, provide a compositional framework for a better picture, or just produce a literal window into other people's lives. And let's face it, it's always interesting to peek into someone else's house or yard, just to see how they live.

What you'll learn in this guide:

- Ideas on shooting doors and windows
- Composition ideas
- Choosing your subjects, and why
- How to shoot a jigsaw panorama
- Post-processing ideas
- Best times of the day to shoot



Photograph by Robin Nichols

I don't generally go for a lot of people shots in poorer countries. I find it a bit voyeuristic so it doesn't sit well with me. But in this instance, when we stopped to actually visit this home in Madagascar, I couldn't prevent myself from taking a snap of these two kids as they peered down at me from their bedroom window.

I specifically framed it as a tall composition to give weight to the image, and to emphasize the nature of the mud brick construction.

Westerners tend to use windows and doors as a way of shutting out the intrusions of life – dust, dirt, noise, and often prying eyes. But I've come to the conclusion that, in less wealthy countries, and especially those in hot climates, residents do the opposite – throwing open their doors and windows partly because that provides better ventilation, but also because, though their homes might not be big, it's part of their cultural make up.

Wander the streets of Havana or Marrakesh or Florence and you'll see masses of people sitting out on their porches, wandering the street, or chatting with folk in cafes.

Recommended Reading:

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Photograph by Robin Nichols

*Another favorite shot, not because it's my best – far from it – but it's noted because the overgrown yew tree at St Edward's church in Stow-on-the-Wold (UK) is thought to have inspired JRR Tolkien when he wrote *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Because I'd read about this tree somewhere, I specifically sought it out to take this picture. Tolkien or not, it's still a magnificent sight.*

Photograph by Robin Nichols

In another pilgrimage I visited Wells Cathedral in the UK. It's a popular tourist spot as it is a truly magnificent religious edifice, but as a photographer I wanted to emulate the early pioneer photographer Frederick H. Evans who snapped it back in 1903. His image was entitled a 'Sea of Steps' and was taken through a vaulted archway leading to the Chapter House. The unevenness of the steps, combined with the vaulted ceiling and open doorways, make this a classic composition which I tried to copy. (Because of the volume of tourists, a lot of patience is required in these places if you want it to appear deserted.)



RECORDING HISTORY

Whenever I travel to Europe I inevitably find myself shooting doors and windows simply based on their history – an entranceway to a medieval castle, a bursar's gateway into an old university courtyard, or a vintage church door that has somehow survived since the Norman invasion of England. History is often etched with a thick patina that, in the right light, can be recorded almost as if it were applied like paint; it's so gorgeously sensuous.



Photograph by Robin Nichols

Church exterior, Prague. I took this because at the time I was working on a project entitled 'Yellow' and the stark, bold primary color used on the outside of this church was brilliantly eye-catching, even on this dull November day.

Inevitably I often switch to black and white, or at least tinted black and white, when shooting historical subjects because that medium really suits the mood. It doesn't work every time, but it's certainly worth bearing in mind when post-processing such pictures.



Photograph by Robin Nichols

Fishing village, Southern Oman. I loved this image for its compositional balance and simple color. The heavy blue window on the right-hand side balances out the two lighter, pastel colored doors to the left-hand side of the image.

COMPOSE YOURSELF

Another way to look at this subject matter is that both doors and windows are great **compositional aides**. Shooting through either presents a perfect way to **crop out** stuff that you don't like for the purpose of making the subject simpler (i.e. less cluttered) and therefore stronger.

Use doorframes and archways to hide uninteresting skies, buildings, or other visual complexities that might dilute the strength of the subject. Note also that the distance you stand from a window frame works a bit like a zoom lens; the further back you are from the opening, the less you see of the view. If you have the space to stand back, use this as an additional and variable framing device to make tighter compositions.

Another feature I frequently hunt out is **contrasting symmetry**, such as two doors side by side in a perfectly symmetrical Georgian street, or the totally asymmetrical doors and windows found in a row of Elizabethan alms houses that no longer possess a straight edge anywhere in its makeup.

And because I love the look of high dynamic range photography (and its ability to add tremendous textural detail to an image), I'm also drawn to photograph old shopfronts, crusty doors, or blocked-in windows – basically anything that has seen better days.



Photograph by Robin Nichols

Man in a church, Lake Tana, Ethiopia. I asked this man if I could take a portrait. He agreed and I asked him to stand in the doorway of the church. He did but he turned to look at me, throwing his face mostly into deep shade. I asked him to look outside instead and pressed the shutter. Providing the situation is right, window light can be used as effectively as big lights in a studio.

USE WINDOW LIGHT TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

“Lighting is everything,” so use this knowledge to position your subject in a window or doorway so that the light pouring into the room falls onto their face. Natural light portraits using nothing but window light can be spectacular in their simplicity and their impact.

When in the field I also find it’s sometimes best just to **lurk**.

If I find a door with potential I’ll perhaps wait until a person or a vehicle passes through the opening before I press the shutter. Often, I’ll set the shutter speed to record that intrusive motion as a blur to give the impression of anonymity – more a ‘presence’ than a sharp figure.

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Photograph by Robin Nichols

Damascus old city, Syria. Walking away from the souks into the darkness of a covered alleyway at night looked really spooky. So I leant against the side of the alley and hung about for a person to walk past and shot the image with a slow shutter speed to give a ghostly look to the shot.



BEST TIME OF DAY TO SHOOT

Ironically, though most photo techniques require you to rise early to get the first light of the day, or to shoot during the golden hour around sunset, most of my favorite doorways have been shot in the middle of the day. This rule doesn't apply to every subject, but at times you'll find overhead sun produces amazing three-dimensional lighting, emphasizing the textures in a wooden door, for example, or just blasting it with sunshine to bring out the best color and definition.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

Middle of the day, blisteringly hot, but the light produced fantastic hard shadows on this door frame giving the large rivets and bolt a strong 3D look.

POST-PROCESSING

I also have a habit of post-processing everything with a dedicated HDR application. It doesn't matter if I'm specifically trying to record more tones in the frame or not. If the dynamic range of the scene is too much for a single shot, which it often is, I might set up my tripod and shoot three or five frames at different exposures for processing using HDR software. Even with a single file, I find that this treatment often produces images with better visual punch than if I'd simply processed it using, say, a color and contrast boost in Photoshop. For me, the HDR application is faster and often produces better results.



Photograph by Robin Nichols

Rajasthan, India. This was a tiny little peephole in a country house somewhere in the Thar Desert. Someone had painted this exquisite decoration around the window to act as a frame and decoration at the same time.



PANORAMA TO THE RESCUE

On occasion I have found that there's not enough room to get the shot. This is particularly relevant if you are a street photographer. If I can't step back far enough to get everything into the frame, and using an ultra-wide lens adds too much distortion, the answer might be to shoot a **jigsaw panorama**. Basically, shoot the required scene in sections and then use a photo editor to stitch the pieces together into an irregular-edged document.

The trick with the jigsaw panorama technique is to lower your camera's resolution before you shoot (to keep the composite file size manageable) and then take multiple snaps of the scene, overlapping the frames generously – above, below, to the left and to the right – until you have everything covered, and then process the lot in Photoshop.

Even with 15 or more frames, the software does an amazing job of lining everything up. You can then either leave the irregular edges as an additional visual effect or crop to a rectangle. (Don't forget to reset the camera resolution!)

Havana, Cuba. Although this looks like a normal snap of a very big front door, it was in a street that was probable only 15 feet wide, so almost impossible to shoot, even with a wide-angle lens. One easy solution is to shoot the subject in bits and to use a program like Photoshop to stitch it together as if it were a panorama.



Photograph by Robin Nichols

One of my favorite techniques is go inside a doorway wherever possible and shoot looking back, with the light spilling into the room. In this example the light was coming in through both the entrance at left and the tiny light well at the top of the frame. By combining three exposure-bracketed images using an HDR application, I captured good detail in the shadows as well as the highlights pouring in from the left to illuminate the steps on the right-hand side.

THE MORE DOORS THE MERRIER

I love haunting relics from the past – old buildings and castles are my favorite because the architecture is so aged, uneven and, well, **historical**.

To include a little mystery, I try to position myself so I can get a doorway opening onto another door, and then onto another door, to capture as much of a **visual pathway** through the image as possible. You usually can't do this with modern buildings because they are so rectilinear and architecturally 'correct.'



Photograph by Robin Nichols

Another favorite location – sadly now off limits because of the Syrian conflict. Krak de Chevaliers is a massive Crusader castle built in 1031. I was in the store rooms underneath part of the castle photographing these wonderful vaulted rooms. Again, it's a scene of archways leading to more archways (it's a slight obsession).

In the days when the Crusaders built the massive **Krak de Chevaliers** castle in what is now war-torn Syria, there were no building codes as such, so when I visited a few years ago I was so excited by all the irregular and revealing passageways, doors, openings, alleyways, and yes, more doors.

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Photograph by Robin Nichols

I think photographers often forget to zoom in and shoot the details in many subjects.

Large, bold images are fine, but if you see too many of them you might find it is information overkill. Close-ups can be simpler and, in many cases, more to the point.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL

And don't forget to record the detail. One afternoon I was wandering through the old and very dilapidated section of Nizwa, a country town in Oman. Most of the houses were in dire need of repair – which was probably why I was attracted to photograph them in the first place.

The streets and the crumbling mudbrick work were bleached almost colorless in the hot sun, but the doors retained some of their paintwork so the point of my focus became the smaller details in the doors themselves; not macro, just close-ups – paint surfaces and the locks that festooned each old house. Always keep this in mind as you wander the streets; close-ups are simpler and easier to visually digest than endless large, busy scenes with too much pictorial information in them. These also made a nice double-page spread in a photo book I put together after the trip.



Hey there!

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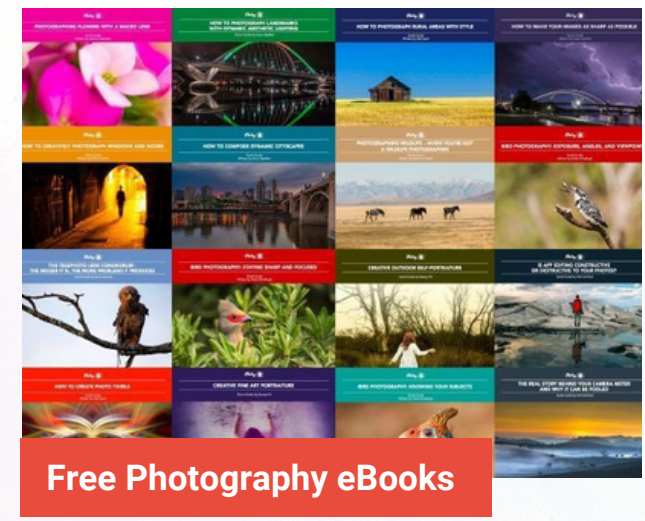
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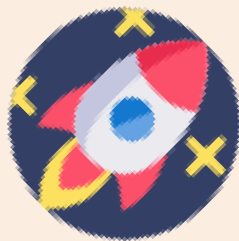
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robin Nichols is a UK-born photographer. He has spent the past 30 years in Sydney, Australia, where he began work as a cameraman, then as a freelance photographer.

He worked as a freelance writer and then as a magazine editor for several photography publications for more than eight years. He also ran his own publishing business, producing two specialist magazines - *Better Photoshop Techniques* and *Better Digital Camera* magazine.

Aside from conducting photo tours and workshops, Robin teaches photography, video, and post-processing classes through the Centre for Continuing Education at Sydney University.

His work can be seen online at

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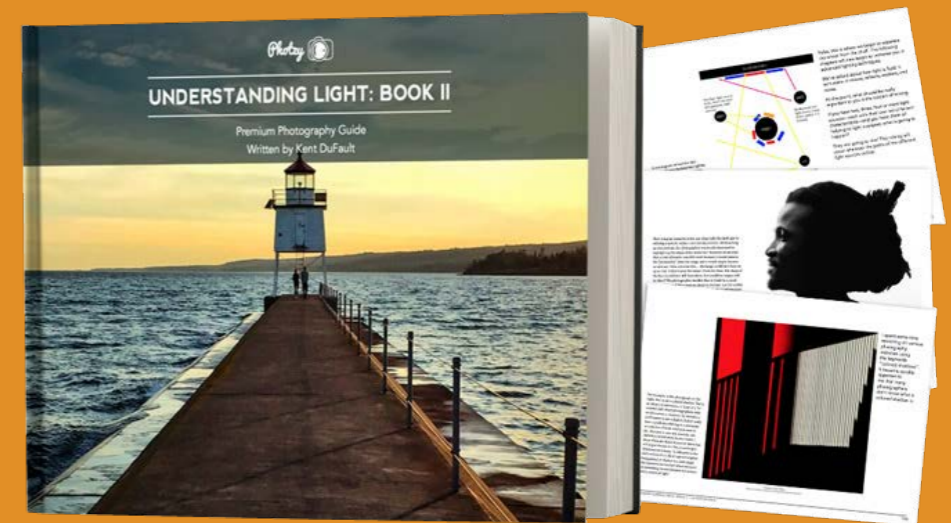
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