

Martin's Personal Top Ten Photos For 2019

Jan 5, 2020



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A very Happy New Year to you, as we dive into the third decade of the 21st century, I’ve spent a few days returning to my 2019 Top Ten selection, and

whittled it down to what I consider to be my favorite 10 images for the year. It was a tough process, as usual, but I’ve talked about the process itself at length almost every year

since 2007, so I’m only going to skirt over that with a few thoughts today.

The thing that I found most difficult about this year is that I have done all of the tours that I did in 2019 many times, so it was difficult to find images that felt relatively fresh, but most of what I have ended up with has at least a small element of freshness, for one reason or another. For notes on the selection process I’ve put a grid of previous year’s podcasts at the end of this post, so check out some of them if you are interested.

We’ll work through the top ten images in chronological order as I don’t necessarily want to order them any further than including them in this list. This first image is from my Hokkaido Winter Landscape Tour which I will be starting for this year on the day that I release this podcast. These are the falls behind the hotel that we stay in for the first three days, as we travel around Biei making mostly minimalist photographs of the snow-covered hills and trees.

Shirahige Falls


I love the work from this trip, but because I’ve shared it many times I decided to include this shot which is not what I would call minimalist in the least. There’s lots of detail and 24mm a much wider focal length than I often shoot on this trip. That in itself is one of the things that felt fresh at this location for me. I usually prefer going in close, picking out details, and that’s probably why I found this somewhat refreshing.



This next image is from my Japan Winter Wildlife Tour and one that is probably the closest to the sort of work that I usually shoot, but I couldn’t help but leave this in my selection. You probably won’t appreciate the reason for that at the Web size for the images, as I found myself unable to remove this after going through the images on a 54-inch 4K TV screen as I shared my final 24 images with my wife to get her opinion and help me to whittle down to the final ten.

This shot really came to life on a big screen, which is hardly surprising because the details need to be viewed larger to really understand what’s happening. As with a large print though, images can come to life when viewed large, and that right there is part of the appeal of large format prints to me as well.



A photograph of a barred owl sitting in a tree hollow, looking out at a nuthatch perched on a nearby branch. The owl is positioned in the center-right of the frame, nestled within a large, dark, irregular opening in the bark of a tree trunk. It has a white face with a dark stripe through its eye and brown and white barred plumage. The nuthatch is a small bird with a grey back and white underparts, perched on a branch to the left of the owl's hollow. The tree bark is thick, textured, and shows signs of decay and moss. The background is a soft-focus view of other tree trunks and branches.

The next image is also from my Winter Wildlife Tour and I was attracted to this more than anything by the serendipity of owl's attention being caught by the scratching of the nuthatch that was scuttling around on the side of the tree. The owl wouldn't have been able to see the small bird from its vantage point, so it must have been the sound that alerted it to the nuthatch's presence.



The following image has remained my favorite of a series of three images that I cropped down to a 4:5 ratio, all of the same pair of Red-Crowned Cranes dancing together at the end of the day. It was so late by the time I shot this that I had to pump my ISO up to 8000 at f/11 to get this shot at a 1/400 of a second shutter speed, which is what I needed to freeze the movement.

I suppose I'm also including a few points for the technology as well, as this image would simply have not been possible even just a few years ago. The only problem with shooting wildlife in this level of light is that you have virtually no chance to get a catchlight in their eyes, and I don't like to use flash for that purpose, but I think the form of the birds and the minimalist white on white look that I love still makes for a shot that I find very appealing.



That's also what I like about the next image, shot three months or so later, in Walvis Bay in Namibia, during my Complete Namibia Tour. We were treated with a beautiful morning mist that I'd expected to burn off quite quickly but which actually hung around for over an hour. The very pale pink of the flamingoes against the mist and water in this highly diffused morning sunlight was lovely to watch and photograph. The reflections

were a little bit ripply but defined enough to form a pleasing additional dimension that basically disappears if the wind gets up any higher. The mist was again cutting out a lot of light, forcing me to work at ISO 5000 for this image for an 1/800 of a second at f/10. I like to keep a reasonably small aperture for these shots, as the depth of field is too shallow for multiple subjects if you open it up much more than this.

At the end of the same day, we were back out on the beach, enjoying the fact that the EOS R has an articulated LCD so that I could drop the camera down literally to water level to capture the beautiful salmon pink tones of the setting sun behind the flamingoes that were gathering in larger numbers now to spend the night in a group.



Also gaining protection from being in groups, the Zebra in the Etosha National Park played a large part in my photography last year. I love this shot of a young zebra merged into his dazzle doing just that as they made their way across the planes. This area was a rarity with a reasonable amount of vegetation, albeit very dry. Most of the rest of the park was very baron in 2019 as the

country struggled with a particularly bad drought. I love taking my zebra shots into black and white, as I think it helps us to concentrate on the graphic appeal of these beautiful black and white Equidae. That’s just a lucky bonus for the photographer really, but of course, the zebra need their stripes to confuse the likes of this guy in my next photo.



I have had this image as the desktop background on my iMac Pro for most of the last six months since returning from Namibia, and absolutely love the serenity of this lion as he snoozes in the morning sun, also in the Etosha National Park, Namibia. I find it amazing that these animals are so similar to their cousins that share houses with millions of humans the world over, despite them weighing probably 80 to 100 times more than those cousins.

Still, it's always a privilege to get so close to these magnificent big cats, and I was particularly happy that this guy was on a slope,

allowing me to get a shot from a vehicle that looks like I'm much lower. This is a special bonus in Etosha as you aren't allowed out of the vehicle at all. You might think that getting out of the vehicle around lions is not a good idea anyway, but that makes me recall having to get out and push our car out of the sand when we got stuck leaving the dry Hoanib Riverbed a number of years ago, while listening to the lions behind the vehicle, hoping that they preferred the taste of the giraffe they were feeding on to overweight humans.





The final two shots were from a trip to Mie Prefecture in December 2019 to photograph these two rocks in the sea that are connected with a large rope by the Shinto Shrine on the shore just to the right of the rocks. They are called Meoto Iwa, with Iwa meaning rock, and Meoto, in this case, means husband and wife. I'm not sure that I like the idea of a husband and wife being tied together, but the sentiment is harmless and the shrine is supposed to help people find a partner, so it's all connected, like the rocks themselves.

I've had this location on my wish-list for a number of years, and my friend Ulana Switucha has a lovely shot of these that had caught my eye too, so I decided to have a few days out of the office in December to go and shoot them. The two rocks in this image are, in my opinion, nicer to look at from this angle, so I chose this EOS R photo over a closer image that I shot shortly after on medium format film with my Rolleiflex TLR camera, which has too wide a lens to shoot from this angle.

Having this final image (following page) that was shot on the Rollei though seems like a fitting way to end the series, as I also ended the year being somewhat consumed by a revival in my passion for film photography. It's been exactly twenty years since I switched to digital and almost instantly stopped shooting film. I remember shooting my second camera on film briefly on my first visit to Hokkaido in the winter, as I only had one DSLR, and even compared to my Canon EOS 10D, 35mm film didn't really cut it, but the images that I'm getting on medium format

with the new Rolleiflex and the film and chemicals I'm using have been blowing me away.

It's not just about the resolution of the images though. I have thoroughly enjoyed becoming more comfortable with developing my own film at home since getting the revolutionary Lab-Box and with Fujifilm re-releasing their Neopan 100 Acros II film and me also finding Rollei RPX film, I'm kind of in film heaven at the moment.

The final photo for my series is a two-minute exposure shot on Neopan Acros II, with a cormorant that stayed almost completely still for the entire two minutes, which I thought was very nice of him. I love the soft quality of the light in this image, and how the horizon line is barely distinguishable from the sky. I'm also really pleased that Neopan has not lost its ability to create beautiful deep blacks as it got reborn as a Mark II film. Without the color information, there is no easy way to mess with the feel of the image either, so I'm very happy that I have been able to create work that matches much of the minimalist work that I find so appealing.

I'm not sure how much of it I'll have time to shoot, but I've just packed twenty-five rolls of film into my bag to take with me on the Hokkaido Winter Landscape Tour that I will be on by the time most of you listen to. I'll be shooting digital as well, just in case it all goes pear-shaped for any reason, and of course, with only a 75mm lens to work with, there will only be a certain number of locations that will work, but I'm going to try really hard to make other scenes that I'm already familiar with work on this format. I think it's become a bit of a personal challenge too, but it's really just a lot of fun, so I'm really looking forward to seeing how it turns out.

MBP Film EXIF Updater

One last thing that I wanted to point out is that I have just about finished the script that I'm creating to provide a command-line interface for updating the EXIF information in my film images. Of course, it uses Exiftool from Phil Harvey on the back end, but I've created something quite sophisticated to walk through the process of tagging scanned film in a number of ways, and hope to be able to release it as a product for sale very soon. I'm not going to charge a lot for it, but it's been a lot of work and will require more work to refine and maintain, so free doesn't really work for me.

Anyway, the point is, if you click on the final image and take a look at the shooting information ([on the blog](#)), you'll see that my site is reading the shooting data just as it does my digital images, and that was my main motivation in creating the script. I really wanted to be able to record this information in the image easily. I'm also tagging the images with the time, so they sort correctly along with my digital work, and that was also important to me.

As I mentioned, there is a grid ([on the blog](#)) of all the previous year's top ten selections and the episodes on the selection process itself, which I find to be a great learning experience and practice for creating small selections of images, for both personal and professional scenarios. Check out these earlier posts if that interests you and you haven't heard my thoughts on this already.

As usual, if you have your own top ten posted online, or your own thoughts on the process, please do

comment below and include a link. I did a terrible job of following up on this last year, and hope to be better this year, but I will get to it at some point, so please do post, and feel free to comment on each other's work as well.

In the meantime, I'm off to Hokkaido and I have not been able to create anything for release next week, so unless we get any serious downtime during the trip, I will be back in two weeks. All the best for 2020, and I'll see you on the flip-side.





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