

The Simplicity of Digital Infrared Photography

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For many years, those of us who used to shoot photos using non-digital manual cameras have had many choices available to us with regard to film types. One of those choices has been infrared film. Basically, infrared film enables your camera to measure heat as opposed to light. Infrared black and white, and also color films have enabled photographers to create very artistic, ethereal-looking images that can be exceptionally stunning to look at. There are several drawbacks to shooting infrared film with a non-digital camera, which include the following. First of all, shooting infrared film is very time-consuming. Considering the current digital technology that is available to us, I consider conventional infrared photography to be extremely inconvenient, and difficult to process well. Most of all, conventional infrared photography can be very costly because the film is so expensive. When you weigh that along with the processing time and hassle involved, you would most likely not have any interest in trying it.

However, these days, infrared photography can be accomplished very easily using a digital camera, with little fuss or inconvenience, and minimal additional cost (just the investment of buying the two filters necessary for your digital camera)! This great advancement in the digital photography realm should be considered priceless. I personally have experienced photographing infrared images using a manual, standard 35mm camera, as well as using a digital camera, and believe me, I'll never use anything but my digital camera to shoot infrared from now on. You will find the difference in procedure, ease, and cost, absolutely remarkable. More importantly, however, the difference in results has been stunningly surprising. Let me take some time now and compare my results between shooting infrared film on a standard, non-digital, film using manual camera, and shooting infrared photos using a digital camera that has a "Night Shot" mode.

On the subject of shooting infrared film in a manual 35mm camera, I found the following routine to be frustrating. First, you may be aware that just one roll of 36-exposure, 35mm Infrared black and white film, can cost over \$20.00. Considering the difficulty of working with this film, you may find the price to be rather cost-ineffective! Next, loading the roll of film into a camera may prove to be especially cumbersome. This has to be accomplished in complete darkness, and in a cool environment, since this film is ultra-sensitive to heat. Light also ruins it, if the film exposed to it. I personally found it necessary to cool my hands down with an ice pack in order to handle the film long enough so as to load it in the complete darkness of a closet. The reason I had to cool

my hands is that infrared film is sensitive even to body heat. Just handling the film long enough to load it can 'fog' it. Consequently, the process requires that your body temperature be cool enough during the handling of the film. The next step in this time-consuming procedure consists of placing your camera in a re-sealable plastic bag, and then into an ice chest filled with ice packs or dry ice. Unless you are shooting in a place like Alaska in winter, or the North Pole, you have to keep that camera cool, or the film will fog due to the heat. Once you reach your photographic destination, you need to place the necessary infrared filter on your camera lens and start shooting your film. Focus is also a big issue when shooting infrared film. To illustrate this point, briefly imagine that you are shooting a subject such as a landscape, which requires your focus to be set all the way to infinity. When using infrared film, you have to back your focus off slightly. Some manual cameras actually have a little red mark on the focus ring just shy of infinity. The existence of this feature makes it more convenient and eliminates the process of 'guessing as to where you need to focus! However, if you forget this procedure, don't expect to have sharply focused infrared images; it just is not going to happen.

Having finished shooting the entire roll of infrared film in one sitting, the next step in this procedure is to get your camera home, unload the infrared film in complete darkness, and place the film into a processing tank. If you don't process your own film, the challenge is getting the camera to the nearest photo lab that does process infrared film (most do not), and hope that the technician understands the fact that the film canister has to be handled in complete darkness, unlike normal print film.

You probably have guessed that the good news is on the horizon after having me discuss all that rigmarole just to get one roll of infrared film shot and processed. I would next like to briefly discuss a hassle-free procedure, which outlines the ease of shooting infrared images with a digital camera. Please note that here I am assuming the digital camera you are using has a "night shot" feature, as you may not be able to shoot infrared on a digital camera without this feature. You really should refer to your manual if you are not sure about this issue.

In order to capture memorable infrared images, you should first remember to purchase and place two filters on your digital camera lens: an infrared filter (80A or equivalent), and a neutral density filter (NDX2). You can find these filters for sale fairly inexpensively on the Internet. Then, simply switch your digital camera to "night shot" mode, and begin to shoot. What's nice about this is that you can pop the filters off and switch out of "night shot" mode anytime during your shooting process, and capture a color shot of the same subject you are photographing in black and white infrared. The point to remember when switching back and forth is that you should never snap a photo in night shot mode without the filters on. Otherwise, you might damage your CCD chip that is in your digital camera. Make sure you are out of night shot mode before you take the infrared and neutral density filters off your lens. So that said, is this Amazing? Easy? Inexpensive? You bet!

I next would like to briefly touch upon something that I mentioned earlier about the surprising results I obtained by shooting infrared black and white images using my digital camera. The results have been stunning. In fact, nothing I previously photographed using a standard camera and infrared film has even come close to the quality, crisp focus, detailed contrast, and overall beauty of the infrared images I shot using my digital camera. What's more is that I did not experience one iota of inconvenience. The whole procedure took hardly any time at all; I had no need to have to fuss around with 'irritable' film, and there were no extra costs involved. All I did was place two filters on my digital camera lens, then switch my camera to "night shot" mode, and began to shoot my terrific infrared images. Once I finally uploaded my images to my computer, I was done! I had nothing more to do with the exception of manipulating the images slightly using Adobe Photoshop. Shooting digital infrareds makes for a wonderful raw image to work with in Photoshop in order to 'tone' the images, which you can do easily to create your own sepia toned infrared photos, or any other color you like. It is all good...

I sincerely hope that you have now been convinced that digital infrared photography will not only be fun for you, but may provide you with another aspect and perspective of artistic satisfaction. I have certainly enjoyed my experiences with digital infrared photography, and I have created some memorable images! If I can do it, so can you!