



Never use 'Auto' again

An SLR isn't a cheap piece of kit, but it's worthless if you don't know how to use it properly. TNT takes a bootcamp camera course

WORDS **CAROLINE GARNAR**

Hands up if you have an SLR camera. Now keep your hand up if you constantly have it on 'Auto'. If your hand's in the air (maybe not literally, but in your mind at least), then don't be ashamed, but do read on.

Three days ago, my hand would have remained pointing to the sky. But, after just a two-day photography course, I can comfortably throw around words like "aperture" and "shutterspeed" and actually understand what they mean and – even better – how to put them into practice on my SLR.

Usually, 10am on a Saturday is strictly reserved for lying in bed sleeping off my hangover, but this Saturday I found myself in a studio on Mortimer Street, sat at a table with a handful of strangers and feeling like I was back at my first day at school. At this school, though, there was free coffee, tea, chocolate and fruit, and the teacher wasn't a wheezy old bore who smelt of pipe tobacco and Polo mints, but an enthusiastic, interesting and engaging guy called Nigel Wilson.

Clearly passionate about his subject, he did warn us that we would be consuming a helluva lot of information over the next two days, and he was right, but Wilson managed to keep us going despite the intensity – the coffee also helped.

The idea behind the course is to teach you how to use your camera, rather than what sort of photos to take. Or, as Wilson puts it, "Technique is the hanger on which creativity is hung. This weekend we are learning the technique, so then you can be as creative as you like."

On the Saturday, we learnt that all those numbers and letters on our camera dials and screens aren't just there for decoration, or even for the sole use of Ansel Adams' ancestors. In fact, Wilson tells us the only difference between post-course us and the pros is practice. We will know all they know, it's just a case of applying it and perfecting it. Also, like driving a car, if we practise enough, the process of knowing what buttons to press and what numbers to turn to will become second nature.

With this in mind, we got to practising our newly learnt techniques on the Sunday. Heading out onto the streets of London, I would have put a coach-load of Japanese tourists to shame with the amount of snapping I was doing. It was great to put what I had learnt to the test. I made a lot of mistakes, but bearing in mind I was an 'auto girl' barely two days earlier, I was switching between my aperture and shutterspeed numbers with confidence.

When we got back to the studio and saw each other's images, it was incredible what a bunch of amateurs had achieved (it would be bragging to mention that I won a prize for best portrait, so I won't). Wilson describes this weekend workshop as his "bootcamp course" as you go from knowing a little to a lot. And he's right. The proof is in the pictures. »

Nigel Wilson Weekend Workshop, £265. See website for dates.

▶ 36 Mortimer Street, W1W 7RG www.photographycourses.org.uk
📍 Oxford Circus

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN...

Shutterspeed How to change your shutterspeed in order to capture different levels of movement.

Panning How to shoot and freeze a moving vehicle whilst retaining the movement lines in the background.

Aperture How to shift the focus of your image by varying the blurriness of the background using aperture.

Composition The rule of thirds and watching out for visual debris.

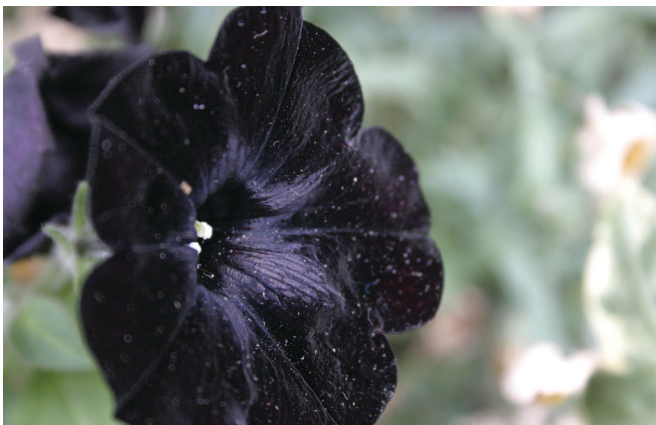
Equipment What filters and lenses do what, when you need a flash and why you MUST buy a tripod!

Useful links Where to get quality prints, second-hand equipment, repairs, further courses and inspiration.

Further learning Once you've done this course, or if you already know the above, Wilson offers night shoot and travel photography courses.

Nigel Wilson also offers night shoot courses





APERTURE I shot this flower on the narrowest aperture, keeping everything sharp, and then on the widest aperture, blurring out the background.



COMPOSITION Positioned in the right third of the frame, there is no visual debris, which is also helped by the wide aperture, so the focus is entirely on him.



SHUTTERSPEED Using a fast shutter speed, I panned this moving taxi, taking a quick succession of shots, to freeze the vehicle but show movement in the blurred background.



TEXTURE Using maximum zoom, I emphasised the roughness of this rusty nail by using a wide aperture.