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Issue 74

Photographer

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EXPERT ADVICE

TOM KIRSCH

Web: www.opacity.us

Tom Kirsch's work primarily consists of documenting abandoned locations in both text and photographs, often using guerrilla methods of accessing dangerous and off-limit places. Both the stirring history of the psychiatric hospital system's decline as

well as the abundance of abandoned mental health facilities in the United States have influenced his subjects greatly; most of his photographs and writing focus on exploring and documenting the remnants left behind in these shuttered institutions. His work can be found at www.opacity.us.

1 STAY SAFE

Watch your footing and head clearance while inside, and try to bring another person who shares the same interest. Educate yourself on the dangers of mould and asbestos, as well as preventing exposure.

2 PROTECT YOUR GEAR

Water and dirt can fall unexpectedly from above; it would be wise to keep your lens cap on as much as possible, and always use a protective glass if your lens has a thread for it. You might want to invest in a sensor cleaning kit, as the dust can be pretty invasive after a few trips.

3 HAVE FUN

Being on edge is pretty natural and adds to the excitement of it all, but if something is affecting you to the point where you're panicking, or you're just bored out of your mind because all you see is peeling paint, it's probably not your cup of tea and your photos will reflect that.

4 GET DIRTY

Put on your ripped jeans and old hiking boots, and experiment with various angles by climbing or crawling around. Explore that small backbreaking tunnel one day, or the flooded basement; it might lead to a really incredible place!

5 PRETEND IT WILL BE YOUR LAST TIME THERE

Take tons of photos and vary your style like there's no tomorrow. Try shallow and deep depth of field, straight and angled shots, macro, colour and black and white. If you show your work in a set, it'll be much more diverse and interesting and you'll have more to choose from.

UNDERGROUND BUNKER FOR CIVILIANS, GERMANY

"Flashlight painting objects in complete darkness can create wonderfully stark photographs"

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D with EF 24-70mm f2.8 L USM lens at 25mm and f5, 8sec, ISO 400

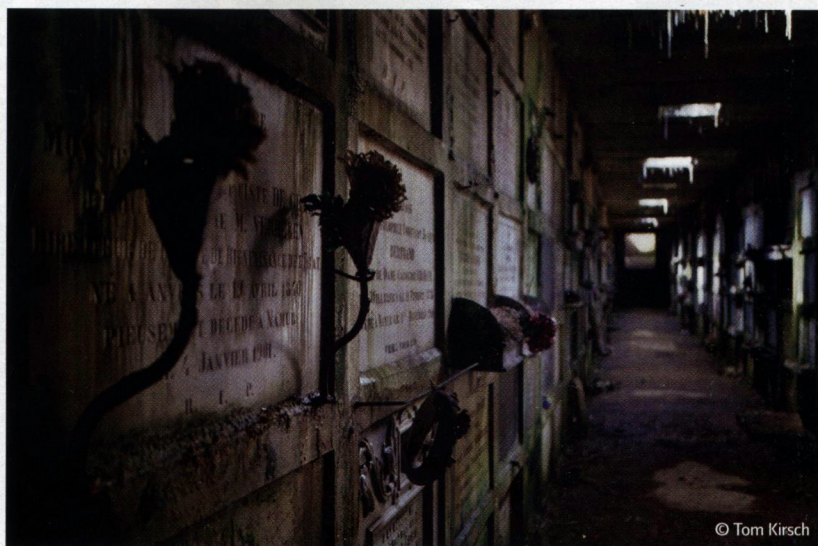


© Tom Kirsch

UNDERGROUND CRYPT, BELGIUM

"Old cemeteries can provide some incredible scenes, and underneath them is no exception"

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D with EF 24-70mm f2.8 L USM lens at 35mm, f2.8, 1/15sec, ISO 100



© Tom Kirsch

▶▶ To give you some idea of the risks involved, Tom outlines the main obstacles you can expect to encounter: "Problems I often run into are rotting floors and roofs in the older buildings that used wood as the primary building material. My foot went through the floor of an old asylum one day, and when I pulled it out there were four stories of empty space underneath me leading to a pile of sharp debris in the basement, as all the floors had rotted out – that was a reality check."

Corroded metal is a real hazard as well, especially when it is exposed to the weather. I've seen steel I-beams a few inches thick become paper-thin with rust. At one abandoned hospital, an environmental inspector fell through a corroded metal stairwell and plunged to his death just two days after I was in the same building. Self-locking doors are common in fire escape stairwells and psychiatric/correctional institutions; care should be taken to not lock yourself in (check the latch while it's open, and prop the door open).

Another problem you might encounter is the presence of officials: security guards, property owners and contractors, as well as police and military who not only patrol these places, but also use them as training grounds for both humans and K-9 units. I've been pursued by guards, police, a K-9 and even a police helicopter. The level of security depends on the place you're exploring, but you should be prepared to get a trespassing ticket in any case, and use some common sense in choosing locations to explore and photograph."

In the UK, it's a civil offence to enter a building that's off-limits to the public. If you're caught as a trespasser, it's between you and the owner of the site to work things out. It's not a criminal offence, so the police are unlikely to get involved, unless you're deliberately causing structural damage or otherwise breaking the law. Of course, you can try contacting the owner for permission prior to your visit, but most urban explorers, like Tom, prefer to take their chances.

"The most inspiring location I've visited would probably be the remnants of an old mental hospital I first visited in 2005," Tom recalls. "I'll never forget scanning my flashlight over a pile of caskets in the basement, or the thick, weathered doors on the top floor that still had glass observation windows to keep an eye on seclusion patients. Some might call it a morbid fascination, but you have to admit it's pretty powerful stuff. The underground bunkers I photographed in Germany also moved me very deeply."

Light is often in short supply when taking photos at sites like these, but there are ways to make the most of what's there, as Tom explains: "The buildings that were constructed before the advent of electricity are often the most beautiful in terms of lighting, as they were designed to use natural light as much as possible. I try to keep direct sunlight out of the photos to avoid the blown-out highlights that happen so often in digital photos, but it's often impossible to completely avoid. I just roll with it; sometimes those hot spots don't look so bad in black and white, or after some post-processing."

Sometimes there are some really interesting items or spaces I want to capture, but it's pitch black. In that case, I'll break out the flashlight and do some light painting. I generally enjoy light-painted or strobe-lit photos where the subject is lit from the top and/or the side and the light is not emitted from near the camera, like in a typical flash hotshoe setup.

If painting with a flashlight, the amount of movement while the shutter is open is important – if you hold the flashlight absolutely still, you'll get really deep and dramatic shadows much like how you see the subject in real life, but if you shake and move the light around, you can create some nicely blended lightscapes. Moving around a room without getting the actual flashlight bulb in the shot can get tricky, and the correct exposure usually takes a few shots to get it right."

"The most inspiring location I've visited would be the remnants of a mental hospital"

Timing is everything; the chances are you'll only get one shot at getting all the photos you want, so varying your framing and experimenting with different angles is good practise. Tom advises that you look at the bigger picture rather than one shot at a time: "I look at composition in terms of an entire shoot at a location, not on a per photo basis. I think it's important to step back and look at your shots as a whole, because it is easy to get stuck shooting in one 'mode'. For example, say the building has really beautiful, long symmetrical hallways and you've gotten a whole bunch of them, mostly centred or off to the side, and they look great. Try changing your lens to something totally different, or go off and shoot some macros of something you find interesting in the rooms. Stand on desks or crawl into the dusty recess in the floor for a super-low angle. Even if dead-centred photos are your style, it's always good to expand into new territory; you might find something really awesome, even if it only works for that one shot."

PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL, GERMANY

"Repetition of shapes and compositions, especially in institutional settings"

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D with Canon EF 24-70mm f2.8 L USM lens at 35mm and f8.0, 8sec, ISO 160

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BIGFEATURE ► URBAN EXPRESSION

▼ ROLLER COASTER

"This wooden roller coaster has crumbled over the years, making it a challenge to climb on for various angles." Shot using an infrared filter, amusement park, USA

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D with EF 24-70mm f2.8 L USM lens at 28mm and f7.1, 1min, ISO 100

► Tom's images are imbued with his distinctive style: eerie lighting and an emotive feel. When asked how he achieves this incredible level of impact in his shots, he responds: "These places are so incredible to begin with, I think they mostly shoot themselves with regard to lighting and atmosphere. Photo after photo of just peeling paint and empty rooms can get a bit monotonous, which is where your personal style comes into play and things get interesting. I'm always thinking what it must have been like to be in these places while they were still functioning. It's similar to an unconscious thought or background process in my mind. I'll feel compelled to take a photo of a machine where a factory worker might have stood each day for every working day of his life, or capturing the beams of light travelling across a day room where a hospital patient might have sat, watching those same patterns slowly move across that very floor. These things are interesting and important to me, and I think I reflect that in the photos. I also don't use any automated post-processing techniques, so each photo I work on has a personal touch. It adds a sense of pride, somewhat akin to the feeling of completing a drawing or painting."

Tom's clearly incredibly passionate about his urban explorations, which is what makes the difference in the end product. As any photographer who is passionate about his subject will tell you, if you're enthusiastic about what you're doing, that ardour will shine through. Tom confesses: "There's something about disuse that intrigues me – the process of decay can transform a space into a totally different creature. A clean, well-lit hallway might turn into something out of a horror film within ten years. The mysteries beyond the rusty fences and locked doors also spark my curiosity – I want to know what's back there. If that means dodging security, hopping fences, and wading through smelly waist-deep water in an underground tunnel, then it's all the more fun! The fact that I'm able to climb up the facade of a building, have wheelchair races in basements, and go wherever I please without someone getting in my face is something that I really enjoy. It's like being a little kid again, free to do whatever you please in a fantasy world full of decay."

It just goes to show that there's beauty to be found everywhere in the world, from the people that walk the streets and the buildings that line them, to your very own urban wonderland.

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