



Viewpoint Mike Smith

Missing the perfect shot is always heartbreaking. Take it from Mike Smith who had to learn the hard way

Imagine you are asked to complete a Dutch Tourist Board questionnaire. It is interested in British perceptions of Dutch stereotypes. What would yours be? A wideangle view of a sea of bright-orange tulips in full bloom? How about a vast, flat fen landscape, topped by a brightly painted windmill? Or a view of a coffee shop sandwiched between a souvenir boutique and bookstore? For me, I think bikes. The Dutch are a nation of cyclists and I have vivid images of bikes hammering around the narrow cobbled streets of Amsterdam or on wide, flat cycle paths traversing mile upon mile of polder. What I find amazing are the types of people that cycle – from a six-year-old on their way to school through to a grandfather on a trip to the shops.

So, on my visit to Delft I was always going to get a bike shot. Yes, I would take shots of the Nieuwe Kerk, some Delftware and canals, but always a bike shot. I stood on one of the street corners for about half an hour practising my panning skills, trying to get a group of riders cycling past, background blurred, all in mono. I nailed that one, and with some Dutch tilt to boot. Then on the way back to the station, I spotted a momentary piece of Dutch-bike arcana – a guy was cycling to get his train, ready to leave his bike in the racks. He was obviously off on a trip as he had a bag. Actually, he had a suitcase on wheels that he was towing behind him. What a

great fleeting moment – I didn't hesitate. I lifted my Nikon D700 with an 85mm f/1.8 lens to my eye, I tried to move the spot focus on to him and fumbled trying to press back-button focus before firing. Then he was gone. The 85mm happened to be what was on the camera, and although he was a little small in the frame, it was cropable. I viewed the image on the back of the camera and my heart sank. Not only had I missed focus, but f/1.8. Why f/1.8? The depth of field was so shallow that it couldn't rescue poor focus. He was frustratingly blurry.

Some shots you set up, some shots you wait and prepare for, but others are momentary. You have one shot and need to be ready. Look at your camera now – what lens is on it and how is the camera set up? If you had two seconds to point the camera and press the shutter release, would you get your shot? My Nikon D700 currently has a 35mm f/2 lens attached – it's set to aperture priority, with Auto-ISO and back-button focus (focus point in the centre). And yes, f/8! It means I retain control of the camera and have creative use of focus and aperture, but if I need to fire rapidly, I can. I usually check my camera settings, but now I always leave it in a default set-up. To quote Weegee 'f/8 and be there!'

Mike Smith is a London-based wedding and portrait photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk



A missed opportunity. The blurry shot in question, taken at f/1.8

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