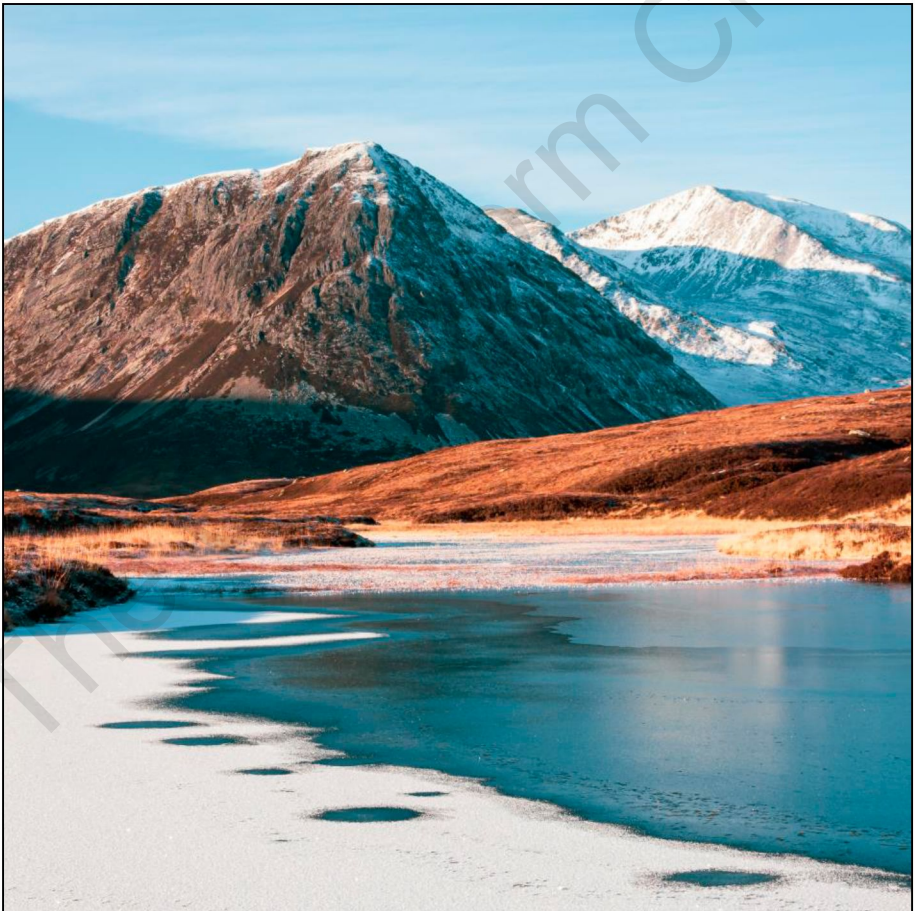


MOUNTAIN PHOTOGRAPHY

JAMIE VINCE

Since moving to Scotland in 2016 and picking up my first digital camera shortly thereafter, I've been hooked trying (and most of the time failing) to capture the beautiful essence of this country. The Cairngorm Club has helped me access some awe-inspiring places and views around Scotland and unless the forecast is dire, I've tried to bring my camera along for the ride. The following article looks at a handful of photographic lessons that I've learnt and tips that I've picked up during this time.



1 The Devil's Point, Cairngorms

Jamie Vince

1. Find an interesting foreground

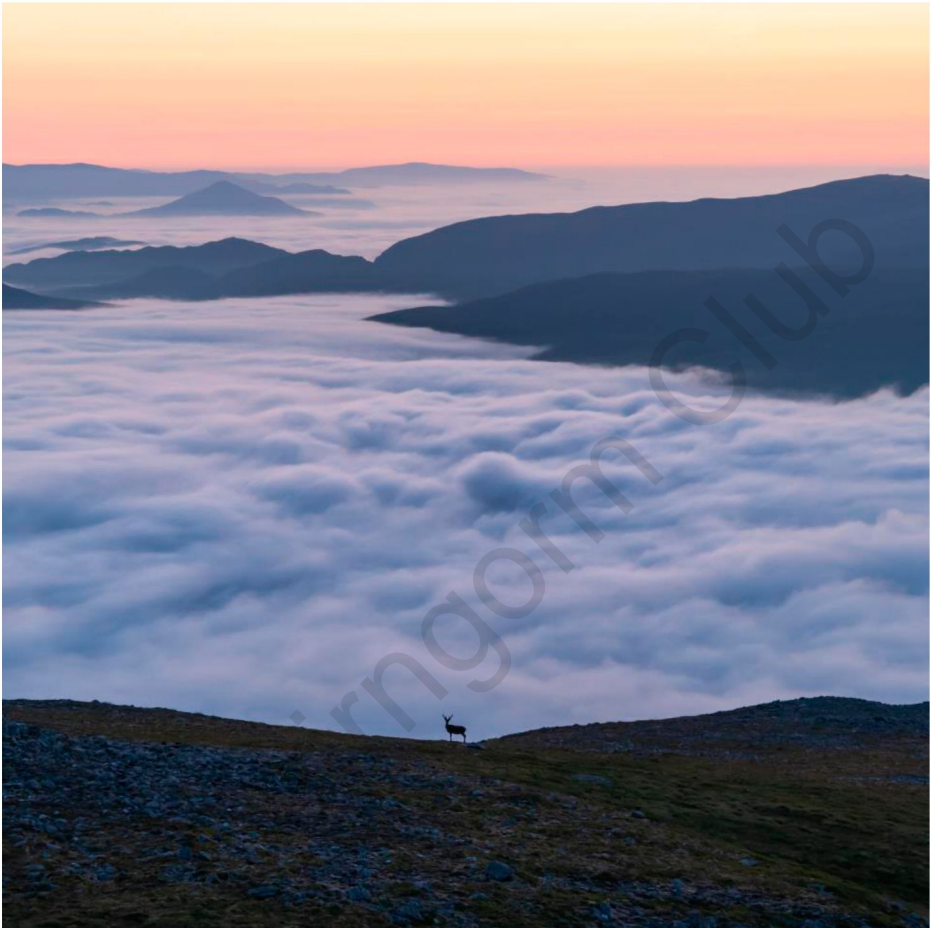
This is key. Something I quickly learnt was that an image with a clear foreground and background, with distinct separation between the two, is just simply more pleasing to look at than a flat image of a mountain skyline. Now there are exceptions here - for example long lens (zoomed in) images with the right light can be stunning - but generally an image with these two elements has so much more depth and can tell more of a story than an image with just one.

The example here (photograph 1. previous page) shows the Devil's Point and Cairn Toul, softly lit by a low November sun, which are stunning in themselves, but what I think makes the image is the use of the patterns on the partially frozen lochan in the foreground which lead the eye towards the hills beyond. I find the combination of both elements extremely pleasing to look at and I'm glad I put in the work lining up the foreground, as opposed to just shooting the hills from the path.

2. You make your own luck

I find that a lot of the time when taking photos in the mountains, the truly epic shots are technically the easiest. It is a case of being in the right place, at the right time and all you must do is press the shutter (or to tap the screen on your phone). All the hard work has already been done by getting to that spot, and without that previous effort the photographic opportunity - whether that be a golden eagle, stunning light, or a Brocken spectre - would cease to exist.

A case in point is the following photo of a stag poised above a cloud inversion at dawn which was taken from the summit of Carn Dearg near Ben Alder (photograph 2 the following page). I had put in a lot of effort to get to this position: driving to Dalwhinnie straight from work the night before, cycling into the Culra Bothy with a heavy load, then ascending the steep hill with my tent before darkness descended. I knew that inversion conditions were forecast, otherwise I would have left in the morning, but the cherry on top that morning was the stag waiting to greet me as I emerged from my tent. No fancy settings, all I had to do was zoom in and "click".



2 Staggering View from Carn Dearg

Jamie Vince

3. Get panoramic

Sometimes views in the mountains can be vast. So vast that you aren't sure where to look, what to focus on, or what to photograph. It's general wisdom that in these circumstances it is best to isolate a segment of the scene, to zoom in and to tell an intimate story which comprises just one part of a boundless mountainscape. This, however, requires a telephoto lens, something not everyone may have. In the absence of this, I find that the long, thin profile of a ridge line or hilly horizon suits a panoramic format well. True landscape photographers would implore you to use a tripod when doing so to ensure a level horizon, however I find the

software these days (such as Adobe Lightroom) to be so good that if you are steady handed and get the correct amount of overlap between pictures (roughly 30%), you can achieve great results. Smartphones also now do a great job taking and processing panoramic images almost instantaneously.

An example is the following picture (photograph 3 below) of the main Cairngorms in a thick winter coat taken from the south (near Carn Bhac). This is a combination of around ten photos and because of that the resolution is huge and you can zoom and explore every hilltop and corrie. It's not my favourite image but I love the sense of wilderness and vastness it conveys.



3 Winter Cairngorms Panorama

Jamie Vince

4. Don't try to get it all in

In what is a complete contradiction to my last point, here I advocate not trying to get everything into the frame. Whether you capture the whole scene or just part of it, depends on the situation. The following image is a good example of what I mean. Taken on the shores of Loch Torridon, this photo depicts gorgeous golden-hour light striking the southern face of Liathach. At the time I got excited and just tried to take a picture of the scene as I saw it, which included three elements: Liathach in light, Beinn Alligin in shade and the island in the loch. Reviewing this photo now (photograph 4 the following page), I wish that I had moved around to the left and focused purely on Liathach, excluding Beinn Alligin - which I find just distracts from the main show - whilst possibly including the island and its pines in the foreground. This was taken in March 2017, and I don't think I've seen light as nice since!



4 Liathach at Golden-Hour

Jamie Vince

5. Venture out after dark

We are extremely lucky in Scotland to have some of the most stunning landscapes in the world, combined with some of the darkest skies. When the skies are clear, which obviously isn't always the case, the two can make for epic photographic potential. With the Cairngorm Club I've been able to stay in some amazing locations on weekend meets and when you are sleeping in these awesome places with dark skies, it pays to stick your head out after nightfall and see if the stars are twinkling.

I find that the best bang for your buck with astrophotography is to shoot the Milky Way with an illuminated foreground. The best times of year for this are spring and autumn and it's easy to find the galaxy, as in clear conditions in Scotland you'll be able to see it with the naked eye! Astrophotography does require a tripod to stabilise the lens for the relatively long duration of time that the shutter needs to be open for. You don't need any other fancy equipment though and even a smartphone (in long exposure mode) on a tripod these days will be able to take a half decent image; some phone cameras are amazingly now starting to rival digital cameras in this field.



5 The Milky Way, Bridge of Orchy

Jamie Vince

My favourite example to date of the Milky Way (photograph 5 previous page) was taken in spring 2021 on a camping trip near to Bridge of Orchy. The incredibly dark skies led to a super bright display of the galactic core which I was able to line up between our tents and campfire. Note that the fire in the picture was in a portable fire pit (the luxuries of camping by the car) and was off the ground.



6 Snow-holing on Cairn Gorm

Jamie Vince

6. The best camera is the one you have with you

To reiterate a point, I made in the previous paragraph: you really don't need a big fancy camera to take special pictures in the mountains. Smartphone cameras are now exceptional. When I use them though I try to keep in mind their limitations, mainly reduced ability to produce a sharp image when zoomed in and limited dynamic range (the ability to capture details in both the brightest and darkest parts of an image). Therefore, when shooting with my phone I aim for wider angle shots that are evenly lit and don't have bright skies and dark rocks.

Three of my favourite ever images were taken on my mobile phone and they all have one thing in common: beautiful light. In the right lighting, I feel the overall gap between a smartphone and a "proper" camera is narrowed. One of these images was the morning of the Cairngorm Club's 2019 snow-holing overnighter (photograph 6 on previous page). I love the combination of the way the soft light caresses the pitted walls of snow, the intriguing nature of the snow shovel and the expanse of wilderness beyond.

7. A great view doesn't always make for a good photo

The view of the Black Cuillin from Sgurr na Stri is my favourite view in the whole of Britain, though probably tied with that from the summit of A' Mhaighdean. I had seen photos and videos of 'that' scene, looking down over Loch Coruisk with the imposing, jagged peaks beyond and couldn't wait until I was there myself. The Cairngorm Club's May 2019 weekend meet at the Coruisk Memorial Hut allowed me the opportunity to make the pilgrimage there. After snapping every angle and focal length that my memory card allowed for, I returned home to look at the images (photograph 7 the next page). I was disappointed with how they turned out and that was due to a couple of factors. Firstly, the light was incredibly flat and there is pretty much no appreciable depth in the image. Secondly it was the wrong time of day to take the shot, as the sun was setting beyond the mountains when ideally it should be rising behind the camera. I've edited this image differently a couple of times, but I feel in the end it just looks 'muddy'. I've tried to make it work as it's my favourite view but alas a great view doesn't always make a great photo. It has taught me to read the conditions on location and to know

when to judge there is photographic potential and shoot away and when to know that it's best to put the camera down and just take it all in.



7 Loch Coruisk from Sgurr na Stri

Jamie Vince

8. Move your feet

Photographers often say that having a zoom lens can make you lazy. If you want a different scene, you can just zoom in or out. With what is called a 'prime' lens (one with a fixed focal length), if you want the composition of the image to change, you must move your feet. Camping on the shoulder of Cul Beag in September 2020 I was met with this challenge. As the sun was setting over the Summer Isles and the mist was gathering in the glens, I was trying to take a telephoto image of Stac Pollaidh. I was attempting to line up the northern ridge of Cul Beag to mirror the eastern flank of Stac Pollaidh but with my lens at maximum zoom I had to move quite a bit to get everything to line up. I ended up descending quite a way down the hill so as to move to my right enough to get everything where I wanted it. In the end I'm glad I put in the effort as I love the result in this photo (photograph 8 on next page).



8 Stac Pollaidh from Cul Beag

Jamie Vince

9. Keep your eyes peeled

The Scottish hills are renowned for having four seasons in one day. Their mercurial nature can lead to some unexpected and very short-lived light displays of epic proportions. On days when these conditions are present, it's a good idea to try to look up from your feet every once in a while, to make sure you don't miss the show.

A good example of this was at the Cairngorm Club's November 2018 weekend meet to Glenfinnan. Whilst walking along the ridge to Sgùrr nan Coireachan I happened to look over my shoulder and to my astonishment, I saw the most incredible display of crepuscular rays. I

quickly lined up some foreground rocks and snapped away. Within probably less than a minute the light rays were gone, not to return in the glen for the remainder of the day (photograph 9 below).

As well as being aware of your surroundings, it's important to make sure your camera settings are dialled in to take advantage of these fleeting moments. I missed out on a great opportunity to photograph a nearby passing golden eagle in Glen Ey because my camera was still in long exposure mode from when I last used it for astrophotography!



9 Crepuscular rays over Glen Finnan

Jamie Vince

10. Try to tell a story

The final tip that I want to share, is that I've learnt that photos which pose a question, provide intrigue, or present a story, can be some of the most impactful. Great light, composition and subject are the core elements of great photos but what I feel elevates them to something special, is the notion of a narrative which is either laid out for the viewer to follow or is hinted at and left to ponder.

I quite enjoy the following photo of the Cuillin Ridge from Garsbheinn (photograph 10 on the following page) with the gradational tonal

contrast from the warm grasses transitioning into the cold blues of the snow dusted ridge beyond. What I really like in this image however is the inclusion of the stone circle in the foreground. I know that this is a bivouac site for those intrepid climbers who aim to complete the Cuillin Ridge traverse - the pinnacle of mountaineering challenges in the UK. For me, the image evokes the tension, nervousness, and excitement that those who use this small stone shelter must feel, as they toss and turn in their sleeping bag, waiting for their shot at 'the ridge' - which is laid out in the background for the viewer, in all its terrifying glory.



10 Gars-bheinn bivouac

Jamie Vince

So, after five short years taking photos, those are my top tips and some of the lessons that I've learnt. I hope they may be of use to you, and I'll try to remember to practice what I preach! I'm looking forward to seeing your photo of the month on the website soon!