



Vanda Ralevska

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHER

Interview by Michéla Griffith



Vanda Ralevska

Vanda Ralevska is as unstinting in her enthusiasm and encouragement for her fellow photographers as she is in her own passion for creating images. Despite being a talented wedding and portrait photographer, she has chosen to concentrate on landscape photography. If there is a hill or mountain in the UK that she hasn't climbed or an area of coast yet to be walked, you can rest assured that they are probably on her list.

At times it is easy to forget how much our own experiences of the landscape may have changed over a period of years. I remember being struck by a series of images that Vanda included in a blog about her time in Czechoslovakia – even here, amid the despoliation, she had found interest and colour, so I started by asking Vanda if this early experience had been influential.

You have a great passion and sense of wonder for the UK's natural beauty. Do you think that growing up in an area of heavy industry is in part responsible for this?

I think it was a part of it. Growing up in an industrial area definitely made us spend weekends away from the city's noise, overpowering smell and imposing silhouette of chimneys, coal mines and blast furnaces. I love the Czech and Slovak countryside. There is a lot to admire in the mountains, forests and lakes, even towns; and I am always happy to go back to visit. However the first time I saw the





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I like those moments in time when everything goes quiet, my heartbeat gets faster, I take a deep breath and the time stops... until the shutter clicks and the moment that took your breath away is preserved... forever...

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White Cliffs of Dover from the ferry, I was smitten. They say, "Home is where your heart is", and I definitely experienced the true meaning of the saying. Since then I have never stopped admiring this country's incredible beauty.

Can you tell me a little about your education, childhood passions, early exposure to photography and vocation?

I wish I could say I grew up in a family of artists or photographers. But there was always music at home and in our family. I remember those precious moments, when I listened to Radio Luxembourg under the duvet, hanging on to every note disappearing into the ether, just when one of my favourite songs was on. From the age of 6 I learnt to play the flute, which I never continued beyond my teens. Had I known of Ian Anderson from Jethro Tull, I might have been inspired to carry on. Nevertheless love for music became a part of me, and I cannot imagine my life without it.

My first encounter with a camera was actually quite a disaster. At about the same age as I started my musical experience we had a family camera – my Granddad's Agfa Billy Record from 1930s. One day, on a family outing, I had a genius idea. I opened the back to make sure there was a film loaded. As you can imagine, after that I was not allowed anywhere near it.

My passion for photography started later



on, in my teens when I got my first camera from my Dad. It was just a little red Konica. But it helped me discover a whole new world around me, and see things I walked by before without noticing them. Needless to say, I no longer opened the back until the last frame was exposed.

Both cameras have found a permanent place on my desk. They remind me of those little moments that laid the foundations for my lifetime journey through the world of photographic discoveries.

What are you most proud of in your photography?

I am not sure if “proud” is the right word. Being behind the camera simply makes me happy. I love discovering unusual views, exploring and experiencing the locations I visit, and sharing the way I feel about photography with like-minded people. Recently a few people have commented that there is a certain peacefulness and stillness in my images. That for me was the nicest compliment, as this is what I have been trying to convey in my work.

In most photographers lives there are ‘epiphanic’ moments where things become clear, or new directions are formed.

What were your two main moments and how did they change your photography?

I think the first time I realised how deep my connection to landscape was, and how much I loved capturing it with my camera was on one of the weekend trips with my Mum and Stepdad. It was one of those beautiful autumnal days, when the combination of the sun streaming through the trees, the bright colours of the leaves, and the blue sky with pure white clouds created a magical scene all around. This was when I took one of my favourite pictures so far.

The move to the UK was one of the most significant milestones in my life, not only on my photographic journey. My passion for photography grew into an inseparable part of my life, partly because I started to discover the unique charm of this beautiful country.







However the most significant moment that opened my eyes and made me see clearly the direction I wanted to follow occurred just over a year ago. After three years of trying to build a wedding and portrait photography business I realised it was destroying the very thing I enjoyed doing. With the decision to sustain my passion by working in IT for four days a week, I also removed the stress of having to rely on the income generated from photography, and regained the freedom to be true to myself, follow my heart and do what I really love.

Tell me about why you love landscape photography? A little background on what your first passions were, what you studied and what job you ended up doing.

I was brought up in a very practical way. In this day and age your passion rarely pays the bills. So I got a degree in Maths and Physics, later on in English, and when I moved to England I completed an MSc in Computer Science. That led me to a job as an IT consultant.

I love getting away from the precise numbers and figures, from the hustle and bustle of the city, and finding quiet moments in the middle of natural beauty. Every time I manage to escape I am reminded how beautiful the English landscape is. With a love for the outdoors it became natural for me to capture it with the camera. It goes beyond recording the reality. It is the whole experience of being out there, capturing the atmosphere and the impression that the place made on me.

Although you have a particular passion for the sea, I believe that you are reluctant to limit yourself in your choice of subject matter?

Yes, my biggest passion is the sea. Perhaps it comes from my childhood and growing up in an insular country. The closest to the sea that I got was the Black Sea in Bulgaria, which is really just a huge lake.

But my love for the sea never left me even after I moved to England. I take every opportunity to drive down to the coast and enjoy its infinite power and uncontrollable energy.

However I would find it very limiting if I focused only on



seascapes. There is so much beauty everywhere. It can be anything from a breath-taking view from a hilltop, evening light in a forest, a misty morning in a park, or simply a detail of a flower petal. Anything that creates an emotional response is worth capturing. I think that a very important part of it is to never lose a sense of wonder. Look at the world with fresh eyes, like you did in childhood, when everything was so new and interesting.

That gives me a lot of freedom to enjoy the location wherever I am, and the weather conditions that happen to develop.

Earlier this year you sought out colour in the urban environment and turned the wet winter to your advantage?

The first sight of rain usually makes us hide our cameras away. However once you embrace the conditions, you can even take advantage of them. Suddenly you will see a lot of opportunities for creating images from reflections, colours, abstracts, or stormy

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light. You may see raindrops running down a window pane, or droplets on the railings. Bright umbrellas reflected in a puddle, or the whole world reflected in one drop of water. The opportunities are endless. I find myself looking forward to the rainy days so that I can look for more subjects to photograph.

Could you tell us a little about the cameras and lenses you typically take on a trip and how they affect your photography?

For landscape photographs I currently use a Nikon D800, the nicest camera I have ever had. I have a number of lenses – Nikkor 24-70mm f/2.8, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8, Nikkor 16-35mm f/4 wide angle lens and Nikkor 105mm f/2.8 macro lens. The wide angle lens comes out only occasionally when I feel I have a strong foreground. The macro lens is a wonderful lens for close-ups. I have recently bought some Kenco extension tubes, which I intend to use for extreme close-ups and creating more abstract images.

I use Lee filters, out of which I find the ND soft graduated ones the most important.

One filter I really love using is the Lee Big Stopper. It helps me create those peaceful images I love, and it slows me down. Long exposures create that time for me when I can just stand and observe the scenery while the camera is capturing it.

For street photography I have Nikon D610 and the Nikkor 28-300mm f/3.5-5.6. It's a very nice universal combination that gives me the flexibility to capture the unexpected moment more easily.

**What sort of post processing do you undertake on your pictures?
Give me an idea of your workflow.**

My post processing is reasonably simple. I use Adobe Camera Raw for basic adjustments of my RAW files. I use highlight recovery, sometimes exposure adjustment if necessary, I remove chromatic aberration, and sharpen. I save the files as TIFFs and complete processing in Adobe Photoshop CS6. Mostly just levels and curves, and sometimes dodging and burning. I also find Nik Software plugins very helpful – Color Efex for boosting the contrast and Silver Efex for conversion to black and white.

Do you get many of your pictures printed and, if at all, where/how do you get them printed?

It is one of the things on my 'to do' list. I have not printed a lot of my pictures so far, but I am planning to change it this year. In the past I have used The Printspace, a printing service based in London, and was amazed by the quality of their work and high level of their service. I will definitely use them more in the future.







Tell me about the photographers that inspire you most. What books stimulated your interest in photography and who drove you forward, directly or indirectly, as you developed?

There are so many great talents out there that I do not really know where to start. My first influences were Joe Cornish, Charlie Waite and Colin Prior - Colin Prior especially because of his contagious passion, dedication and the way he manages to capture the magical atmosphere of the Scottish scenery. Scotland is my favourite part of UK, and some of his images remind me of the places we visited and the mountains we have climbed.

There is one photographer who will always stand out for me - Josef Sudek. I have always admired his ability to capture the pure essence of the subject he photographed. It's the way he used light to create those timeless images. There was a reason why he was called "a poet of Prague". His work is pure poetry.

I have a few shelves of books that inspire me and that I love going back to again and again. "Josef Sudek – A Photographer's Life", surprisingly, is one of them. David Ward's "Landscape Beyond" is full of great examples of quiet landscapes that I love so much. So is Eliot Porter's "Intimate Landscapes", which simply is a work of art. I also must mention Freeman Patterson's books "Photography and the Art of Seeing" and "Photo Impressionism", which he has written with André Gallant. I have also recently picked up a very interesting book called "The Practice of Contemplative Photography" by Andy Karr and Michael Wood, which looks at photography as a result of the connection between the eye, mind and heart.

Together with Beata Moore (featured previously in On Landscape) you've started a website and community for female landscapes photographers in the UK. What has the journey been like so far and how do you see this developing further?

Beata and I have always had an impression that women are not given enough exposure in the world of landscape photography. We could not believe that women in general have no interest in this field. We decided to look for them, and at the beginning of last year we started the "Landscapes by Women" group and website. We hoped to find 10 contributors; at the time of writing we have 29.

I would like to stress that in no way are we biased against men. All of us have been inspired and admire many photographers out there, regardless of their gender. The idea of the group is to create a friendly community for women to support each other, to inspire each other and to share their work, successes, and upcoming events. At the same time we would like to increase the visibility of women in landscape photography.

It has been a great experience so far. I have enjoyed watching the group grow and meeting some of the members in person. It has been very rewarding to see that women, who in some cases did not know of each other previously, are now discussing their ideas together and even forming friendships. I am myself grateful for the opportunity to make new friends.

Last year, we organised a weekend in the Lake District which proved to be a great success. So this year we are planning to have another weekend away.

We had a feature published in "Landscape Photography Magazine" just before Christmas. So the word is definitely getting round. This year we would like to contact other magazines, and prepare for an exhibition for next year.

Tell me what your favourite two or three photographs are and a little bit about them.

My favourite photographs usually change over time. They might not be my best ones, but what makes them my favourites is usually the experience related to them.

AUTUMNAL REFLECTIONS

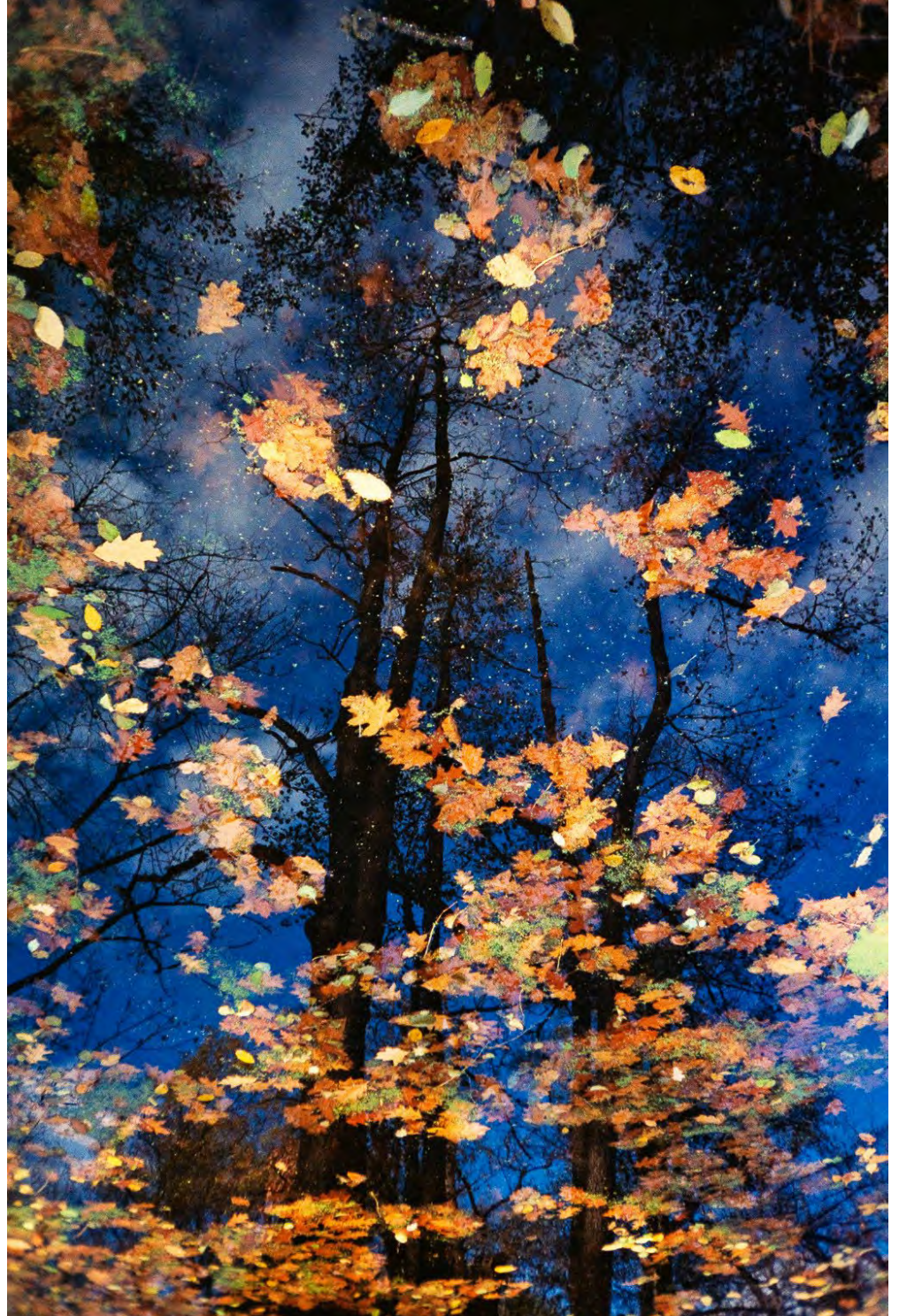
I have already mentioned the first one. With my Mum and Stepdad we often spent our weekends exploring surrounding areas. It was on one of these occasions when we came across a truly magical scene. A little pond surrounded by trees dressed in autumnal colours, the sunlight streaming through the branches, blue sky reflecting in the water covered with bright coloured leaves. It was the reflections that caught my eye.

SUNSET BAY

Sandwood Bay in Scotland's Sutherland is one of my favourite places of all times. You can only reach it on foot by a 4 mile long hike. If you really want to experience it, you need to camp overnight. Then you will have the whole beach for yourself. I am not very keen on wild camping, but in Sandwood Bay I would do it again without any hesitation.

MORNING MAGIC

Sometimes I do not get an opportunity to travel very far because of other commitments. On those days I try to find a location that is closer to home. Bushy Park is one of them. When the conditions are right, the place turns into a fairy tale setting.







If you were told you couldn't do anything photography-related for a week, what would you end up doing (i.e. Do you have a hobby other than photography).

I think a week would not be enough. I have a long list of books to read. I would love to sign up for a creative writing course. I always wanted to be able to play saxophone. I have always enjoyed dancing. Singing lessons would also be on my list. However most of all, I love to spend my time outdoors walking, if not taking photographs. So if I really had a spare week of freedom, I would spend it with my partner on one of the long-distance walks - most probably the Coast to Coast.

What sorts of things do you think might challenge you in the future or do you have any photographs or styles that you want to investigate? Where do you see your photography going in terms of subject and style?

Over the years I have realised that I am at my very best when photographing on my own. Fundamentally, landscape photography is a solitary venture. I find the silence and solitude to be most inspiring. Only then I can de-clutter my mind and listen to my inner thoughts. Only then I can really experience the scene before me and try to capture the emotions that it evokes in me. I find myself more and more drawn to the early hours before dawn or the later hours after dusk. Blue hour has become my favourite time of the day. I would love to focus more on peaceful and calm spaces, and quiet images that compensate for the busy reality of the life we live.

How important do you feel that the written word is to your artistic development?

There is always a story, an experience, an emotion behind every picture, which I sometimes feel is important to share. I have a real love for poetry, and the written word in general. I think that the

written word is very closely connected with the visual arts. It is just another way of bringing us closer to the beauty that surrounds us and the feelings that our experiences evoke in us. I am not a writer or a poet, but I very much enjoy the process of writing. It takes me back to the places we have visited and brings back the memories we have created.

Who do you think we should feature as our next photographer?

This is a very difficult one, because as I said before there is so much talent and inspiration out there. The first person that crossed my mind is Deborah Hughes. She is an American photographer based in Utah, and I was lucky enough to meet her in person last year. She has an incredible connection with the natural world that surrounds her, and she can convey that in the intimate landscapes she captures. She is also an amazing poet and writer.

And of course any photographers from our "Landscapes by Women" group..... However I have also met many interesting and extremely talented photographers through social media, especially Flickr, including David O'Brien, George Edwards, Neil Langdon, Souvik Chakraborty, and Keith Craven, just to name a few. My apologies to those I have not mentioned - there are so many.

Thank you, Vanda. You can see more of Vanda's images and read about her relationship with both land and sea on her website. She is also on flickr and facebook.

Featured Comments...

Lizzie Shepherd: It's great to see you featured here at last Vanda – you have such an exceptional eye and seem to be able to turn in to any subject matter you choose! As I'm sure you know, I'm a huge admirer of your work and it's lovely to see a few new (to me) pieces here as well as to hear more about your journey so far.

I was interested in your reference to your childhood and the fact that there was always music in your home – I think many would argue music is one of the most powerful arts that exists, and I'm possibly one of them ;) You should definitely have a go at the saxophone if you have time – it is tremendous fun – I did it for a term at school and loved it – only stopped because it became a lesson too many ;) So I'll look forward to hearing how you get on!

Vanda Ralevska: Thank you very much for your kind words. They mean so much to me, especially because I have always admired the quiet poetry in your beautiful work. I'm really glad we have met, and hope that one day we will be able to meet in person. I think we have a lot in common, and now when you mentioned music and saxophone – even more! One day I will find that time to try it. Even if it's just a few lessons Thank you for all your support and encouragement.

on landscape

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