



Part of the process of building your skills as a photographer involves pushing your boundaries at times and trying something new — from new equipment and techniques to new locations and unique subjects. This article is part lighting tutorial and part story. The story part revolves around a shoot I did just over two years ago, and how I got to shoot in a location that really sang to me when I first saw it. The location was an upmarket bar in Whangarei with a very unique ambience — all leather couches, wood, mood lighting and vintage decor. Maybe it's just me, but every time I walked in there, Frank Sinatra started playing in my head and all I wanted to do was collapse on one of the leather couches with a good single malt, a fat Cuban cigar, and just relax. From the start I knew I had two options if I wanted to shoot there: either be direct and ask the proprietor for permission to drag subjects and gear in on a quiet evening, or go the quid-pro-quo route. Not being one to accept anything for nothing, I opted for the latter, and approached the owner, offering to provide him with free interior shots in exchange for the permission to do the work I wanted to do.

This approach would involve more work, but I figured it was the smarter move for three reasons:

1) It would give me a chance to do some thorough location scouting — both for places to shoot and times when it would be least disruptive to other patrons

2) Knowing what kind of ambient light you're dealing with will save a lot of headaches (turns out the place was a photographic black hole — which made things quite interesting)

3) If it turned into a useful location for repeat work, being on the owner's good side would make future requests easier.

So I headed into the bar with a camera and a few Speedlights on a quiet weekday night. Basically, all I did was look for angles, backgrounds and props that would improve the final images I took. I did manage to snap a few images that the owner was happy with, and seeing as I'd now given the owner something

of value I felt happier going ahead with my own shoot.

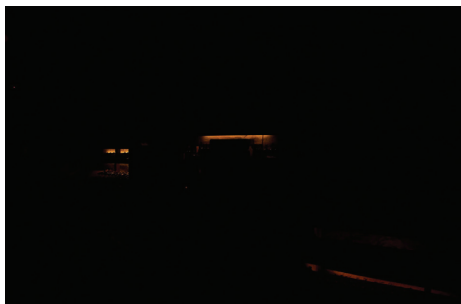
I rounded up willing guinea pigs for the shoot, (two friends from a business networking group I belonged to), descended on the bar one quiet Thursday evening with a car full of lighting gear and a number of little road bumps to navigate.

STEP ONE: Work out the ambient light first. This involves working in manual and dialling-in the exposure settings you are hoping to work with. The trick here is that both your shutter speed and aperture provide their own limitations for safe

hand-holding, sync speed and depth of field. So, not keen on shooting slower than 1/125s, or on a depth of field shallower than f/6.3, I dialled these settings into the camera (along with an ISO of 200) and got ... exactly what I expected.

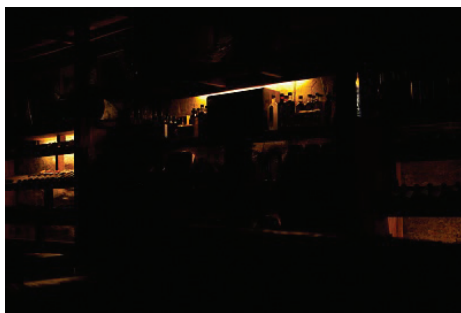
Rory Laubscher runs workshops on flash photography at his Firefly Photography studio in Auckland. Visit www.fireflyphotography.co.nz for session times or to arrange one-on-one tuition.

LIGHTING A BLACK HOLE



Given the work I had already done in that location, I was fairly certain that ambient light would not be a part of the image. Regardless, things can change on the day of a shoot, and I took a few shots to find out if my initial hunch was correct.

STEP TWO: Ramp up the ISO by one stop and open the lens all the way (f/2.8).



Better, but in the same way that a BMI of 40 is better than 50! Scientifically I could bump up the ambient light by increasing ISO to "Holy *@!! that's noisy" or drop my shutter speed to well within "get me a tripod and don't move a bloody muscle" range. Realistically, for image quality, neither was an option. So, question answered, I needed flash to light my background.

STEP THREE: Set up a TTL flash (triggered with PocketWizard Mini/Flex) and take a look. Camera settings: ISO 200, f/2.8, 1/125s. Better, but not quite there. It almost approximated the ambient light. The problems for me were the colour and intensity of the light, but there was an easy fix. I added a half-



cut CTO (colour temperature orange) gel to the flash, warming the light, and the gel itself sucked a stop or so of light out of the flash — two birds with one stone. This time I brought Steve into the shot, as I was certain I was in the ballpark.



I was definitely getting there, but the depth of field was a problem. I had yet another easy fix up my sleeve — set the aperture to f/11 and the miracle of wireless ETTL flash would sort out the rest.



Bingo, time to start making magic. I brought in a 90cm square soft box on a 600W/s Interfit head, triggered with Elinchrom Skyports. I've found the combination of PocketWizards and Skyports to be quite useful in certain circumstances, even if it does make the camera hot shoe look a little odd.

The Interfit was powered by a Tronix sine wave inverter (no wall socket required), which has been a godsend for this kind of work. The combination worked fine, soft light on the subject and mood in the background thanks to a gelled Canon 580EX II (in retrospect, I would have been happier placing the Speedlight higher to eliminate the unnatural looking shadows on the glasses — you always learn a lesson or two with each shoot). All that was left was to work on poses and switch out lenses for close-in work.

The big problem, though, was the ambient light, which made the simple act of focusing impossible. Luckily I had the help of two very capable assistants and a rather bright torch.



Even with one of them using torch light to illuminate the subjects, I still got a lot more blurry shots than I'd want — not good when eyes have to be pin sharp. Ordinarily the modelling light on the soft box would work fine, but this is not an option with a sine wave inverter.

Gaining experience is a great thing, but gaining it by smoothly negotiating the little hiccups that are part and parcel of location work is a very rewarding feeling, and does much to lessen the nerves at the next shoot. My take-home message in this article is simply this — get out of your comfort zone, get out on a limb and give yourself an opportunity to do something new. Remember too that there is much to be gained by making use of the friends and contacts you have. I have made it a habit to write a post-mortem of every location shoot I have done, listing problems and mulling over ways to avoid the same mistake again. I encourage you to head on over to the Firefly Photography blog and read the post-mortem on this shoot: www.bit.ly/VY3zDz. 