

What Are We Really Photographing For?

As AI makes image creation easier, the photographic experience matters even more now

Text & Photography by Josh Miller

Why do we photograph? Is it to capture ego-boosting, prize-winning hero shots, or is it a vehicle for experiencing the world more deeply through travel and time spent outdoors? With the rise of AI, the question of why we are photographers is more relevant than ever.

Sure, we all strive for perfection in our images and spend enormous amounts of time and money trying to be in the right place at the right time, with the skills and equipment needed to capture the perfect decisive moment. But what happens when conditions don't come together? Do we still go home with our hearts full from the experience, or do we return frustrated because we "missed" the shot and try to fill that void with AI?

When I was first starting out as a nature photographer and had fewer successful images in my portfolio, I often judged a trip solely by whether it produced a new portfolio-worthy photograph. In doing so, I may have missed some of the joy of the overall experience.

It's easier now, as a well-established nature photographer with many strong images in my files, to sit back and enjoy the luxury of having nothing to prove. But I would argue that photography has become far more fun — and far more satisfying — as I've shifted my focus from the outcome to the experience. Yes, I still occasionally bring home prize-winning images, but I also recognize that the stars don't always align. I "win" whenever I'm having fun and enjoying the experience along the way.

The AI Temptation

Which brings me to my point about AI. I can't count the number of times I've heard other photographers standing beneath a cloudless sunrise say something along the lines of, "That's OK, I'll just add a better sky with AI."

Yes, it's truly amazing what AI and Photoshop can do, but at what cost? Do we diminish trust in our medium? Does anyone still believe a photograph represents reality? Are we diminishing nature itself by creating unrealistic expectations for future generations? And perhaps most importantly, does the finished image actually reflect the experience we had in the field — waking up early, hiking to the location, feeling the wind on our faces and listening to the birds sing?

AI is a powerful and remarkable tool, and I would be lying if I said I didn't use it to remove a branch rather than break it off a tree, reduce noise or fix a dust spot. But where do we draw the line as creative individuals?

As an artist, I firmly believe art should have no rules. The purpose of art is self-expression and self-exploration, and people should feel empowered to take their work wherever they want. Just be transparent about what you've done and call it digital art. But I would also argue that if we aren't careful, we risk diminishing the very experiences we went into the field hoping to have.

Why We Picked Up a Camera

Why did we become nature photographers in the first place? For me, it was to have an excuse to spend more time in the

mountains with close friends, experiencing nature — not to spend more time in front of a computer.

I suspect many people reading this column share a similar love of nature, landscapes and wildlife. We are among the fortunate few who can visit some of the world's most amazing places while taking the time to look, listen and immerse ourselves in nature at its best. Talk about a first-world problem.

If we follow the AI train to its logical conclusion — from removing a branch, to replacing a sky, to adding extra wildlife — then why not simply tell AI all the elements you want in a photograph and let it do the hard work? No need to pack a bag, fly half-way around the world, get up early, hike for miles, freeze in the cold or get eaten alive by insects.

It's certainly easier to stay in the comfort of a warm bed, sleep through sunrise, get up late and sit down with a hot cup of coffee while AI generates the scene for you. Heck, why not throw in a few unicorns and rainbows while you're at it? The sky's the limit.

The Real Reward

I know this may ruffle a few feathers, and I'm being somewhat dramatic to make a point. The experiences are what make life worth living and, by extension, what make our photographs meaningful. A great image can instantly transport us back to the time and place where it was made and allow us to relive the experience all over again. Can AI do that?

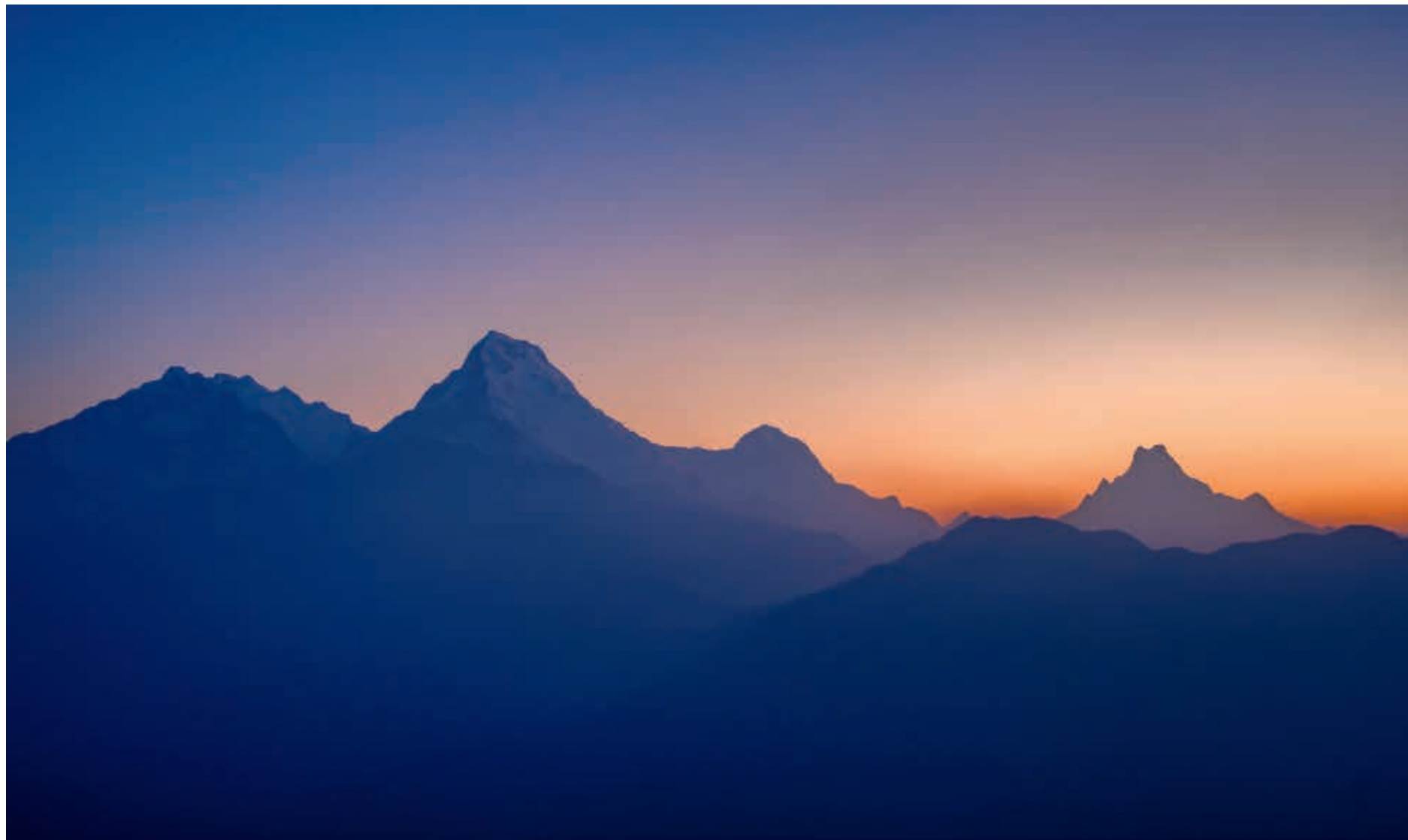
So why not focus more on the experiences and less on the outcome? Photography is a vehicle that opens the world to us. With a camera in hand, people have opened their lives to me, and photography has led to more amazing experiences than I ever could have imagined.

Yes, some of those experiences also resulted in great photographs, but it's the experiences themselves that hold the deepest meaning. The photos are simply the icing on the cake.

If we shift our thinking toward capturing experiences rather than chasing a single predetermined shot, our work will improve and gain greater emotional depth.

And when the stars do align — when everything comes together in that perfect decisive moment — we'll be ready to capture it with our cameras rather than create it on a computer. **OP**

See more of Josh Miller's work at joshmillerphotography.com.



Sometimes the best color arrives before sunrise, especially in hazy, cloudless conditions. This single exposure of Annapurna I, Annapurna South and Machapuchare in Nepal became one of my favorite images from the trek despite the lack of dramatic clouds. Nikon Z7, NIKKOR Z 24-120mm f/4 S. Exposure: 1/2 sec., f/7.1, ISO 100.