

RICK SAMMON'S

# DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY SECRETS









Mariza Gasparotti photographed on the Venice workshop organized by VSP Workshops ([www.vspworkshops.com](http://www.vspworkshops.com))

# Rick Sammon's Digital Photography Secrets

**Rick Sammon**



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Rick Sammon's Digital Photography Secrets

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## About the Author



### **Rick Sammon**

(lower tandem jumper), falling to earth at 125 miles per hour, during one of the few times that he was not photographing, writing a book, leading a workshop or giving a seminar.

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# Acknowledgments

As you saw on the cover of this book, I get credit for writing this book. Sure, I put a ton of work into it, but the truth is I had a lot of help – just like every author. It's the same for all artists. Take Tom Cruise, for example, he gets top billing, but he has dozens and dozens of people – including make-up artists, lighting directors, set designers, acting coaches and so on – who make him look good.

So I thought I'd take this opportunity to thank the folks who helped put together this work, as well as those who have helped me along the path to producing this book, which is my 31st.

The guy who initially signed me up for this book is the same guy who made my Canon Digital Rebel and Basic Lighting DVDs happen: Barry Pruett, Vice President and Publisher at Wiley. Barry has a quality that every author needs: faith in the author's belief that someone actually wants to hear what he or she has to say!

Once I was signed up, Courtney Allen, an Acquisitions Editor at Wiley, took over the project, helping me big time with everything that you see between the front and back covers. Not an easy task, especially considering that the book was produced in just a few months.

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So thank you, one and all. I could not have done it without you!

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*Dedicated to the four people from whom I have learned the most in life.*

*In order of appearance . . .*

*My mother, Josephine, and dad, Robert. My wife, Susan, and son, Marco.*

*"We are a part of everyone we meet."*

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# Foreword

For most of us, daily reality includes raising children, mortgage payments, aging parents and career obligations. To balance these demands, many of us enjoy creative pursuits including photography, painting, gardening or visiting museums and galleries. Have you ever wondered, “What would it take to leave your day job and dedicate yourself to making art full-time?” If this seems like a drastic move, consider developing a parallel professional career that allows you to follow your dreams. Whatever your profession, leading a dual life allows you to experience the best of both worlds – financial security and ongoing creative development. Teaching is a natural pursuit for many artists, but sadly being a talented artist doesn’t mean that the person is an equally talented teacher.

I’ve had the pleasure of meeting Rick Sammon and more importantly, seeing him teach. The man is a lightning-fast, silver-haired energy bundle, and the first thing that strikes you is his sparkling eyes and ready smile. Rick loves life, which is very apparent in his passion for music, travel, family and photography. But Rick has one more passion we all benefit from – teaching. He loves to inform, inspire and enlighten, and the idea that this book is called Rick Sammon’s Top Digital Photography Secrets is wonderfully absurd. Rick doesn’t believe in secrets; if he did he wouldn’t have written this book! Part of enjoying life for Rick is inspiring and sharing with others, and as an educator I know how much he benefits from teaching. Perhaps Rick wrote this book for himself – that is how much he loves to teach and share!

In exchange for reading this book, I challenge you to share one “secret” you learned that helped you to make better images with two other people. Show, explain and inspire your passion to your friends and family with the same energy that Rick put into these pages. Believe me – teaching will make you a better photographer and image-maker.

Best regards,

*Katrin Eismann*

*Artist, Author and Educator*

*Chair, MPS Digital Photography*

*School of Visual Arts*



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## Preface

First off, thank you for picking up a copy of this book/DVD set. Your interest in my ideas about taking digital pictures is much appreciated. I hope you learn a lot, and I hope you have a lot of fun capturing your reality with your imagination.

Let's talk about the book first.

This book is packed with more than 200 ideas for taking pictures indoors, outdoors, in bright light and in low light, with and without a flash and with reflectors and diffusers. I'll also share some ideas on how to take pictures by candlelight and how to paint with light.

You'll find one tip per page. How easy and cool is that!

In some cases, I've included two or more pictures per page to illustrate a before-and-after technique or how an effect can enhance a series of pictures.

You may want to start with the Introduction, where you'll find my *Digital Photography Recipe for Smokin' Photos*. If you want camera tech talk, I think you'll enjoy the *Digital SLR Must Know Info* chapter.

If you like photographing landscapes, animals, close-ups and people, you may want to jump to those chapters. I've included my favorite tips and techniques to get you started.

I've also included chapters on *My Photo Gear* and on *Home and On-Location Digital Darkrooms*. Check 'em out to learn about the kind of gear I use and the gear I recommend.

And speaking of the digital darkroom, the chapter *Top Digital Darkroom Techniques* includes, that's right, my top tips for digitally enhancing pictures. What I've done here is to make the enhancements as easy to follow as possible. After you learn my techniques, experiment with them on your images.



*Reality leaves a lot to the imagination. – John Lennon*

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One of my favorite chapters in this book is *With a Little Help from My Friends*. There you'll find great tips from great photographers whom I am lucky – very lucky – to call my friends. Don't stop with their tips! Check out their Web sites to continue your digital photography learning experience.

Also check out the Web sites in the chapter, *Cool Web Sites*. Yup! More photo – and digital darkroom – learning and fun!

Okay, here's the scoop on the DVD.

Pop the DVD into your computer's DVD drive, click on the different QuickTime movies, and you'll get personal digital photography lessons from yours truly. Hey, it's the next best thing to taking a workshop with me (which I hope you can do someday).

Because they are QuickTime movies, you can start and stop them whenever you like, and even fast-forward and rewind if you want to skip or review a segment.

The movies – which cover flash, focus, lenses, portraits, shooting in low light and more – are a sampler of the videos from some of my other Wiley DVDs, which cover lighting and how to use Canon Digital Rebel cameras. Check them out at [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com). If you shop at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), you can find my DVDs by typing in Rick Sammon in the Search window.

So, you'll find a ton of tips, tricks and technique in this book and on the DVD. You'll also learn about some of my favorite photo philosophies.

In going through the material, please keep this adage in mind:  
*I hear, I forget. I see, I remember. I do, I understand.*

Hey, you will hear me say a lot and you'll see a lot in the book and on the DVD. The real magic happens when you start to “do” and understand.

So go out and do it – and don't forget to have fun in the process.

I began this preface with a favorite quote and a photograph I felt illustrated the quote, so I thought I'd end with another favorite quote, illustrated by two pictures. The idea is that as a photographer, it's important to keep changing, growing and evolving.

Rick Sammon  
Croton-on-Hudson, NY  
October 2008



*When you're through changing, you're through.*  
– Bruce Barton





## Intro

### A Digital Photography Recipe for Smokin' Photos *10 Ingredients for Dishing Up Successful Images*

Hey all, as you'll see on the following pages, I've packed this book with my favorite digital photography secrets – a full-course meal on digital photography, if you will.

But if you can't wait to dig in, and want to quickly cook up some sumptuous photographs, here's a quick, 10-step recipe that I think you'll find appetizing.

To illustrate the results of my recipe, I'll use some photographs that I took on a recent trip to Papua New Guinea. My guess is that many of you probably will not get to (or even want to go to) that exotic destination, but that's okay. The same ingredients can be used to create images that will quench your photographic thirst in any location around the world.

Let's dig in!



## Interesting Subject

I know it sounds simple, but having an interesting subject, such as this Huli Wigman posed by a remote waterfall, is important in the making of a good photograph. For example, a photo of me watering my lawn in my shorts would not be as interesting as this exotic-looking image. Seek out interesting subjects, and they will add interest to your photographs.

## Good Composition

A well-balanced photograph is like a well-balanced meal: very satisfying. Placing the main subject off-center is usually more interesting than placing the subject dead center in the middle of the frame. Experiment with positioning the subject in different parts or sections of the frame to find the best composition for a particular scene. Usually, dead center is deadly.

In addition, carefully compose your pictures so the background elements complement the main subject. In people photography, for example, the subject should stand out from the background in the frame. That can be accomplished by using a long lens (200mm or more) and shooting at a wide aperture (around  $f/2.8$ ) and focusing on the subject. With that lens/f-stop combination, the subject will be sharp and the background will be blurred. In addition, the closer you are to the subject, the more blurred the background becomes. You can also make the subject stand out by composing your picture so that a relatively plain background, or darker background, allows your subject to stand out.





## Creative Cropping.

Getting the best possible crop in-camera is a good idea. However, sometimes that's not possible due to the lens you are using or the camera-to-subject distance. What's more, after you take a picture, you may see a picture within a picture, which you can create by simply cropping in the digital darkroom. I like the full-frame image of these sing-sing (festival) performers. However, the tighter crop draws more interest to the main subject, as well as cropping out the spectators in the background on the left side of the frame.







## Careful Focus

Having an Auto Focus (AF) camera does not mean the camera knows where to focus within a specific scene. Carefully use the AF focus points in your camera's viewfinder and make sure the most important part of the scene is selected. When it comes to a person (or an animal) the main focusing point is usually the eyes. Also don't overlook the importance of the Focus Lock feature on your camera, which lets you lock in focus for a particular part of the scene, after which you can recompose and take the picture. Refer to your camera's manual to learn more about how your specific camera's Auto Focus and Focus Lock features function.

## See the Light

Our eyes have the ability to sense light. In photographic terms, our eyes have a dynamic range of about 11 f-stops, which is why, in a high-contrast scene, we can see details in shadow areas and why highlight areas are not washed out. Our cameras, however, don't "see" exactly what and how we see. They have a dynamic range of about five or six f-stops. Therefore, we need to be able to see and understand the contrast range of a scene, from the brightest area to the darkest area, and know what our camera can and can't capture in order to make a good exposure decision. Read on for more details.





## Fine-Tune Your Exposure

In most cases, when thinking about the exposure, we want to expose for the highlights (the brightest parts of the scene). That's because when highlights in a digital file are "washed out" or overexposed by more than one f-stop, they are difficult (or impossible) to recover later in the digital darkroom. RAW files offer more exposure latitude (are more forgiving) than JPEG files, making it easier to recover seemingly lost highlights. As a general rule, to avoid washed-out areas in a scene, I use the Exposure Compensation (+/-) feature on my camera and reduce the exposure in the Average Metering Mode (when my camera is set on the Aperture Priority or Shutter Priority exposure mode) by  $-\frac{1}{3}$ . That helps to prevent bright areas of a scene from becoming overexposed. In addition, don't overlook the importance of fine-tuning your exposure using your camera's Exposure Compensation feature. Sure, you could use the Spot Metering mode on your camera or use the Manual Exposure mode, but I think you'll find that using the Exposure Compensation dial on your camera is much faster and easier.

Of course, it's important to check the Histogram and Overexposure Warning indication on your camera's LCD monitor, to ensure a good exposure. If you are not sure how to activate these features on your camera, be sure to refer to your camera's manual.



## Control the Light

Sometimes, the contrast range of a scene is too great to be recorded by our cameras. That's when we need to control the light by using accessories. Basically, we have three types of accessories that can be used for controlling the light. Read on to learn about each of these three options.



**Flash** – Here I used a flash to evenly illuminate the face of this woman who was sitting in the shade. Sunlight filtering through the leaves of the tree created unflattering shadows on her face, which were eliminated by using an accessory flash (which was held off-camera and triggered by a wireless transmitter mounted in the camera's hot shoe).



**Reflectors** – Here I used a reflector to bounce sunlight onto the face of a subject who was sitting in the shade in front of a dark background. The reflector also added some nice catch light to the subject's eyes.



**Diffusers** – Here I used a diffuser, which is shaped like a reflector but is used to filter light falling on a subject instead of reflecting onto the subject, to soften strong shadows on the man's face that were created by direct sunlight.

If you are new to photography and have not used reflectors and diffusers, I have some with/without examples at: [http://www.ricksammon.com/RS\\_Tote.html](http://www.ricksammon.com/RS_Tote.html).