
Featuring NIKON AMBASSADOR JOE MCNALLY

"I got to photograph him on his shift in the Lupeni mine and at the portrait session," Joe says. "Definitely a cool guy—you can tell from what he gave me in this photo. We had a laugh together even though we couldn’t understand what each other was saying." Z 6, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/1600 second, f/0.95, ISO 4000, aperture priority, Matrix metering.

First, it’s Nikon’s fastest NIKKOR ever, a fact that’s evident in its full name: NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct lens. Right, f/0.95, which makes it the largest aperture lens we’ve ever made.

The Noct is designed to be shot wide open to provide maximum bokeh for beautiful, non-distracting portrait backgrounds and incredible performance in low-light; think night landscapes and astrophotography.
It is an incredible technical and practical achievement; not an everyday, multipurpose lens, but the absolute right tool for the right job.

Which is exactly what it was in the hands of Joe McNally.

It's quite a story.

"His nickname is Coco, and he asked me to autograph a print of a photo I took of him in the mine on the first day. Those cylinders are the hydraulic tubes supporting the ceiling." Z 6, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/500 second, f/0.95, ISO 4000, aperture priority, Matrix metering.

Into the Dark

If you know Joe's photography, you know he loves to come up with imaginative concepts that often push his creativity and the capabilities of his gear.

For this special lens, he came up with something unexpected.

"I've always respected people who work hard for a living, people dedicated to their jobs, especially jobs with history and significance," he says. Fast forward, and Joe is off to the coal country of Romania, where a production company he'd worked with previously had arranged access to the Lupeni coal mine in the Jiu Valley.

Which was a challenge.
“The idea for some of the makeshift-studio portraits was for the men to engage with the tools of their trade—shovels, pickaxes, drills, headlamps; the simple props. With others I went just for their expressions. This is the second guy I photographed in the portrait session.” Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

He’d been in deep mines before—one in Siberia ("That was a trip," he says, and lets it go at that) and one 7,500 feet below ground in Kentucky. Like those, Lupeni was one where, as he says, "you have to steel yourself to the fact that there's a lot between you and the surface."

The first day of photography at Lupeni saw Joe, his assistant and his translator take a cage elevator 500 feet down into the mine. "That was the easy part," he says. "Then you walk, stumble, stoop and half crawl for over a mile into the mountain." Along the way there were doubts about the wisdom of the idea. "But I thought, Well, this is where the pictures are, so that's where you go. At that point, it's a responsibility. But—and this is why I love doing what I do—when we finally got to the miners—a small crew of maybe six guys—they all started talking and laughing and I thought, This is really the determination of the human spirit, and that's what I'm really going to be photographing."
"When the miners are working, their headlamps are clipped to their helmets, with the battery packs on their hips. I was counseled to loop the lamp over my shoulder while I was making my way into the mine—a more convenient way to control the light. That's a pneumatic drill over his shoulder—it's the only mechanical gear they use." Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

Capturing active mining work wasn’t possible—the Noct isn’t set up for catching motion—so Joe positioned the miners and working quickly with his tripod-mounted Z 6, took...well, call them what they are: environmental portraits.

"There's no light down there, no electric wires tacked to the ceiling, no work lamps, nothing," he says. "It's old-school mining—shovels, pickaxes, helmet lights only." He took his photos by the light of a sealed LCD panel he brought along; the miner's headlamps provided the only ambient light. "I positioned the men and used their headlamps to light a little bit of the background—and there wasn't much background, just blackness and hydraulic supports holding up the ceiling."
“He was quiet and comfortable in front of the camera; his assurance comes across, and it made me think that what I was really photographing was the resilience of these men.” Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

"And that was it—all day there, then the return trip to the surface, which was a lot tougher because I was exhausted and realized I had more than a mile to go. At that point it's one step ahead of the other and the promise of seeing the light of day again."

As tough as it was, shooting the first day in the mine turned out to be the right decision because it gained the miner's respect and cooperation for the next day's portrait shoot.

"We couldn't form a bond from experience," Joe says. "They'd never seen me, and it was only one day, and when you can't speak the language, it's all in your body language, demeanor and openness."
"I did direct them in the portrait session—here, to look off to one side—but whatever I said had to be quick and decisive. There was no 'Maybe we'll try this' or 'Let's do this, too.'" Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

And likely just your willingness to be there. "Going into the mine means you are willing to experience what they experience," Joe says. "They are very proud, and they're willing to show you—Okay, this is what we do. Then they make an assessment of you, and they seemed to understand there was a purpose to what I was doing."

But it might have been something Joe did after the first day's shoot that was the convincer. "The production crew went to a quick-print place and had some overnight prints made that I gave to the guys the second day." When one of the men asked Joe to autograph his photo, Joe sensed, Okay, that'll do it; mine cred earned.
"He’s the first miner I photographed for the portraits. He was leaving the shift early because he had to go to a wedding—which might explain the smile. Working fast, my point of focus as always was on the eyes, and the camera’s Focus Peaking was confirmation that I got it." Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/4000 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

In the Light Room

"The next day we set up a studio in the headlamp charging room for the portrait shoot," Joe says. "Very rough, very simple—black cloth clamped to light stands, battery-operated location flashes, and as the men came out from their shift I made the photographs."

He had to make them fast. "These were three-minute portrait sessions, sometimes even less," he says. "They're at the end of their shift, they want to go home. You can't take your time. It's all, 'Step over here, look at the lens, here we go.' I ripped through them."
"In a sense I had it easy—I was essentially a tourist who got to go home. You can see in this guy's face what it's like for them. They make more money than the average person in the area, and they're guaranteed a pension after 20 years, and that's what they do it for—for their families and for the security of a paycheck. But it's tough, brutal work." Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

Prior to the Romania shoot Joe had worked with the Noct on a very different project—about as different as you could imagine: beauty portraits in Los Angeles. "That studio shoot gave me the chance to become familiar with the lens," he says, "so I had a bit of experience when I brought it to the mine."

Which was a good thing. "It's a learning experience because of the Noct's critical focus," Joe says, and "critical focus" is not just a phrase with this lens: at f/0.95, you're measuring depth-of-field in millimeters. Fortunately, the Focus Peaking feature of the Z cameras provides a colorful confirmation of focus. Given the Noct's razor-thin depth-of-field, Focus Peaking is not simply welcome, it's essential.
"I had to take this picture. He wears his wedding ring on his shift and that’s the story: he’s doing this job for his family." Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 100, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

This is a specialty lens, and not everyone will want it, or should want it. But for those who do—who want the look of the images, their consistency and incredible detail—the Noct can create truly stunning imagery.
Joe had made a couple of decisions prior to the shoot. First, black-and-white was the way to capture the men and the work. He'd set the Z cameras' Picture Controls for monochrome—"so I had the black-and-white experience on location"—but during editing he became intrigued with the color rendition of the images. He'd shot NEF + JPEG, so viewing and saving full-information, full-color files for several of the images was an easy post-processing step.

The second decision was to use the Z 7's square format option for the second-day portraits. "I've always loved square format portraiture," Joe says, "and I felt the formality of it would complement the miners standing proudly in front of the camera. It's a classic look—the old helmets and the battered clothes and ancient tools. It seems to have a historical continuum that the square format in a slight way gives expression to."
"The same feeling as the previous photo—direct communication, nothing else needed. The mine operates 24 hours a day, three shifts, and the miners are a tough bunch. Historically, in this area, miners were highly valued because they produced energy." Z 7, NIKKOR Z 58mm f/0.95 S Noct, 1/200 second, f/0.95, ISO 64, manual exposure, Matrix metering.

The Lure of the Lens

There is nothing quite like the Noct lens, and nothing quite like the images it is capable of producing. The first part of that sentence can be supported by tech specs and a few conversations with Nikon engineers. The second part—that's something different. No less real, but a lot harder to pin down. There's an amazing capture of detail, but there's something else, too.

"There's something special about the Noct's rendering of tones, especially in color images," Joe says. "This lens has its own look, almost a tonal quality of its own, and a consistency of that tone that it imparts to the image—that's why I fell in love with the color images.

"This is a specialty lens, and not everyone will want it, or should want it. But for those who do—who want the look of the images, their consistency and incredible detail—the Noct can create truly stunning imagery."
"I took the portraits in the headlamp charging room, and this is the charging station. The story is in the numbers: each miner has his numbered headlamp. The mine once employed about 1600 men; now it's about 200. The Noct wasn't wide enough to get this shot, so I used a 24-70mm." Z 6, NIKKOR Z 24-70mm f/2.8 S, 1/10 second, f/3.5, ISO 3200, aperture priority, Matrix metering.

One of the many attractions of Joe McNally's website, at www.joemcnally.com, is his blog and its behind-the-scenes tales of imagination and technique that reveal the how—and sometimes why—of recent images.
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