

Adobe Studio on Adobe Photoshop CS

Infrared photography goes digital

If you're an Adobe® Photoshop® user, you don't have to give up your digital camera to shoot infrared. With the right camera and the right filter, you can take digital infrared photographs that are every bit as beautiful as their film counterparts—and a lot less trouble to create.

Infrared, the digital way

If you've ever tried shooting and processing infrared film, you know what a pain in the aperture it is to deal with. You have to load the camera in complete darkness, guess wildly about the exposure settings, process the film, and then cross your fingers that at least one or two shots turned out the way you had hoped. The results could be stunning, but they came at a painful price.

Digital photography has changed all that. Not only is persnickety film handling a thing of the past, but you also now get to preview your infrared images on the LCD monitor before taking the shot. And the best part? They will look every bit as beautiful as their film counterparts, as you can see in the image below, which was shot with a Canon G1 digital camera. This barn shot was taken at 1 p.m. Most photographers are diving for cover at this time of day—that is, unless they're shooting infrared.



An infrared shot of a barn

Infrared photography deals with the spectrum of light that you can't see but that your digital camera can. If you buy a filter to eliminate the normal light rays and capture only the infrared rays, you can add this look to your photographic bag of tricks.

The first thing you'll notice in infrared photography is that the blue sky goes dark and that most trees turn very light. Glare is minimized, giving your pictures an eerie clarity.

A popular filter for digicam infrared photography is the Hoya R72. If your camera accepts filters, then go get an R72 at the camera store, attach it to your camera, and look at a brightly lit scene in the LCD viewfinder. You'll know right away if your camera is suitable for this kind of shooting. You can test the "infraredness" of your camera by pointing a remote control toward the lens and seeing if the beam registers the camera's LCD monitor.



Use a remote to test infrared capability.

What's interesting is that older digital cameras often work better than newer models. Over the years, many camera makers have added internal filtering to improve overall picture quality (color, that is) that unfortunately hampers the camera's infrared capability. For example,

my Canon G1 takes great infrared shots, but the G2, G3, and G5 don't perform nearly as well. This is a great argument for hanging on to your older digicams, because you never know what they'll be good for up the road.

Tip: Other older models that shoot great infrared shots include the Nikon CoolPix 800 and 950, Canon S10, Olympus C-3000 series, and Kodak DC 260. Many others also work well. If you want to test a few cameras you have on hand, try this. Line them up and activate their LCD monitors in Record mode. Take a TV remote control and point it directly into the lens of each camera while pressing any button, such as the channel changer. The camera that displays the brightest light from the remote on the LCD monitor is your leading candidate for infrared photography.

Now, take your camera with a Hoya R72 filter out into the bright sunlight. The best conditions for infrared shooting are a blue sky, puffy clouds, and some trees in the landscape. Mount your camera on a tripod and put it in Program mode. You need to steady the camera because the shutter speeds will be very long, even in bright sunlight, due to the density of the R72 filter.

Preview the scene in the LCD monitor and find a composition that best shows off the drama of infrared. Some trees will turn white and others won't, so you have to preview the scene to see what's most dramatic. Take a few shots, and then switch to B&W mode and take a few more. Later, while viewing the pictures in Photoshop, you can decide which type you like better. In the image below, the sky turns dark, the foliage light. What kind of weird world is this?



That's all there is to it. Now, during the bright midday sun, when other photographers refuse to go outside, you can create dramatic, artistic images that will truly impress your friends.

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