

ADVENTURES WITH A SIGMA DP2

BY JASON SCHNEIDER



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As many enthusiasts are well aware, the Sigma DP2 and its able stablemate the wide-angle DP1 are the cameras that sparked the latest trend, now taken up by Olympus, Leica and others, toward compact digital cameras with large image sensors. However, the consumer-DSLR-sized (20.7x13.8mm), 14-megapixel Foveon X3 CMOS sensor in the DP2 (it's also used in the DP1 and in the Sigma SD14 and forthcoming SD15 DSLRs) is what really makes the DP2 unique. Its ability to capture full color information at each image point results in extraordinarily beautiful, exquisitely detailed images that have a different feel from those taken with conventional Bayer-pattern image sensors. Many have described them as looking more "film-like" and I agree—DP2 images have a visceral quality that reminds me of Kodachrome.

The other thing that sets the Sigma DP2 apart is its high performance single focal length lens, a superbly corrected, extraordinarily sharp, multicoated seven-element/six-group 24.2mm f/2.8 lens with two molded glass aspherical elements that provides a 35mm-equivalent focal length of 41mm. Its semi-wide-angle coverage is very flexible for general shooting and more convenient than a true wide-angle for close-ups and portraits. The f/2.8 aperture offers operational advantages in low-light shooting and lets you use shallow depth-of-field to diffuse the background, thereby focusing the viewer's attention on the main subject. When assessing the real-world performance of this optical jewel, an old Konica ad tag line of the '60s comes to mind, "The lens alone is worth the price!"

Opportunities to put the Sigma DP2

through its paces came courtesy of my motorcycle trips to three of my favorite places in this great country—Fairfield, Iowa, a small town of 9200 in the southeast part of that state; Catskill, NY, about 120 miles up the Hudson River from New York City in the northern Catskill mountains; and Moab, Utah, site of the magnificent Arches National Park which, despite being a tourist Mecca, still manages to evoke the ambience of the Old West.

Considering my space-challenged mode of two-wheeled transportation (a Kawasaki Ninja 650R sport bike pressed into service as a long-distance touring machine) the DP2 is the ideal tool of choice—a robust, elegantly compact camera of elemental simplicity fitted with a very high quality single-focal-length lens and a big sensor, an unobtrusive no-frills camera in its simplest and purest form that's clearly been optimized to deliver excellent image quality.


Now before I launch into the specifics of each of the four pairs of images shown here, let me say something about my general shooting parameters. Essentially, these were all what used to be called "grab shots," that is, pictures taken in the course of poking around with no particular aim in mind. Also, all four original images were shot handheld in natural light at ISO settings of 100 and 200 for optimum image quality—the camera performs well at ISO 400, and satisfactorily at ISO 800, but is not so hot at higher ISOs. The DP2 will not always autofocus in low light or with very low contrast subjects, but it does have an excellent and very convenient manual focusing system that can display a magnified image on the LCD for more precise manual focusing.

All the pictures shown here were taken

at moderate apertures in the f/4 to f/8 range with the camera set to RAW mode. When I'm on one of my "art quests" I generally set the camera to "A" (aperture priority) mode to control depth of field, and let the camera select the proper exposure and shutter speed, and that's exactly what I did here. Shutter speeds were in the $\frac{1}{125}$ – $\frac{1}{250}$ -second range, except for the "Wagon Wheel" image, which was shot

handheld at $\frac{1}{30}$ second. The commendable crispness of this image is also a tribute to the DP2's supersmooth and predictable shutter release, something I refer to as a "primary image stabilization system."

For more information on Tiffen Dfx and free trial download, please go to www.tiffen.com and click on the Tiffen Dfx tab.

Now, let's delve into the details of each shot taken with Sigma DP2. 

Jason Schneider is best known as a prolific writer and editor on all aspects of photography. He began his career at Modern Photography in the late 60s and in 1987 signed on as editor-in-chief of Popular Photography a position he held for nearly 16 years. Considered an authority on the history of camera design and technology, he has written three books on camera collecting, is an active contributor to leading photo magazines and websites, and is Senior Editor of Photo Industry Reporter, the industry's authoritative trade magazine.



Hay Storage House: Step 1 (Before)

I shot this original image of a weathered, old building along rural Route 1 at about 2 p.m. while motorcycling from Fairfield to Washington, Iowa in the southeast part of the state. The Sigma DP2 was set to ISO 100 in Program mode which gave a moderate aperture and very good depth of field. The original shot is extremely sharp, and charming in a minimalist way, but I think the enhanced version below really takes it up a couple of notches.

Hay Storage House: Step 2 (Using Tiffen Dfx)

- EZ Mask around house and foreground. Applied Tiffen Dfx "Day for Night" Effect to sky.
- New EZ Mask to mask only foreground foliage in front of and around house. Applied Bleach Bypass effect.
- Copied first layer EZ Mask to new layer. Applied Rainbow Effect using Parameter settings to create custom rainbow look.
- Again, the most time was spent adjusting the various effects to what I personally liked. That is as much a part of the creative process as determining which filters or effects to use.

Hay Storage House: Step 3 (After)

Enhancement took about 30 minutes, most of which was spent deciding which effects I like best and using the Dfx Digital Recipe set-ups to try various iterations.



Before



Train in Station: Step 1 (Before)

I call this picture "The End Of The Line." Taken at a disused railroad siding in Fairfield, Iowa it conveys a surreal post-apocalyptic feeling just as recorded with literal precision using the DP2. The red reflections in the train windows really unify the composition and help it to make a statement, but I thought it could be even more compelling, and the Dfx- enhanced version proves that I was on the right track.

Train in Station: Step 2 (Using Tiffen Dfx)

- Create mask using EZ Mask
- Invert mask for sky, select Dual Grad (Blue-Red) filter, then rotate grad 90 degrees for left to right effect
- Add new layer, copy mask to layer and invert to apply filter only to foreground
- Apply Temperature Warm #7 Effect
- Add new layer, create new mask for windows of train using EZ Mask
- Apply Sunset Effect from Color Looks
- Save information as Dfx Setup for later use

Train in Station: Step 3 (After)

Now this symphony in red really sings. I think this version is a lot more graphically compelling without being overstated or untrue to the original concept I had in mind. Remarkably, this transformation was relatively quick and very easy to achieve with the Tiffen Dfx Standalone version, even for a non-computer-geek like me.

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After



Before



Wagon Wheel: Step 1 (Before)

This century-old relic sits forlornly outside a local eatery in Moab, Utah in mournful tribute to the hardships of the Old West. I took pictures of the dilapidated wagon from all angles, but this is the one I liked best. You can't argue with the superb technical quality of the original un-manipulated image that faithfully records the details of the weathered wood and rusted iron, but overall the picture falls flat.

Wagon Wheel: Step 2 (Using Tiffen Dfx)

- Apply Defog #8 Effect to image to increase contrast and color saturation
- Adjust image using Ozone Effects to selectively control color by zone
- Save information as Dfx Setup for later use

Wagon Wheel: Step 3 (After)

Now that's more like it! The ho-hum picture has been utterly transformed into an icon of the Old West, and while the feeling is more akin to a lithograph than a photograph, it is clearly on a higher level as a work of graphic art.

After



Before



House: Step 1 (Before)

This typical Iowa “handyman’s special” cottage has its own rustic charm but it had to be carefully framed on the DP2’s LCD and it just barely fit the frame when I shot it from the only possible shooting position that allowed me to crop out extraneous details. It’s exquisitely sharp just as it came out of the camera, but it cried out for a less literal interpretation to convey its inherently iconic quality.

House: Step 2

- Apply Antique Look from B&W Looks
- Add new layer and apply Red Enhancer to increase warmth
- Add new layer, select Vignette Effect Parameter setting to create custom vignette color, adjust size and look
- Save information as Dfx Setup for later use

House: Step 3 (After)

This is the art image that I had in my mind’s eye when I was taking the shot—something you might find leafing through an old photo album from the turn of the last century. It’s yet another example of a good shot made even more memorable in postproduction, and it was remarkably easy to achieve using the Tiffen Dfx Standalone version.

(After)

