

THE PERFECT STORM

BY ROBERT SANGER

»» *With an introduction by
Gillian Greenwood*



Robert Sanger is a founding subscriber of *Nikon Owner* magazine. He is a world travel photographer and writer, and the creator and owner of world travel images library [Blue Planet Images](#).

For many years, Robert followed a career in the shipping industry as a broker for ship sales and purchase as well as latterly being involved with new shipbuilding projects. He purchased his first Nikon, the Nikon F3HP, over twenty years ago while employed as a shipbroker in Monaco. A self-learning process followed, and, as his passion for travel photography developed, the building of his world travel images archive evolved and flourished. In his current career as a world travel photographer and writer, he now uses an F100, F6, D2X and an array of different lenses including a 24-85mm Nikkor, and an AF VR 80-400mm. His newest acquisition is a DX 12-24mm.

He fulfilled a long-held ambition when he first visited the Isles of Scilly in June 2003. Aptly named "The Fortunate Islands", the Isles of Scilly are about 28 miles off Land's End, England's most South-Westerly point. Of the fifty-five islands that make up the archipelago, only five are inhabited; their white sand beaches, clear waters, famous sub-tropical Abbey Gardens, and tranquil way of life draw him back at least once a year. In this article, Robert tells us of his passion for storm-photography, and offers photographers some very useful guidelines for taking pictures of the perfect storm.





"My senses ... are reactivated. I am back into 'photographic mode', alert to the sights, sounds and smells of nature"

» ABOVE:
Bryher, Hell Bay
storm-watching.

» BOTTOM
LEFT:
Bryher, Hell Bay
storm wave on
Shipman Head.

» BOTTOM
RIGHT:
Bryher: Hell Bay,
October storm





» **ABOVE:**
Tresco: New
Grimsby Harbour
& Bryher

» **LEFT:**
Tresco: Heliport

» **RIGHT:**
Bryher: Force 8
and rising to storm
Force 10

"I catch my first glimpse of the islands beneath the whirling blur of the helicopter rotor blades."

It is late October and with five days of storm-watching photography in prospect, the outlook is good – North-Westerly Gales, Force 8 possibly rising to Storm Force 10, although not everyone's ideal weather forecast when starting out on a trip. As we approach the Isles of Scilly towards the end of the twenty-minute flight from the Cornish mainland to Tresco, I catch my first glimpse of the islands beneath the whirling blur of the helicopter rotor blades.

A few minutes after landing we are on what passes for a bus on Tresco – an open-air tractor-drawn trailer. The ten-minute drive down a narrow lane past dry-stone walled meadows, sandy bays and the cosy New Inn soon brings us to the boat quay at New Grimsby. The ferry "Firethorn" is already alongside waiting to take us on the three-minute ferry crossing to the island of Bryher (pronounced "briar"), the smallest of the five inhabited islands in the archipelago.

I disembark and set off from the jetty along the track, first through the dunes of white sand, then, climbing the hill, I pass cottages from whose chimneys drifts the rural smell of wood-smoke. My senses, dulled by urban living, are reactivated. I am back into "photographic mode", alert to the sights, sounds and smells of nature: gulls mew overhead, sheep bleat on a bracken-covered hillside up to my right, and to my left the distant sound of a ferryboat's





engine as it heads down the channel towards the main island of St. Mary's. At the brow of the hill the wind off the Atlantic is exhilarating.

Below me is Hell Bay Hotel, a haven of comfort and good food in this wild landscape. Offshore are the skerries and reefs of the Norrard Rocks whilst on the horizon you can make out the lone tower of Bishop Rock Lighthouse, known locally simply as "The Bishop". This is a tiny

community facing the might of the Atlantic with nothing but the open ocean westwards until one reaches America.

To my right is Hell Bay with its rocky shoreline and granite cliffs where during Westerly and North-westerly storms, fearsome waves build up into a foaming maelstrom of surf. It is these conditions that have been the cause of so many ships foundering here through the centuries with the loss of numerous lives.



By the light of dawn the following morning I can already see great waves of white water crashing onto the rocks offshore – I pull on my boots and storm-gear, gather up my photo equipment and head up along the cliff-top path above Hell Bay leading to Shipman Head at the northernmost tip of the island.

The sea in all its moods under ever-changing light conditions is one of the most fascinating and awe-inspiring subjects. Given the right conditions, storm-watching and



photography does not get much better than in Hell Bay, with its remoteness and sense of isolation.

One has to accept an element of good and bad luck when photographing the elements and make the best of whatever nature chooses to give you. To some degree though you can "make your own luck". Based upon my experiences, here are some suggestions that I hope will prove helpful in your endeavours to shoot images of your own perfect storm. ■

» **ABOVE:**
Bryher: West Coast
Cottages & Norrad Rocks

» **TOP LEFT:**
Bryher: Rising tide

» **FAR LEFT**
Bryher: Stormy low tide,
Hell Bay

» **RIGHT:**
Bryher: Autumn storm,
Hell Bay





"If you see good storm waves, be quick to shoot your images whilst the conditions last."

» **ABOVE:**
Tresco: St. Martin's
from Lizard Point

» **RIGHT:**
Tresco: Abbey
Gardens

» **BELOW:**
Tresco & St. Martin's
from Bryher: Calm
before the storm



STORM PHOTOGRAPHY >>> Practical & Photographics Tips

>>> Research your location well in advance. Take the time, trouble (and expense) to get to remote locations as these often present the best storm-watching opportunities.

>>> Allow for the possibility of weather delays disrupting your travel plans. Take out adequate travel insurance even when travelling in your home country.

>>> Check when is the best time of year to catch storms in your chosen location and from which direction the biggest storm waves come. A large-scale map will prove to be a good investment (see Ordnance Survey Explorer Map No.101 for Isles of Scilly).

>>> Check weather and shipping forecasts and tide tables as well as sunrise and sunset data. Often the most spectacular storm picture possibilities occur at high Spring tides.

>>> Talk to locals such as fishermen to find out about local weather and sea conditions.

>>> Prepare your kit very carefully in advance. Clean everything meticulously and keep lens caps in place until the very last minute before taking photographs. Take a good supply of lens tissues and lens cleaning cloths. Make sure these are newly washed and completely clean. Keep each one separately wrapped, and as you use them keep the clean ones separate from the dirty. (On a storm shoot I get through about six lens cleaning cloths per day, plus lots of lens cleaning tissues and lens cleaning fluid.)

>>> Check on travel weight limits if applicable. For example on helicopter flights to the Isles of Scilly, the limit is 15 kilos. To reduce checked baggage weight on a flight, wear as much as you reasonably are able such as boots, sweater, fleece and storm jacket. (No cabin baggage is permitted on most helicopter flights for safety reasons though I usually have one camera hanging from my neck to further reduce checked bag weight.)

>>> Wear good weatherproof clothing and good footwear: coastal paths can be rough and slippery and weather can change quickly.

>>> Do not take risks that might endanger your own safety or that of others and always allow an extra margin of safety in case a "rogue wave" comes higher or further than you had been expecting.

>>> If possible, for safety, do not go alone on a storm-watching photo trip.

>>> Just as storms can build up quickly so they can also moderate sooner than expected. If you see good storm waves, be quick to shoot your images whilst the conditions last.

>>> Take more than enough spare caps for camera bodies and lenses and try to avoid the need to change lenses in high humidity salt-spray saturated conditions.

>>> Keep all prime lenses fitted with a protective UV filter all the time when in storm-watching photo locations.

>>> Check carefully to make sure the horizon in the image is level. Use one of the Perspex cube spirit levels that slot into the camera's flash-hotshoe to assist in this.

>>> Use a sturdy tripod and cable release for stability and composition control. Extend the tripod legs as little as possible in windy conditions. The more you extend the legs, the more will be the risk of windshake. Try to find yourself a shooting position that is partially sheltered such as in the lee of a rock outcrop, to reduce the buffeting effect of the wind.

>>> Despite the usual advice that one should not turn on the VR (vibration reduction) on a lens when using a tripod; I ignore this advice when shooting in windy storm conditions when I find it very useful.

>>> Take a water-resistant cover for your camera. A large zip-lock type clear plastic bag with a hole cut through it for the lens is a cheap and easy solution.

>>> For variety take some shots with, and some without people. People in the composition give a reference against which the scale of the scenery can be better judged. Place them off-centre – one-third from the left or right-hand side is most pleasing to the eye. Picture editors of publications prefer the main subject in an image to be on the right side.

>>> In dull light conditions, look to include highlights of bright colour to lift your image composition.

>>> Watch how waves are breaking so that you recognise when the most dramatic image opportunities are about to happen and can capture them in your pictures.

>>> Try varying shutter speeds for different effects with breaking waves – higher speeds to freeze the action, slower speeds for a more "fluid" image effect. With storms I find that the real drama of waves breaking is best captured with higher shutter speeds and this has the added advantage of reducing risk of camera shake caused by the wind.

>>> Vary the lenses that you use: telephoto lenses can foreshorten perspective, sometimes producing dramatic results.

>>> Clean all camera kit including lens cloths very thoroughly every evening after storm-watching, being sure that you remove all traces of sea salt. Clean everything again even more carefully when you get home.

Travel and photo facts:

Isles of Scilly Tourist Information:

www.simplyscilly.co.uk

Hell Bay Hotel & Island of Tresco:

www.tresco.co.uk

Film: **Fuji Velvia 50 & 100**

Cameras & lenses:

Nikon D2X, F6 & F100

Blue Planet Images website:

www.blueplanetimages.com