

Earth

As a 14-year-old lad on our return from Canada, I remember looking down from the circling jumbo jet at the patchwork of fields that make up England's green and pleasant land. It seemed a toy landscape in contrast to the huge open spaces of Canada. In Europe our rural landscapes have been shaped and maintained by man for centuries, even millennia, to such an extent that the old stone walls, rustic barns and church steeples are as much part of the environment as the trees and hills. Age generally mellows man's input and the rural architecture of a region becomes deeply imbedded in its character and culture.

For all the challenges of deserts and ice caps some of my favourite trips have consisted of loading up the motor and drifting through the rural heartlands of Europe. On a long haul flight difficult compromises have to be made with what can be taken, and I'll often opt to travel light with just the DSLR system. So on these road trips it's such a relief to load up virtually all the gear I own, including the heavy artillery.

I've been wedded to the panoramic format for some 17 years. I first hired a panoramic camera on trial and was so bowled over by the impact of the big 6x17 cm transparencies for landscape work that I immediately bought one. Since then it and its successor have been round the world many times. As yet there is still no practical digital alternative to the big 'pano' and I still love the impact and quality of the format. The camera itself is big and bulky, but not particularly heavy. It's also simple, with no electronics and not much to go wrong.



Poppies near St Remy de Provence, Provence, France
I found this concentration of poppies by one of those typical tree lined roads near St Remy de Provence. They're everywhere in southern France in late May, and I never can resist getting them in my foreground. Well, Monet did, so why can't I?
Fuji GX617, 90mm lens

Olive grove near Cazorla, Andalucia, Spain
Wendy and I have found this spot in Andalucia that's proving very difficult to leave. With the wild spring flowers growing in among the olive groves it's a verdant, lush landscape that we cycle through every day when we're there in search of locations. I reckon I've made some worthwhile images and it's probably time to move on, but somehow, we just can't seem to.
Fuji GX617, 90mm lens

“Location searching in such regions can and should be a real joy”

Having said that it does demand a different, more rigid way of working; I have to be meticulous in the way I put together an image and operate the camera. I strongly believe that you need to be diligent whatever camera you're using, but with the heavy artillery it does take a while longer to set up and deploy. This can be a good thing, imposing a more disciplined regime on the business of making an image, and when you see a print from this format enlarged up to several metres wide it makes it all worthwhile.

In Europe the classic regions of Provence, Tuscany and Andalucia take some beating, but of course there are many, many more equally bucolic and enticing areas. Indeed part of the attraction of such trips is getting off the beaten track and discovering for yourself rural backwaters not mentioned in the guidebooks. By its very nature this is an environment lacking in any particular challenge of survival or access. As always, location finding is crucial. I've often found myself in a region I know is attractive, with much photographic potential, only I can't seem to express it in an image. It's extremely frustrating, and it happens all too frequently. A mental block can develop; the harder you look, the less it all