



Harbor Details are Fun

Cleat

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In the July 2006 and August 2008 issues of the *PSA Journal* I wrote about techniques for photographing details of rusty cars, found objects, and decaying buildings. Photographers who have learned to enjoy making this type of image will discover that harbors provide good sources of similar compositions. Those who have not will find that a harbor is a good place to begin.

Chain



It's important to choose your harbors carefully. Pleasure boats are usually fiberglass, with white, uninteresting hulls. Many commercial fishing boats are steel, sometimes colorful, and often rusty. They are also much more likely to have interesting ropes, nets, buoys, bumpers and chains. Therefore it makes sense to do one's best to visit fishing-boat harbors. High overcast provides the best light for photographing the subjects, because this kind of light is usually more effective to show more or less abstract patterns and colors rather than to model detailed objects. On the other hand, if one must deal with contrasty light one can often include the shadows in compositions to create new patterns. The shadows are especially effective when they are cast on colorful textured surfaces. Excellent harbors and perfect overcast conditions can be found on the Oregon Coast.

When you get to a harbor, do your best to walk all of the docks slowly, and chat with the people you meet. If you tell them what you want you may get suggestions. Often the docks are gated, but the gates are frequently open and if you look respectable there is rarely a problem getting on. Sometimes you may have to look for a harbor office and get permission, or even the loan of a key. Many interesting, colorful boats can be spotted from a

distance, but if possible cover every dock, because small items are not easy to see from far away.

Among the first things one notices when entering a fishing harbor is a profusion of **ropes and nets**. They are often very colorful. They are found on the main quays, the docks, and the boats themselves, often on the after parts. Sometimes the nets are wound on large reels. Although they are very tempting, it can be quite difficult to separate them from the background and isolate parts of them to make coherent compositions. This is a situation for the use of one of the photographer's rubrics: *less is more*. It is worthwhile to look at the nets or ropes from many angles and use many focal lengths to help decide the proper areas of concentration. The various ropes and chains that tether boats to the docks can also provide counterpoint to the shapes of the boats and gear.

Perhaps even more striking than the ropes and nets are the **buoys and bumpers** attached to them, hanging from the ships, or simply floating in the water. Many of them are designed to attract attention, and so are made in bright colors, which contrast effectively with the often-dull paint of the unrudded parts of the hulls and the different colors of the ropes. In the case of bumpers it is often easy to make simple compositions using their reflections in the water. The buoys, however, like the nets, tempt the photographer to include too much. It might be a worthwhile exercise to make images including only parts of one or more buoys.

When salt water interacts with steel boats, a lot of rust is produced. The rusty places can be more or less categorized into three classes for the purpose of composition: hulls, spots, and objects. If a large portion of a hull is covered with **colorful rust**, the photographer must show some restraint so as not to include too much of it in one image. Of course it is perfectly feasible to record the entire rusty areas and do the cropping later, but one can obtain better resolution by making more exposures of smaller areas—and they can still be cropped. It is not necessary for the final image



Three bolts



Buoy in rope



Two bitts



Cone

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to have the same aspect ratio as the camera's sensor. If one is lucky, some of the rusty hull will be reflected in the water, making the image even more interesting. In the case of rust spots, it is

particularly useful to pay attention to the angle of the camera while making the exposure—it is not necessary to confine oneself to vertical or horizontal. The angle should suit the composition



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Pad eye



potential of the spot. Remember that extra spots may improve the composition if they are in the right place in the frame.

Individual objects, like winches, anchors, chains, blocks, cleats, padeyes, and bitts (the last four are things that ropes are tied to or go through) are easy to isolate. Also, they seem to get rustier than the main parts of the hull, perhaps because they expose a larger fraction of their surfaces to the elements. Again, however, one should consider the composition. Sometimes the object lends itself to a vertical or horizontal position and perhaps even centering, but often it is more useful to place it at an angle in the frame.

Pilings are the posts that hold up the docks. They are usually made of wood, which can accumulate spectacular growths of algae and sometimes marine animals, and steel, which often rusts in interesting patterns. It is important when photographing either kind to isolate interesting patterns. Since pilings are tall and thin, it is often unavoidable to include some of the background in the frame, and then one should be careful to prevent the often-bright background from influencing the exposure. Positive compensation helps, and it can be useful to have the display in highlight mode so you can see what parts are overexposed—they can be cropped or modified in Photoshop® later.

Don't forget to look down. There usually **many things floating** in a harbor, and some may be worth photographing. Seaweed, leaves, pieces of wood, and scraps of rope can swirl and combine with reflections to provide fascinating compositions. Films of oil can add to the mix. And sometimes fish or even marine mammals can contribute to the interest. Of course, harbors are full of fascinating reflections too, so many that they really need a separate article to discuss them.

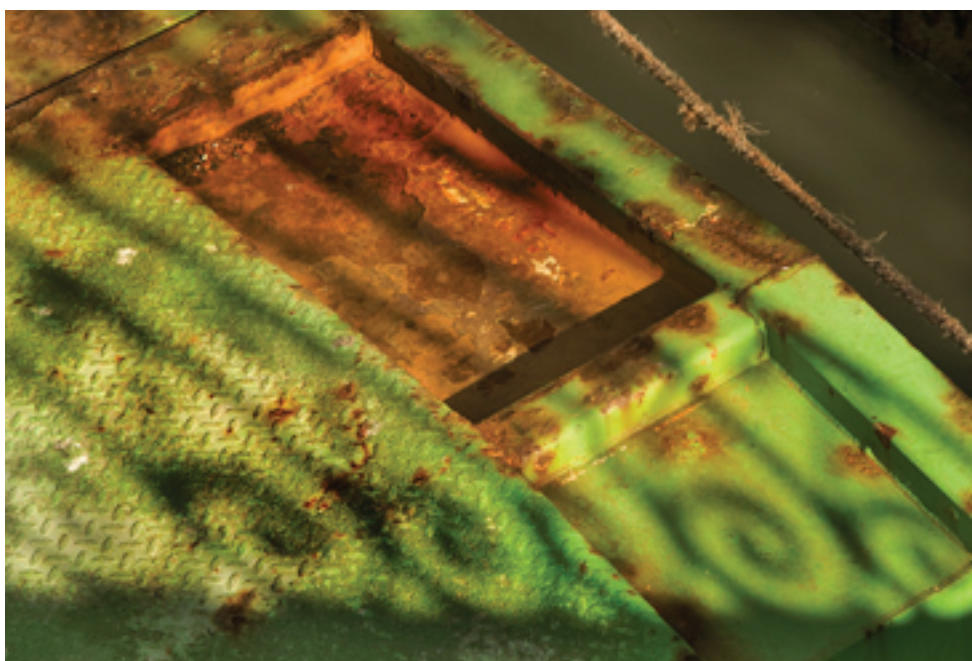
Finishing the image

In many of these cases the rust appears at first to be pale and uninteresting, but the image can often be made spectacular by increasing contrast and saturation in Photoshop. Sometimes compositions can be improved by rotating the image. The background can be made less intrusive either by blurring contrasty elements, replacing them with bland ones, or by changing the color or brightness of the sky. It is often useful to remove or darken distracting objects, and sometimes it makes sense to change the position of some of the minor constituents of the scene. Since in most cases no one knows what the subject actually looks like or what the true colors are, the maker has almost complete freedom, and should make use of it.

With all of these opportunities, it should be no surprise that one can often find more potential images in a fishing-boat harbor than at any other site in the same amount of time.



Bumper



Shadows on a deck