

*It hasn't taken long for Sandra Bartocha's unique style to capture the public imagination. Keith Wilson catches up with the innovative photographer*

**T**raditionally, nature photography has been typified by perfectly exposed, pin-sharp, motion-freezing images that provide an accurate visual record of the subject. Sandra Bartocha has broken with that tradition by breaking the 'rules'. She uses soft focus, blur, noise and movement to create highly original impressions of the natural world. It is a new conceptual style that is winning awards and a growing global following...

**It is plants and small creatures rather than more spectacular subjects and places that interest you. Why is this?**

Well, when I first started I didn't have money to travel the world and document the most spectacular places, so I started working in my local surroundings in search of interesting subjects. But I'm also a person who gets easily bored by the pure documentary style of photography and by making visual duplicates of subjects. I've always tried to challenge myself to create something interesting, and I find a lot of joy in transforming ordinary and simple things into pieces of magic and adding my personal point of view.

**Why are so many of your nature images shot close to where you live?**

Because it is a beautiful place! It's not spectacular. It has a quiet and subtle beauty, one that doesn't scream, but lasts longer. Some known photographic hot spots are too beautiful for me, and in that sort of location you can easily fall into the trap of purely documenting the scene in front of you. This rarely happens at home. I really have to work my brain and eyes in order to bring home some decent images.

**So how old were you when you were first hooked by photography, and what triggered it?**

I have been taking photos for as long as I can remember. My dad was a photojournalist and he always took me on assignments with him, so I got interested in photography from very early on. I loved the way photography documents and secures moments of interest and beauty, and I still do love that about it. ►



 **BLURRED TREES**  
Nikon D200, Nikon AF-S DX 17-55mm  
f/2.8 ED-IF, 0.4 sec, f/22, ISO100



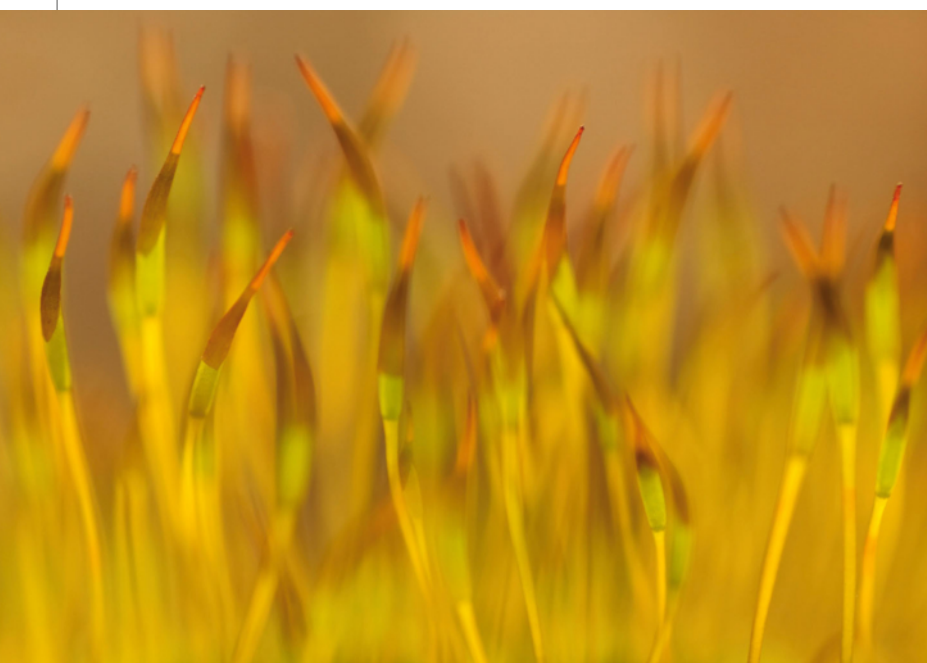


CLOSE-UP

# SANDRA BARTOCHA







**UMBELIFER**  
Nikon F90x, Nikon AF-D 20mm f/2.8, 12mm extension tube,  
1/160 sec, f/3.5, Fuji Velvia ISO50 film

**DANCING MOSS (BELOW)**  
Nikon D200, Nikon AF-S 60mm f/2.8G ED,  
1/125 sec, f/6.3, ISO100

**What type of photographer did you dream of becoming when you graduated from university in Potsdam?**

Actually, I find pleasure in all kinds of photography, but I have always been most interested in nature photography. However, I didn't think it was possible to make a living from this particular genre so I started to do all kinds of photo commissions. But my dream has always been to travel and to be involved with nature.

**What exactly was your first big break as a nature photographer?**

I think two things happened simultaneously. I was asked to participate in the Wild Wonders of Europe project (find out about it at [www.wild-wonders.com](http://www.wild-wonders.com)), and a German national park asked me to photograph for a 20-year anniversary celebration. These were my first paid jobs, and that's when I started to believe that I could make this into a career.

**You are very active on Facebook. How did you build up your online following?**

I still consider my following quite small compared to many other photographers. I started in 2011 because I thought it might be a good marketing tool, but I had no

real clue about what I was doing. Nothing that I did was on purpose. I just uploaded pictures when I wanted to show something new or wanted to share some ideas. And I am editor of a magazine too, so for me Facebook is a great platform to see what is happening in the world of photography and to keep up-to-date.

**Could you shoot a wedding if you had to? Most professional photographers who we speak to don't enjoy it!**

Yes I could, and I really love to do it. I like people and I love creating beautiful, memorable shots. I am happy that I don't have to do it as a career, though, because that way I can keep the excitement of the moment when I do photograph one.





 **SUNDEW**  
Nikon D70, Nikon AF-S 60mm  
f/2.8G ED, 1/200 sec, f/5, ISO200

#### What's your desert island lens?

The new Nikon 80-400mm VR does it for me. It's brilliant. I love the zoom range and the versatility. It's small and relatively lightweight and it exactly fits my style of working as I can compress scenes, and do macro stuff as well as intimate landscapes. Combined with extension tubes, the possibilities are even greater.

#### f/2.8 or f/8?

Clearly f/2.8! I'm not an in-between person. I like extremes. I love working completely open and working the 'soft' background.

#### What is the weight of your kit bag for a typical day's shooting?

I always carry everything I own. I choose ►

## PROFILE

### *A dedicated photographer, Sandra edits an important German photography magazine*

■ Born in 1980, Sandra Bartocha read media studies and English at Potsdam University.

■ She is the editor of *GDT Forum Naturfotografie*, the magazine of the German Association of Wildlife Photographers (GDT), and was vice-president of the

Association from 2007 to 2013.

■ Sandra was a category winner in the prestigious Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition in 2011 and has also been highly commended and a runner-up on numerous occasions.

■ She is a sought-after speaker at photo festivals in France, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia and the UK.







**THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING (TOP)**  
Nikon D700, Nikon AF-S Micro 105mm f/2.8G VR,  
1/8000 sec, f/3.3, ISO200

**SPIDER (BELOW LEFT)**  
Nikon D70, Nikon Micro 60mm f/2.8G ED,  
1/640 sec, f/4.5, ISO200

**TOADSTOOL**  
Nikon D700, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8,  
1/80 sec, f/2.8, ISO200

my overall equipment based on my needs in the field, and I want to keep my options open. The weight is around 18-20kg.

**What was your first Nikon camera?**

The first one I owned was the Nikon FM2

– it's a great piece of metal. I still own it. I have never sold any camera body I have owned. They have all been very important in every stage of me growing as a photographer.

**Which other models have you owned since and what has been the best thing about each of them?**

The FM2 was followed by the F90x, then I moved to digital with D70, D200, D700 and now the D800 and D800E. I have loved all the Nikon cameras during the time I have used them and each one brought improvements that I needed, be it the multi-exposure feature of the D200, the full-frame format of the D700 or the 36 megapixels of the D800 cameras.

**How many bodies do you currently use?**  
I use two, the D800 and D800E.

**What's the most unusual thing in your camera bag?**

The most unusual thing in my bag doesn't come from Nikon! It is an old Meyer Görlitz Trioplan 100mm f/2 lens that I use sometimes as it produces very interesting optical effects.

**Speaking of interesting optical effects, what are your tips for soft focusing, movement and the other creative techniques in your pictures?**

The core of each of these techniques is the right light and the perfect composition. I always look for these things first. A





## MIXING THE MEDIA

*A life-long Nikon user, Sandra's development as a photographer has followed the evolution of camera technology from film to digital, stills to movie. More of her recent presentations to European photo festivals now include music and movies as well as still images, and she and Werner Bollman are even working with a composer, Torsten Harder, on the presentations for the LYS project...*

**Do you prefer shooting HD movies or still images nowadays?**

■ I definitely prefer shooting stills. But I do also take movies occasionally. I always switch to shooting movies when it comes to scenes that capture moving objects much better than a still image could do, things like swaying barley, moving snow. But I love the power of a great still image. It lasts.

**Can you really combine the two media successfully? A lot of people say they could manage one or the other, but not do both to a satisfying standard.**

■ It depends on your standards, I suppose, and how the movies are being used. I don't have the intention of being the next great nature film-maker. For me, movie scenes are just an addition to my still life images, a little movement here and there, elegantly woven into a slideshow with stills. I don't think it is possible to shoot both still images and movies and have perfect and standalone usable results, as the required equipment and way of thinking are quite different.

technique should never be used just for the sake of making something different – it should suit the subject and the idea. For the soft background I always use open aperture and I pay very close attention to the background. It should have elements that complement the main subject without taking too much attention. The background can make or break an image. For movement, I experiment a lot with different exposure times in order to find the perfect rhythm.

**Your 'Twilight' series of landscapes features a lot of noise. What ISO ratings did you use and what was the effect you were going for?**

In analogue times I always liked the

 **POPPIES**  
Triple exposure image  
Nikon F90x, Nikon Micro 60mm f/2.8,  
1/250 sec, f/2.8, Fuji Velvia ISO50 film

“A technique should never be used just for the sake of making something different – it should suit the subject and the idea... The background can make or break an image”

Sandra Bartocha *Nature photographer*

effect created by high ISO films with their extensive film grain. So I tried to work in twilight situations, just me and my camera – back then it was the Nikon D200 – with ISO3200 to achieve a similar sort of effect. Unfortunately, the new digital cameras handle high ISO very differently and don't produce this even and beautiful noise any more. But you can't have the best of both worlds, I guess!

**Another project is Dublin. Why did you choose this city?**

I just chose it by accident. I liked the feeling and the appearance of the city by night. The typical shop fronts, the light, the rain... German cities have a different vibe from Dublin. ▶



## COMPETITION KUDOS

*Sandra is a two-time winner of the German Society of Photography 100 Images of the Year contest and a category winner of the 2011 Wildlife Photographer of the Year. She has also served as competition judge.*

How important are competitions to making a successful career as a photographer?

■ I think it depends on the competition. The Wildlife Photographer of the Year is, of course, the one when it comes to nature photography. The images are exhibited throughout the world and the media coverage is amazing; it helps to get you noticed. But I also think it depends on the image you win with – whether it is a special image or one that blends in with the 99 others displayed together. For me, competitions are a fun thing. I don't take them too seriously. I take part and if I win with an image I like a lot then I'm really happy. They bring some exposure, but they are not the basis of my career plan.



**SNOWDROPS**  
Nikon D700, Meyer Görlitz Trioplan 100mm f/2,  
1/50 sec, f/2, ISO200

How many gigabytes of pictures do you shoot a week?

Some weeks I don't shoot anything at all, and sometimes I return home having shot 50Gb of images in one day. Of course, it's easy to do that now with the Nikon D800, which creates large files.

What percentage of the images you take do you delete?

I should start to delete images as my server is filling up with material. However, I'm a bit lazy when it comes to deleting. All too often I have found great material long after the trip. Sometimes I need 'in-between' images for shows, or images that went wrong to use as part of written tutorials. Many of my images are results of



**SPOOKY FOREST**  
Nikon D70, Nikon 80-400mm,  
2.5 secs, f/29, ISO200

“I'm working on a challenging photographic project right now: a long-term project about the north of Europe, called LYS”

**Sandra Bartocha** *Nature photographer*

experimenting with camera techniques, so there are quite a few hit-and-miss images on my memory cards.

How important is it to stay on top of image workflow? Do you feel organisation is important for a pro?

I think it is very important to have a working system. I'm not deleting images

as I should, but other than that I'm quite organised when it comes to workflow.

How do you do it?

I use Nikon Transfer to import my images. I add IPTC contact information while importing, and I rename my files. I use a chronological order and sort by years. I do two backups and then start editing by assigning stars and colour-coding images. Images that I want to convert get two stars, the ones I want to keep get one star. Images that have to be combined get different colours, for example, panoramas and HDR images. I then convert the RAW files to TIFF using Nikon View NX2. After that, the usual stuff in Photoshop. I like to have 'ready-to-use' TIFF files.





**DARK FOREST**  
Nikon D200, Nikon 80-400mm,  
1/4 sec, f/5.3, ISO3200



**Where do you derive your photographic inspiration?**

From everywhere: art, music, TV, everyday life. I keep my eyes and ears open. When I like something I always try to think immediately of how I could implement that idea into my own subjects and photography.

**How did you come up with the idea for 'Frog and Landscape'?**

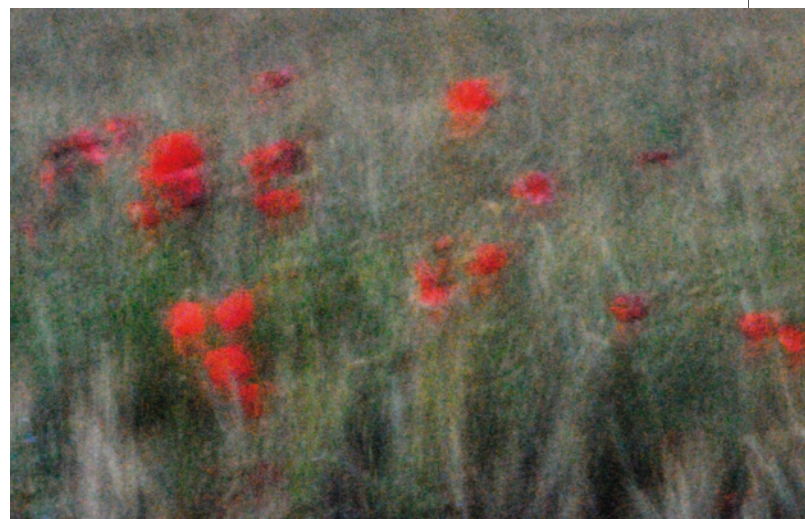
The frogs came to me, or rather to the garden of my parents. One year they were there: everywhere, hundreds of frogs sitting on every possible plant.

**What has been the most challenging project you have done?**

I'm working on a challenging project

right now: a long-term project about the north of Europe. It is called LYS, which is Norwegian for LIGHT. Of course, light is the main ingredient of a photograph and the light is very special in the north so I think it is the perfect title for a photographic project.

The project is challenging because we sometimes work under extreme conditions, and because it is very strictly conceptual. My colleague, Werner Bollmann, and I have specific ideas about which mood the pictures shall convey and a certain level of perfection and timelessness they should attain. That makes it very demanding in the field as a lot of great scenes are not fitting into the concept, or the weather doesn't play along as we wish.



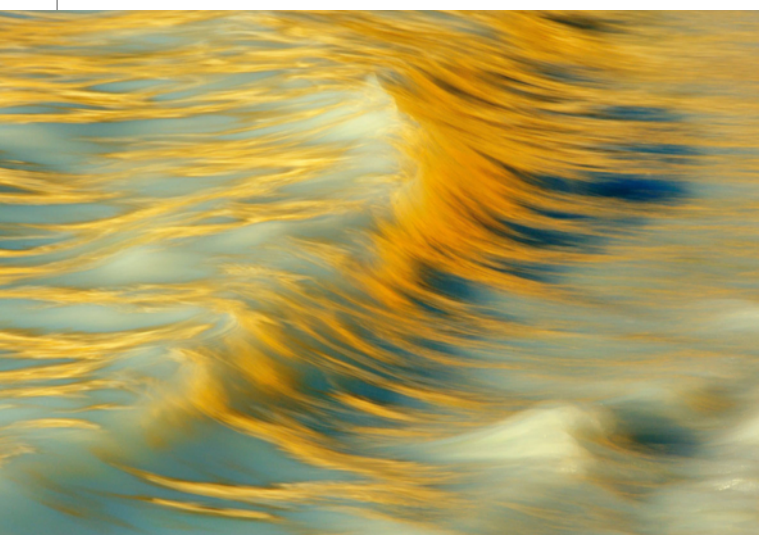
**LILY PADS (BELOW LEFT)**  
Nikon D200, Nikon 80-400mm,  
1/13 sec, f/13, ISO3200

**POPPY FIELD (BELOW RIGHT)**  
Nikon D200, Nikon 80-400mm,  
0.6 sec, f/29, ISO3200

**The LYS project is nearing completion. What is it about and will we see it as a book or exhibition?**

We have been working more than two years already in the northern regions of Europe, concentrating on Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. It is a really conceptual approach. It is not about the countries as such, or a special unique national park, it is a personal interpretation





**FROGS (TOP)**  
Nikon D700, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8,  
1/160 sec, f/5.6, ISO200, 2x teleconverter

**ICE PATTERNS (MIDDLE)**  
Nikon D70, Nikon AF-S 60mm f/2.8G ED,  
1.4 secs, f/29, ISO320

**WATER (BOTTOM)**  
Nikon D700, Nikon 80-400mm,  
1/13 sec, f/36, ISO200

of the typical features of this region: the forests, the coastlines, the tundra and so on. It's about the essence of these places.

We are planning a book and an exhibition and a slideshow together with a great composer, Torsten Harder. So we will have live music on stage too. It is really exciting and so far we have been lucky and

have experienced beautiful situations on and off the road.

**What has been the best thing about shooting Arctic Europe in the winter?**

The cold, the ice, the snow and the wind. That might sound weird, but being out there surrounded by nothing other than white and really feeling the remoteness and the harsh environment is liberating. The good thing it is that when I'm photographing I don't notice how cold it is. But the cold temperatures transform landscapes into something magical – almost fairytale-like.

**Will you continue to make journeys to Svalbard, Lofoten and the north?**

Definitely. I had caught 'the bug' long

before I started working on this project and I will definitely go up north all my life.

**What has been your greatest moment as a photographer?**

I cannot really remember a single great moment, as there have been so many. Every time I'm outdoors experiencing the elements, seeing the beauty of monumental landscapes in great weather conditions, I'm totally happy. I always think that I'm a lucky person being able to experience these precious moments.

**And the worst?**

I always feel bad when I have to work under time pressures and the conditions are not right. Last year I was commissioned





 **MAGICAL FOREST**  
Nikon D700, Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8,  
0.8 sec, f/5.6, ISO200

“Every time I’m outdoors experiencing the elements, seeing the beauty of monumental landscapes in great weather conditions, I’m totally happy. I always think that I’m a lucky person”

**Sandra Bartocha** *Nature photographer*

to photograph a certain area in Germany in winter conditions. However, snow is not always guaranteed here. So I drove to that location four times when it had the slightest chance for snow but I wasn’t in luck on any of those occasions. It was like a bad curse! The surrounding area was fairytale white with snow, but the place I had to photograph was still green. Then the winter was over. Fortunately, the

client opted for some alternative winter landscapes I offered.

**You’re only 33, what are your photographic ambitions?**

Well, that is good question. I’d love to develop a more sophisticated style, and dig deep into projects and conceptual photography. I hope I’m able to continue working on exciting self-chosen projects

and at the same time earn enough money from what I do.

So, what is the best piece of advice you can give to someone starting as a professional photographer today? Stay passionate and use your imagination.

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• You can find out more about Sandra Bartocha’s work and see some of her latest photographs from the Arctic online at [www.bartocha-photography.com](http://www.bartocha-photography.com) You can also subscribe to her newsletter (German language only) and find information on the publications she’s been featured in via her website.