

Grant SHEEHAN

Lights in the landscape,
New Zealand lighthouses

Lights in the Landscape is a spectacular photographic journey from New Zealand's most northern lighthouse at Cape Reinga, to its most southern, in Foveaux Strait.

The book shows not only the lighthouses themselves but also the landscape around them, capturing the wild beauty of the coastline, the often unpredictable weather and the wildlife that lives in these, mostly isolated, areas.

Photographer Grant Sheehan is also the publisher of *Lights in the Landscape*. The book is a long overdue follow up, a modern day take on his earlier effort on the same subject, *Leading Lights*, which was published by Hazard Press in 1991. That book marked the significance of the year 1990, the year that saw the end of the era of watched lights, and the automation of the last light to have its own lighthouse keeper.

The new book is a lot more ambitious, hard cover rather than soft, and almost 40 pages longer. The photographs in *Lights* capture sharp textural landscapes in many different lighting situations, from storm light and moonlight ▶



The Cape Egmont lighthouse with Mt Taranaki in the background. Nikon D3 with 80-200mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

and nightscapes filled with stars. They are, in a sense, more evocative, even more solitary sentinels for their isolation from generations of keepers of the light, men and women whose role it was to run these rugged navigational outposts.

If the name seems familiar, perhaps that's because Grant Sheehan's work featured in issue 6 of this magazine, Dec/Jan 2012, when we showed a portfolio of his monochrome images from another of his books, *Ghosts in the Landscape*.

Recognising that many photographers are in his audience and amongst his readership, Grant has ensured that photographic data is included in the caption of each image in this new book.

The book also includes a brief history, with portraits, of the last keepers that manned the lighthouses in the final days before automation. Accompanying the photographs is text giving a short history and for lighthouses still operational, technical details.

The images in this portfolio are all from the new book. Grant provided a bit more by way of background to the project:

f11: 22 years Grant, that's a long time between lighthouse books, what was your approach?

GS: My approach on this occasion was much more focused and carefully planned. The first book took several years to shoot due partly to a casual approach to planning and my visiting each lighthouse several times to get a variety of weather conditions. This time I shot most of the book over a somewhat intense 10 month period, often planning trips to coincide with bad weather or full moons. The project was made easier by technology, such as the Photographer's Ephemeris iPad app, that gives every type of information you could ever need about a location, such as sun position, moon rise time and position, Google Earth, to name a few. As much of the project was shot through winter, Arctic clothing and waterproof camera housings made cold wet night shoots less challenging.

f11: We share a passion for these lovely structures, but what was the driving force behind the new book?

GS: The first book, *Leading Lights*, published by a cash-strapped Hazard Press was quite small and many of the photos were used very small and poorly laid out. When I set up Phantom House Books in 1996 I decided at some stage I would redo it, as a large coffee table style book with high production values – however it has taken me 16 years to get around to it.

The structures themselves appeal on several levels, they are architecturally interesting and diverse, they are often situated in dramatic landscape locations, subject to wild weather and they echo with history. A good example of this is Waipapa lighthouse in the Catlins, a handsome structure near the waters edge, and the scene of New Zealand's worst civilian ship wreck which occurred on the reef in 1884, just 200 or so metres away. Dozens of the bodies are buried nearby in mass graves and although it occurred long ago, there is a discernable air of sadness that seems to hang over the place.

f11: Did you have a real sense of déjà vu, of going over old ground as you shot the new book?

GS: Not really, when I starting shooting for the first book all those years ago about half of the light stations were manned. There were domestic animals about, well kept gardens, the stations were well kept, they were living places, now they feel silent and lonely. ▶

Cape Reinga tower and world signpost, with the Milky Way overhead, 2 hours after sunset. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens, a 39 second exposure.
© Grant Sheehan



f11: 22 years is also a lifetime in terms of capture technology, can you compare and contrast how you shot both books, the similarities and the technological differences?

GS: Actually 22 years equates to several lifetimes in the context of modern camera evolution but at the end of the day whatever tools you use, you still wind up with images that illustrates the subject and carry the narrative.

The enormous flexibility of digital over film though, did make it easier, especially in capturing the night-skies and the more dramatic weather.

Having said this I did use three or four slide images, shot back in the 80's in the book that I found hard to duplicate digitally.

f11: I know that a lot of long exposures were involved in shooting this book, and that you're fascinated by this process. Can you tell us more about that aspect of the photography?

GS: In the past shooting slide film, I would regularly do night-time exposes of 20 or 30 minutes or even hours, this is something you just can't do with current digital cameras. The longest exposure I did with the D800E was 8 minutes and even with the noise reduction turned on, it still resulted in lots of dead pixels due to the sensor heating up.

The sensitivity of the sensors in the 2 cameras I mostly used, a Nikon D800E and a D7100, was such that several lighthouses I shot in moonlight (at 15-30 seconds) almost look as if they were shot in daylight.

In daylight I used two 10 stop ND filters, often stacked, achieving long exposures with cloud or water movement in bright sunlight. ▶



View out to sea from above the lighthouse with Motukokako Island in the distance to the right. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

f11: There are also a number of aeriels, tell us about those, and the process involved in shooting some of them?

GS: I used a helicopter for the Cape Brett lighthouse but mostly I hired Cessna 172s. I like these aircraft, they can fly quite slowly and they are cheap to hire. This means you can stay up for hours, trying different angles and checking out nearby landforms. They do bounce around in turbulence a bit. You can take the passenger door off quite easily but mostly I shot through the open window, which opens upwards and stays held in place by the slipstream, at around 90 knots.

f11: There must be real access issues involved in visiting some of the more remote locations; can you give us an idea of some of these?

GS: There were few real access issues this time around; it was much harder back in the 80s. The only difficult ones now are the Island Lighthouses in the Cook Strait and Cuvier near Coromandel and Mokohinau in the Hauraki Gulf. These all have restricted access. Puysegur Point is difficult but can be reached via a walking track, a 2 day trip, as can Cape Brett in Bay of Islands.

f11: By contrast, other locations are simply – drive up, hop out and shoot?

GS: Yes – there are many lighthouses you can drive to now, although mostly some walking is required and in a couple of instances there are steps – such as Cape Palliser with 258 near vertical steps.

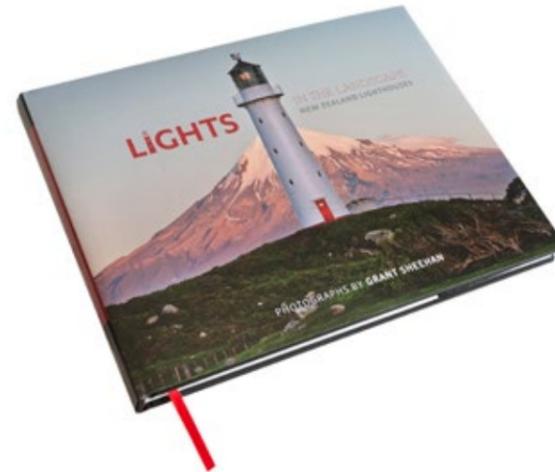
f11: Leading Lights found a strong audience back in 1991, who do you think will buy the new book, and why?

GS: New Zealand still has lots of lighthouse enthusiasts and many photographers are attached to them as subjects. They also attract many tourists. Cape Reinga has more than 10,000 visitors annually. As the book also encompasses our coastal landscape and includes some wildlife as well as the lighthouses, I am

hopeful it will have a wider appeal than *Leading Lights* did.

f11: Thanks Grant, and best wishes for the next project, whatever it may be. ■

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New Zealand Lighthouses**

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Castlepoint lighthouse at night. Nikon F3, Velvia film, exposure 20 minutes. © Grant Sheehan





The annual Castlepoint horse races, in storm light. Nikon D800E with 70-300mm lens. © Grant Sheehan



*The last remaining fragment of the SS Gairloch, which ran aground 1903, visible at low tide, taken at sunset in stormy conditions. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. Exposure 15 seconds at f22, ISO 50 with 10-stop ND filter.
© Grant Sheehan*



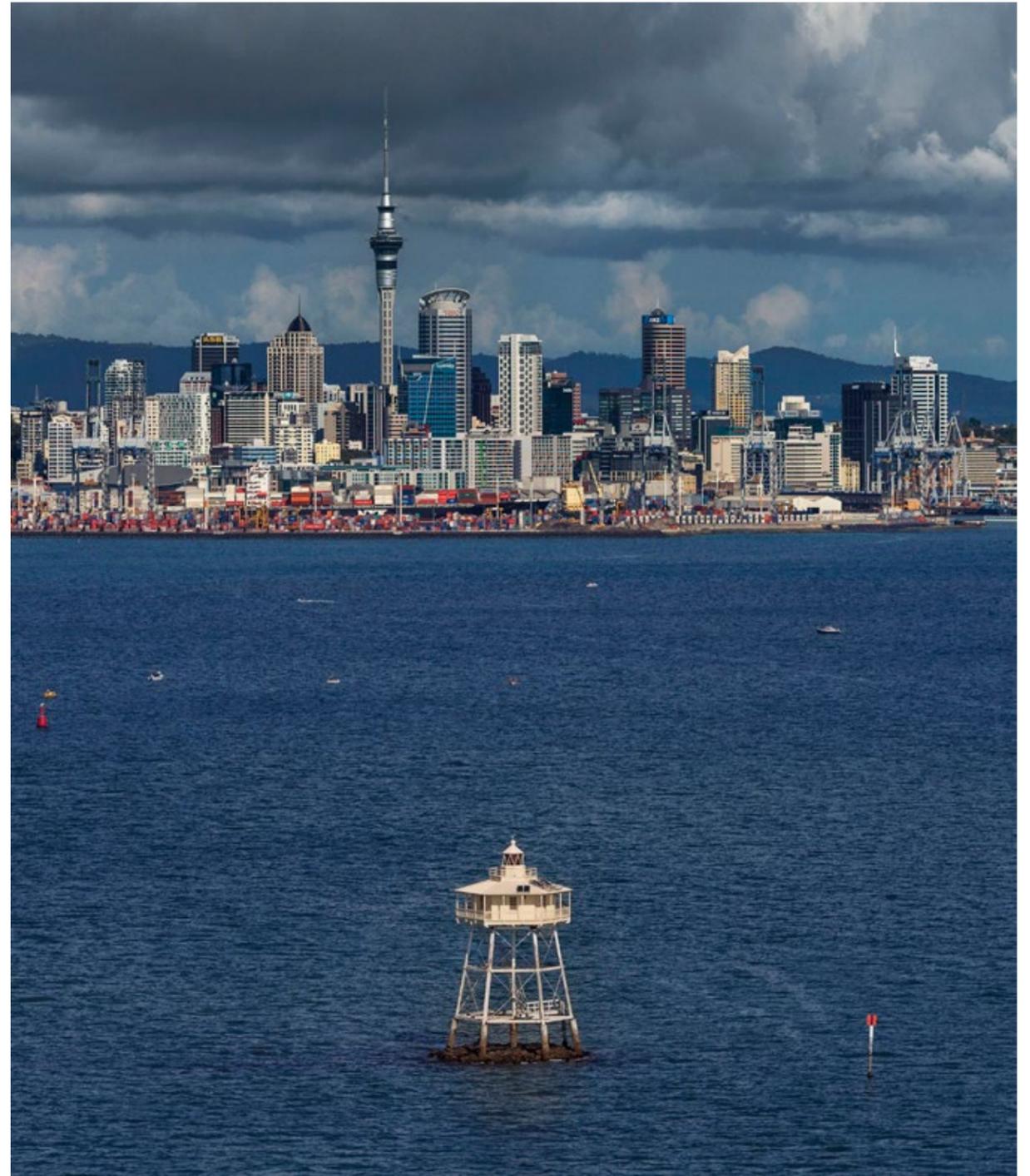
Wild weather batters Nugget Point. Nikon D7100 with 70-300mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

'This book is dedicated to all those people that kept the lights shining out to sea BA (before automation.)'

'The sensitivity of the sensors in the 2 cameras I mostly used, a Nikon D800E and a D7100, was such that several lighthouses I shot in moonlight (at 15-30 seconds) almost look as if they were shot in daylight.'



Point Halswell beacon with Somes Island and light in the distance, one hour after sunset. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. Exposure 25 seconds at f8, ISO 320. © Grant Sheehan



▲ Bean Rock lighthouse with the Auckland CBD in the background.
Nikon D800E with 70-300mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

◀ Nelson lighthouse. The octagonal tower, cast in iron by engineers
Stothert and Pitt, in Bath, England. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm
lens, exposure 5 seconds at f22. © Grant Sheehan

Kaipara Head lighthouse. The white pristine tower sits starkly among the sand dunes. Nikon D7100 with 14-24mm lens. © Grant Sheehan



▶▶ *Following double page spread: Cape Campbell lighthouse lit by a full moon. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. Exposure 13 seconds at f4.5, taken 3 hours after sunset in full moonlight. © Grant Sheehan*





Nugget Point lighthouse. Elevated view of the Nuggets in rough weather. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. Exposure 10 seconds at f22. © Grant Sheehan



Wairarapa lighthouse, just after dusk, looking north. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. Exposure 5.9 minutes at f9, ISO 250. © Grant Sheehan



Dog Island lighthouse. New Zealand's tallest lighthouse seems to rise up out of the sea as it sits on the low flat island. Nikon D800E with 70-300mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

▶▶ *Following double page spread: Sunrise silhouette of the Castlepoint lighthouse. Nikon D800E with 70-300mm lens. Exposure 1/5 sec at f11, ISO 50 with solar filter system. © Grant Sheehan*





Cape Palliser lighthouse. The sharp, rugged rock outcrops of the Cape with small islands of varied plant life. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. © Grant Sheehan



French Pass Passage. High tide approaches. Nikon D800E with 14-24mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

'While photographing the French Pass lighthouse, I met a veteran seaman and we talked of the place of lighthouse in the present and future. He said that although GPS was the main navigation tool now, 'when you're cold, wet and exhausted from pushing through a heavy sea in darkness, the sight of a distant light signalling the way into port is a soul-warming experience.'



Manukau Heads lighthouse. Storm light on the tower, with multiple rainbows. Nikon D7000 with 14-24mm lens. © Grant Sheehan



Pencarrow lighthouse and the Wellington Heads from the air.
Nikon D7100 with 14-24mm lens. © Grant Sheehan

'I used a helicopter for the Cape Brett lighthouse but mostly I hired Cessna 172s. I like these aircraft, they can fly quite slowly and they are cheap to hire.'



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