

# Amateur Photographer



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# Viewpoint Jon Bentley

Smartphone technology is highly impressive but could we be reaching a plateau?

**L**ike many people I've been amazed in recent years how smartphone makers have used software and processing power to boost their devices' photographic prowess. Scene detection, depth of field and lighting effects, and a seemingly effortless ability to combine images to achieve noise reduction, image stabilisation and night vision have doubtless given traditional camera manufacturers sleepless nights. But I suspect we're about to reach a plateau in this most popular manifestation of computational photography.

Surprisingly, perhaps, my expectations have been lowered by the iPhone 12 Pro Max I bought shortly after launch. The improved 'Deep Fusion' technology (first seen on the 11) promises all the tricks and more, taking nine shots every time you press the shutter, analysing them with its 'neural engine' and combining the best details into one shot. How effective it all is though is another matter.

### Feeling blue

My suspicions were aroused on my first afternoon out with it down by a misty local canal. When I first reviewed the pictures on the screen they were as my eye saw the scene. But in the next second or two the processing happens. That afternoon, more often than not and much to my frustration, the phone seemed to be thinking the mist was an overexposed sky, and turned it blue.

At least I could remove the blue cast later. It was more difficult when the phone decided that the dark background against which a colourful canal boat stood out should be brightened to reveal every detail. That would need more time-consuming editing to correct.

I was hoping the ProRAW feature, in a software update, would enable me easily to dial down any unwanted supposedly intelligent assistance. Sadly not, and



My 'smart' phone merged me with the sky

even with the smart features switched off in the menus, strange transformations still happen. One funky example occurred while taking a selfie against a landscape. The AI seemed to conclude I wasn't there and put a grad filter over the sky, darkening the top half of my face where it rose above the skyline. Maybe merging with a cloudy sky is a particular hazard when you have grey hair like me. But it's still slightly chilling that my phone thinks I don't exist.

Don't get me wrong. The iPhone 12 Pro Max is still one of the very best camera phones you can buy right now. It's just not as smart as it thinks it is. I wonder if the world of image making is actually more complex than software engineers imagine. As with self-driving cars, which repeatedly prove unable to cope with the convoluted challenges of real-life driving, our expectations may need to be recalibrated.

Though I love technology, I actually welcome these particular shortcomings. They mean camera makers can feel less threatened by smartphones and machines are less likely to outperform humans when it comes to taking pictures. Which is all rather reassuring.

Jon Bentley is a TV producer and presenter best known for *Top Gear* and Channel 5's *The Gadget Show*

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## Books

The latest and best books from the world of photography



### Vulnerable by Olga Michi

£45, TeNeues, hardback, 240 pages, ISBN: 9783961712984



In this beautiful compilation of 140 images, Olga Michi's striking portraits shine a light on endangered ethnic groups from across the globe.

Shot against a black background, the portraits have been designed to focus on the people's dress, accessories and their individual expressions.

Representing some of the most unique cultures in what has become a hyper-globalised world, these indigenous peoples were met by Olga on her travels across the globe in her bid to share their traditions and customs. The book aims to make no political argument, but hopes to raise questions that are relevant within it. One such position is the remnants of Western culture that are pervading other societies – typically in a detrimental way.

As an interesting and thought-provoking set of portraits, this book comes highly recommended.

### Silicon Valley. No Code Life

£48, Rizzoli, softback, 192 pages, ISBN: 9788891829535



There are no road signs which indicate where the famous 'Silicon Valley' in California starts and ends. From a geographical point of view, it doesn't exist. In this new book, shot at the end of 2019 – just a few weeks before the world changed – all the images were shot by Iranian American photographer Ramak Fazel, described as 'an anthropologist with a camera around his neck'. Crossing the valley for around ten weeks with a Rolleiflex camera, his resulting photo essay explores the mysteries surrounding the area by documenting daily life – what kind of houses do its inhabitants live in, what cars do they drive, which restaurants do they go to, how do they spend their free time – and more. An intriguing look at one of the most famous – yet undefined – areas in the world, this is a great read for fans of the documentary genre.

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