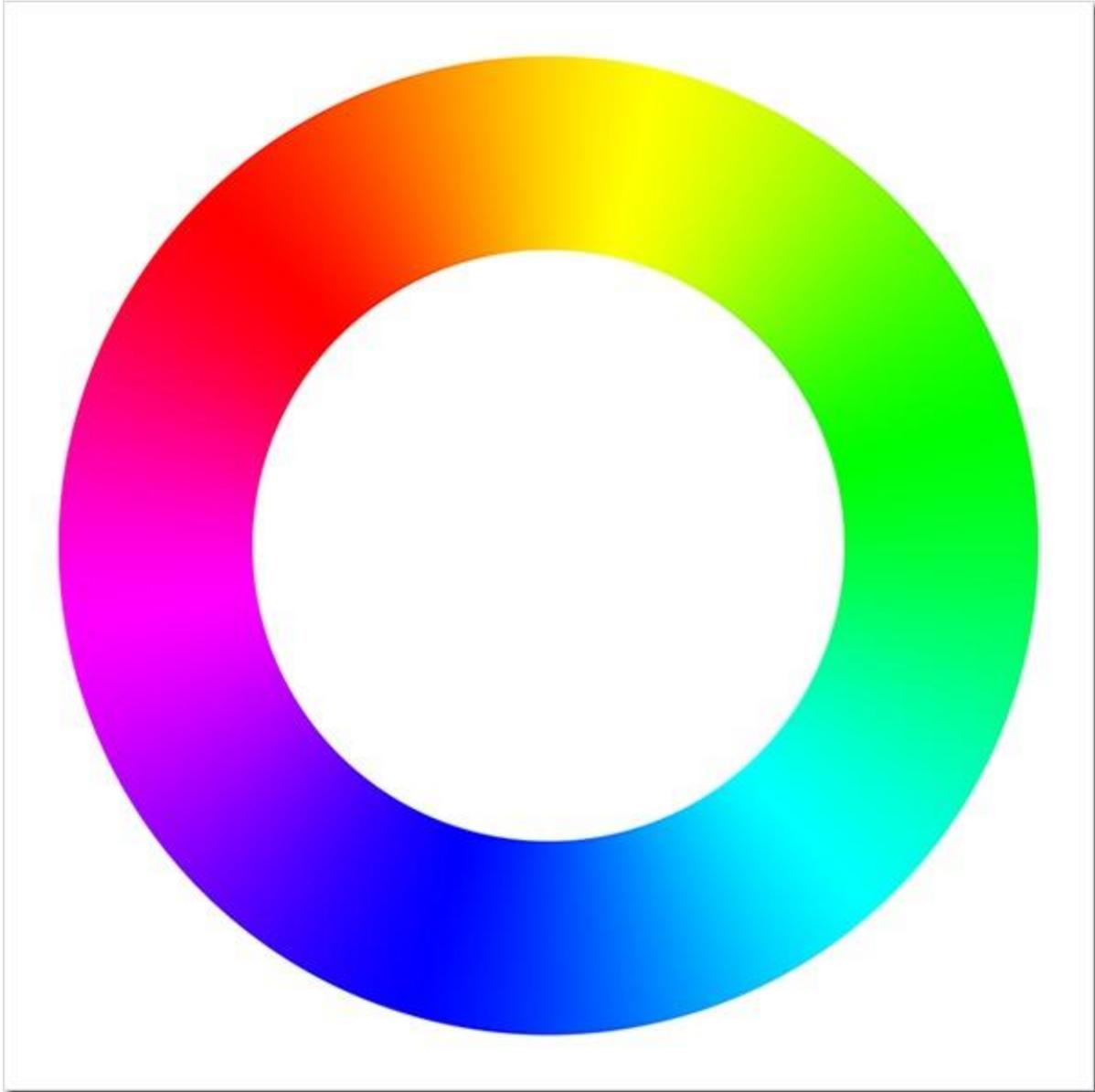


Colour Harmonies: Watching the Wheel

Posted By [David Taylor](#) on May 10th 2013

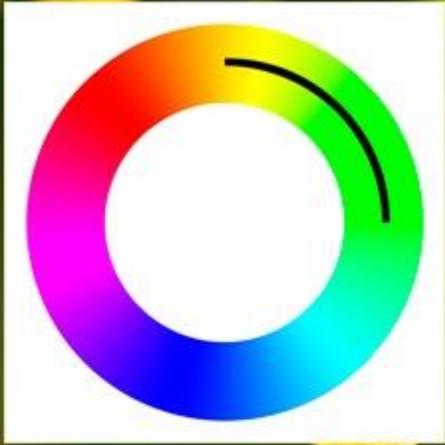
Wheels are useful metaphors for all sorts of things. Think the 'Wheel of Life', the 'Wheel of Fortune', the 'Wheel has come full circle' and others. For photographers the most important wheel is the 'Colour Wheel' (though the control wheel on a camera probably comes a pretty close second).



A standard colour wheel. Invented by Sir Isaac Newton no less.

There's a picture of a colour wheel above. Take a look before we go any further. Don't dawdle, but remember there's no running in the corridor... Right, you're back again. As you can see a colour wheel is made up of the colours of the spectrum. Start at red and, travelling clockwise, you meet orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue magenta and then come back to red again.

Colours are a bit like people. Some get on well with certain types of colours, but others just rub them up the wrong way. The idea that colours have natural partners that work well together is known as colour harmony. The colour wheel is a useful device to describe different types of colour harmony.

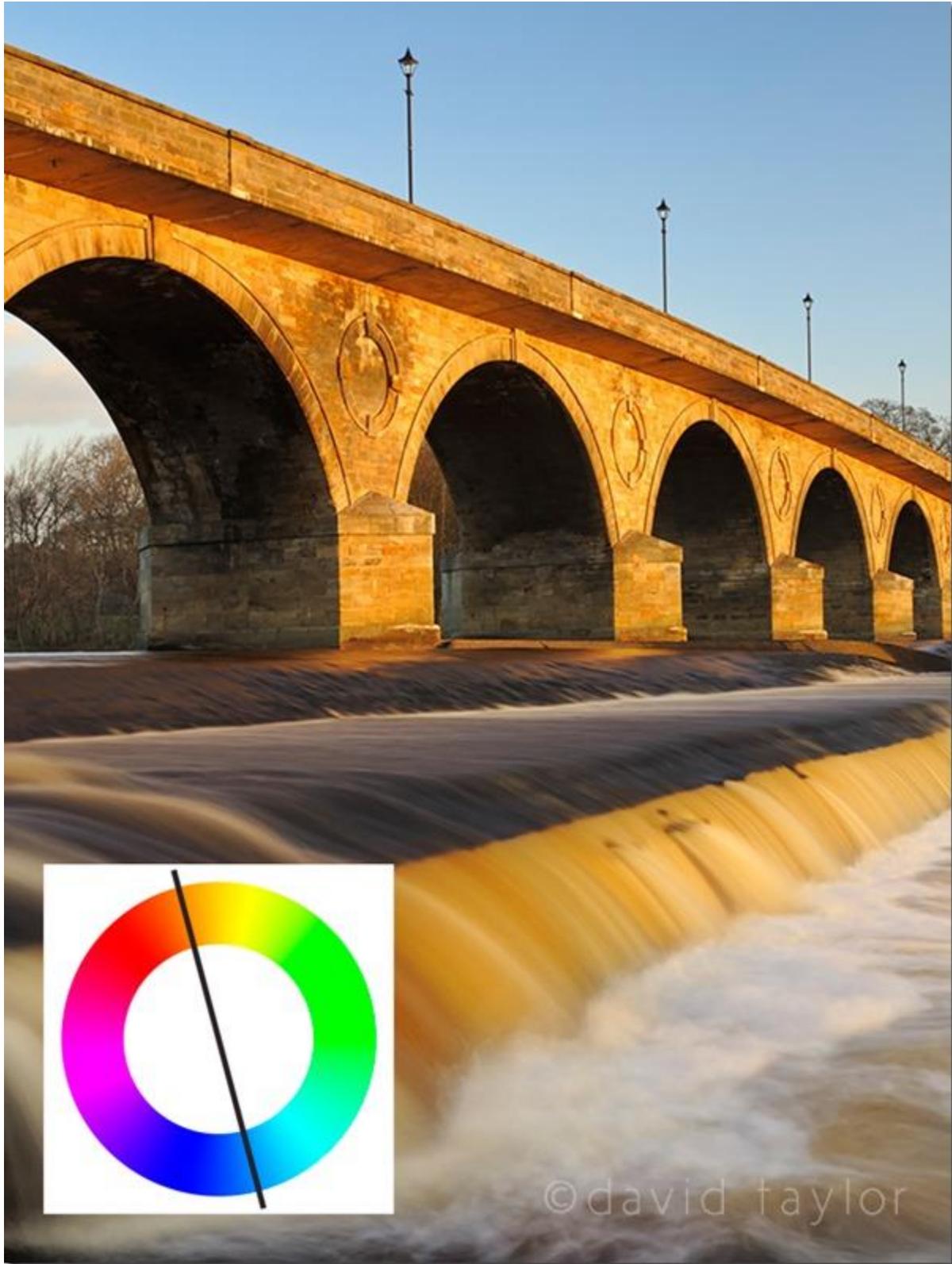


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Autumn foliage is a good subject for Analogous colour harmony images.

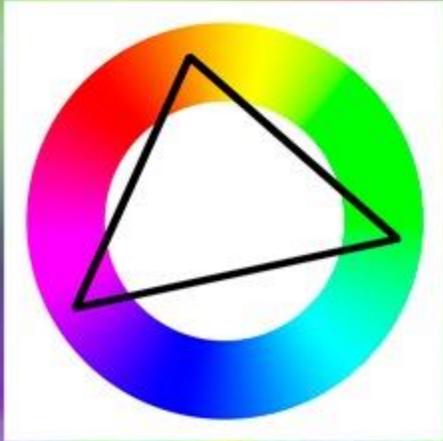
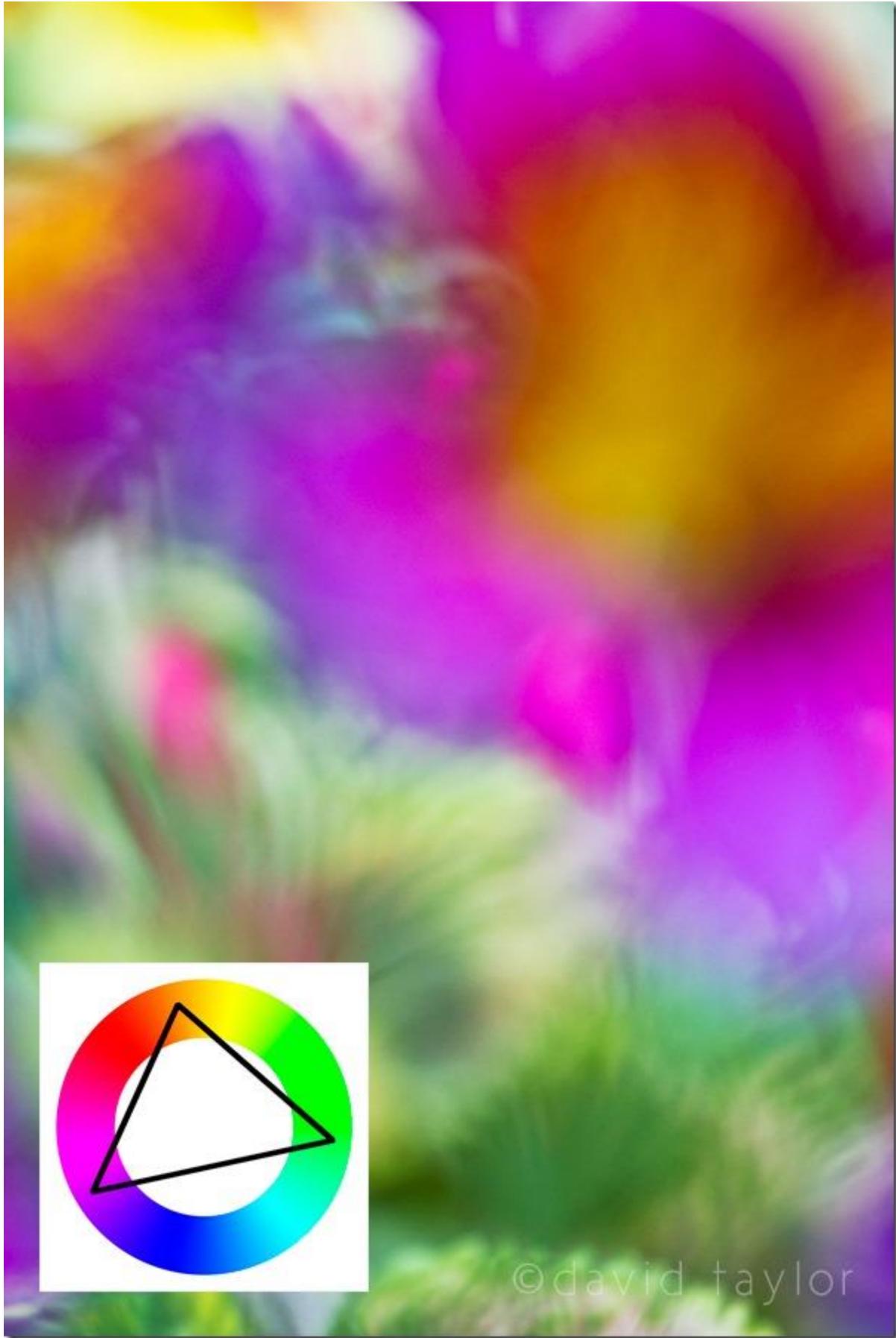
By far the simplest colour combination is when variations of the same colour are used together. This is known as a Monochromatic colour scheme. It's not strictly a colour harmony but it is a combination you come across occasionally. It's a very restful colour scheme, particularly when it involves blues or greens.

The easiest colour harmony to understand is the Analogous colour harmony. Analogous colour harmonies use colours that lie right next to each other on the colour wheel. Yellows and greens are analogous colours. Rather usefully they're commonly seen together in nature. Analogous colour harmonies are pleasing to the eye, though they're not particularly exciting.



The warm light of sunrise on sandstone in this image forms a complementary colour harmony with the blue sky above

That's not something you could level at Complementary colour harmonies. Complementary colours lie on opposite sides of the colour wheel to each other. A commonly used combination of complementary colours is blue and yellow. At first glance they don't appear to have much in common. However, when used together complementary colours make the other appear brighter and more vivid. It's not a combination that you'd describe as restful, but it is one that's striking and energetic. Complementary colour harmonies are found less in the natural than world than Analogous colour harmonies but they're there if you look. A good sunrise or sunset sky is an example of a Complementary colour harmony: the blue of the sky and the red/yellow of the clouds are Complementary colours.



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For this shot I deliberately defocused the camera so that the image is just about the Triad colour harmony

Another colour harmony is the Triad. As the name suggests this involves three colours. The colours are evenly spaced around the colour wheel. Magenta, orange and green together form a Triad. Just like a Complementary colour harmony, a Triad isn't restful but the combination does tend to feel more balanced than Complementary colours.

Being aware of colour harmonies and their effects will help you pre-visualise your images more effectively. Here's a challenge for the weekend. Shoot two images: one that uses an Analogous colour harmony and one that uses a Complementary colour harmony. Flowers and foliage are usually good subjects to find these colour harmonies if you find inspiration lacking.