

Landscape and Scenic Photography

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Most great landscape and scenic photographs owe their success to thought and creativity, not expensive lens and fancy cameras or frankly even advanced techniques. The most important thing you take along on a photograph quest is what's between your ears and not in your camera bag. In this handout, I hope to outline the thought processes that show how a successful photographer develops an idea into an image.

Ready, steady, go!

For sharp, well-framed landscape photographs, you must hold the camera absolutely still while you release the shutter. Camera shake at the moment of exposure is by far the most common cause of un-sharp or crooked photographs.

Here's how to take steady and therefore sharp photographs.

To achieve a firm but comfortable camera hold for both horizontal and vertical pictures, you can vary the exact grip to suit your own hands and camera. But, you must stand squarely, feet apart, with the elbows tucked well into the body. In general you will grip the camera with your right hand, using the index finger to release the shutter. Use your left hand to support the camera and lens, and to adjust focus. Gently press the shutter release.

Whenever possible, take advantage of any additional support as shown below. Extra stability becomes crucial when you're making slower exposures during evening and early morning light.



Composition and creating pictures with a purpose

Viewfinder awareness and learning to see objectively

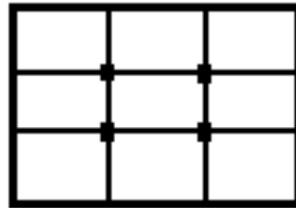
Organize all the elements and include only the ones you want. Scrutinize your viewfinder by looking at all the corners for things that don't belong. Is there something that doesn't belong or will be distracting? Cameras record everything; they don't see emotionally like people do. Learn to look at your subject without the emotion of the moment.

Verticalize

It's important to not get stuck in a horizontal format all the time. Many landscapes work best when composed vertically.

Rule of Thirds

A traditional way to produce a balanced, satisfying composition is to use the Rule of Thirds. It suggests dividing the picture plane into thirds and positioning the subject of interest at the intersecting points. The rule applies to both horizontal and vertical compositions. Positioning the horizon line of an image on one of the lines also can enhance an image. This will also help you avoid an uninteresting, symmetrical centering composition.



Keep it simple

Most great landscape photographs are essentially simple with a strong focal point. Often the more complicated the concept, the more confusing the image. Less is almost always more.

Change your viewpoint

Explore the image from all angles; move left and right, back and forth, up and down. When was the last time you made a photograph while lying *on* your back?

The horizon

As a general rule, use this formula - 1/3 sky and 2/3 land. However if you're photographing a dramatic sky change, it to 1/3 land and 2/3 sky. Seldom does a great image include the horizon right in the middle.

Framing

Consider using foregrounds to your advantage by framing the image with the objects in the foreground. Trees, flowers, gates, doorways, windows, parts of buildings all can make great frames.

Backgrounds

Be aware of what is behind your subject. Does it add to the image or will it distract? Consider moving or changing your perspective to avoid a distracting background. If that doesn't work, consider using selective focus and choose a larger aperture to get a shallow depth of field, therefore placing the background out of focus.

Filters

There are two very useful filters for landscape and scenic photography. One is the polarizing and the other is a graduated neutral density (GND) filter. A polarizing filter has many uses, but the most common in landscape photography is to increase the saturation of blue skies or fall colors (especially effective on raining days).

A GND filter is used most often when you need to balance the exposure between a bright sky and a darker area such as a meadow. The top half of a GND is usually 2 stops darker than the bottom half. GND's are normally rectangular filters that need to be used in combination with a filter holder so that the filter can be slid up or down which allows you to "hide" the transition point.

Film

A film's ASA reflects its sensitivity to light and basically indicates how much or how little light might be necessary to easily expose the film. Also a film's speed will influence the film's grain structure or apparent sharpness. Films with higher film speeds (400 ASA and above) are considered faster films and require less light for exposure but can have a larger/coarser and therefore more obvious grain pattern. Films rated with a lower film speed (50-200 ASA) are considered slower films and require more light for proper exposure but will have a fine-grained pattern in which the grain is virtually undetectable. Slower ASA film is the more popular choice of landscape photographers. However, slow film requires slow shutter speeds, often too slow to hand hold. Make sure you use a support such as a tripod and cable release in low light situations. You can also place your camera on something such as a wall and use the timer release.

Let there be light

By understanding the characteristics of the light illuminating your subject and by using that light to your advantage, you can turn just an okay image into one that is great. Since you can't move the sun or roll back the clouds, landscape photography requires that you make photographs at a time when the light presents itself to best suit your idea for an image. Sometimes this might mean coming back at a different time or another day.

Contrasty/hard lighting (bright, sunny day)

This type of light emphasizes texture, especially when the subject is side lit, and works well with subjects where the hard-edged shadows and small highlights can add composition interest to a simple subject. A popular and perhaps the best time for making landscape photographs with this type of light is the half hour after sunrise and the half hour before

sunset. This type of light during this time of day is very directional, from the side and often a warmer color than normal. Generally, this type of light during the rest of the day does not make for great scenic or landscape photographs.

Diffused/soft lighting (cloudy day or shade)

With a diffuse light source the light practically surrounds the subject. Shadows become soft or non-existent. A cloudy sky and shade are the most common examples of a diffuse light source. Diffuse light reduces the 3-D effect of a scene, emphasizing the shapes in a composition. Complex subject matter is best photographed with diffuse light where a hard light source may complicate a photo with loss of detail in harsh dark shadows. Soft light can help establish the mood you'd like to create – pre-sunrise mist on a lake, or fog lifting off a field of flowers. Soft light is also a great light for photographing wild flowers.

Soften hard light (high thin clouds)

Personally this is my favorite type of light. It gives some of the benefits of hard light - defined shadows, and form and depth as well as some of the benefits of soft lighting, such as simplicity and soft-edged shadows with greater detail. This type of light is found most often on days with high thin clouds during the late afternoon or early morning. It is a wonderful light for large wide landscapes and panoramas.

Film processing and printing

No matter how great an image you make, your success relies heavily on whom processes the film and makes your prints. Unfortunately, film labs have as much to do with the your final results as you do. Here are some suggestions that I have found helpful.

Get to personally know the people who are processing your work. If at all possible, bring it to a local lab that does the work in house. Although printing machines make most of the decisions and do most of the work, an operator still has to make adjustments and corrections. If they know you, they often will be more careful in evaluating each image and sometimes will even make several prints from one image to give you a choice.

Always, look at your images at the counter before you leave the store. Compare them to the negatives. Did they crop your image? Is there detail on the negative that didn't make it on the print? Don't be afraid to ask them to reprint an image if you think it was not done well. Good processors will be happy to do that in return for your future business.

Once you have a print you like, be sure to give them that print to match if you have additional copies or enlargements made.

A 35mm negative does not enlarge proportionally to a 5 x 7 or an 8 x 10 enlargement. Be sure to give the printer clear directions on how you would like it cropped.