

The Landscape Photographer

How to Photograph Landscapes Without Becoming a Landscape Photographer

An Essay on Amateur Landscape Photography.

We all know who they are. They are the Greats, the ones who write the coffee-table books, the prototypical 1/2s of that one famous guy, the photographic family dynasties, the mountain climber with a camera. They are The Landscape Photographers.

This is how-to essay on landscape photography for the rest of us.

The Three Things You Must Never Do. Ever.

Let's start with the things you must never do. Ever. Even after you *are* a landscape photographer.

Never, ever, call yourself a Landscape Photographer. Even if you are good at it. 'Landscape' is not a subdivision of photography. All photographers know the skills and art of capturing something on film, and have the equipment to do so. That you point your camera at rocks and trees is really no different than pointing it at newlyweds. No, Landscape Photography is nothing more than a business sales model, something you'll invoke when you want to attract the buyers who'll shell out for pictures of rocks and trees, or buyers who don't know the difference.

Calling yourself a landscape photographer does not improve your work; it brings extra baggage. One example: if you call yourself a landscape photographer the expectation is you'll produce the same sort of photographs we see in the books. The Greats work for years to get enough good stuff to make a book, and you'll be lucky to get just one that looks good after spending a week in the field. Call yourself an amateur and all the pressure is off, you don't *need* to produce works of art.

This brings up the second don't: *don't seriously read coffee-table books.* They are to photographers what fashion magazines are to teenage girls. They show the very best, the most extreme; photographs you can aspire to but to which you should never compare your own work, because your images will be uniquely yours. Coffee-table books don't tell you how and why the shot was made, and rarely where, and those are the things you need to know. You need to know the location, and time of day and year, not just which national park. You need to know how the shot was exposed, and more importantly, what the photographer was thinking. Coffee-table books are wonderful for inspiration, to get you out in the field, to remind you of the wondrous beauty you can find out there, but not good for your ego or your technique. Nor for developing your own style. Don't imitate a book. Make something new. Make a photograph that only you can make.

Never think that equipment makes the image. Landscape photography makes the least demands on equipment. All you need is a steady camera and a few filters. We are not working against time,

we don't need to catch the 'defining moment' (another sales model). I was at Arches National Park a few years ago, shooting Delicate Arch at sunset (in October). With me were about 50 other photographers, all after that one great shot. At two hours before the light was right they started shooting. The light was too white, the contrast too high, and they were going through rolls of film shooting the same thing on every frame (they were not moving positions to change the relative positions of the arch and the LaSal mountains behind). I sat where I could look at the sun setting, enjoying the sunset accompanied by the chorus of shutters, keeping track of the clouds on the horizon. I figured there was a ten-minute window of perfect light, so I waited until then and took two images (both almost identical), then sat down again to wait for the afterglow of the sunset while everyone else, out of film, packed it back to the parking lot. My point is this: in landscape work there are no situations so fleeting that you need an auto-everything camera. Since the photographers were not moving while shooting, image stabilization, mega-fast lenses, and 10fps drives were only in the way.

So don't worry about having the latest or the best equipment. Most images landscape photographers make don't need exacting sharpness and perfect autoexposure. In fact, some of the better images are made with a deliberate lack of sharpness. Maybe it invokes in the mind of the viewer those old classic images taken with two- or three-element lenses, where it's obvious the camera failed in some way, but without distracting from the landscape. And, as we'll see later, exposure is better done manually.

Don't use a format larger than your end product will require. Large format cameras are expensive to use and are heavy. Small format cameras are light, easily transported (you'll be doing a lot of that in the landscape) and film is cheap. I use a 4x5 inch camera only because I like to print 20x24 inch prints. If 35mm could print that big I'd use it all the time. I still like to grab it just to experience the fun of shooting small format.

There is one more big Don't we'll get to later.

The Philosophy of Landscape Photography

Making a landscape image requires one overriding goal: *Put as many interesting things into a photograph as you can, but make sure the image is not cluttered.* That's all it is. Make a list of all the interesting things you find in a location, and figure out how to include as many as you can into a single shot with the proviso that no shot ever looks chaotic; keep the image as simple and straightforward as you can. This is where painters have an advantage over the photographer: they add the scene to the painting, while we remove things from the scene. Weeds and disheveled undergrowth, power lines, contrails, and roads all get in the way, and part of cleaning up a scene is to find locations, lens length, and framing to keep those out of the picture.

Now, there is some compositional advice I could give you here, the rule of thirds (or the golden mean, whatever you want to call it), diagonals, juxtaposition, framing, and a lot of other things, but I won't. You can look that up elsewhere, and those who live by those rules can explain it better than I can. Here is my opinion: those rules are nothing more than a list of the things anyone will learn after a year in the field. I've found that making an image to fit the rules gives stilted or forced compositions.

And one other aspect of landscape philosophy: *You can't make a photograph if you aren't there.* The whole point of landscape is to capture the beautiful scenes you see when you are out in nature. You are the proxy for those who aren't there, so you need to be out in the field a lot. Get used to the idea of camping or touring, of getting up early in the morning and staying out late, of packing equipment in inclement weather, of standing around for hours waiting for the right light, or being bitten by bugs just when you are about to trip the shutter, or waiting in the rain for the clouds to break. Miserable, eh? Well, it's easy to put up with the misery if you are in a place you really enjoy. So find the places you like or love, and visit them. Again and again.

One of the hardest parts of landscape photography is making images that show your love of the land. This is where your artistic skill comes to bear. Just *how* you will show us your love of the land is what makes your images unique in all the world.

The Practice of Landscape Photography

Use a tripod

This is essential, not always for stabilizing your image, but to free your hand for other things you need to be doing after you've framed your shot.

It is not essential that you have the latest and lightest carbon fiber masterpiece. Get one of those if you will pack your equipment many miles. The tripod needs to hold your camera firmly, provide a way of repositioning the camera quickly and accurately, and prevent camera shake as winds buffet the camera and as the shutter trips. I prefer a heavy tripod for stability (good wood tripods from Reis or Berlebach are very nice), with a pan and tilt head (allows you to adjust one axis at a time), with as few leg joints as possible (my current [Berlebach](#) tripod, the Report model 3032, has only one extension per leg, quick to set up, quick to take down, but almost four feet long when collapsed). Others prefer ball heads that allow rapid adjustment of all three axes then lock down with one lever only.

Use a couple filters

The list of necessary filters is pretty short, and is summarized in my [Saturation](#) article:

A *Polarizer* is essential for controlling the lightness and richness of the sky and for controlling reflections off water. Polarizers come in two varieties; linear and circular. Circular polarizers add a second 'unpolarizing' element (called a quarter-wave plate) to remove the polarization before it gets to the camera, and is needed for some auto focus cameras. Landscape photographers rarely need them. Linear polarizers work very well for us, as we will not be relying on our cameras to focus the scene. But be careful about overusing the polarizer: if you use one to darken the sky using a wide-angle lens, the sky will be darkened unevenly, ruining the shot.

A *Neutral-density Half Graduated* filter is used to control the brightness of a scene. Most interesting shots have areas of very different brightness: the sky may be 2 or 3 stops brighter than the land, and will appear washed-out if you expose for detail in the rocks. A NG grad has half the filter darkened with gray, the other half clear. It's typically a rectangle that fits into a holder that will

both rotate and allow the filter to slide up and down. That way you can place the transition on the horizon, then expose on the area of the scene that is not darkened. You'll need to carry several ND grads, both 2- and 3-stops, and with hard and soft transitions. But to use an ND grad you'll need the next item on the list to choose which filter to use. I use the Cokin P holder set, but I've cut the 4-filter holder down to hold only two filters so I can use it with a wide-angle lens.

Black & white shooters will need the colored contrast filters, mostly yellow, orange, and red.

Some carry skylight filters permanently attached to the lens, but it's only necessary at high altitudes where UV is a bit stronger and over exposes the blues.

Use a spot meter

Never rely on your camera to choose your exposure. You never really know what it's looking at and you never know what it's thinking. These are things *you* need to do if you want the shot to come out how *you* want it.

A spot meter lets you see the exposure information for specific locations in the scene. Of course, *which* specific locations is up to you to find, and choose what to do with them. It takes some practice, but here are a few ground rules to get you started.

Get a gray card. Don't use it for metering, but to give you eyes a chance to see what middle gray looks like. If you can find some middle gray in the scene, meter that and use the reading for your exposure. What the meter is doing is telling you the exposure that will make whatever the meter saw when you pressed the reading button look middle gray on film. Here are a few things that I've found are middle gray: sunlit foliage and grass, the cloudless sky 90 degrees from the sun, and typical gray rock with no reflections.

Buy what if you can't identify something that is middle gray? Adjust. When I shoot sunlit red cliffs I don't look for middle anymore, I look for the bright face. I've found that they are one stop brighter than middle. So if I get a reading of $f/16$ at $1/8$ seconds on the bright rock, I know that it will be middle gray at that setting, and the entire picture too dark. So I will expose $f/16$ and $1/4$ seconds. In other words, if I meter on something that is brighter than middle gray I open up as many stops as I need.

Figuring out how to read stops in a scene is tricky, and will require experience and good recordkeeping. If you get it wrong (if your image is too dark or too light), have enough information recorded so that when you encounter that situation again you won't make the same mistake twice.

I made a [database application](#) for my PocketPC to handle my recordkeeping tasks. A notebook works just as well. Keep a list of exposure, location and subject info, a drawing of the scene with enough detail you can figure out which image it is, and notes on where you metered and what reading you got. A special problem that roll-film shooters have in keeping notes is to actually do it. It's very easy with an auto wind camera to blast a few frames when the muse prompts. But in doing that you miss the chance to learn from the exposure settings. It requires a lot of discipline, but the effort will really pay off later.

And know your film. You need to know the latitude of the film you are using, or how many stops of exposure there are between white and black on the film. Fujichrome Velvia, my preferred film, has about 5 stops of latitude, so if I expose for middle gray, I know that any object in the scene (clouds, typically) that is 2.5 stops brighter than that will probably be all white on the film, and anything 2.5 stops darker (shadows) will be black. If I find I face a scene with more latitude than my film will accommodate, I have to make some choices: will I let part of the scene go white or black, or can I use a ND grad to fix the problem? Or can I wait for the illumination to change to solve the problem (clouds moving to block direct sunlight, or wait for twilight)? It takes a spot meter to answer these questions.

Another aspect of exposure is how things look in different light. Green grass can have a very different appearance depending on the direction of the illumination. If the sun is directly behind you, grass and foliage will lighten slightly because of the direct reflections (see my [saturation](#) article on ways to control the reflections). If you shoot at a 45 degree angle from the line of the sun to your position you get a very nice glow to the grass because of the shadows that tend to form behind the blades. The same is true if you face the sun, or shoot 45 degrees away from the sun itself. Rock can also change its color depending on the relative position of the sun and the camera. See my article on [Fisher Towers](#) for an extreme example. Both of these examples present problems in spot metering, and the solution depends more on how you want it to look than on there being one right answer. Again, try things, and keep notes. If your film is cheap, try bracketing exposures when you can't decide the best one. Shoot a second frame a half-stop over, and another a half-stop under your chosen settings. Then when you see the pictures you can see which you like best, and if you remember what you've learned, you can get the best exposure for you right away.

Use the right film

Your choice of film, or camera and post-processing settings for digital, can certainly influence, and maybe make or break, an image. All films have personalities: how they handle shadows and highlights, what exposure latitude they have, what colors are emphasized, how they handle the appearance of colors (dull them down, are accurate, or over saturate them), and you can use them to alter the feeling of an image. Landscape photography is very forgiving of colors. Typically we shoot at sunrise and sunset, when some colors are exaggerated. Exaggerating a bit more can sometimes help, sometimes hurt. Films can do that for you. [Here](#) are some of my thoughts on different films.

A caveat: exposure isn't too important with print film. It has inherently larger latitude than slide film (due to slide film needing one major processing step more, the reversal step, than print film). With this greater exposure, you can fix many exposure errors during printing. I recommend to anyone interested in landscape photography, or anyone interested in learning exposure, to use color slide film only, and then only use one emulsion. With slide film you see the same film that was in the camera, and you see far more clearly the results of your choices while shooting. It can be more disappointing at first because you will find there are a lot of things our brains do to correct the appearance of a scene that film will not do, especially with colors. For example, and shot made in the shadows will have an overall blue tint. The only light for the scene is what we call skylight, the diffuse blue light that comes from the blue sky. Our brains will automatically correct for skylight

and we will see the colors that would be seen under white illumination. But film sees colors as they are. With print film the correction can be made (and *will* be made if a commercial lab prints your negatives), and you'll never see the effect that color correction filters, if you used any, might have had. So at first you might find a bad slide because of something you didn't correct, disappointing, I know, but far more instructive.

In the digital realm it will be about camera settings and post-processing. Some like to shoot in RAW mode, then process the images at home. This certainly gives the best control over the image, but it does require lots of time. I tend to work in .jpg mode, and use the camera settings to control the image (I like to increase the contrast and decrease the sharpening, and in the canyons and desert I increase the saturation). Controlling white balance can also impart a lot of feeling to digital images.

Use a vest

The more convenient it is to take a picture, the more likely you are to do so. If by packing your equipment you've made it inaccessible (in my case if I take it all down and store it in my ATV carrier) it's very easy to pass a scene rather than bother shooting it. Photo backpacks might be good for storing your equipment, but they aren't very good in the field. Use a good, cheap vest. I got mine five years ago at Cabelas (the [safari vest](#), \$50 five years ago, the same now) and it's perfect. Lots of pockets for lenses, film, filters and holders, meter, PDA or notebook, some food and water in the back pocket, safety equipment in the inside pockets, all handy to reach, quick to use. I keep all accessories in the vest, and when hiking, I keep my camera as set up as possible on the tripod over my shoulder so I don't have much set-up time when I find a shot.

The point is: *your equipment should not get in the way of taking a picture*. Using your camera should be like walking or looking: your camera should be part of you, handy to use, and using it should be like using any other part of your body. When your equipment encumbers your work as a photographer, change it. This will require some practice, especially for a new meter, or when you move to large-format cameras and the film holders they use. Don't pack all your equipment in your bag as you walk a trail from viewpoint to viewpoint.

I suppose I should add a caution here: don't show off. I remember shooting at Bryce Point with my 4x5 on two occasions, with very different results. The first time I went I loved the attention my camera got, and because of it I couldn't concentrate on shooting and got nothing. The second time I tried my best to ignore the stares and concentrate on the scene. I got some great stuff that day (my site banner image came from that shoot), but I'm afraid I left a rather poor impression on the more sociable of my fellow photographers: I was concentrating so hard on shooting that I lost the ability to speak; when a small girl asked to look through my 'telescope' it took about 10 seconds to sort out my exposure calculation before I could answer her. In show-off mode I could have had more fun on the overlook, but I couldn't have gotten the shots I did. Save the showing off for the gallery wall. I always prefer to slide my white Canon L lenses underneath my vest than carry that ostentatious thing in the open. So that's another reason to use a vest.

Use good maps, an ephemeris, and a GPS

You need to know where you are. And where the good places to stand are. And where things are you haven't seen yet. And where the sun and moon will be. Having good maps, a good mapping GPS, and an ephemeris are essential.

I use several maps. At home and on my PDA I use the [National Geographic TOPO!](#) program. This map series used digitized USGS topo maps and digital elevation models to produce shaded topo maps of unequaled detail. Very good for planning and for double checking locations in the field. They are expensive. \$100 per state, but worth it. Other electronic topo maps, like DeLorme's series, aren't as good. They don't have the details, and miss many trails on the USGS 7.5' (24,000:1) maps. I also use the [topo](#) map from Magellan (the company that makes my GPS). It has fewer details than DeLorme's electronic map, but it does exactly match what's on my GPS, and is good for presenting data downloaded from my GPS (tracks and waypoints).

I also use the [Trails Illustrated/National Geographic](#) trail maps. These are small-area maps printed on polyethylene, which makes them waterproof and very durable. Again, they don't have as much detail as the 7.5' USGS topos, but they have more hiking trail info.

Always use a GPS unit with topo maps. I use the older Magellan Map 330, and will for some time. I can upload topo map regions from the Magellan toto program (mentioned above). Again, the details are lacking, but fairly good for route-finding and locating your position. Have a look at both the [Magellan](#) and the [Garmin](#) websites for more info.

An ephemeris, a program that tells you where the sun and the moon are, along with rise and set times, is invaluable for landscape photographers. I try to plan trips just before the full moon. Although it means camping under a bright moon, it also means the moon will be somewhere near the horizon, useful for enhancing twilight shots and sunrises. I use a program on my PocketPC written by [Jonathan Sachs](#), a photographer and the author of the first successful spreadsheet application on the PC (Lotus 1-2-3). He has some other useful (and free) photographic programs.

Be an artist

One of the biggest pitfalls a landscape photographer can fall into is to think he's a journalist simply documenting where he's been. This is the last big Don't: *don't assume that a photograph of a beautiful scene will be beautiful*. Travelogs are good, but it makes for some pretty bland scenics. Documentary photography is good, but it's interesting only to those who have a reason to be interested.

Instead, show us something new, something unique. Show us something that we wouldn't see if we were there, viewing from eye level, between midmorning and late afternoon.

Think about it from the general public's point of view. First, they haven't visited that location, and aren't likely to. And even if they have, they didn't explore the place and were there during the day, but they do carry away some memories of what they felt there that have improved over time. You are their ambassador to that place, but you are up against their expectation of what a beautiful place should look like, and the feelings that a beautiful place evoked in them. It's up to you to show

it off bigger than life so it matches.

Here is where you should NOT try to duplicate exactly what you've seen by the pros. Find things in the landscape that you like, that make you smile. And get them. Please don't worry about making a cliché½d shot. Heck, everything we've seen was cliché½d fifty years ago, we've all been repeating since the discovery of color film. Buy do try not to make an exact copy of nature unless nature is so amazing that it alone can make the shot look good. Use filters, time exposures, early morning and late-evening shots to get colors and light visitors will not normally see. Wait out the rainstorm instead of ducking for cover like the rest of the tourists; show them what they missed. Use bright flashlights (not duraflame logs!) to illuminate the rock at night, or use a colored gel over you flash to paint color on some bland rocks. I guess here *is* where you want to see what others have done. Find those techniques that appeal to you, that made a scene really stand out, and practice them.

Be creative. As good as the early photographers were, they weren't all that creative. After you come to love a place, stay there until you don't feel pressure to produce shots (Galen Rowell referred to a rat gnawing your insides as the drive to shoot; stay there until the rat is asleep, then have fun shooting).

The non-professional landscape photographer has a huge advantage over the pro: no pressure. It is our privilege to have as much fun shooting the land as we like, and we'd do ourselves and those who view our work a disfavor to think we should or could do it like a pro.

So good luck out there, and please let us see what you create!

Bruce Wilson
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