

PCQC Video Presentation

Fundamentals of Travel Photography by Bob Krist—National Geographic

Lesson 4: Natural Light on Landscapes

This lesson will explain how to use natural light to your benefit in landscape photographs. In photographic terms, light has 3 components:

- The direction of the light
- Light quality (ie., soft vs harsh)
- Color (ie., warm vs. cool)

Photo Examples

- Sidelight and Backlight: When the sun is low on the horizon it creates sidelight. Sidelight is good for landscape shots because it helps capture depth and texture. Shooting at noon on a sunny day is difficult because the light creates shadows that obscure the scene. For example the scene from Death Valley, with sun low on the horizon, shows an intricate pattern of salt ridges. The ridges disappear as the sun rises in the sky. The photograph of a Tuscany vineyard cuts out the evening sun to create a backlight which sculpts rows of grapevines. The early morning photograph of a college campus shows fall foliage colors in a slight fog. The backlight evokes a sense of nostalgia.
- Diffuse and Dark Light Conditions: You can shoot landscapes in cloudy and overcast conditions. The master of the hounds hunting group in England was shot on a cloudy and drizzly day. The photographer cut out the grey sky to give an evocative misty portrait. Shooting a scene in total darkness poses some problems, however twilight shots, about ½ hour before sunrise or sunset, provides enough ambient light to give buildings and people some detail.
- Quality of Light: Waiting for the correct quality of light can make a dramatic impact on the photograph. For example, look at 3 photographs of the Loretto Hotel in Sante Fe, one taken in daylight, one at late afternoon, and one at dusk with parapet lights turned on. Which is the most dramatic?
- White balance: All natural light has a color tint, from orange to blue depending on the time of day and conditions. This color is measured on a Kelvin temperature scale, with lower temperatures being orange and higher temperatures being blue. Most digital camera have an automatic white balance which will adjust towards white. For example fluorescent lights will have a green cast; auto balance adjusts towards white. It's best to leave the autobalance set to daylight. For special effects you can manually adjust white balance.

Exercises

1. Shoot a favorite local view at different times of day and in different lighting conditions. Which gives the best photo?
2. Practice moving the horizon in a landscape photograph to see how it changes the composition.

See next page for an example of a Kelvin photo scale from carcere.

