



Chasing the Light

Lecture Notes

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Shooting into the Sun

Only safe when the sun is low in the sky.

Creates a backlit feel to the scene, and often more vibrant/saturated colours.

A sunstar can create leading lines to draw the eye to the sun (not that it needs much help!)



The dominance of the bright sun in the frame means that the rest of the composition needs to support it.

Can be about making space.

e.g. - Left: Sun not in best position - might be better in the space on the left. Fighting with the composition in the foreground.



This composition deliberately leaves space for the sun to rise into. Other elements positioned to provide framing and balance.



Can be helpful to create a relationship between the sun and another element.



Creating a Sunstar

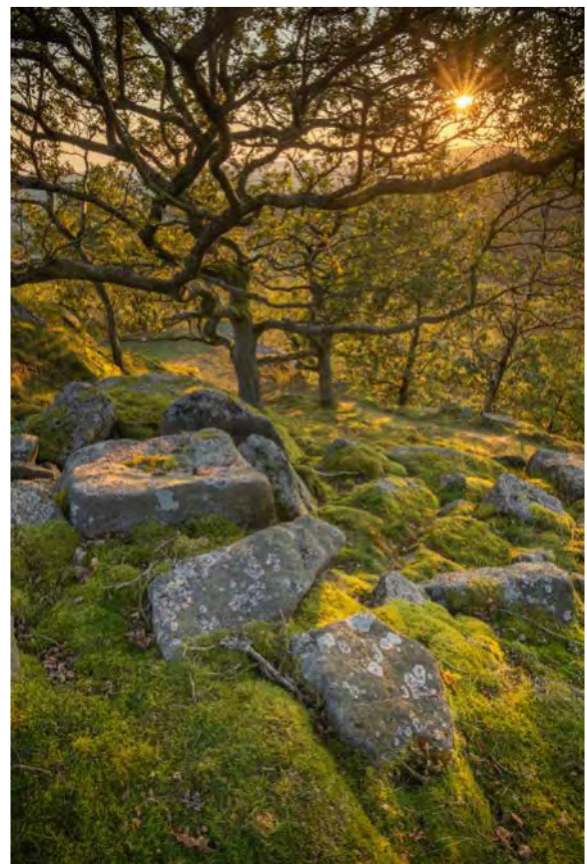
Caused by the angles between the aperture blades diffracting the light. The smaller the aperture (higher number), the more pronounced the sunstar will be.



Diagram from Wikipedia Commons

The smaller the sun is in the frame, the more defined the rays will be. Shooting wide angle helps with this.

But also, you can block part of the disc of the Sun with a tree branch or rock, or shoot as it crosses the horizon.

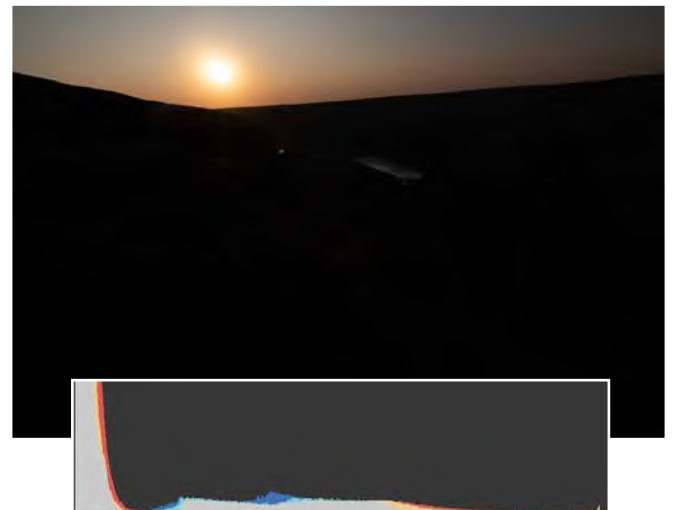


High Dynamic Range

The amount of contrast in a scene from bright to dark is known as Dynamic Range. Having the Sun in the frame creates extremes in the scene and means that the sensor struggles to get everything in one shot.



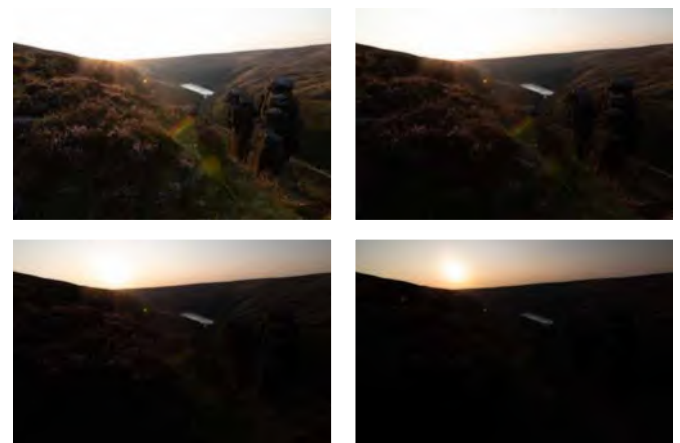
Bright Exposure - The histogram is clear of the left (dark) edge, showing good detail in the shadows. However it is bunched up at the bright end, signifying burnt-out highlights.



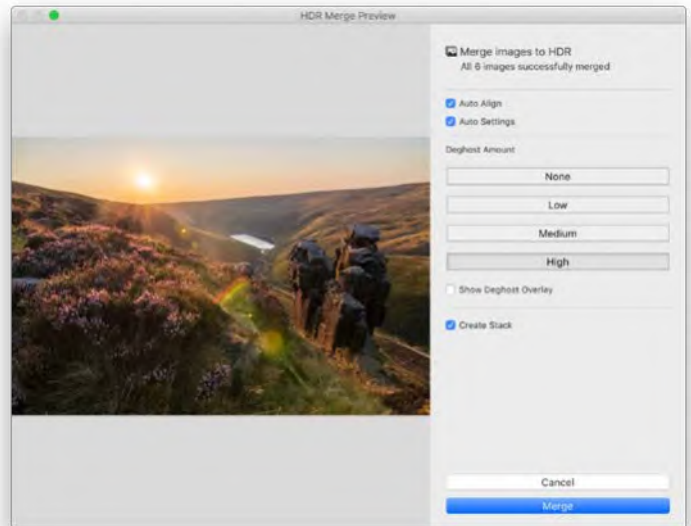
Dark Exposure - The lack of a spike at the right hand side of the histogram shows that the bright sky has retained detail, but instead the loss of quality is in the dark areas.

Need to deal with this in the field:

- 1) Shoot Raw not JPG - ensure that you have as much data work with as possible
- 2) Graduated Filters to darken the brighter areas. Not always necessary, but can help
- 3) Exposure Bracketing - As the camera cannot capture the whole range in one shot, multiple exposures are used at different shutter speeds (same ISO and Aperture). These are the four additional exposures used (straight out of camera).



Use Photo Merge > HDR in Lightroom to combine the best-exposed parts of each file into a single RAW file for processing.



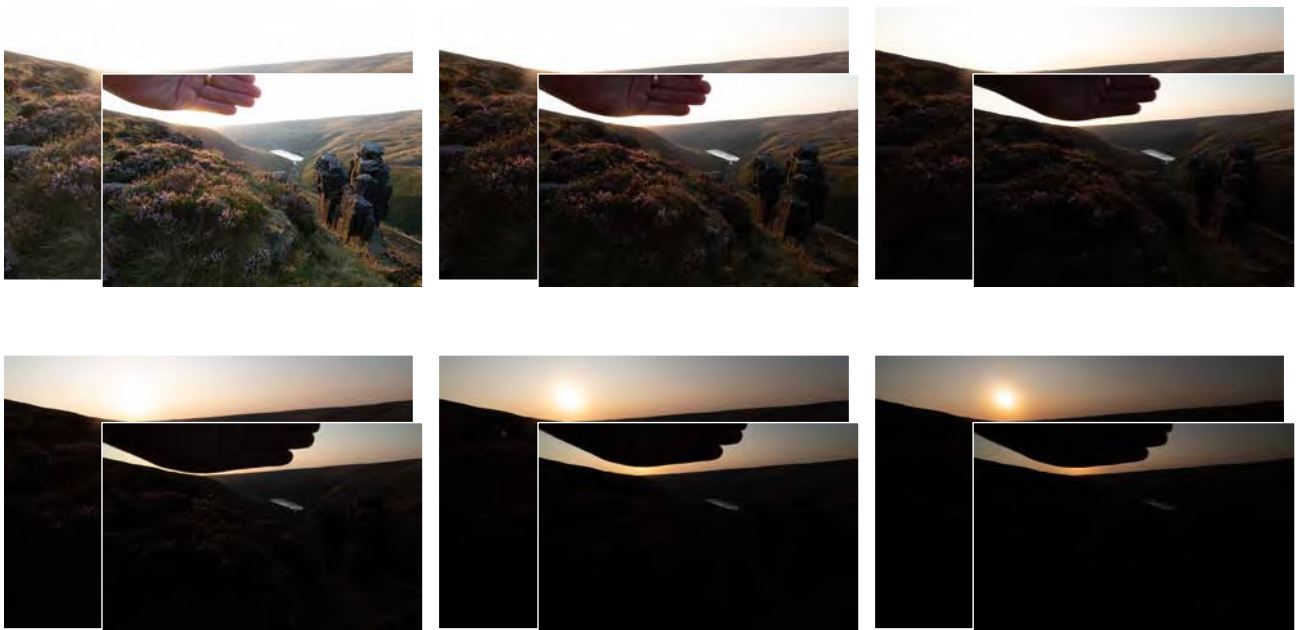
Dealing with Lens Flare

Shooting into the sun will produce large flares on the image - normally too large to repair easily and cleanly.

Need to shot carefully to correct it later:

When bracketing (as above), take a second copy of each shot with lens cap / hand over the sun (taking care not to obscure the foreground). Blend these in Lightroom, and process to match main image.

Use photoshop and layer masks to easily blend the two, restoring the visibility of the image behind the flare.



Sidelight

When the sun is low in the sky, but we leave it out of the image, the light picks out textures and details. Allows the image to show off the landscape itself, rather than needing to support the position of the sun.

Picks out detail and texture in the foreground of a scene.



Also shows off the shape of the landscape. Adds three-dimensionality to the scene. In this image, light from behind the camera would evenly illuminate the hills, making them seem featureless.



Similarly, the sidelight shows off the cylindrical shape of this lighthouse.



There's something in the air...

As the sun's light comes through the atmosphere, the particles it interacts with will change the quality of the light.

Clearing skies after heavy rain can create more vibrant sunsets as the moisture in the air scatters the cooler wavelengths of light.



Mist/fog, spray and distant rain, when illuminated can bring a scene to life.



Smoke and Dust can have a similar effect:

Below - sunset through wildfire smoke in Yosemite Valley.

Right - sunset through Saharan dust over the Peak District.



Too much of a good thing?

It's often said that it is hard to get a pleasing image when shooting on sunny days. The light is harsh and direct, and can produce deep shadows.

Sometimes, clouds can be a big help as they change the quality of the light:

1) Large fluffy clouds act as reflectors and soften the shadows by scattering the light.



2) High, thin clouds act as diffusers, again softening the quality of the light but create a more even glow across the scene.



When you don't have clouds, getting out of direct light can help too:



Woodland – sometimes a clearing can let a shaft of light in, while the rest of the scene stays in shadow. Contrasty, but provides a striking subject.



In spring and summer, the broad leaves of deciduous trees create a soft glow on even the brightest of days

Sometimes it's best to visit locations where reflected light can come into play as it's much softer. Light was bouncing across the gorge at the fairy glen, hitting on the left and the reflecting to the right, pulling out details.



There may also be ways to work with the light - in this scene I wanted flat light, but the sun came out and caught in the branches of the tree, bringing the scene to life

When Less is More

It doesn't all have to be about vibrant colours and glorious sunsets. There's a lot to be said about getting out in other weather conditions to tell different (possibly more gentle) stories about the landscape.

Woodland – especially in fog (very popular on social media at present!). The mist helps to simplify the scene by softening the trees in the distance. Gives a sense of depth which would otherwise be very busy indeed.



One important note is that wide-angle lenses will reduce the impact of fog on the scene

The lens will be much closer to the various elements with no air-gap to allow the mist to have a visible effect



Using a longer focal length and moving further from the subject will capture more atmosphere.

Images can feel more moody when the weather conditions interact with the landscape (as opposed to high cloud on overcast days).



When Less is, well, Less...

Sometimes the light is flat and feels like it does little to help the scene. Adding motion and compositional elements will strengthen the image.

Leading lines and flowing water add interest into the image to hold the viewer's attention.

That's not to say that composition can be forgotten when you have good light - it's always important, but even more so when the light 'lets you down'.



Wait for it...



If possible, when conditions don't seem great, stick it out as they may improve. Certainly not always the case, but nothing worse than a burst of light on the way back to the car!



On a changeable day, it can be rewarding to stay in a single location for a number of hours and capture how the scene changes.



It is also worth revisiting locations and subjects at different times of the year.

Rhapsody in Blue

Blue hour provides a wonderful contrast to Golden hour, but you don't have to wait long for it.

- Often softer pastel colours
- Warm band around the horizon (known as the Belt of Venus) can add soft warmth to colder tones.



Can create a softer, more expectant image than a similar shot taken with the Sun above the horizon



With longer shutter speeds, the camera can pick out details well after your eyes start to struggle. The result often has a wonderful dreamlike quality from the soft light and lower contrast.



However, Blue hour is not always about soft colours

This is when the most intense colours catch in the clouds, as the light is being bent round the earth and coming through so much air

The colour then also reflects down onto the landscape.



Do you feel lucky?

Think ahead about the landscape you're shooting.

- In the Lake District (for example), the deep valleys will lose the light well before the stated 'sunset time'. (Shade.app website can help visualise this)
- Think about how far you might be walking in the dark – is it worth a daytime visit first?



Think about the Weather

- Obviously, no forecasts are dead certain
- Clear Outside App (also at clearoutside.com) gives very details cloud forecasts – both heights and percentage cover. Better than BBC / MetOffice for level of detail
- For vibrant clouds, need clear skies on the horizon (check locations a good few miles away), and broken high cloud overhead. SkyFire is an app which helps do that calculation for you.
- For misty mornings / cloud inversions, need high humidity, low wind and the temperature at-or-below the 'dew point'.



Clear Outside

Skyfire

Think about Alignment

- What direction is the sunlight coming from?
- For Milky Way, which direction is it arching overhead?
- Ephemeris Apps can tell you this – The Photographer's Ephemeris / PhotoPills / Plan-it Pro

But – also think about whether it matters!

I'm well aware I've forecasted myself into staying at home. There's a lot to be said for going out regardless.



Planit Pro

Best Laid Plans

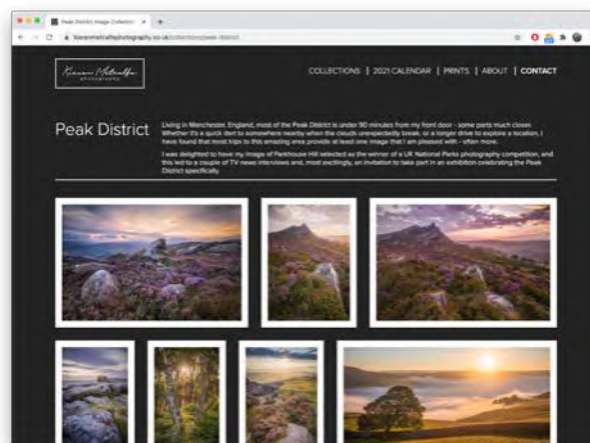
Given how little control we have over the exact conditions we'll get at a location, it's sometimes best to think of a forecast simply as the inspiration to leave the house! If we are too hung up on getting the shot we had in mind, we will quickly become disillusioned.

Rather, go out in hope, but be ready to work with the landscape and the conditions to make images which capture the beauty on that day – whatever it might be.




(Left - Cloud instead of sunlight, but still water provided a great opportunity for reflections instead).



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