

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY TECHNIQUES

Landscape & Nature Photography

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As low as 282 feet below sea level, with temperatures often as hot as 120° F, Death Valley presents some of the most extreme, formidable, and magnificent landscapes in North America. I find the area truly inspirational and well worth visiting.

Camera on tripod, at the upper end of Death Valley near Hell's Gate, I waited for sunrise. The original version of my capture is shown on the upper left (this JPEG was generated in-camera).

Thinking digitally, the view appealed to me because with its multiple

"layers" it would be easy to manipulate in post-processing. You can see an intermediate stage of post-processing on the lower left. The final image I created is shown above.

[100-300 zoom lens at 300mm, ISO 200, f/36 at 1/50 of a second.]



Magical Vistas



A rainbow is always an exciting subject for a landscape capture. When a rainbow appears within a waterfall, the subject matter is twice as exciting.

This capture shows a rainbow at the bottom of Vernal Falls from the Mist Trail in Yosemite National Park. It is almost impossible to hike this spectacular trail in the

wetter months without seeing rainbows.

The combination of falling water and a rainbow create a prismatic effect will get the attention of anyone who looks at your photos.

[18-70mm zoom lens at 70mm, polarizing filter, ISO 200, f/4.5 at 1/320 of a second.]





Water in all its glory is one of the great landscape subjects. Water in lakes, rivers, streams, oceans, and even puddles is rarely still and always changing. But when water is still, reflections add mystery and depth

to any capture, and cause viewers to want to delve in and explore the mirror worlds that have suddenly been created.

[18-70mm zoom lens at 18mm, polarizing filter, ISO 200, f/8 at 1/60 of a second.]

Wind and Weather as Elements

Consider for a moment the elements of a landscape capture. Of course, at our end of things, there's the photographer, camera, and lens. But what about the subject?

The obvious first answer is that the subject of a landscape is, well, land, or the earth. Or maybe water: a lake or ocean. But without light these subjects cannot be captured. A landscape in a pitch-black night will probably be rendered as black. So the earth, its land masses, canyons, valleys, mountains, oceans, and lakes need to be rendered by ambient and direct light—probably from the sun (although moonscapes are sometimes also possible).

But isn't there an important component of the landscape (and landscape photographs) that this omits?

Weather of all sorts, from clear, crisp, and serene to wild and stormy informs all landscape photographs. This atmosphere may be implied, or the weather may itself be the subject of the landscape photo. In any case, it is present.

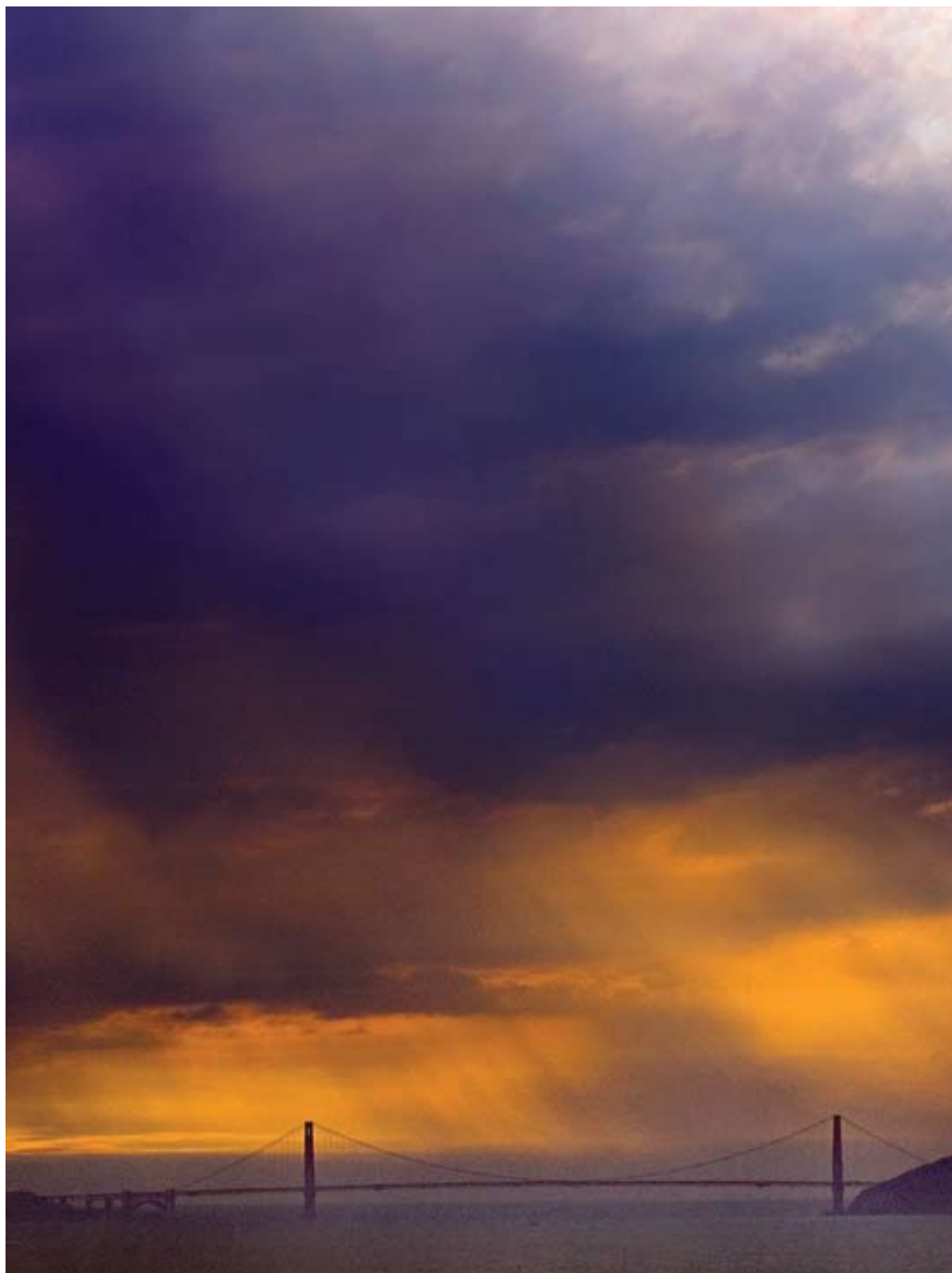
The way you handle wind and weather as elements of your photograph and (both technically and in terms of its composition) will determine the success—or failure—of a great many landscape captures.

To start with, you should recognize the truism that all landscape photographs explicitly or implicitly embrace wind and weather.



Rain was whipping all around, and keeping my camera dry was a true challenge. In this capture of the storm-bound coast of Northern California in winter, I purposely set the shutter speed as fast as possible to get an image that shows the huge breakers crashing on the shore with as much clarity as possible.

[70-200mm VR zoom lens at 200mm, ISO 200, f/2.8 at 1/640 of a second.]



The storm across San Francisco Bay was dropping moisture on the Golden Gate. I used my polarizer to accent the rain caught backlit in the beams of the setting sun. This gives the diagonal lines of rain an almost "grainy" appearance.

I underexposed in post-processing to emphasize the ominous appearance of the rain cloud.

[18-200mm VR zoom lens at 95mm, polarizing filter, ISO 200, f/9 at 1/160 of a second.]

Photographing the Winter Landscape

Winter photography presents special challenges both photographically and personally.

The photograph challenges include: exposing images properly, managing white balance, and creating interesting color compositions out of what may be essentially monochromatic conditions. There's also the issue of keeping your photographic

equipment safe and functioning in harsh conditions.

The personal challenge is to keep yourself warm, dry, safe, and comfortable. Since the most dramatic captures can occur during the harshest winter storms, it is important for the photographer to be prepared for all conditions. Getting to the site for a winter photograph may require special planning, and may involve special safety considerations. Staying comfortable while waiting for a break in nasty weather is an art form all in and of itself.



It may seem like a minor point, but if you are using a tripod in winter weather, it is specially important that it be constructed of carbon fiber rather than metal (since metal is such a good conductor of cold). The first time you use your tripod in snow you'll be glad you sprang for the extra expense of a carbon tripod.

The chief exposure problem with snow is that glare off snow can “trick” your camera's light meter into thinking the scene is brighter than it really is. Winter landscapes can create surprisingly bright highlights, even when the sun isn't shining (as you may have noticed if you've participated in winter sports without sunglasses). The

digital impact of this brightness phenomenon is somewhat helped by the bracketing inherent in RAW captures. It also helps to try to set your exposure by metering on areas of your composition that aren't as reflective.

Depending on your camera, automatic white balancing may be set incorrectly for snowy landscapes. The good news here is that this can be corrected in post-processing. So if your camera's automatic setting has misjudged white balance, or if you have incorrectly set white balance for winter scenics, this can be fixed later.

Composing an essentially monochromatic image is a tougher issue, with no right or wrong answers.



This is a photograph of Elephant Rock from across Yosemite Valley. Winter conditions were harsh with fast-flying snow and a white out. Four-wheel drive and chains were mandatory on the approaches to Yosemite National Park.

As I began the descent into the valley, the storm lifted for a moment, and I saw this vista in the background. I pulled over, struggled to get my camera out, did my best to keep the big, wet snow flakes off the lens, and snapped this photo in the instant before the clouds closed up again.

[18-200mm VR zoom lens at 52mm, ISO 200, f/11 at 1/400 of a second.]



Patterns & Textures

