Gearing Up Workshop March 3, 2012

Landscapes station By Marea Downey

Introduction:

A good landscape image needs good quality of light, interesting and dynamic composition, and it needs to engage the viewer's attention.

A photographer is not photographing a subject, but rather the light that falls on the subject. When attempting to capture your vision of the landscape before you, you might need to return to the subject at a different time of day, or in different weather, maybe at a different time of year, to get the shot you want.

Consider walking round the subject or taking it from a different viewpoint. Try to take the image in both vertical and horizontal formats to see what works best for what you want to say with the image.

Equipment:

When you've established the best viewpoint, consider where the light is, or will be coming from to light the scene. You may need to be in position before dawn or after sunset, or during a "magic light" time, which is generally considered to be a couple of hours, either side of dawn or sunset. Perhaps bring a flashlight?!

Try to use as low an ISO as you can, without compromising the right aperture and shutter speed choice, to maximize the density and saturation in the image.

Try to squint at the scene (narrow your eyes), to give an idea what the camera sensor can see. This is helpful in deciding which range of light values you will ask the camera to work with. Our eyes can see a wider array of light values than the camera can, so we need to make choices. You can also bracket the exposures in case you want to sandwich them together in HDR.

To try to get it right in the camera, if the range of light from absolute dark to absolute light is too great we can use a graduated neutral density filter to "hold back" the very light area that we want to hold detail in – often the sky). For example, take a reading off the sky, and a reading off the land below it to determine which strength of graduated ND filter to use. 0.3 equals one stop, 0.6 equals 2 stops, and 0.9 equals 3 stops.

Photographers usually use a polarizer filter to cut the glare from parts of the image. This really works best when the light is coming at right angles to the camera. Be careful about how far to dial in the polarizing effect since it can give an unrealistic effect.

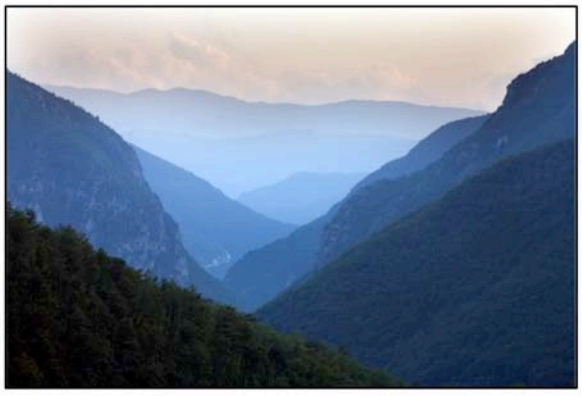
Use a wide-angle focal length lens to get good depth of field in the shot. Use a tripod, so you can use a small aperture (to get good depth of field), and you will need a cable release and mirror lock-up to minimize any vibration at the time of taking the image. (Turn off Image Stabilizer when shooting on a tripod.) A bubble level in the hot shoe will ensure lines in the shot such as the horizon, are level, or that lines such as columns are vertical. If the camera is tilted up or down and some verticals are leaning backwards or forwards this can be corrected in Photoshop (but pixels will be lost as the software straightens the shot). Otherwise one can use a tilt/shift lens to correct to overcome this.

If you have a lens hood, use it. Just watch out for some darkening at the corners of the frame if the lens is at its widest focal length. If you take your eye away from the viewfinder, put something in the viewfinder to block the light. It can make as much as a 1/3rd stop difference if stray light gets in.

One can use a telephoto lens when taking landscapes if one wants to make the planes in the photo appear closer together.

Telephoto lens

Appears to bring the foreground and background closer together



If you want to have the clouds or water blur use a slow shutter speed (on a tripod). If the light is too strong and the shutter speed is not slow enough for the effect you want, use a neutral density filter (not graduated) and even a polarizer to cut the light. See on next page - Shot on left: 30 seconds; Shot on right: 1/8th second.


Compositional Elements:
In considering the composition the photographer needs to consider the balance of lines, shapes and forms, the proportions and scale of objects.

The photographer needs to decide what to include and what to exclude – to include enough information in the frame, without creating confusion or distraction.

Since a landscape photograph is a two-dimensional representation of a 3-D scene the foreground is important.

You might use lines to lead the viewer's eye through the picture.

You might consider the rule of thirds, and place something of interest on the points where the lines intersect.

Perhaps choose to include foliage, doorways, or something in the foreground to create a frame for the subject, which adds to the 3-D effect.

To make a really effective landscape image it is necessary to put some effort into creating a picture that touches the emotions of the viewer, not just a "you were there" shot. It might be a special moment in the weather, or some ephemeral action that takes place – something that lifts the image out of the ordinary.

Some outstanding professionals whose work I admire: David Noton, Charlie Waite, Joe McNally, Bob Krist, Joe Cornish, William Neill.