

Anatomy of a Landscape



A series of articles on tips and techniques for producing the perfect landscape.

Article 1: What to look for when choosing your subject. By Nick Melidonis

I would like to thank the numerous readers of *Better Photography* who sent me cards and emails wishing me a speedy recovery after my unfortunate accident in Karijini National Park at the end of April. It will be a lengthy process before I can say I'm back to 'normal', but I'm very lucky to be alive and not to have suffered any serious, permanent damage. And I'm in great spirits.

In this series of articles, I would like to share with you my approach and the techniques I use in seeing and producing my landscapes.

When enthusiasts first approach the subject of landscapes, they often think of the great masters such as Ansel Adams with

his stunning black and white images of Yosemite and the High Sierras. An immediate impulse is to find and shoot 'the grand landscape', places of immense grandeur and obvious beauty. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I spent years (and still do) seeking out the world's iconic landscapes.

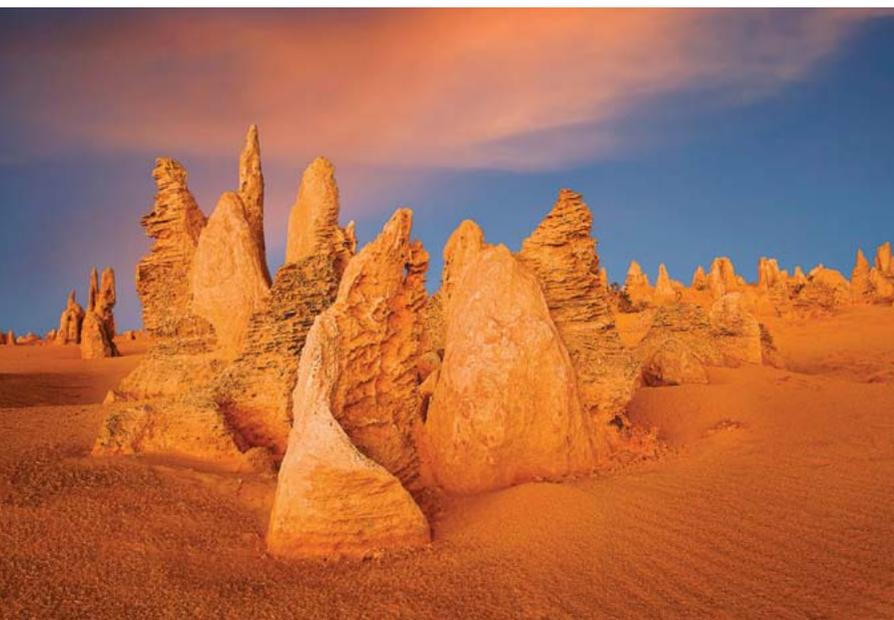
However, I've seen some amazing work from photographers who seek to photograph the landscapes in close proximity to their homes. The advantages of this approach are many. Firstly they are easy to get to. You can photograph the same scenes all year round during the four seasons and really get to know your subject matter, photographing it from many different angles and moods. You are able to capture 'a sense of place' that to me, is one of the essential ingredients of a great landscape; and it's a great way to start to really hone your technical and compositional skills before you spend a fortune chasing 'the grand landscape' somewhere else.

What makes landscapes fascinating and absorbing is their dynamic nature. They change from season to season, day to day and frustratingly, they change as we watch them, which is why we need to pick 'the decisive moment', as Cartier-Bresson put it, when all the elements of light and shadow and colour are right before we capture the image.

Visualisation

Ansel Adams was not only a great landscape photographer, he was able to articulate the process of seeing an image: "If I feel something strongly, I would make a photograph equivalent of what I saw and felt. When I'm ready to make a photograph, I see in my mind's eye something that is not literally there in the true meaning of the word. I'm interested in expressing something which is built up from within rather than extracted from without."

To capture a great landscape, you must cultivate the habit of 'seeing' it in the photographic symbols of lines, tones, textures, shapes and colour. The mental process of interpreting the reality of a scene and translating it into photographic symbols is called 'visualisation'. Note, Adams said he did not merely record the reality in front of him, he translated that reality into what he saw and felt, and he did that partly by masterful manipulation of the image through dodging, burning, toning and adjusting the contrast of the negative and photographic paper. It's been said that the photographs of Adams' never existed in nature because of his darkroom



Afterglow at sunset is one of my favourite lighting conditions for landscapes. This simple composition of the Pinnacles in Western Australia has been a best seller at the Pinnacles Visitor Centre.



Mesa Arch, USA at sunrise. This was one of my early images shot on Velvia Film when I first aspired to become a landscape photographer and was motivated to go and shoot 'The Grand Landscape'.

interpretations on photographic paper. He would have embraced the digital process were he alive today, and relished the ease with which we can “express something which is built up from within rather than extracted from without”.

Composition refers to the structural relationships between the basic elements, tones and colours as you frame the scene in your viewfinder. You will find the spatial relationships and even the shapes of the objects will vary depending on your viewpoint and your choice of lens, that's why it's so important to spend time exploring the best vantage points and angles prior to capturing your image. Visualisation, then, is the rational and emotional process by which you arrive at your chosen composition.

Essential Stages

There are three essential stages in every creative process, including photography.

- Generating the concept – seeing a subject that you want to photograph;
- Deciding how to achieve the concept in practice – setting up and choosing the appropriate lenses and equipment, viewpoint, etc;

- Executing the concept – making the photograph which can include digital post-production to translate the mood and feeling you had when you first saw the image.

Steps 1 and 2 of this process are the essence of visualisation, that is, seeing the photographic symbols. For the viewer of your work, the symbols you create will in turn be transformed into an emotional response, and the strength of that response will be a measure of how well you were able to visualise and interpret the scene.

Look at a great landscape photograph and you will understand that one distinction between a ‘snapshooter’ and an accomplished photographer, is the ability to visualise a scene to maximise the power and emotion that emanates from the work. However, although volumes have been written on the ‘rules’ of composition (most of them valid), never let rules stifle your creativity.

Be Selective

A natural landscape rarely conforms to a photographer's ideal. It is often full of messy elements such as trees that block part of a view, buildings and fences in the wrong place and mergers that make important elements less distinct. Mergers



I strive to keep my landscapes simple, clean with little clutter, but strong lines. The lone tower jutting above the fields and sunflowers in the Andalusian landscape in Spain presented a simple but striking composition.

occur when the outlines of main objects intersect and cause confusion. An example would be a tree that cuts across the clean outline of a natural feature or an important building. Keep the outlines of objects clean and avoid messy or confusing backgrounds.

When capturing a landscape, I try to ensure that the elements I consider important are easy for the viewer to see and savour. Time is the most important investment you can make in getting a good landscape. When you arrive in a place you've never visited before, spend time scouting,



Symmetry can present a powerful compositional option. The art centre in Valencia, Spain was shot under an overcast sky during an approaching storm.

driving or hiking to different locations, finding different vantage points.

The cardinal rule is to keep it simple and say what you have to say with the fewest elements possible. Again, have a look at a great landscape photograph and you will find that there is a pleasing balance between the main elements, and it is simple and easy to find the main subject matter without your eyes wandering around a confusing mass of unrelated objects.

With the popularity of 'apps' in iPhones (or similar) these days, it is easy to find where and at what times the sun rises and sets, so imagine how the location would look in different kinds of light. This can take some practice because you also have to look at where the light will not be falling. Photographing in a gorge, for example, you might see that the west wall will be beautifully lit in the early morning, if the gorge is deep, however, the east wall will be in such deep shadow that your camera will be incapable of handling the large contrast unless you employ HDR techniques. You'll either have to modify your composition, shoot it later in the day, or plan to return on an overcast day when both sides of the gorge will not have such a huge contrast to deal with.

Compositional Guidelines

Note, I use the word 'guidelines' rather than rules. In your visualisation, ensure that you strive for simplicity in the graphic lines, shapes and forms in the landscape. When I judge camera club competitions, I would say over 70 percent of entries could be vastly improved had the authors chosen a simpler composition with a distinct centre of interest. Having said that, achieving simplicity in the often chaotic and complex world of nature is not easy and that's why time spent visualising the image prior to capture will pay handsome dividends.

The most powerful landscapes usually have a compositional 'hook' to keep the viewer interested in exploring the image further. Hooks can include contrast, such as a large salt pan with a solitary tree jutting from the desert floor, or a large expanse of ocean with a rocky outcrop with a lighthouse on it.

Another hook can be repetition, where an element in the photograph is repeated many times. For example, several similar multi-coloured boats in a row on a beach, or a building in the foreground with a couple of similar shaped buildings in the middle distance and background.

Symmetry can also be powerful in composition. Symmetry can take the form of identical parts of a building or a monument, or the symmetry of mountains reflected in the still waters of a lake.

'S' shaped sinuous lines of paths, telegraph lines; tree-lined avenues and waterways all provide an interesting path for the viewer's eyes to follow, leading to the centre of interest of the image. And the strong energy of diagonal lines will add impact to an image, rather than elements that are horizontal and split an image into two.

These hooks work their best when they don't compete with other distracting and confusing elements within the photograph. It needs to be clear to the viewer where their eyes will rest, together with an interesting path to take them there.

When I'm moved to take an image of a landscape, I try not to selectively focus on one or two elements I find appealing.



This sunrise shot at the Fremantle boat harbour in Western Australia is walking distance from my home. The panorama was stitched from nine vertical shots on a Canon EOS 5D MkII. I rather like the colours of first light over the harbour and I was ready to take this shot after checking the wind forecast the night before to ensure the reflections would be possible.

I try instead to find a way of combining all the necessary elements to express not only what I feel at the time, but also to capture a sense or a spirit of place to give the viewer a feeling of what it is like to be there. This final ingredient, if properly captured, is what makes great landscapes timeless and keeps viewers coming back to savour them over and over again.

Nick Melidonis is a Master of Photography and was awarded the 2008 AIPP Australian Professional Landscape Photographer of the Year. He won this award twice before in 2000 and 2001. Nick leads photo and cultural tours to the Greek Islands and Africa and conducts seminars and workshops including new, Creative Photoshop, Lightroom and Photoshop Elements Workshops (see his new website under 'courses'). Nick is also available as a speaker. You can contact Nick at nick@nickmelidonis.com or visit his website at www.nickmelidonis.com.



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