

Anatomy of a Landscape



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

Article 2: The Iconic Themes. By Nick Melidonis.

In the last issue of *Better Photography*, I outlined some tips on composition and visualisation for landscape photography, including the importance of choosing the right viewpoint, selecting the essential elements in producing a powerful image and capturing a sense of place. In this article, I will touch on some of the perennial and iconic themes of landscapes and some tips in preparing and shooting them.

Capturing Seascapes

In Australia, most of us are never far from the water and one of the most popular themes for Aussie photographers is the seascape. We never seem to tire of the wide horizons and also our weather can produce outstanding sunrises and sunsets with stunning cloud formations.

Firstly, wear the right clothing and protect your equipment. Keep warm with weather-proof clothing in winter or protect yourself against the sun in our tropical North. I find that good hiking boots don't last very long in the salt water and I often choose some budget 'reef walkers' to step over sharp coral or slippery rocks.

Salt spray can easily damage electronics and quickly mist up lenses and viewfinders, so a small towel is useful to have near your tripod. Protect your camera with a plastic bag or one of the commercial water and dust-proof coverings like Ewa Marine's. Tripod legs should always be washed in fresh water after a beach shoot, even if you have a carbon fibre model.

Check the tides before you venture out as a receding tide will expose the rocks and leave stunning reflections in the sand. Beaches like WA's Cable Beach in Broome are stunning under these conditions. Try the 'Seabreeze' website www.seabreeze.com to check forecasts on wind strengths and movements in the tides.

To ensure you arrive at the right time and place to capture a sunrise and a sunset, try 'The Photographer's Ephemeris' application. This free software uses Google Earth and shows on the map exactly where the sun and moon rise and set in any location on the planet on any day.



Scamander Inlet, Tasmania. The fiery display in the sky is reflected in the water. A wide-angle lens (16mm) was used to provide depth and perspective to the photograph.

As in all good landscapes, quality of light is paramount. Pre-dawn light and after-glow after the sun has set will produce stunning results. Decide on your viewpoint well before the sun has risen. Get to your destination at least half an hour before sunrise to capture pre-dawn light and stay after sunset for the pinks, mauves and blues reflected in the water and the sand.

Don't forget to also capture the wild light just before and just after a storm, with grey threatening clouds and shafts of light breaking through and lighting up patches of the sea. You may need to indulge in some HDR (High Dynamic Range) bracketing of shots in these conditions as often the tonal range is well over the six or so stops a digital SLR can capture.



It's not often I'm fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time when the setting sun produces this display of colour. Mt Cook in New Zealand set amidst the foreground of Lake Pukaki.

A popular look to seascapes is blurred water and clouds from long exposures using neutral density filters (often more than one stacked together is required), or if you have a bigger budget, go for the 10 stop circular filters that can be used to dial in variable neutral density, such as the Singh Ray models.

Choice of lenses can vary from wide-angles for a large 'stretched' perspective to the compressed images obtained from a telephoto to get in close to crashing waves and rocks offshore.

Capturing Mountains

The predominantly flat nature of the Australian landscape means many of our photographers go overseas to capture mountain scenery, but there is an abundance of mountain locations to be explored at home.

As in most landscapes, getting up early or staying late will reward you with some of the best and warmest diffuse light. Bright midday sun with lots of hazy ultra-violet light usually has too much contrast for mountain shooting, especially when there is snow about. Having said that, I have obtained some very pleasing shots in these conditions using a polarising filter. Beware of scenes that have a lot of deep shadows in them when using a polariser as the increased contrast the filter produces will easily block them up. Also, the higher the altitude, the darker the sky becomes with a polariser and you may need to back off the effect if the scene looks too unnatural.

Clouds will improve mountain scenery in most situations and lenticular clouds are very striking above mountain tops. If there is mixed light at sunrise and sunset, try and position yourself so your subject is back lit. If the clouds are going to light up and explode in colour, they are more likely to do so in this direction. If you are lucky enough to have a fiery display at sunset or at sunrise with a still lake or water to reflect the mountains and the clouds, you will capture stunning images.

Study the weather and wind forecast before venturing out, but I've learned the hard way that even though it's sunny where I am now, the weather in the mountains can change

very quickly from sun to snow in a short space of time. Be prepared with warm clothing and always take your mobile and preferably a hand held GPS.

Capturing great mountain shots is really all about light. Days with intermittent sun and overcast light mean waiting and waiting until the sun pops out to give cloud shadows on the mountains. Since you can't move mountains around to get better lighting angles, you're the one who has to move, so plan to be in the right place at the right time with the camera ready to catch the magic light.

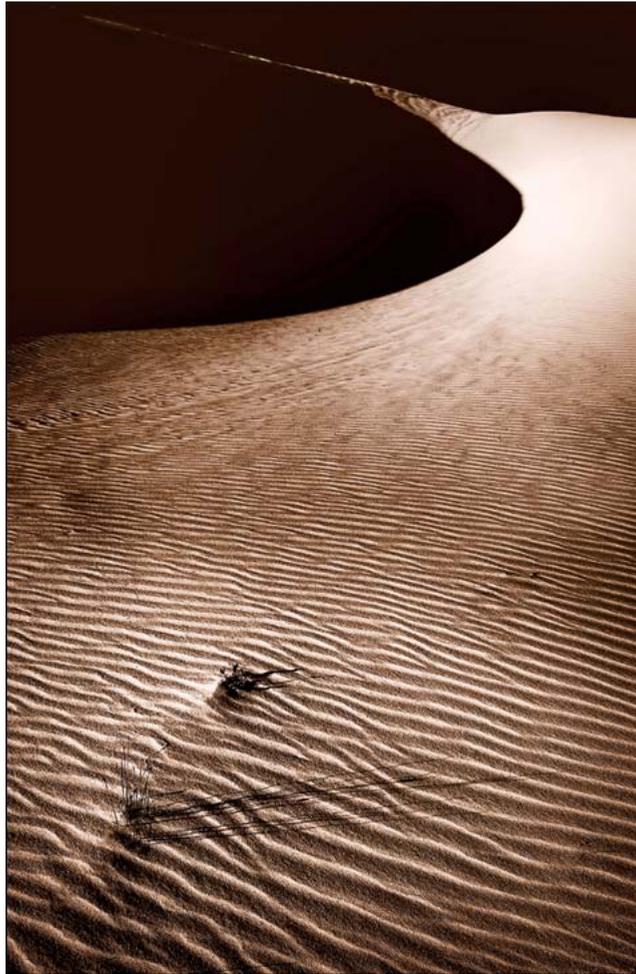
Capturing Dunes

Most landscape photographers have a few folders of great dune shots; especially in black and white or toned images as they really are one of the iconic landscape themes.

I find the best dune shots generally require low, angular light found just after dawn and just before a sunset. The wind is not generally strong at that time as well. This type of light will highlight the long, sinuous ridges found in most dune formations around the world. If the light is bright and clear (not overcast), the contrast will produce strong highlights and shadows to emphasise the ridges.

The approach is to walk around before you get your best light to find a promising patch of dunes so you are ready to take advantage of the small window of magic light when it comes. Shoot quickly and shoot often, you'll be surprised that a small variation in your composition can produce a totally different effect.

I try to use a tripod because it is a discipline that makes me take more care in composing my image. However, when a tripod is difficult or I haven't got time, I try to use lenses with image stabilisers together with a high ISO setting to ensure I have a fast enough shutter speed as well as good depth-of-field (small aperture). I often see dunes displayed in camera club competitions that are out of focus or too soft which ruins the tactile sensation we feel when looking at sharp images of dune particles and textures.



Dunes near the Pinnacles in Western Australia. Shot just after dawn when the low angle of the light produced shadows to highlight the sinuous ridges of the dunes. A 16mm wide-angle lens produced the stretched perspective and the plants in the foreground are accentuated by their long shadows.

Be careful when sharpening dune shots in Photoshop as it's very easy to over sharpen them and end up with an unrealistic, gritty image with halos around the edges. I generally use a third party sharpening plug-in, like Nik Software's Sharpener Pro, to 'paint' in the areas I want sharp and leave the other areas softer, thus guiding the viewer's eye to where I want it to go.

Another favourite type of light for dune photography (and as with most of the themes I have been describing), is after-glow (just after sunset and almost in the opposite direction to the setting sun) and pre-glow before dawn. This light is magic for most landscape images when it bathes the scene with pinks, reds and mauves. The advantage if you are shooting white coloured dunes is that they'll reflect this light, turning the dunes the same colour as the sky. If you are shooting red dunes, the warm light will make the dune's colour richer and more saturated.

I've found that good images can be obtained from both wide-angle lenses and telephotos. If I want to emphasise the long narrow ridges disappearing in the distance to give perspective and depth to an image, I use a wide 16mm lens (35mm format equivalent). I try to get as much depth-of-field as I can with the foreground sharp (try a tilt-shift

lens for greater depth-of-field) and include a feature in the foreground to create a point of interest. This can be an unusual dune feature, a plant or dead tree which contrasts with the surrounding dunes.

On the other hand, if I want to compress the image and emphasise the distant dunes, I use a telephoto lens. Telephotos are also useful when I want to capture smaller details within a dune or if I want to compose my image from the flexibility of my car or a viewing platform.

Capturing Deserts

Although not always the case, deserts often don't have the large, strong features of other iconic landscape themes such as mountains. To get a feeling of the great expanse of a desert, wide-angle lenses provide great depth in a photograph because of their ability to 'stretch' the perspective of the image more than the eye sees normally. To further add to the perspective, finding a feature (log, plant, rock, etc.) close by in the foreground will further enhance the feeling of depth in your capture.

The striking light of early dawn and dusk can be great and when I am after a different perspective, I will take balloon or small aircraft flights over desert scenes to photograph the strong patterns that these aerials often provide.

Capturing Forests & Waterfalls

A favourite theme for landscape photographers centres around waterfalls, forests and trees, especially in the rich colours that are found in autumn, or in rainforests after a heavy rainfall. Trees in bright, contrasty light are very difficult to photograph and the patches of bright and dark areas are often beyond the tonal range that digital SLRs can capture, so try to avoid strong sunlight in the middle of the day. Forests and trees look better under light overcast skies when the tonal range is more even and manageable.

A polarising filter works very well in a rainforest when it is lightly overcast because it can bring out the rich green of the leaves and browns of the trunks. It will turn autumn colours very rich and saturated and if you have wet or moist lichen or fungi, it will enhance their colours as well. Be careful when photographing pools in a rainforest as the polariser may remove the reflection in the water altogether so it stops



Milford Chasm in New Zealand was photographed with a 24mm lens on a Canon EOS 5D, tripod mounted, f13 @ 1/25 second. I combined the ancient forest scene with the fast flowing waterfall and shot it during a downpour under overcast conditions. The even, diffuse light was perfect for this type of image.

looking like water. In this situation, back the polariser off a little.

One thing I always look for when shooting in forests is a waterfall or stream. The classic image includes a soft blurring of the moving water. Put the camera on a tripod; compose and use a slow shutter speed to blur the water. I find a good starting point is about 1/10 second. The shutter speed needs to be long enough to provide a pleasing blur for the water, but not too long so the water becomes a featureless 'blob' with no detail.

Capturing Buildings and Monuments

I have had great delight shooting landscapes that include farm houses, iconic monuments such as Angkor Wat, or abandoned ghost towns set amidst desert.

I'll spend quite some time walking around, looking for interesting shapes and angles where parts of buildings, lamp posts or other objects intersect, but one thing to always keep in mind is the old cliché, 'Less is more'. I've seen some very interesting scenes ruined in a composition by having too much confusing detail. It can be difficult to treat a cityscape or monument like your usual landscape, but surprisingly there can be many similarities. For example, there are normally lots of straight lines in the cityscape, so try using diagonal hand rails, stairs and paths to lead the viewer's eye into your picture. Also, a city background can be enhanced by including foreground interest such as a fire hydrant, a sign or some feature to create more interest.



I look for ways of displaying great monuments in different light. This is an iconic view of the magnificent temple at Angkor Wat, reflected in the still lily pond near the front entrance.

Always be on the lookout for interesting reflections in the glass windows or street puddles after a storm at night that reflect coloured neon lights.

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 and takes pleasure in leading his iconic Greek Islands Odyssey Tour, now in its 12th year (see his website for details of the tour). He will soon be offering further photographic adventures to other exciting destinations such as Cambodia. He also conducts seminars and workshops including Creative Photoshop, Lightroom and Photoshop Elements Workshops (see his 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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