

Photographic Hints and Tips

The word photography is derived from ancient Greek and means “drawing with light”. An apt description that acknowledges the importance of light in the photographic process - it is impossible to take a picture without it. If you have an understanding of the attributes of light and its qualities, your photography will benefit immeasurably.

Whilst British Rail once infamously complained about the wrong type of snow, in photography there is no such thing as the wrong type of light. Provided there is some form of illumination, a picture can be made. That said, the nature of the light will have a significant bearing on the final image.

Light varies infinitely by time of day, season and location. With the UK's variable weather, there can be dramatic changes from one moment to the next. In India and other hot countries, conditions tend to be more predictable.

When shooting by daylight, the first thing to be aware of is the position of the sun in the sky, or in the UK whether or not it is actually shining! During the middle of the day, especially in summer and warmer climes, the sun produces very harsh light that makes everything look flat. Also, while some parts of the image will be very bright, it is likely that other areas will be in shadow. In these conditions, any camera will struggle to capture all the detail as it cannot cope with the range of light values in the scene.

If the exposure is set to record detail in the shadows, areas directly in the sun will look washed out; if the better lit areas are properly exposed, the shadows will be dark or even black. Should the sky be in the picture, it can be difficult to retain its blueness without under exposing the subject area on the ground.

This does not mean photography should be avoided, but better results could be obtained by shooting in a shady area. You might well find a lot of light is being reflected off nearby surfaces and provides a more even illumination. Beware of non white surfaces imbuing your subject with a colour cast, though. This can be corrected later if necessary, but it is easier if you get everything right when you press the shutter.

In winter with its shorter days, the sun does not get so high in the sky and conditions can be more favourable throughout the day. I have seen fabulous winter light during the middle of the day in Scotland, albeit often from inside an office!

Landscape photographers often only shoot at the beginning or end of the day when the sun is low in the sky. The optimum times are the hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset, which are often referred to as the “golden hours”. Late to bed and early to rise is the lot of the British based landscape

photographer during the summer, although winter brings some respite.

At either end of the day, there is a more directional light that brings out textures and details. As the sun rays will have travelled at an angle through more of the atmosphere, the light is softer and in the evening especially has a pleasing warm tone. This is a happy coincidence for safari photography, as animals are more active during these cooler periods.

When there is a diffuse haze or cloud cover, sunlight will be more evenly distributed which means that extreme contrast is less of an issue. Although colours can appear more muted, this will benefit some subjects. Such days will present different opportunities. As an example it becomes easier to photograph woods without the sun shining between the trees. Or perhaps you can indulge in some street photography.

Even rainy days are not necessarily a problem. Reflections in puddles or raindrops on leaves are just a couple of instances. And some of the most dramatic lighting conditions of all can occur when there is a break in the weather. The only restriction is your imagination.



There is some glorious, warm light from the sunset on this tree at Derwent Water. The low angle of the sun brings out the textures in the bark and branches.

Once you know what to look for and start observing the quality of light, you will find yourself doing it instinctively even when you do not have a camera with you. In a further article on this site, I continue my look at this subject.

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