

Chapter 3

Golden Rule #3 -

Chase the Light



Light is the heart and soul of photography. It shapes the landscape, creates depth, and sets the mood of your images. Mastering light is not just about knowing when to shoot; it's about understanding how light interacts with the scene and how to use it to your advantage.

Understanding Natural Light

Natural light is ever-changing, and learning its subtleties is key to capturing breathtaking landscapes. Here are the main types of natural light to consider:

1. Golden Hour

The golden hour occurs shortly after sunrise and before sunset when the sun is low in the sky. This light is soft, warm, and directional, casting long shadows that add depth to your images.

Why It's Magical: The warm tones create an emotional connection, and the low angle of light enhances textures and details.

2. Blue Hour

The blue hour is the period just before sunrise and after sunset when the sky takes on cool, soft hues.

Why It's Magical: The tranquil tones of blue hour create a dreamy, ethereal quality, perfect for minimalist and moody landscapes.

3. Midday Light

While often considered the least desirable time to shoot, midday light can work if you're photographing high-contrast scenes or looking for vibrant colors in shaded areas.

How to Use It: Seek out patterns, textures, and shadows created by the harsh light.

4. Diffused Light

Overcast days provide soft, even light with minimal shadows. This lighting is ideal for capturing details and textures, especially in forests, waterfalls, or macro landscapes.

Why It's Useful: Diffused light eliminates harsh contrasts, allowing you to focus on subtleties in the scene.

The Role of Shadows and Contrast

Shadows are just as important as light. They create contrast, define shapes, and add depth to your photos. Pay attention to how shadows move and change over time. Use them to lead the viewer's eye through the frame or to emphasize the texture of a landscape.

Contrast—both tonal and color—is another powerful tool. Strong contrasts between light and dark areas can make an image feel dramatic, while subtle contrasts lend a more serene quality.

How to Chase the Light

1. Plan Ahead

Use tools like The Photographer's Ephemeris or PhotoPills to determine the angle of the sun, sunrise and sunset times, and the position of the moon. Knowing where the light will be helps you anticipate and prepare for the best conditions.

2. Be Patient

The perfect light often takes time. Arrive early and stay late. Sometimes the most dramatic lighting happens in fleeting moments—be ready to capture them.

3. Experiment with Backlighting

Shooting into the light can create stunning silhouettes, glowing edges on subjects, or a dreamy atmosphere. Look for opportunities to use the sun as a backlight for trees, flowers, or mist.

4. Watch for Weather Changes

Clouds, fog, rainbows, and storms can transform a landscape. These conditions often create dynamic, unpredictable light that adds drama to your images.

5. Embrace Imperfection

Sometimes the light isn't what you expected—but that doesn't mean it's bad. Learn to adapt and work with what nature gives you. Unexpected light can lead to creative and unique compositions.

Tips for Shooting in Different Lighting Conditions

- Golden Hour: Use the warm light to highlight textures and colors. Experiment with side lighting to emphasize depth.
- Blue Hour: Use a tripod for longer exposures, and capture the soft, even tones of the fading or emerging light.
- Midday: Look for reflective surfaces like water, sand, or snow to add interest to otherwise harsh light.
- Diffused Light: Focus on details—textures in moss, the soft flow of waterfalls, or the muted tones of a forest floor.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Chase the Golden Hour

Find a location and arrive an hour before sunset. Watch how the light changes as the sun sets and shadows lengthen. Capture a series of images to document the transition.

Exercise 2: Experiment with Backlighting

Photograph a subject with the sun behind it. Try different angles and compositions to capture how the light interacts with the subject. Look for glowing edges or flares.

Exercise 3: Embrace Diffused Light

On the next overcast day, head to a forest or waterfall. Focus on capturing details and textures that would be lost in harsh sunlight.

Final Thoughts on Light

The key to chasing light is understanding that it's always changing. Every moment presents a new opportunity, and no two lighting conditions are ever the same. By learning to observe and adapt, you'll unlock the secret to creating landscapes that feel alive and captivating.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how to scout a location like a pro