

## 12 Tips for Photographing Stunning Sunsets



*'No good travel photo album is complete without the token sunrise or sunset picture!'*

Many travelers seem to live by this mantra - however most sunset and sunrise photographs that I see are quite disappointing.

They need not be - sunsets and sunrises are not that difficult to photograph!

### **Tips for Photographing Stunning Sunrises and Sunsets**

**Think Ahead** - While sometimes wonderful sunrise and sunset shots can be taken spontaneously without any forethought it's often the case that the best ones come out of planning. Scope out places that might be good for sunsets in the day or two before your shoot. Look for interesting places where you might not only be able to see the sun track all the way down but where there will be opportunities for shots that include foreground elements and silhouettes. Sunsets only take half an hour or so so you want to think about these elements before they start or you might miss the shots you're after.



Find out when the sun will set or rise and get there at least half an hour before hand as it's often in the lead up to and the time after the sun appears or disappears that the real magic happens.

Keep an eye on the weather also. There are a variety of different types of sunsets that produce a range of different types of lights and patterns in the sky. Don't just go for clear days for these shots - while they can produce some wonderful colors it's usually the times where there is cloud around that the real action happens! Also be aware of days when there is dust or smoke in the air as they can produce amazing results also.

Consider ahead of time what equipment you might need. Include a tripod, lenses that will give you a range of focal lengths, extra batteries etc.

## Composition Techniques

**Shoot at a variety of focal lengths** - wide angle can create sweeping landscape shots but if you want the sun itself to be a feature of the shot you'll want to be able to zoom right in.

Keep in mind that the sun is just half a degree across so when you shoot with a wide lens it will only be taking up a reasonably small part of the photo. If you want it to be a feature of your shot you'll need to zoom in on it using anything from a 200mm lens upwards. This will increase your need for a tripod!

Also be aware that when you look at the sun at the best of times it can be dangerous but when you look through a magnifying lens it can be quite dangerous as the sun is still too high in the sky.



**Silhouettes as focal points** - As with all photos, sunsets need a point of interest and one of the best ways to add one to a picture is to try to incorporate some sort of Silhouette into the shot. This could be something large like a mountain range, something that is part of the environment like a palm tree or a pier or could even be a person.

The great things about Silhouettes is that they add mood and context to a sunset or sunrise shot. I'll write more on silhouettes in a future article.

**Rule of thirds** - Remember the rule of thirds in your photographing of sunrises and sunsets. While you can always break the rule it's often a good idea to place elements like the horizon, sun, silhouettes etc off centre.

## Exposure Techniques

**Shoot at a variety of exposures** - if you let your camera decide what shutter length to shoot at you're likely to get a shot that doesn't really capture the beauty of the light. Quite often the shot will be under exposed because the sky is still reasonably light.

Instead of relying upon the camera's auto mode a sunset is an ideal time to switch your camera into aperture or shutter priority mode and to take a variety of shots at different exposures.

The great thing about sunsets and sunrises is that there is no one 'right' exposure and that you can get stunning results using a variety of them. Also keep in mind that different exposures (aperture and shutter speeds) will produce a variety of different results so it's worth taking more than just a few shots - the key is to experiment.

I tend to switch into shutter priority mode and start with a relatively quick shutter speed and then slowly work down to slower ones.



**Bracketing** - Another technique to try to get the right exposure is 'bracketing' where you look at what the camera suggests you take the picture at and then take a few shots at both under and over that mark. ie if your camera says to shoot at 1/60th of a second at f/8 you would shoot off a shot at 1/60 at f/5.6 and then at f/11. In doing so you end up with a series of shots at different exposures which will all give you slightly different results and colors. Most DSLR's and some point and shoot digital cameras have a built in bracketing feature so you don't need to do this manually - learn how to use it!

**Auto Exposure Lock** - Another exposure trick, if you don't have a bracketing mode or don't feel confident in using it is if your camera has 'auto exposure lock' which allows you to point your camera at a darker place and lock in exposure for that spot (ie you could point it at the ground in front of you and lock in that exposure) and then reframe the picture looking at the sunset. This will mean you get a more over exposed shot.

**Take camera out of Auto White balance mode** - when you set your camera to 'Auto' in it's white balance mode you run the risk of losing some of the warm golden tones of a sunrise or sunset. Instead try shooting in 'cloudy' or 'shade' which are usually used in cooler lights and tell your camera to warm things up a little. Alternatively - if you're shooting a sunrise and DO want a cooler moody shot you can experiment with other white balance settings.

### **Other Sunset and Sunrise Tips**



**Tripod** - If you're shooting at longer shutter speeds and with longer focal lengths then a tripod or some other way of ensuring your camera is completely still is essential.

**Manual Focus** - sometimes when shooting in extreme lighting conditions some cameras can have trouble focussing. If this is the case for your camera consider switching to manual focus to ensure you get nice crisp shots.

**Look around you** - The wonderful thing about sunsets is that they not only create wonderful colors in the sky in front of you but they also can cast a beautiful golden light that is wonderful for other types of photography. As the sunset progresses keep an eye on other opportunities for shots around you (not just in front of you). You might find a great opportunity for a portrait, landscape shot, macro shot etc behind you in the golden light.

**Keep Shooting** - A sunset or sunrise constantly changes over time and can produce great colors well after the sun goes down or appears so keep shooting at different exposures and focal lengths as I've mentioned above until you're sure it's all over.