

The Right Mindset for Photography

Landscape and Nature Photography in the Field

TJ Avery 27-March-2008

The familiar cliché of having your “head in the game” is quite appropriate when it comes to practicing good and effective photography. Most often, you will make better photographs when you’re relaxed, thinking about the landscape almost exclusively, and in-tune with your environment. You will also perform better when you have a clear idea of what you want to photograph and how you want to do it.

As simple as this sounds, it can be rather difficult to practice in the field. So many factors cause distractions while photographing. And if you do manage to find yourself in a wonderful mental bliss, where your mind is free to focus on photography, you might just encounter a creative block and not know what you want to photograph.

I’m going to cite one example and then give some written advice and guidelines. These things have helped me greatly in the field and have led to making better photographs.

1. The Example



Head *Not* in the Game



Head **IN** the Game

The above two photos are from a recent photographic outing. They were taken less than 30 minutes apart in time and less than 100 yards apart in distance. Now, I’m not saying that the photo on the right is a world-class photo, but I can safely assume it is *far* better than the photo on the left.

The difference between these two photos is that I managed to get my head “in the game” in the short time period between shots. I won’t go into details about that now. You will

have to read the next section to understand what it means to have a better mindset for photography and ultimately having your “head in the game”.

You might be inclined to assume that, in the example above, the better photo resulted in me simply spending more time in that general area and scouting around for the right shot. In general, this is true. However, in this particular example, I had initially walked right past the second scene (the photo on the right) before I made the first shot (the photo on the left).

When I took the first shot (the photo on the left), I was fatigued from a long trip, depressed because it was raining a little bit, and disappointed about the heavy cloud cover (there was to be a full lunar eclipse that evening and I wanted to photograph it with somewhat clear skies). I wasn't inspired by the landscape and it didn't feel like good photography was going to happen for me. So, because of my non-photographic and somewhat negative mindset, I missed the good photo initially.

What turned me around and eventually got me in the right mindset (with my “head in the game”) was that I *Broke Into The Thread*. You can read about this in the next section. It worked very well and turned my photographic outing into one of the most creative and in-tune-with-the-landscape sessions I've ever experienced.

2. Advice & Guidelines

Here's my advice. These are guidelines and suggestions that work for me based on my experience. This is the real reason I wrote this article, and I hope you can gain something from it.

- No pressure. Whether you're conscious of it or not, you've probably put pressure on yourself to perform. Attitudes like, you're determined to return from the field with awesome photographs and you'll be damned if you don't, are all wrong and will produce some bad photos (trust me, I've been there). Identifying this pressure and being conscious of it (if it exists) will help you fight it. Following some of the next steps will help take some pressure off too.
- Patience. Don't stomp around the landscape searching desperately for something to photograph. Don't expect the landscape to offer up a brilliant composition that best presents some interesting aspect or element you've just discovered. Turn the flow the other way: let the landscape open up to you. As you wander around, mentally sit back and relax and listen to what the land is telling you. Let it totally flow towards you and into you. When the time is right and the composition, etc. is right, the photograph will happen.

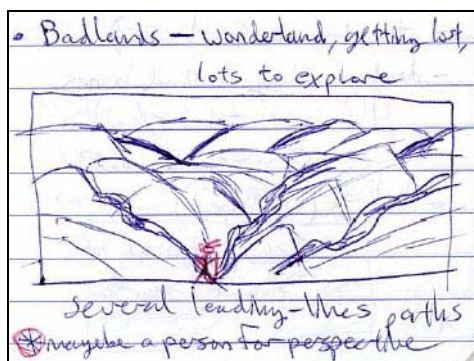
- Calm down, slow down, and relax (sit down, too). Any time is good, but there are two specific times you really want to do this: 1) when you first get on location in the field, take a little while to sit down and absorb everything without the camera, 2) when you're photographing and it doesn't feel right or you feel that you're struggling to find something to photograph – force yourself to shut down the photographic process just for a little while.
- Enjoy. This follows the preceding step, but don't forget to enjoy the landscape and your time in the field. If you're constantly working the camera and taking photographs, you will miss out on the experience of being in the field. Put the camera away for at least 5 or 10 minutes and just be a person in the landscape, not a photographer.
- Simplify the Technical. Operation of the camera should be second nature to you. When shooting landscapes, I usually use the same settings over and over. I may change the aperture a little or use a different ISO depending on what I'm trying to do, but generally the settings on the camera are nearly the same every time.

A *custom shooting mode* is showing up in the latest batch of DSLRs. My 5D has one, and I have it set up for optimal landscape photography. Almost turns the camera into a point-n-shoot ☺

- Don't go on an endless quest. It's easy to look past the scene in front of you and wonder what's next. Wandering around the corner or over the next hill in search of the perfect photograph will often lead you nowhere except further away from your car or campsite. Hold up, take a break if you have to, and try working with the immediate scene.
- Break into the thread. This is Craig Tanner's advice (the Radiant Vista). If you're stuck and can't find the right photograph while out in the field, just plunk down and take a shot. He advises to be productive with the mantra, "shoot and move, shoot and move". I believe this to be good advice within reason. Although you don't want to move too fast! Taking a shot, whether you really like the scene or not, allows you to break into a photographic process and gets the juices flowing. It does work! The first shot won't be great (but hey, you never know!) but it could possibly lead to increasingly better shots as you move on. And don't be afraid, what's the worst that could happen from a snapshot?
- Trip planning. Another way to say this is, "Be Prepared". The more you know about your destination the better off you'll be. You'll be less anxious and more prepared for what's ahead. Also, planning a well-thought-out and realistic schedule for the days ahead (and always build in a lot of flexibility) is the way to go. Being in a new place for the first time naturally evokes some stress, anxiety, and/or giddy child-like excitement, and having good knowledge of what to expect will help calm you and make the experience more enjoyable.

- Go solo. It can be fun to have other people with you, especially family and friends and other photographers too. Sharing your outdoor experience with them can be satisfying and enjoyable. But, usually our best work as photographers happens when we're out alone and given the opportunity to totally focus on the landscape and photography. There is usually some amount of distraction from other people in a group and often conflicts of schedule (e.g. they'd rather be eating and drinking while you want to stay out late for the sunset). If you do go on a trip with others, try to break off on your own for a few hours here and there.
- No quotas. If you're not photographing for a client or some sort of paid job, then chances are there are no requirements of your photography. I.e. you're not required to bring home X photos from location that represent the best you can do. In this case, there really are no consequences if you bring home absolutely nothing. A little disappointment maybe, but you won't get into trouble, lose your job, or not get paid. Just keep this in the back of your mind as you strive to take good photographs with little or no pressure on yourself.
- Previsualization. Each location I visit, I usually do one of the following: 1) research it ahead of time and make a list of interesting aspects and elements that might be worth photographing (as well as sketching a few generic compositions that best display these elements and aspects), and 2) while on location, sit down, put the camera up, look for interesting aspects and elements, and then previsualize photographs.

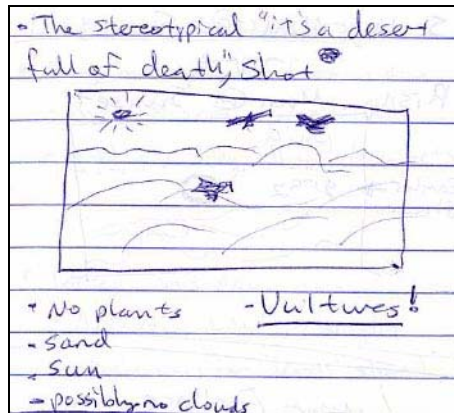
Below are two examples showing previsualized sketches (that I made a few weeks before visiting Death Valley National park) vs. the final photos. I pretty much fulfilled my vision, except for the lack of vultures ☺



a) Sketch



a) Final Photo



b) Sketch



b) Final Photo

- **Simple themes.** Always think about and answer the question, “What is this photograph going to tell the viewer?” This does not have to be complicated. You do not have to suggest some deep, complex concept or idea behind each photograph. If you’re out photographing the natural landscape, then the main subject is most likely the natural landscape. Work on simple themes based on what draws your eye. Some examples could be: clouds, a specific color (e.g. red, blue), space, line, light, texture, shape, material (e.g. sand, granite), a canyon, a peak, a specific plant (e.g. cactus), people in the landscape, etc. Once you’ve identified a subject or concept like that, then work the composition to best display it.
- **Call it quits.** Sometimes when I’ve been out photographing in a certain area for a while, and I feel that I’ve taken some good ones, I’ll just quit. Well, within reason of course ☺ Unless there’s something amazing going on with the light or some beautiful creature has unexpectedly shown up, if I feel photographically full and content, I’ll just shut down and enjoy the landscape. This is the sweet time – time that I really feel happy, content, and I’m riding a natural high. It puts me at ease and makes me feel good.

- Quiet time. While driving and/or hiking out to a location, spend some time without saying anything. Just look and admire the landscape. Turn off the music and let your mind sail free with no thoughts except on what you're seeing. I prefer to think of this as "meditating on the landscape". If I manage to tune out the outside world while quietly observing and letting my thoughts reflect upon the landscape, then I'll be more in-tune and connected with the landscape when it comes time to shoot.
- Tune-in and connect. By now you've read this term over and over and may not know what it means. By "tuning-in" and "connecting" with the landscape, your mind becomes more observant of the details and your thoughts are more pure and clear as they focus on the landscape.

You're more likely to catch little, interesting details that you'd overlook in a different state of mind. Things like the way reflected light takes on the color of the surface that's reflecting it. Or it could be an interesting rock formation presenting different colors and/or shapes under your feet. You could miss the animal crouched on the river bank in shadow as it takes a drink. The landscape can sometimes be very busy and cluttered, but there are wonderful little details waiting to catch your eye and make you thankful that you're alive and witnessing them.

Try using some of these guidelines and advice, and I bet you'll find yourself tuning in and connecting automatically.

Another means of connecting is identifying how the landscape and your experience in it make you feel. Do you feel elated, impressed, awed, small, or thankful for being on this Earth? Does it draw your interest and make you want to explore it and see more? Do you wish to share the sights and experiences with everyone you know?

- Gratitude. Again, this is some of Craig Tanner's advice (the Radiant Vista). If you spend a few minutes and be grateful for the people and things in your life, you will likely be happier and more at ease. This applies to your life in general and not just to shooting landscapes in the field. Give yourself a little pause, even for only a minute or two, and think about all the good and wonderful stuff that's happened in your life.

If you find yourself in a beautiful landscape, camera in hand, and with time for photography, then you have a lot to be thankful for. Just remember your position and the things in your life that have brought you to your current state. This is a great exercise not only for photography but all other aspects of life.

- Think positive and let the magic happen. You absolutely never know what you're going to experience when you're out in the field. Your expectations and judgment of the near future may be bleak and negative based on certain things (e.g. the weather is bad or certain conditions aren't right). But you can never predict what you'll encounter. You have to get out into the field, take the chance, and see what happens.

The example given in Section 1 is a very good example of this. That shooting session started out bleak. I wasn't sure that I'd even get a single useable photograph.

I managed to direct my thoughts and deep love of the landscape towards a creative process (using many of the guidelines and advice given above) that, in short time, took off almost automatically. It was a beautiful thing that I felt fortunate to experience.

And what about the other photos from that session (after I got my "head in the game")?



Note: All photos in this article were taken in Death Valley National Park, February 2008.