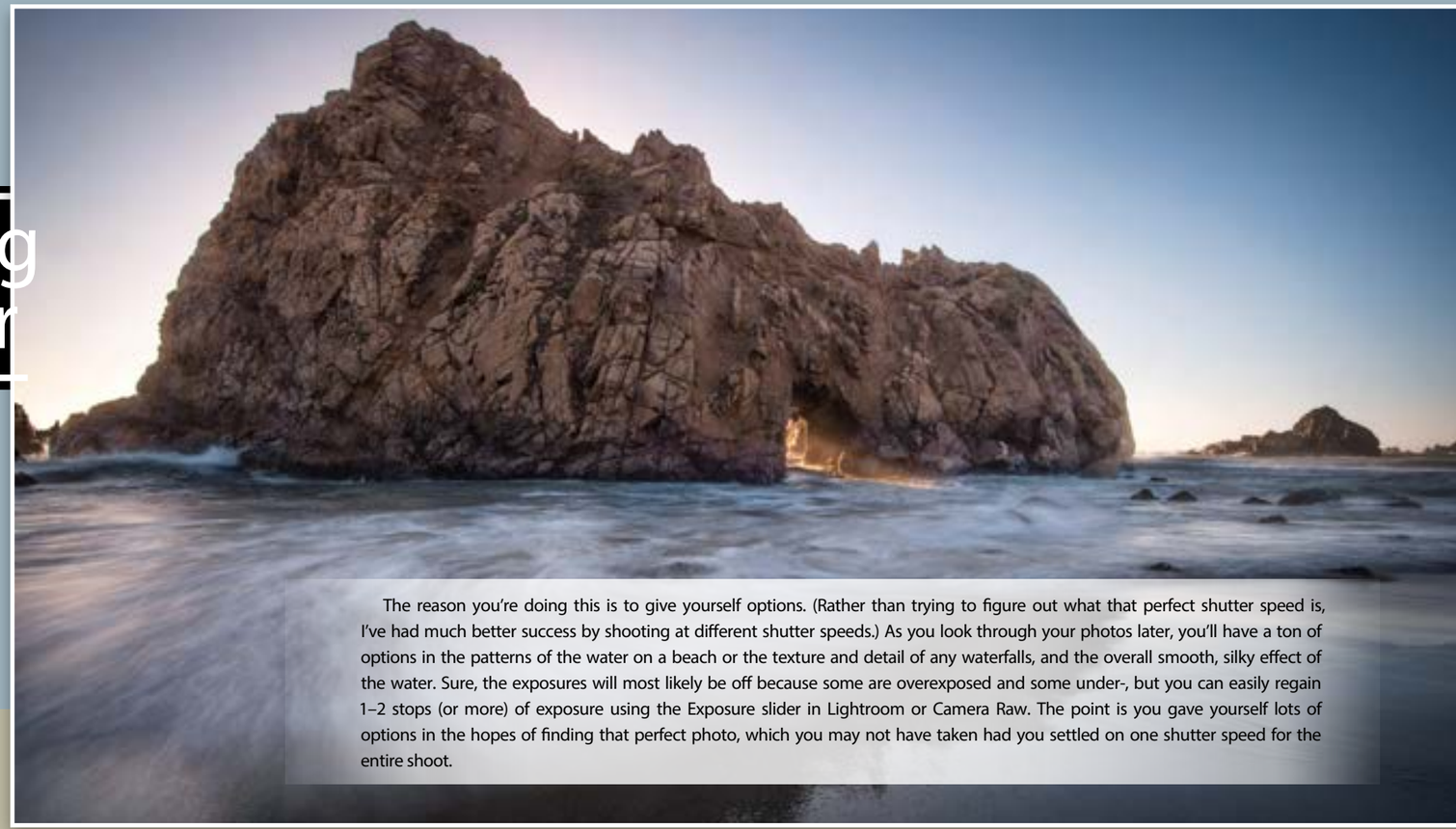
5 Tips For Photographing Places with Water

Ever feel like you're drawn to something? For me, it's water. I've lived near a beach for my entire life. And as much as I like mountains, snow sports, and many places away from the beach, I'm not sure I could ever live more than 30 minutes away from the ocean. That's why, when the editors asked me, I jumped at the chance to write this article. I love the outdoors and I love photographing places with water. So I put together five tips or techniques (or whatever you want to call them) that I've learned over the years to help create some great images.



The reason you're doing this is to give yourself options. (Rather than trying to figure out what that perfect shutter speed is, I've had much better success by shooting at different shutter speeds.) As you look through your photos later, you'll have a ton of options in the patterns of the water on a beach or the texture and detail of any waterfalls, and the overall smooth, silky effect of the water. Sure, the exposures will most likely be off because some are overexposed and some under-, but you can easily regain 1–2 stops (or more) of exposure using the Exposure slider in Lightroom or Camera Raw. The point is you gave yourself lots of options in the hopes of finding that perfect photo, which you may not have taken had you settled on one shutter speed for the entire shoot.

1 There's No Magic Correct Shutter Speed for Photographing Water

Every body of water you encounter will be different. The water flow from one waterfall will be slower or faster than another. Beaches, tides, etc. will all change from one situation to the next.

Let's say that you find this magic setting of 1/2 second, and you think it's the perfect setting for photographing water. Well, you may get to another location and that 1/2 second is either too slow or too fast. The water may look very different than before, so don't tie yourself down to thinking that there's a magic shutter speed for photographing water. Instead, change it up.

The best help I've found is to bracket. Turn on the Exposure Bracketing feature on your camera (the same feature you'd turn on if you were shooting an HDR image). With this setting, the camera will automatically take several photos (I set mine to take five) with different exposures (some overexposed, and some underexposed). If you're in Aperture Priority mode, the way it changes exposure is by varying the shutter speed, so some photos will have a very short shutter speed (the underexposed photos), and some will have a longer shutter speed (the overexposed photos).

2 Use a Neutral Density Filter to Smooth the Water

Neutral density filters and long exposures are all the rage these days. Basically, a neutral density filter (also known as an ND filter) is a dark piece of glass or plastic that sits in front of your lens. It decreases the amount of light getting to the camera's sensor so you can leave the shutter open longer without overexposing the photo.

Neutral density filters are almost essential gear for photographing waterfalls because you have to slow your shutter speed. If you photograph moving water with a shutter speed that's too fast, then the water looks frozen, as in this example. Not pretty, right?

This frozen-water effect happens because there's usually too much light to use a long shutter speed—to capture the movement in the water—and it will overexpose the photo. So you have to use a faster shutter speed, which, in turn, freezes the water and doesn't give you that smooth, silky effect that makes waterfall photos so beautiful. That's where your ND filter comes in handy. It lets you extend your shutter speeds, even in bright light, so you can get a good exposure, while also capturing the smooth water.

Neutral density filters are also great for photographing water with ripples because you can leave the shutter open long enough to totally smooth out all the ripples. While it helps give the water a reflectve quality, it won't totally reproduce a perfect reflection. It does, however, help ease the chaotic look of the rippled water, and it gives a much more soothing and smooth effect to the photo.

Here's an example of a photo I took before using a 10-stop ND filter. The pilings in the water are what drew me to the location. I thought they'd make a great foreground, and the sheer number of them made for a cool-looking photo.

The water ripples make the photo look busy and almost chaotic, and it's hard to concentrate on anything. Now compare that with the next photo. Here, I used a tripod, and all I changed was that I put a 10-stop ND filter on my camera, which let me use a much longer exposure of 60 seconds.

Now that's what I'm talkin' about! See how the long exposure smoothed the water and calmed everything down in the photo. Now you don't see the ripples. It's not a perfect reflection, but I'm okay with that. It's smooth and it really lets your eye concentrate on the star of the photo (the pilings).

That's not all ND filters are good for when it comes to photographing water, but we'll come back to them in a minute.

Shoot Early or Late for the Best Reflections

I love reflections. Some of my favorite photos are where I capture a great backdrop reflected in the water in front of me. How do you get those reflections? Well, the key here is wind. Basically, you don't want any (or at least very little), if possible. That's not something you can predict or control, so this tip is all about giving you the best chance at getting a great reflection.

First, your best chance is at sunrise. Ever notice that most hot-air balloons go up at sunrise? They need mostly stable air conditions to fly, and do better with little wind. The time around sunrise is generally the best time of day for that. The next best time is at the last hours of the day, near sunset. Again, generally, the winds tend to die down.

If I had to pick one, I'd go with sunrise. That's going to be your best shot at getting a great reflection. But sunset is a close second. (If you're into photographing outdoors and landscapes, shooting at those times of day shouldn't be very different for you.) Did you notice that I use "generally" a lot in this tip? That's because, as much as you can try to predict this stuff, there's no guarantee. I've been out at sunrise when it's been very windy. I've been out in the middle of the afternoon and the water has been dead calm. It just depends. At least knowing that these two times of day are generally (see, there it is again) best, you'll have a good chance at a better shot.

Ghostly Seascapes with Long Shutter Speeds

If you're looking for a dramatic water photo, then photographing seascapes, combined with the neutral density filters we covered earlier, work great. This tip is a little different than the first tip where I assumed you wanted to capture some amount of detail and movement in the water. For instance, if you use a slightly longer shutter speed, you'll find the water still looks like water, and it happens to take on the patterns of any rocks or objects it's moving around. But when someone looks at it, they still see water, for the most part.

This fourth tip is all about the drama! With a seascape, try combining the ND filters we talked about earlier and some longer exposures. The rougher the waves, and the more rocks and places for the water to crash on, the better. Why? Because it produces a ghostly effect in the water. It almost looks like a mist or layer of fog: a very different look that will definitely add a dramatic effect to your photos.

Foreground,Foreground,Foreground

The last tip is more of a compositional one. Photographing water is great, but it's hard to make it the star of the photo. We usually need to see something in the foreground. I'm a sucker for docks and old wooden pilings in the water. As you may have noticed earlier in Tips #1 and #2, anytime I can find them, I use them as great foreground elements to help draw people into the photo. If I'm at a beach, the first thing I look for is a tide pool of some sort. The reflections of water pooling around something make a great foreground.

If I'm at a lake, I always look for rocks in the water to put in the foreground. I'll get down low, and include as many rocks as I can with the water, while leaving the top one-third of the photo for the sky.

By the way, have you ever heard of the Rule of 3 (not to be confused with the Rule of Thirds)? The Rule of 3 basically suggests that things look better in groups of three. It's not the number one thing I follow, but I always keep it in mind. ■

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