

In The Frame

July 2026



Lake Bled

Watching the sunrise every day

The Backwards Waterfall

Unusual scenes in Iceland's West Fjords

Working The Scene

How to approach a new location

In The Frame

July 2026

Issue 26

Mobile Edition

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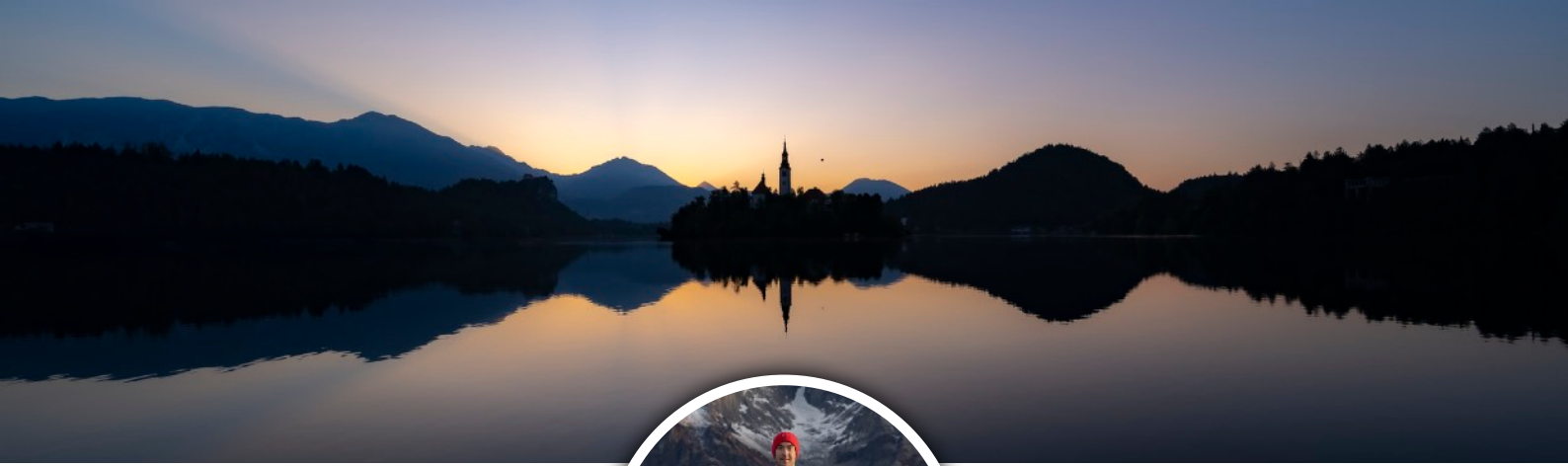


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Welcome

I've spent most of the last month exploring the landscape of Iceland, not in person but through learning how to develop and build my own maps. Cartography is the ideal side project for a landscape photographer, and I'm sure that most people interested in travel have a corresponding love of maps. I've been thinking a lot about how I present the terrain in my books and other material, and wanted to investigate the option of creating a map from scratch.

Map design is an incredible world, full of helpful people, detailed tutorials and forums of advice. You can download glacier databases from NASA and add them to your display, and retrieve amazingly specific features like public parks or commercial buildings from open-source mapping projects. Thinking about the design and appearance of a map produces all kinds of threads to pull on, and it's the kind of distraction that can be great fun but also make evenings disappear.



As a photographer, raw maps can be fascinating. We're so used to seeing maps full of labelled features, from communities and roads to lakes and rivers, that it's often difficult to get back to the underlying terrain. Building from nothing means you start with the landscape itself, and it's a strange feeling to expose a terrain map of Iceland with nothing marked. It's like seeing a miniature version of the real landscape rather than a visual representation of it. I've added a couple of samples in the magazine.

Creating and adjusting my own maps has been a great reminder that a landscape can be understood in different ways. Sometimes that happens through walking, sometimes through waiting for the light, and sometimes through returning to the same view day after day. My experience in cartography has been about stripping a place back to shape, elevation and form, but the articles this month all take their own approach to understanding the landscape.



The location article looks at my experience of staying for ten days on the shore of Lake Bled, waking up each morning to explore a similar scene as the light and weather changed around me. We look in depth at an image taken in Iceland's Westfjords, on a day when the wind was so strong that the waterfalls were flowing upwards. Finally, we discuss the idea of walking a scene and how to get the most out of a photography location by thinking about what we do when we first arrive.

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy this issue.

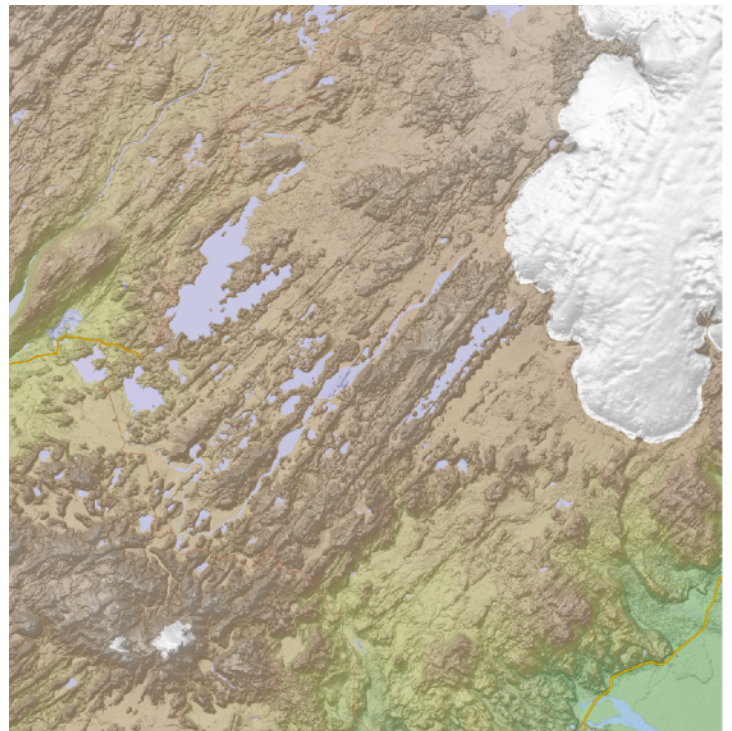
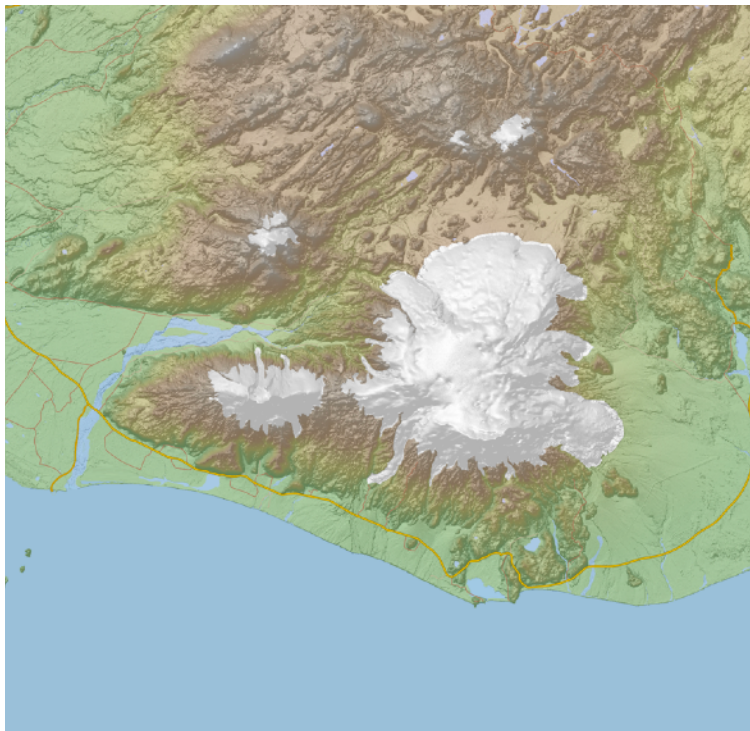
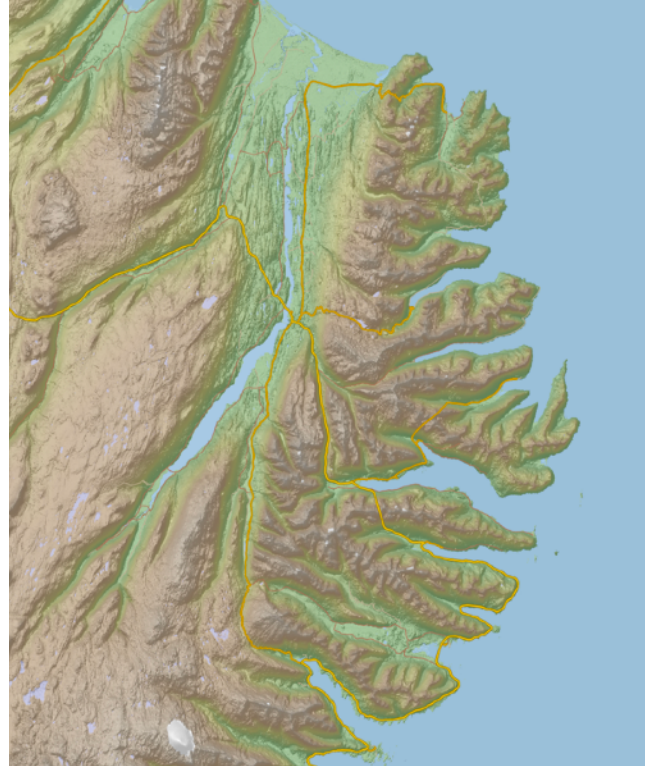
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Shutter Safari Maps

Samples of my custom designed terrain maps of Iceland





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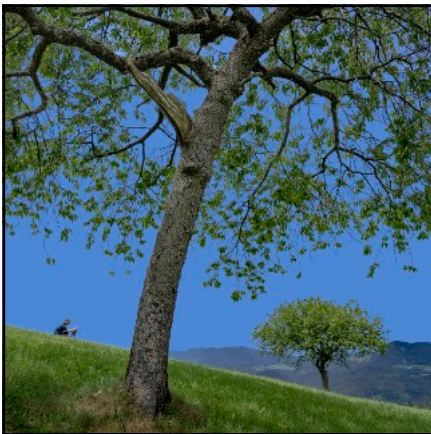
On Location

A daily routine of capturing
the morning light



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On Location

Lake Bled | Slovenia



A daily routine of capturing the morning light



Introduction

Much of my writing revolves around the idea of planning for photography, and how we can get more from our time on location by researching the place and conditions before we arrive. Good preparation can make a huge difference when you have limited time on a trip, but I sometimes question how much space I leave for spontaneity, and I don't always take an organised or rigorous approach. This article is about one of those times when I had less of a plan, and spent 10 days on the shore of Lake Bled in Slovenia.

I picked a difficult time of year for this experience, and the trip was planned around other things going on in my life, rather than around the optimum time for photography. Lake Bled generally looks best in autumn, when the trees around the shore change to a variety of beautiful colours and the weather often brings a layer of mist to the surface. I went in June, when the days were almost as long as they get, and photographing sunrise meant building the whole day around an alarm that felt closer to the middle of the night than the morning.

I spent my time in Slovenia hiking in the mountains and exploring the valleys around the Julian Alps, and the trip as a whole was full of varied experiences and different locations. However, Lake Bled was the consistent anchor of the journey. It defined my early morning routine as I tried to catch sunrise each day, and it was the place I returned to for evening meals or drinks around the shore after a long day of shooting.

This is an article about the longest time I've ever spent in one place on a photography trip, and what it felt like to shoot from the same patch of ground each morning. It's also about the fascinating history of this area and why one small stretch of shoreline has become the natural place to watch the lake react to the morning sky.



Exploring Lake Bled

Most images of Lake Bled feature a peaceful church on an island, surrounded by an expanse of water with a line of mountains in the distance. It's a calm mountain scene that gives the impression of a quiet place where you can be alone among the natural features of Slovenia's landscape. However, Lake Bled isn't just a popular photography spot; it's a busy tourist destination.

People have been visiting Lake Bled for hundreds of years, drawn by the beautiful scenery, the health-giving reputation of the area, and historic buildings such as Bled Castle. More intensive tourism began in 1855, when a Swiss healer named Arnold Rikli arrived and began constructing wellness facilities and a new Institute of Natural Healing. The infrastructure around the lake has continued to evolve since then, with much of it focused on Lake Bled as a place for people to stay for an extended visit.

The town of Bled sits on the eastern side of the lake and contains a mix of historic hotels and modern shopping facilities. It's a convenient base in Slovenia, just off the main route to Ljubljana and the airport, with the Austrian border around 30 minutes to the north. While tourist-focused towns can feel somewhat artificial, the long history of visitors to Bled also gives it a sense of character and purpose.

From the town, a path runs around the 6 km shore of the lake, with a road inland that takes you past hotels, restaurants and sports facilities. It's a pretty area, and there are points of interest scattered around the walk, but most of the lake is wide and open, making it better as a place to visit than somewhere to photograph in depth.



The Island

Photographers gather on the southwest shore of Lake Bled, which has a beautiful view over the island and small church towards the centre of the lake. I planned my visit to Slovenia around this spot, knowing that the lake would always give me somewhere to go at sunrise, while Bled's convenient location would make it easy to explore elsewhere during the day. I found a small apartment within walking distance of the water, and settled in for 10 days with Lake Bled as the anchor for my travels around the mountains.

The island in Lake Bled has a long history of worship, and there was a sanctuary here even before the first Christian church was constructed. The first brick church was consecrated in the 12th century, but it has been through several cycles of rebuilding and renovation over the years. You can visit the island by boat, climb the steps to the church, and see how this small patch of land has been shaped around tradition over many centuries.

Photographers use the island as the centrepiece of compositions from the shoreline, where the distinctive outline of the church creates a beautiful contrast against the natural features around the lake. There's no single perfect spot from which to capture the island, but one stretch of boardwalk gives the church a particularly neat position against the distant mountains, and the curve of the shoreline hides many of the artificial features near Bled.

I researched this spot carefully before booking my trip because I knew that summer's early sunrise would make it difficult to travel far before first light. With the ideal photography spot on my doorstep, I'd always be able to capture sunrise without starting so early that I'd be asleep again by lunchtime.



A Canvas for Sunrise

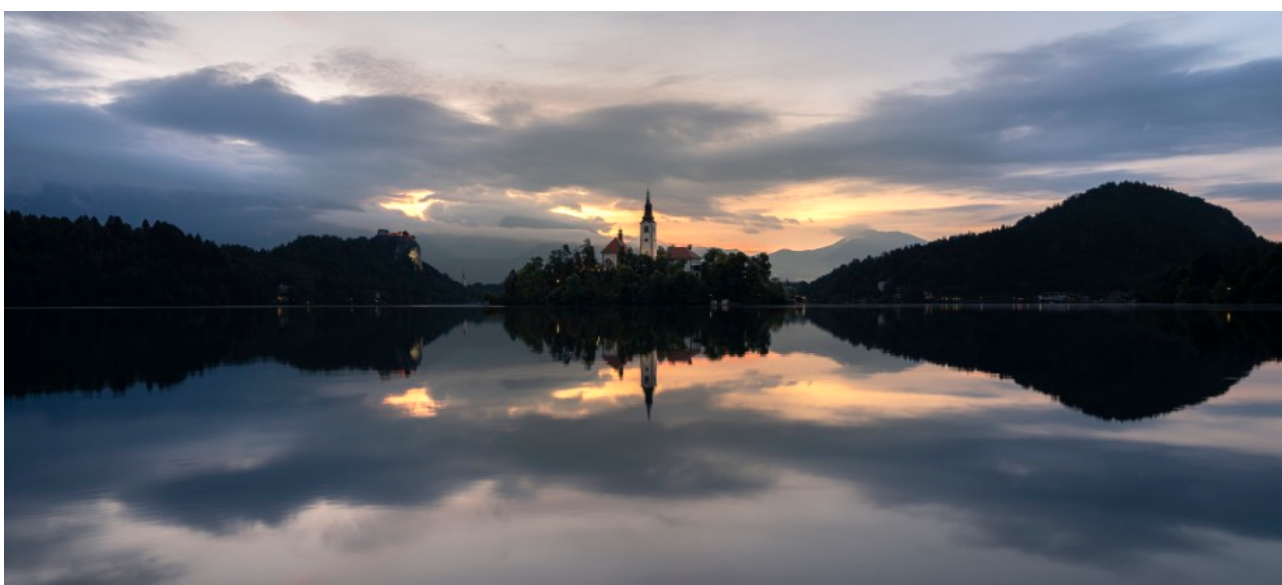
The scene from the southwest shore of Lake Bled is incredibly popular with photographers, but it's a very simple place to explore. There are few foregrounds or varied angles available from the edge of the lake, and you can only change position by moving up and down the boardwalk. With so little variety to work with, this spot would be easy to dismiss as somewhere you can capture a pretty view without having to think very deeply about the scene.

However, I think places like this are best understood as a canvas for the light and weather. The reflective water means that colours in the sky can flow all the way through the image, giving them much more influence over the atmosphere of the photograph. The church and island add a brilliant central feature, just big enough to hold the viewer's attention but without demanding so much space that they fill the frame. This gives you the perfect excuse to shoot wide and take in as much of the scene as possible, with the island and mountains providing just enough structure to hold the frame together.

Photographing Lake Bled over the course of a week reminded me of one of my favourite photographic projects: Golden Gate by Richard Misrach. From the porch of his home outside San Francisco, Misrach captured the same view of the Golden Gate Bridge over the course of more than a year. The composition is always the same, but every image in the collection looks different as the colour, light and weather change.

The framing in Golden Gate reminds me of the composition many photographers instinctively make at Lake Bled: narrow enough that the island becomes a clear feature, but wide enough that the photograph is still more about atmosphere than detail. I wouldn't have nearly as long to try it out, but I was excited to return to the same scene on different mornings and discover how the sky would change.

In the Frame | On Location



A few different skies from the mornings I spent at the lake



A Daily Rhythm

During my visit to Lake Bled, sunrise was just after 5 am, which is a miserable time of day. My plans for the scene made it even more challenging because some of the best colour and light would appear before dawn, during the first stages of twilight. I knew that shooting from sunrise to sunset would be unrealistic in June, so I tested a daily rhythm of heading down to the shore before 4 am, and then returning to bed for a few hours when the sky got light.

I flinched at the alarm each day, but the mornings themselves were often beautiful. The days in Slovenia were hot, which made the crisp walk beside Lake Bled before sunrise feel like the perfect start to the day. Although my summer visit meant that sunrise was very early, it also gave me more reliable weather, and the air was still and cool as I wandered along the boardwalk in the early hours. I rarely had to consider wind or rain, and almost every day brought an opportunity to capture reflections and colour over the lake.

My apartment was a twenty-minute walk from the viewpoint over Lake Bled, the ideal length to wake up a little and prepare for the shoot. It was also long enough to start reading the lake, noticing whether there was colour in the sky, movement on the water, or cloud gathering over the mountains. Even with such an early start, I usually arrived to find a few photographers already set up, watching the lake. While the busyness of some photography spots can make the experience feel less special, I've always liked the quiet community that emerges when people have put in the effort of a long hike or an early start.

On some mornings, the sky over Lake Bled was completely clear and flat. There were still beautiful colours to capture on those days, but I found myself watching and anticipating even small areas of cloud as I walked along the boardwalk. I also started to learn the movement of the water, and studied how reflections formed and broke up again over the course of the morning. Over a single shoot, mist could form and dissipate, clouds could drift through and disappear, and reflections could come and go. Returning to the same spot every morning made even the smallest changes feel worth noticing.



Working the Composition

There's one obvious starting composition from the viewpoint over Lake Bled: a wide, horizontal shot with the island placed somewhere near the middle. My instinct is always to look for some variety on location, but I also wanted to turn this into a study of light and colour. Fortunately, the slow evolution of sunrise in the summer gave me enough time to capture the changing light while still testing small adjustments to the composition.

The most challenging part was finding the right size for the island and church in the frame. If you zoom in too far, you lose most of the sky that forms the canvas for sunrise.

However, if you make the island too small, the composition lacks structure and the church no longer has enough presence. Judging the right size can be difficult on a small camera monitor, so I often went slightly wider than felt natural to give myself more cropping options later.

I also moved along the boardwalk to adjust where the island intersected with the mountains behind, and tried to bring some of the ripples in the lake or branches from the trees overhead into the scene. I find composition most interesting when there are lots of different components to explore and plenty of room to move, but testing my creativity from the limited environment of a boardwalk viewpoint became part of the fun.

As the days went on at Lake Bled, I found myself hoping for more change in the sky. Clear skies and reflective water were exciting at the beginning, because the conditions matched the kind of images I had anticipated. However, it is hard to make two empty skies feel different within the same composition, and I began to realise how much the photograph depended on clouds, colour and weather to add some character.



Conclusion

I didn't specifically choose ten days for the experience of photographing Lake Bled. That felt like a good length for my Slovenia trip, and was roughly the time I had available. However, it turned out to be a really useful amount of time to stay in one place, and I've repeated the idea in other locations since. I didn't make it to the viewpoint every morning, and I learned on that trip that my capacity for very early starts only runs to about four or five consecutive days. I tried to see those mornings off as an important way to manage my energy.

Returning to the same view each day gave me a real appreciation of small changes in the scene. It wasn't just the daily practice that made those changes stand out; the limited room to move at the Lake Bled viewpoint meant that each difference in the light and weather became more significant. When images with a lot of sky and water act as a canvas for the conditions, it makes you pay more attention to subtle details. A small patch of cloud or a single beam of light can make all the difference to the atmosphere of a scene.

It's hard to create the space for this approach to photography. On a trip, we understandably want to explore as many different places as possible. At home, we might not feel there is a nearby spot worth exploring around our usual routines. However, having a single anchor spot for sunrise and enough time to explore further during the day turned out to be a brilliant (if accidental) way to combine focus and variety.

Photographers often say that going back to the same place many times is the best way to discover new ideas, but that advice works best for locations with a lot of natural variety. Returning to the shore of Lake Bled each day showed me new ways to appreciate the sky, and I recommend trying this approach whenever you discover a similarly open view, even if you have to get up at 4 am to do it.

Behind the Scene

West Fjords | Iceland



Dramatic scenes on Iceland's west coast



Introduction

I had been excited to visit the Westfjords on this trip, as it was the first time I'd been to the area in the peak of summer. The region can be challenging to explore in the winter, as the landscape catches the weather systems coming off the ocean and heavy snowfall can make access tricky. With a summer visit, I'd be able to navigate some of the smaller gravel roads and reach more remote parts of the fjords.

Although summer was the most reliable time of year for clear access, the weather was frequently windy and wet. The sky doesn't remain consistent for long in Iceland, especially among the exposed terrain of the Westfjords, so I gave up on trying to make a schedule and accepted each day's conditions as I found them. I did see some amazing light on the journey, but it appeared in fleeting moments that were impossible to predict.

The day I visited Rauðasandur was particularly windy. This beach at the end of a winding gravel road is known for the incredible patterns in its golden sand, and I hoped to capture the scene from the air if I could find a safe place to fly the drone. It turned out to be a hopeless idea, and I watched the waves from the car while it shook with gusts of wind coming off the ocean.

The tall ridges of the Westfjords can shape how the weather flows around this landscape, and it's often better to move locations than wait for conditions to change. Deciding to look for a calmer location, I set off along the gravel road away from the beach and noticed a waterfall that had been flowing off the cliffs behind me while I'd been watching the sky in the opposite direction. Suddenly, the wind was exactly what I needed, so I quickly found somewhere to park and watch my first backwards waterfall.



On Location One

Backwards waterfalls are formed when winds are so strong that they catch the flowing water and push it back into the air faster than it can fall. I'd seen videos of them in the past, and occasionally spotted one caught by a strong gust that temporarily changed the flow. However, this scene was much more consistent and strange, with the wind sustaining enough force to prevent the water from continuing its journey.

There are thousands of waterfalls in the Westfjords, with many constantly forming and dissipating as rainfall gathers in the folds of the landscape. As far as I know, the waterfall in front of me didn't have a name, and it wasn't marked on my map; it was just one of the many places where the higher landscape between the fjords drained onto the slopes below.

This waterfall was perfectly aligned with the conditions on the day. It was falling from a tall cliff to the north, directly facing the strong southerly winds coming in across the beach behind me. The terrain sloped upwards, catching the wind and funnelling it against the water. The waterfall was also flowing at just the right rate; a brief lull in the wind would let some of the water drain away, but the stronger gusts were enough to lift the falls far into the air and scatter them across the landscape above.

I found a place to park and watch as the water changed shape and moved across the cliffs with the shifting winds. It was an incredible sight, but a very difficult moment to capture in a frame. I made a few videos as a reminder of the moment, and then awkwardly set up my camera inside the car.



On Location Two

The first challenge of photographing this scene was dealing with the constant wind. The waterfall was some distance away over farmland, and I wasn't sure how close I'd be able to get. From a distance, I needed to use a long lens, so my shot would be vulnerable to any movement of the camera. Fortunately, my parking area had a relatively clear view, and I had positioned the car so that I could shoot from the window while staying protected from the elements.

The wind was always changing angle and strength, which caused the water to blow back against different parts of the cliff and form new temporary flows among the rocks. A small waterfall would appear for a few moments, then quickly dry up or become covered by spray from another gust of wind. There were incredible details all across the cliff face, but none of them lasted long enough for me to shape into an intentional composition.

I was also torn between capturing the drama of the wider scene and using the opportunity to photograph the unusual shapes forming in the water. So many factors contributed to the feeling of the moment, from the rocking of the car in the wind to the rushing sound of so much movement outside. It was hard to capture the feeling with a simple view of the waterfall, even as the spray was lifted high into the air, but closer shots didn't quite communicate what was happening.

Still, I didn't really have to choose. I had all day to explore the fjords and nowhere particular to be, so I watched through the open window and studied the scene using my long lens. It was just what I needed after a morning of searching for somewhere I could settle and concentrate on photography.



Composition One

My view gave me the chance to explore different parts of the cliffs, watching where the water interacted with the rocks. I found areas where the spray flowed upwards with the wind, and others where it spread across the cliff face, creating patterns of white against the dark background. We often see more detail when we slow down and look carefully, and I noticed that there were plants growing on the ledges, adding a hint of colour to an otherwise monochrome scene.

My close-up photographs would be driven by contrast, with viewers drawn to bright areas and the negative space in the darker parts of the frame. I wanted to include some of the rocks, as they had beautiful patterns and subtle colours that really shone in the damp environment. However, capturing just the right balance of dark and light would be important.

It can be tempting in moments like this to concentrate on the unique features that caught our attention. I wanted to capture a backwards waterfall, so the inverted spray was the obvious element to include. However, my wider shots didn't quite convey the feeling, and the closer I got, the more boring the scene became. I'd have to find a balance between including enough elements for an interesting composition and still allowing a viewer to appreciate the unusual conditions.

The most difficult part of composition was how quickly things changed from one moment to the next. It was impossible to deliberately frame a particular arrangement of the water, as it would be different before I could press the shutter. Instead, I chose somewhere to focus, zoomed out a little so that I could crop to size later, and waited for the moment to arrive.



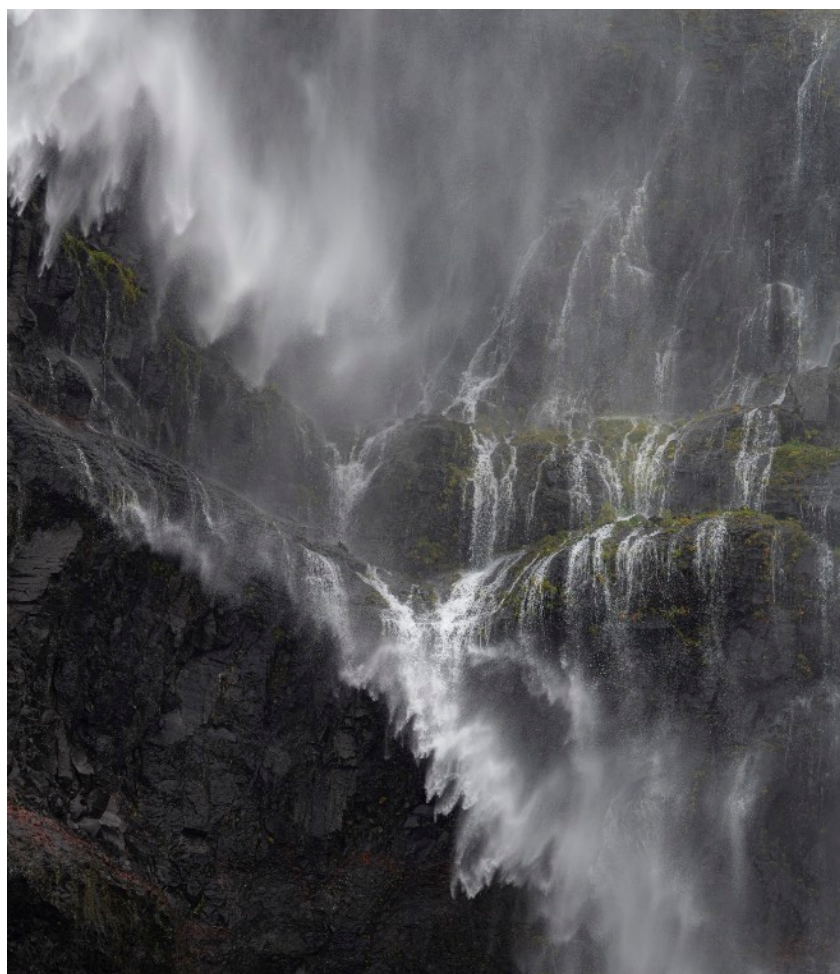
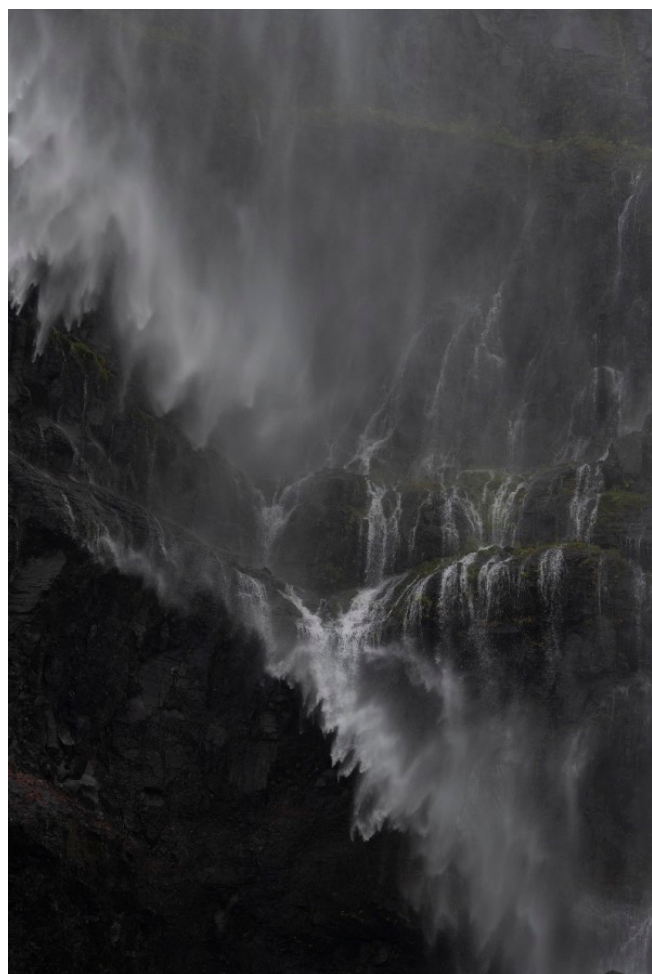
Capture

The most promising area of the falls was a section where a series of steps covered in plants caught the water when the wind gusted. This part of the cliffs wasn't on the natural route of the waterfall, and the spray would occasionally spread across it, then dissipate and reveal the flowing water underneath. I hoped this section would let me capture a combination of intricate detail among the rocks and the dynamic shapes formed as the water was caught by the wind.

The priority for my settings was shutter speed. I was shooting at 400mm, with the camera resting against the window of my car, which was shaking in the violent wind. All the movement around me was amplified by the long focal length, and I could see the frame shaking through the viewfinder.

I used a shutter speed of 1/400 of a second, set the aperture to f/7.1 for roughly optimum sharpness, and used ISO 320 to make sure the photograph had enough light.

Although I could capture a few frames and hope one of them was sharp, the water would change position in between shots, and I didn't want my favourite image to be blurry. It's often helpful to test settings in situations like this, so I made a few images and checked them at full zoom on the camera to make sure that my combination of image stabilisation and a fast shutter speed was enough.



Edit One

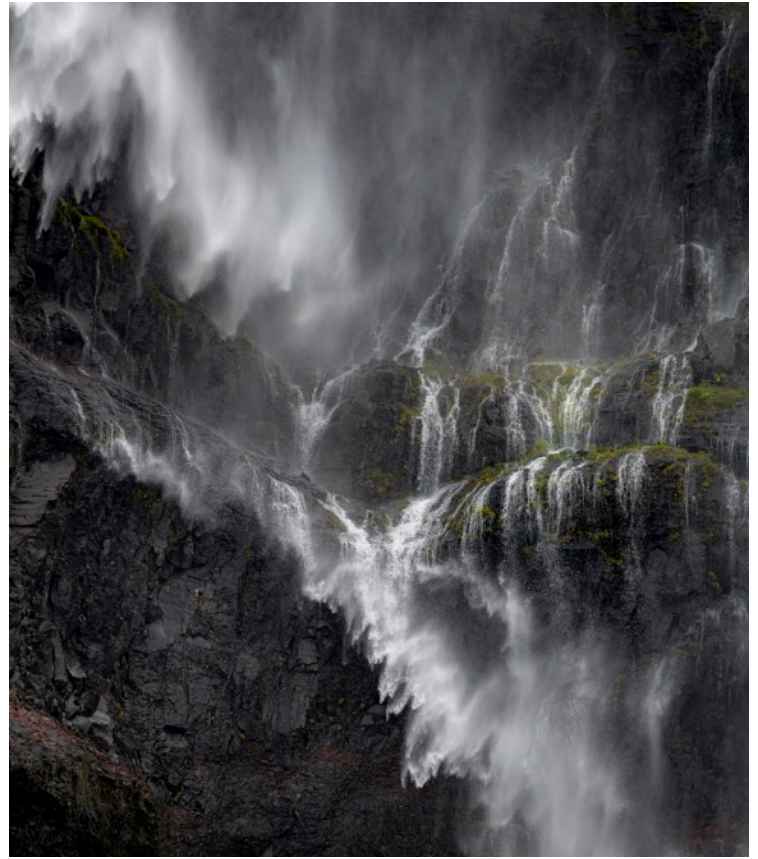
I captured hundreds of frames that morning as the water changed shape and position. After a long session filtering through them for my favourite arrangements, I chose this scene to edit.

First, I cropped to the most interesting part of the frame, trying to find the right balance of light and dark, along with a good combination of blowing spray and flowing water.

I liked this frame because of how well the spray surrounded the tiny waterfalls, and the area at the bottom was a great example of how the water was interacting with the wind. I cropped until these elements filled most of the frame, leaving a small corner of rock in the bottom left to provide a little contrast.

My initial edits focused on adding contrast to the scene. Direct light is often bad for waterfall photography, as the lightest areas can be surprisingly bright in the sun. However, the cloudy conditions left my raw file looking a little flat and dull.

I raised the overall exposure to bring back some detail in the rock, and added extra brightness to make the spray stand out against the background.



Edit Two

I applied the next set of edits using masks to adjust different parts of the frame. Even the adjusted frame on the left looked flat, and I wanted to separate each part of the composition. Making some parts of the scene brighter than others helped add a sense of depth and movement, matching how it had appeared. The original, flatter contrast was more atmospheric, but didn't convey the sense of drama I felt on location.

Selective brightening adds depth, but it also helps guide a viewer. I added more contrast and detail to the rock in the bottom left, without making it so bright that it became a distraction. The waterfalls received more clarity and sharpness so they held attention without competing with the spray.

Applying a little contrast and brightness to different areas of a frame is my favourite way to enhance features without using extreme contrast changes or unrealistic edits. For this scene, I added masks around the rocks, waterfalls and different parts of the spray, then adjusted each one separately until they worked together to pull attention towards the centre.



Conclusion

I'd always wanted to see a backwards waterfall, and my experience on the beach that day was one of the most memorable moments of my trip to Iceland. However, capturing the strange drama of the scene in a still frame was incredibly difficult, and none of my wider images expressed the power of the wind lifting a waterfall into the air.

The challenge of photography is communicating something without simply zooming out and showing a viewer the whole scene. All the features that made the scene so interesting could be found in closer views of the cliffs: the shapes in the water, the changing textures, and the spray that seemed to defy gravity. I might not be able to create a striking image that showed the whole of the backwards waterfall, but I could make something that offered enough clues to convey my impressions of it.

Working a Scene

What to do when you arrive on location





Introduction

It's hard not to get excited the moment we arrive at a new location. When I started in photography and discovered new places to shoot, I used to immediately unpack my camera bag, set up my tripod, and start frantically hunting for an image. I was always impatient to secure my first photograph, and I didn't want to hesitate while the light changed and I missed an opportunity.

However, I noticed that some photographers would pause and look around before taking any action. They would leave their bag behind and start walking around, looking at the scene from different angles and searching beyond the obvious views until they'd found something worthwhile. It always came across as a more professional and calm approach, and one that many of the best photographers advocated.

Gradually, I have changed the way I arrive on location, and developed a mental checklist of things to consider before I start shooting. I still feel that moment of energy when I visit somewhere new, but I try to channel it into a calmer approach that takes in more of the scene before committing to the first image. I've been thinking recently about what has changed.

The decisions we make in the first few minutes on location often determine whether we repeat our habits or discover something new, and this article is about how to change those decisions. It discusses some of the traps we might fall into as we develop more experience, and a few techniques you can use to break out of old habits and find a fresh approach. If you've ever watched other photographers arrive on location and carefully study the scene, these pages might give you a hint about what's going through their heads.



The First Image

I still feel some apprehension when I'm out with the camera. I might have forgotten everything I knew about photography since my last shoot, or I might spend the whole time hoping for a change in the light that never comes. Capturing the first good image can take some tension out of the moment, and work as a reminder that there is usually something to photograph, and that we still know how to find it.

However, the first image is not always the best or most original. Usually, the photographs we notice straight away are more obvious, especially if we're visiting a place with well-known compositions that we've studied before arriving. Even if a place is new, the most striking and distinctive features announce themselves first, and it's rare that we can break through the noise to spot more subtle or interesting scenes right away.

We're also led by our patterns and habits in photography. The kinds of images we take most often help define our personal style and reveal our favourite subjects, but they can also limit our range and creativity. When we act more on instinct and start shooting the moment we arrive, it's these familiar forms that appear first in our images.

Our habits and research do often lead us to a great initial scene, and it's not that our first attempt is always bad (as far as I know, this is only true of making pancakes). However, rushing to capture something when we arrive on location can set us up in the wrong mental mode, and make it harder to change approach and discover more interesting opportunities.



Delay Commitment

If you want to uncover more possibilities in each location, the most important first step is to delay commitment. Don't get your camera out the moment you arrive, and don't set up the tripod until you need it for a composition. The first activity in each new place should be to look and move slowly through the scene.

This is important because rushing to the first shot fixes our mindset. Setting up the tripod without an image in mind anchors us to full tripod height. Getting out the camera without a purpose pushes us to find something to do with it, which usually leads us to more obvious shots. It might seem harmless to grab a quick photograph right at the beginning of a shoot, but it often breaks that sense of fresh possibilities and starts narrowing our focus to particular features.

Instead, wander through as much of the scene as you can access without lingering too much on any part of it. Look at different angles and behind obvious features, explore in every direction, and notice potential subjects above and below you. The idea is not to fix on any one potential image, but to discover as many different options as you can.

If you can leave your gear behind safely, exploring without that weight can help you move more freely and try more positions. There's a mental load to carrying a camera bag, and I often find that I notice more opportunities without it. The most important thing is taking the time, and even ten minutes of delay can give you a whole set of potential options.



How to Explore

Just wandering to discover potential images can feel too aimless to lead to anything useful. Sometimes it helps to be completely free when searching for something to capture, but we might also need a little more structure so that we know roughly what to look for. There are a few different ways of approaching new scenes that can guide you towards fresh possibilities.

The first is to develop a full range of movement. Try standing higher or lower than usual, moving forward and back, turning from side to side, and including views straight down and straight up. The easiest way to move around a scene is upright and looking in the direction you are moving, but we notice more ideas when we break that pattern. Developing the habit of crouching, tilting your head, and staying in place while looking in several directions can reveal more angles on a scene.

Think about the different interpretations you can create with your camera. You could zoom in or out, or use different aspect ratios, from square to panorama. There may be options in the distance or small features in front of you. You could use a shallow depth of field to isolate features or a long shutter speed for a high-key image. Photographs do not have to represent the world exactly as we see it, and we can anticipate the effect of different camera techniques as we explore.

We can also consider different genres and ways of approaching photography. How would the scene look in black and white? Are there opportunities for abstract compositions, perhaps through intentional camera movement? Most photographers stay within one or two genres, and that can be helpful when developing our skills. However, some scenes might be an opportunity to learn something new when we might otherwise have struggled to find an image that works in our usual style.



Make a List

If you like even more structure, it can help to have a physical or mental checklist of things to look for. Long-term readers will not be surprised that this is one of my favourite ideas. Having a set of specific categories to consider can keep our attention in the moment, and make it less likely that we'll miss an option that isn't obvious when we look around.

Some ideas for our list include finding five variations on the most obvious image, creating a set of different abstract or texture-based compositions, trying a perspective from close to the ground, isolating a subject, or capturing a wider context view. We won't be able to find something good in every category, but a checklist, developed over time, can keep us in exploring mode for longer and make the process more intentional.

A checklist makes a big difference if we are trying to expand our range and learn something new in photography. I often have a particular feature I want to improve over the course of a trip, and might have a rule that I always search for compositions with leading lines or try to find an abstract scene at each location. Even if there's only one item on your list, intentionally looking for a specific feature in each location tunes your brain to look for it more in the future.

We can also list the things we find during our exploration, and I often wander with my phone to capture ideas, a little like adding sketches to a notebook before reworking them later with the main camera. Using a phone can mimic some of the effect of different lenses and positions, without putting us in 'photography mode' too early. It also helps if we get wrapped up in a composition later and forget some of the other options that we wanted to try.



Know When to React

Most of the time, we can improve our opportunities on location with a little time spent exploring before we take the first image. However, this isn't always the right plan. If the light or conditions are changing quickly, and the perfect scene appears just as we arrive, there's a risk that we might miss the best opportunity while we search for alternatives.

It's not unusual to spot a great composition or idea the moment we arrive on location, and we need to decide whether to capture the shot straight away or complete a more thorough search of the scene.

Before setting up the camera and acting on our instinct, it's useful to question whether the image depends on the current conditions. Are there elements emerging from the mist or shafts of light in just the right place? With a moment's reflection, we can often tell what drew us to that scene, and whether that quality is likely to disappear if we don't take the opportunity.

Working a scene shouldn't cost us great moments of photography just because they happened at the beginning of the shoot. But recognising that getting the camera out early can limit how much we discover can encourage us to question whether our first instinct really is a fleeting moment. Sometimes it's a chance that we really shouldn't miss, but often it's a result of the habit we all develop of wanting to shoot as quickly as possible.

Even when we do need to react to a fleeting opportunity when we arrive, we don't have to let that become the whole shoot. Building the habit of walking the scene on most sessions can help us quickly return to discovery after we have captured that first moment, when it is essential. The problem is not always taking the first image; it is letting the first image become the only image.



A Better Habit

There are two main options for how we react when arriving at a new location. One of them embraces the opportunities of a new place, and takes advantage of our excitement to explore as much as possible. The other is about our instincts as photographers, and the enthusiasm we have for diving in and evolving our compositions as we go.

Our brains are pattern-recognition machines, and they tend to push us towards the second approach. We remember the compositions we have taken in the past, and the photographs by others that we discovered in our research, and immediately begin spotting similar structures in the environment around us.

However, this initial reaction can influence our entire shoot. Our most open mindset often happens when we first arrive in a new place, and we should use that perspective to discover as much as possible about the location. Starting with a photograph may be our only chance to capture a fleeting moment of light, but it also anchors us to our usual patterns.

Opportunities to improve our photography without learning a new technique or piece of software are very rare. However, a few shifts in how we approach new locations can have a disproportionate impact on our results. Our initial actions are habits, and habits can be changed with a little motivation and a few chances to practise. If you want to try something like this the next time you go out with the camera, the next page contains a short list of things you might look for before you take your first shot.

A Discovery Checklist for Photographers

Before taking your first serious photograph, try to find a few of the following on location, and expand this list with your own ideas of the kinds of images you want to practise.

Subject and frame

- The most obvious composition, plus five variations on it
- A wider view that shows a subject in context
- An isolated subject, perhaps with a shallow depth of field
- Something small or close to the lens

Composition

- A foreground-background relationship
- A leading line
- A repeated shape or pattern
- Something that can be used as a natural frame

Light and mood

- A contrast in colours
- A contrast in light and shadow
- A patch of interesting light
- A possible black-and-white image
- A quieter or more atmospheric version of the scene

Develop and experiment

- A texture or abstract detail
- A square, vertical and panoramic composition
- A long-exposure or movement-based idea
- An over- or under-exposed image



Thanks for Reading

I hope you liked this issue of In The Frame, and I'd love to hear any feedback or ideas for what the magazine might cover in the future. If you'd like to support this project and help me continue to write about travel and photography, there are a few ways you can contribute.

Share: Help me grow an audience for In The Frame by sharing the magazine with other photographers.

Support: You can support the project with a one-off payment at the link below and gain access to the Supporter Library.

www.shuttersafari.com/in-the-frame/support

Shop: Check out my website for my guidebooks on photography and travel.

Shutter Safari

Photography Travel Guides



Planning a photography trip can take a lot of research, and the information you need is often scattered across countless blogs and websites.

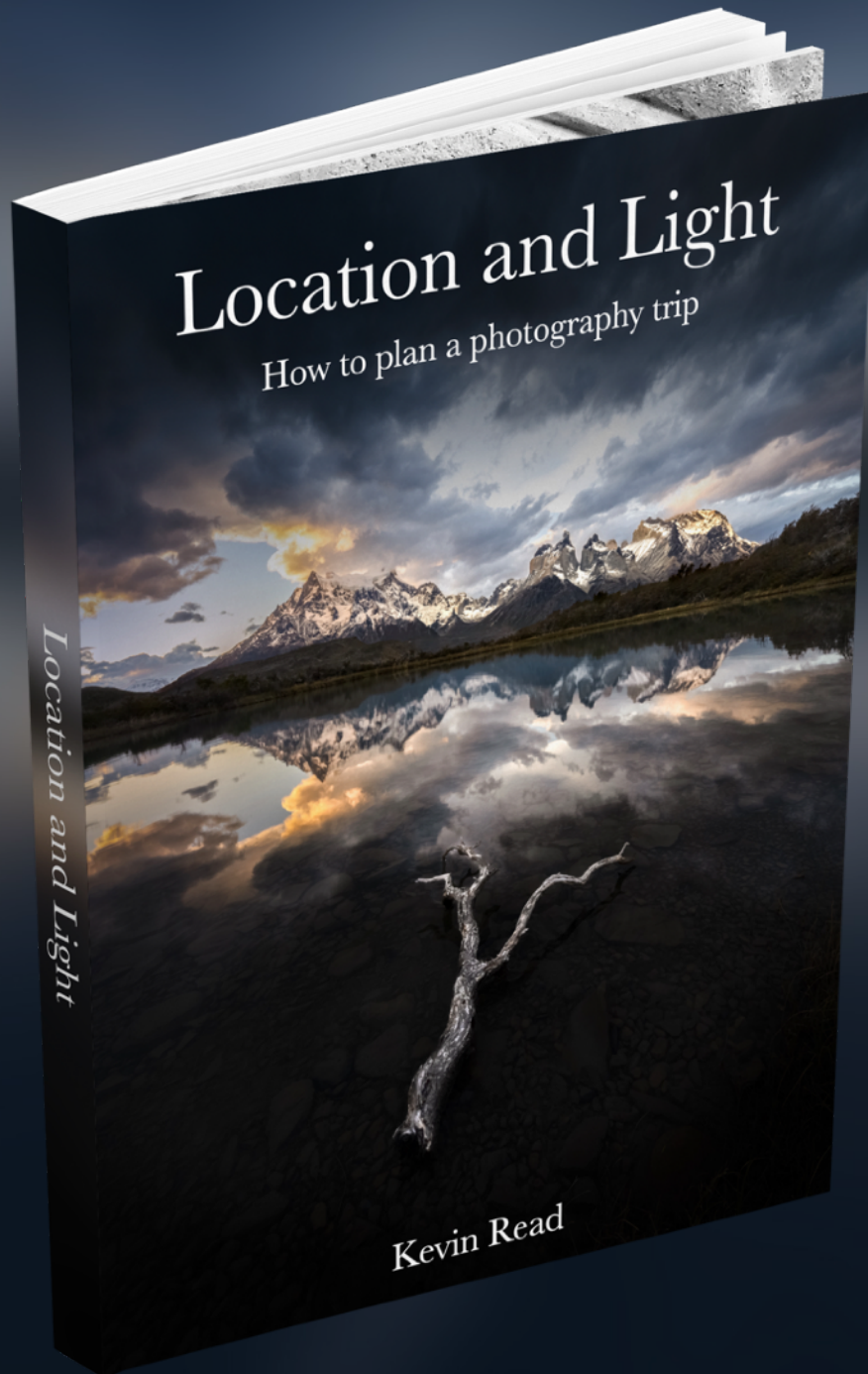
Photography Travel Guides put everything in one place, with structured information to help you plan both your journey and your photography.

I created these books from first-hand experience travelling with my camera to over fifty countries. Each guide combines travel and photography advice, so you can spend less time planning and more time shooting.

www.shuttersafari.com/photography-travel-guides

Location and Light

How to plan a photography trip

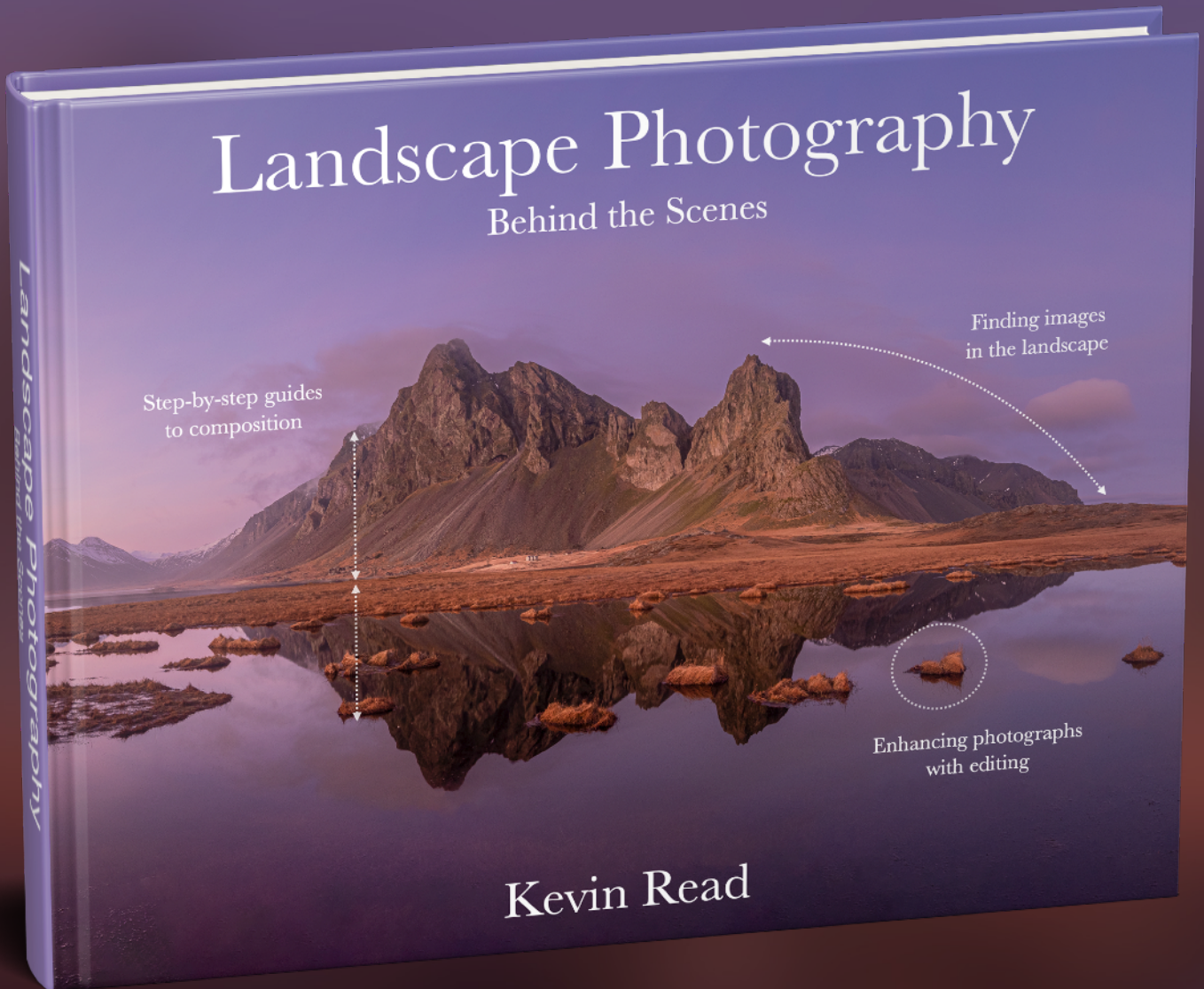


The ultimate guide to finding locations, predicting the light and getting the most from your photography adventures

www.shuttersafari.com/location-and-light

Landscape Photography

Behind the Scenes



My ebook on landscape photography takes a new approach to teaching the skills needed to compose, edit, and develop your own photographic style.

It follows the stories of twenty images from location to final edit, exploring how each was created and what they reveal about building an image.

It's a practical, behind-the-scenes look at landscape photography, built around real examples, mistakes, and decisions made in the field.

www.shuttersafari.com/behind-the-scenes