

# Elements of a Compelling Landscape Composition

- **Prince William Photography Club**
  - **June 8, 2026**
  - **Presented by Judy Graham**



# Introduction

- I'm Judy Graham
- My passion is photographing grand landscapes
- I use low tech techniques
- The presentation this evening is on compelling landscape composition techniques



# Agenda

- Camera equipment
- Filters
- Exposure settings
- Bracketing images (HDR)
- Formula for a great landscape
- Time of day
- Type of light
- ➔ • Composition techniques
- On location

Location: Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona



24-240mm  
ISO 100  
f/11  
2 sec

# Camera Equipment

- Camera body (or cell phone)
- Lenses
  - Ultra wide-angle zoom lens
    - 15-35mm
  - Wide-angle to short-telephoto focal lengths
    - 24-105mm
  - Telephoto zoom (depending on location)
    - 70-200mm
    - 100-500mm
- Tripod
- Cable release

Location: Dolomites, Italy



Photo credit: Matt Meisenheimer

# Filters

- Circular polarizer
  - Cuts down glare and reflections as well as darkens the blue sky
  - Most effective when the sun is at a 90-180 degree angle
  - Slowly turn the filter to see the effect
- Neutral density filters
  - It reduces the amount of light getting through to the camera sensor, allowing slower shutter speeds

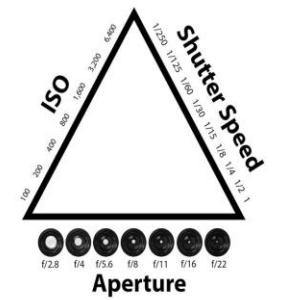
*Note: no need for a graduated neutral density filter if you bracket and then blend images in post*



Photo credit: Creative Pad Media



Photo credit: eBay



# Exposure Settings

- ISO

- Generally, set to the lowest (usually 100)
- When the wind is blowing elements in the scene, such as trees and grass, increase the ISO to stop motion

- Aperture

- Generally, the goal in landscape photography is to maximize depth of field (DOF)
  - The aperture of a lens controls the DOF (and amount of light that reaches the sensor)
  - DOF is the amount of the scene from front to back which falls into focus

f/2.8-f/5.6:	Blurry background, shallow DOF
f/6.3-f/9:	Moderate DOF. Good if you don't have a close foreground
f/10-f/13:	Good general purpose landscape settings. Good DOF
f/14-f/16:	Improved DOF when shooting close to foreground subjects
f/18 +:	Shoot here if you are looking for a specific diffraction effect like a sunburst

- Shutter speed

- Shutter speed is the length of time the camera shutter is open, exposing light onto the camera sensor
- In landscape photography it is generally used to control motion

# Bracketing Images (High Dynamic Range)

## The advantages of bracketing images (HDR)

- Preserves highlight and shadow detail in high-contrast scenes
- Reduces risk of missed exposure
- Provides flexibility in post-processing for subtle blending of exposures

Location: Lake Bled, Slovenia

HDR

ISO 100

15-35mm

f/11

1/13 sec



# Bracketing Images (HDR) – cont'd

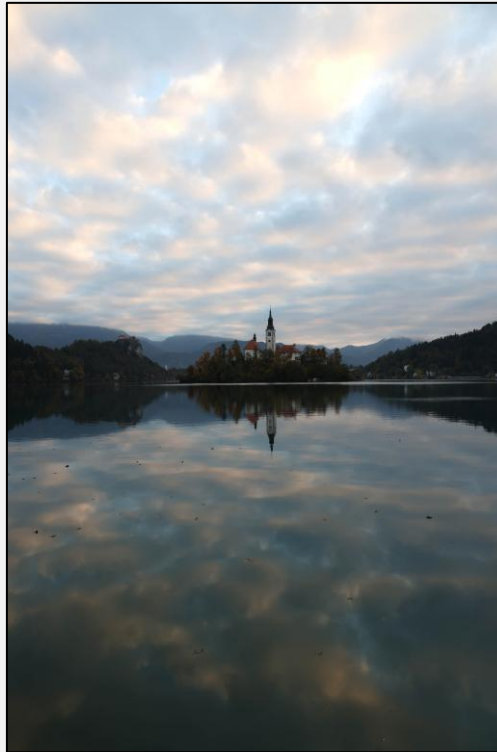
Capture multiple images of the exact same scene at different exposure/brightness levels

- Three different exposures is standard
- The variable is the shutter speed
- This can be automated in most cameras



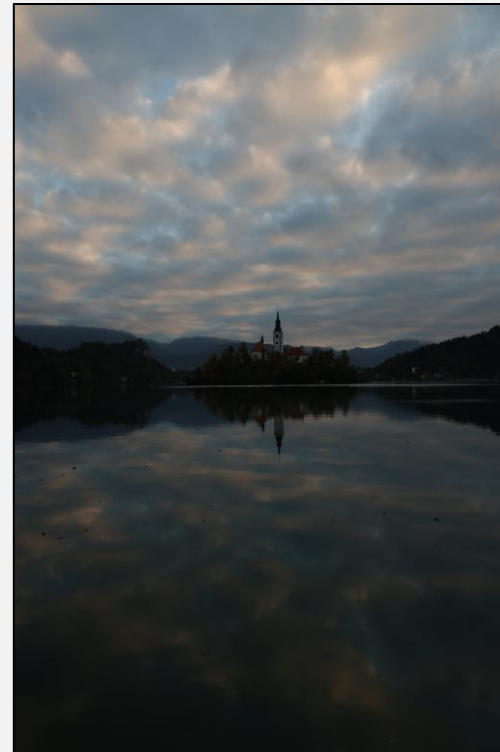
Photo credit: SLR Lounge

Exposure compensation = 0



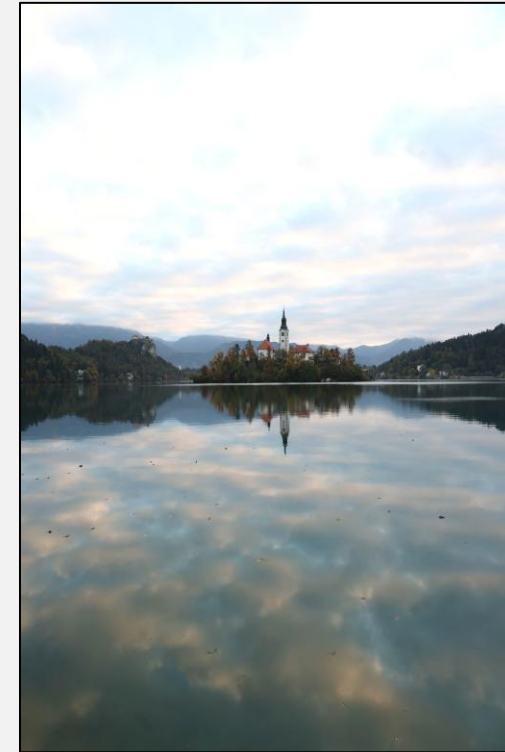
ISO 100  
f/11  
1/6 sec

Exposure compensation = Minus 2



ISO 100  
f/11  
1/13 sec

Exposure compensation = Plus 2



ISO 100  
f/11  
1/3 sec

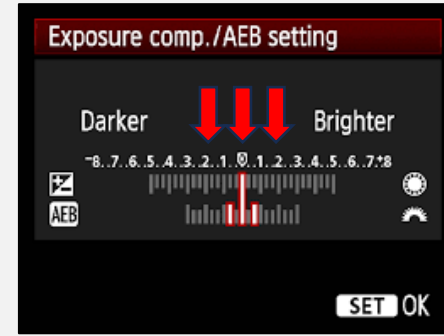


Photo credit: Digital Trends

# Formula for a Great Landscape Photo

- Light
- Subject
- Composition
- Technical
- WOW factor

16-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
.5 sec



Location: Diamond Beach, Iceland

# Time of Day

- Best times to shoot landscape photography
  - Sunrise and sunset
    - Provides most dramatic lighting than any other time of day
  - Golden hour
    - The period of day shortly after sunrise or before sunset
  - Blue hour
    - The period shortly before sunrise and after sunset, when the sun's position is just below the horizon
  - Overcast days
    - Diffused light great for waterfalls, rivers, streams, forests and B&W photography

Example of blue hour

Location: Lofoten Islands, Norway



24-105mm

f/8

1.6 sec

ISO 100

# Types of Light

## Four main types of lighting:

- Occurs during the middle of daylight hours
  - Top – to be avoided
- Occurs leading up to sunset and a short time after sunrise
  - Front – to be avoided
  - Back – silhouettes, tricky
  - Side – ideal light source

Example of side light/sunrise

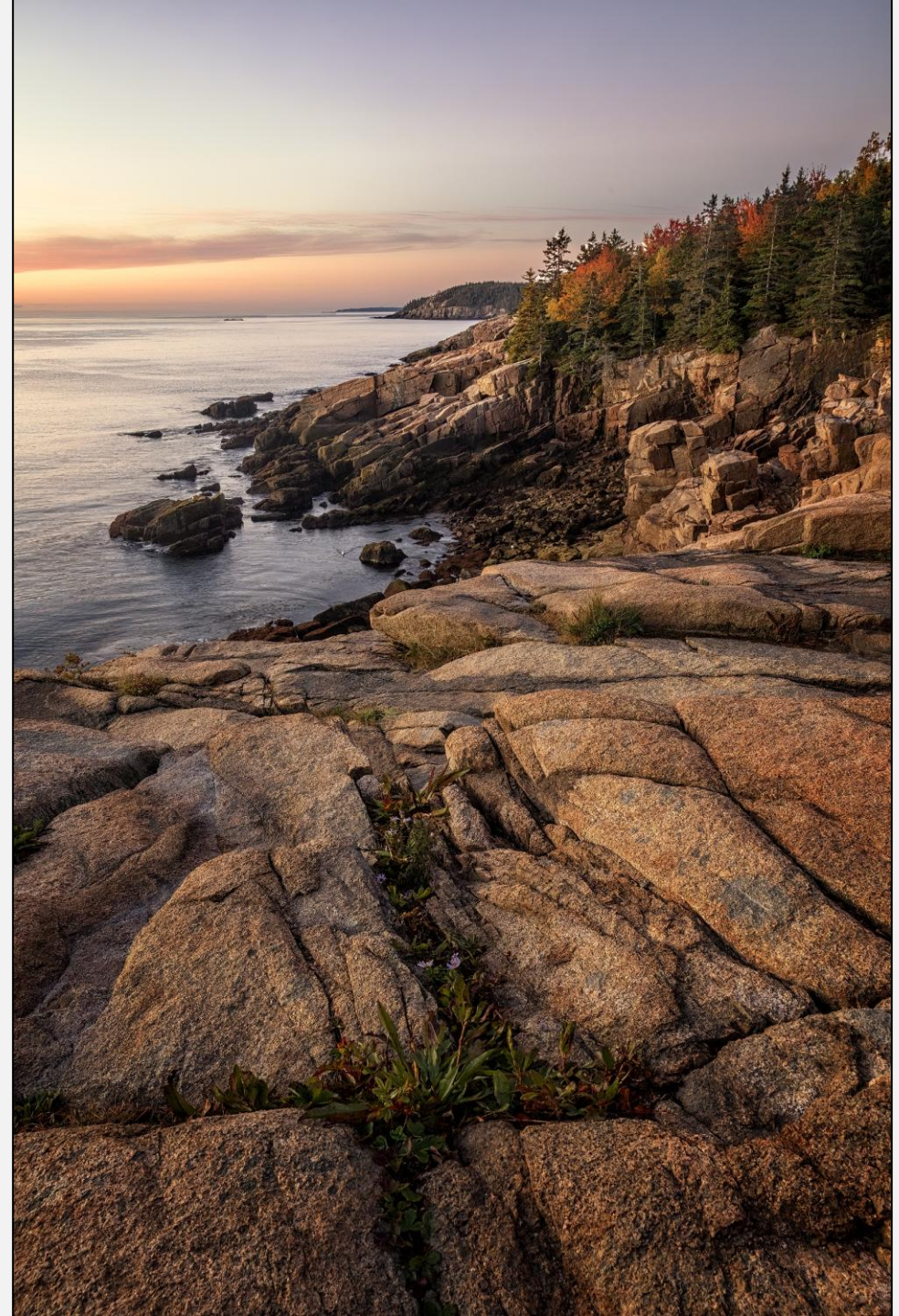
Location: Acadia National Park, Maine

15-35mm

ISO 100

f/16

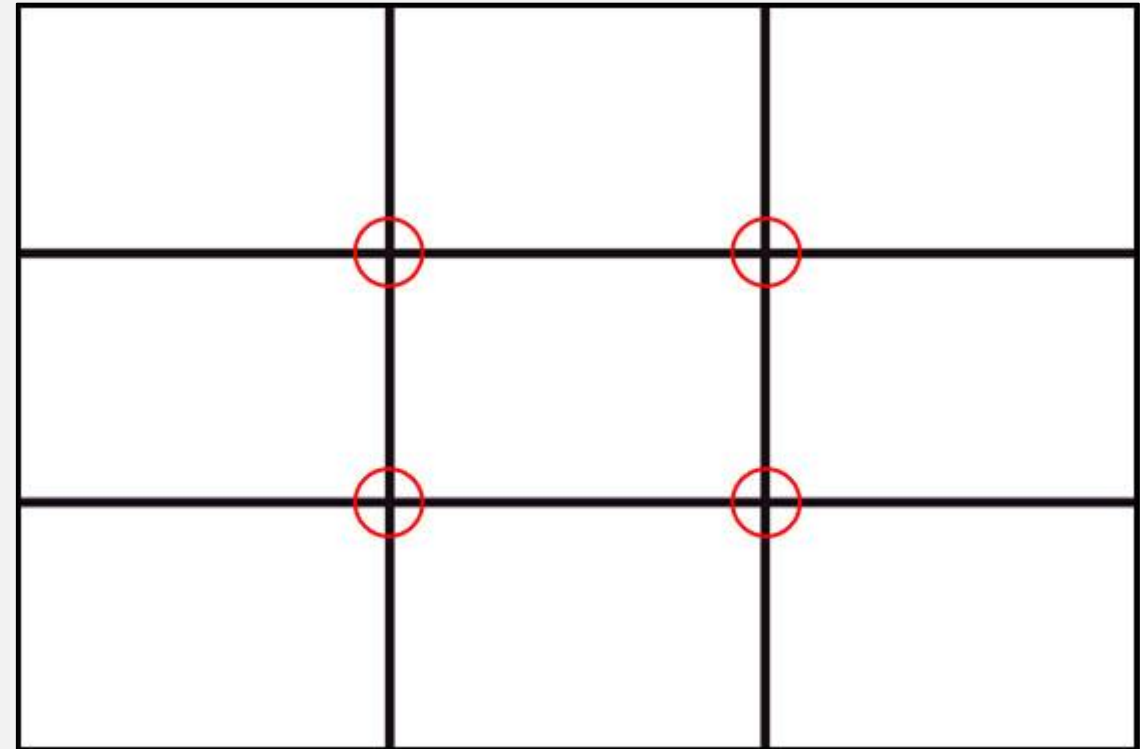
2 sec



# Composition Techniques

- Rule of thirds

- A composition guideline which places the subject in the left or right third of an image, leaving the other two thirds more open
- The rule of thirds generally leads to well-composed photos
- Divide the image frame into three equal columns and three equal rows
- Place your subject in one of the 4 intersections of lines



# Tip

- Most cameras have a grid display setting
- Very helpful in composing images in camera
- Visible in live view and view finder



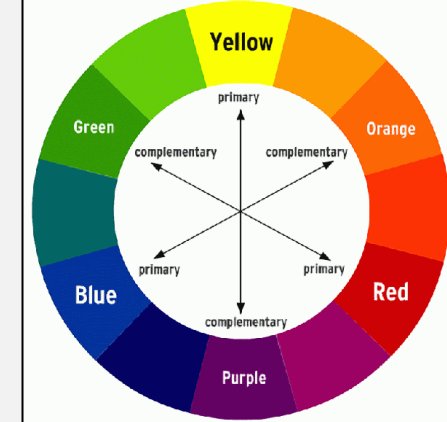
Photo credit: YouTube



Photo credit: Digital Photography Tips



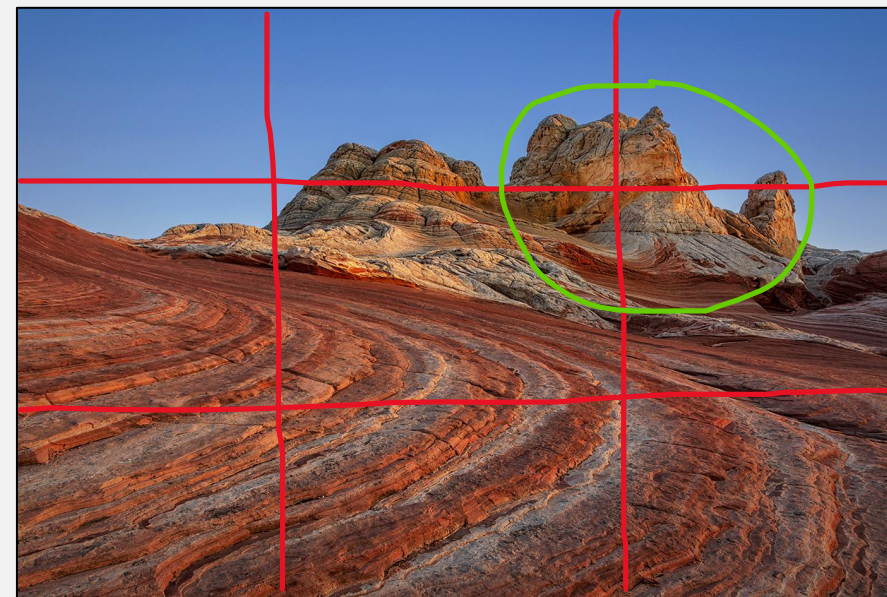
16-35mm  
f/16  
1/6 sec  
ISO 100



Complementary Color Wheel

## Example of Rule of Thirds

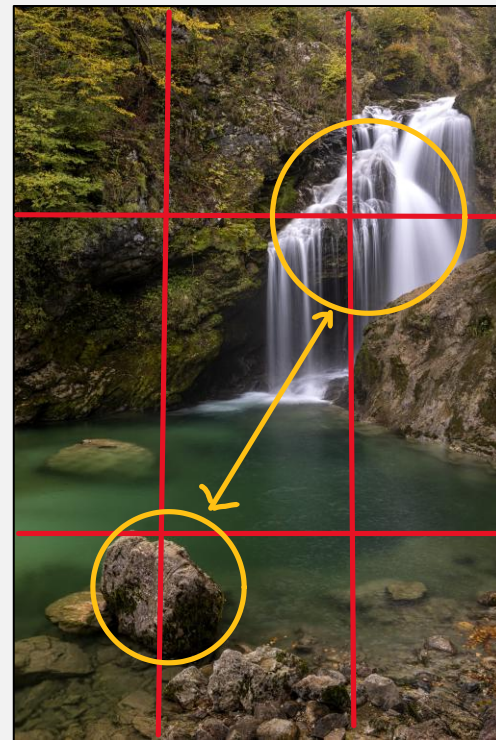
Location: Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness, Arizona



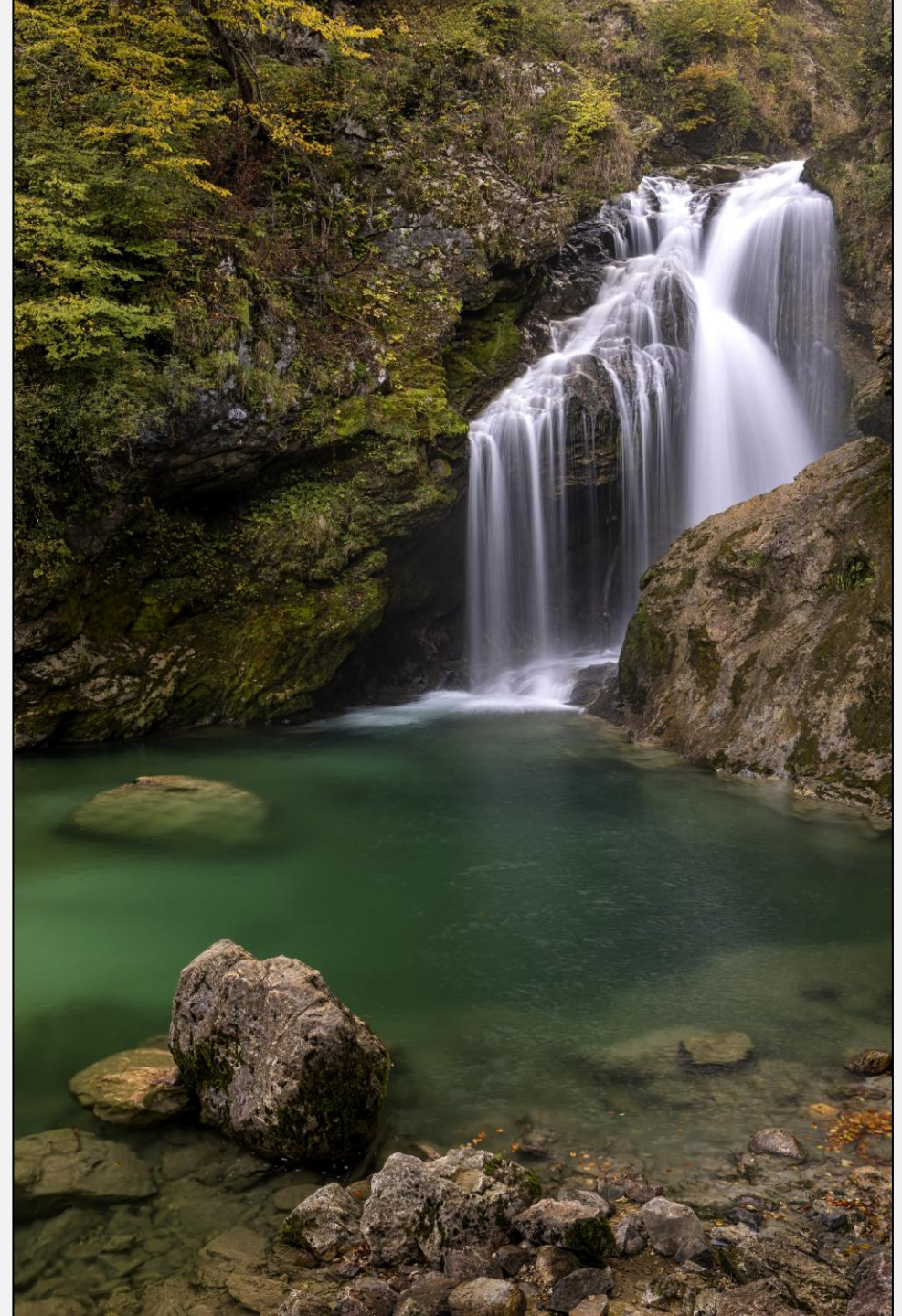
## Example of Rule of Thirds and Balance

- Also notice the contrast between the dreamy waterfall and the texture of the hard rock

Location: Vintgar Gorge, Slovenia

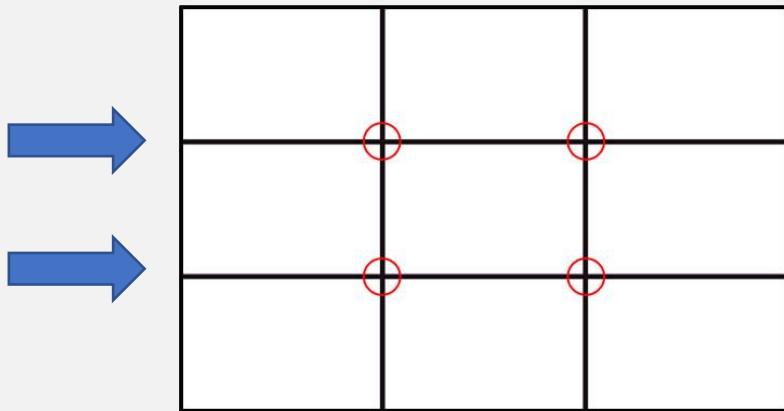


24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/11  
1.3 sec



# Tip

- If the image is about the land, *generally* place the horizon at the top horizontal line
- If the image is about the sky, *generally* place the horizon line at the bottom horizontal line



# Composition Techniques

Location: Vestrahorn, Iceland

## “Near to far” photography

- Accentuates the depth of a scene and makes it more 3 dimensional
- Find an interesting foreground, middle ground and background
- Use a wide-angle lens, i.e. 14-16 mm, and get low and very close
  - Use a small aperture, i.e. f/16
  - Focus 1/3 into image
  - Option to focus stack to optimize depth of field



16-35mm  
ISO 400  
f/16  
1/15 sec

Go Wide,  
Get Low,  
And Very  
Close

Location: Olympic National Park,  
Washington

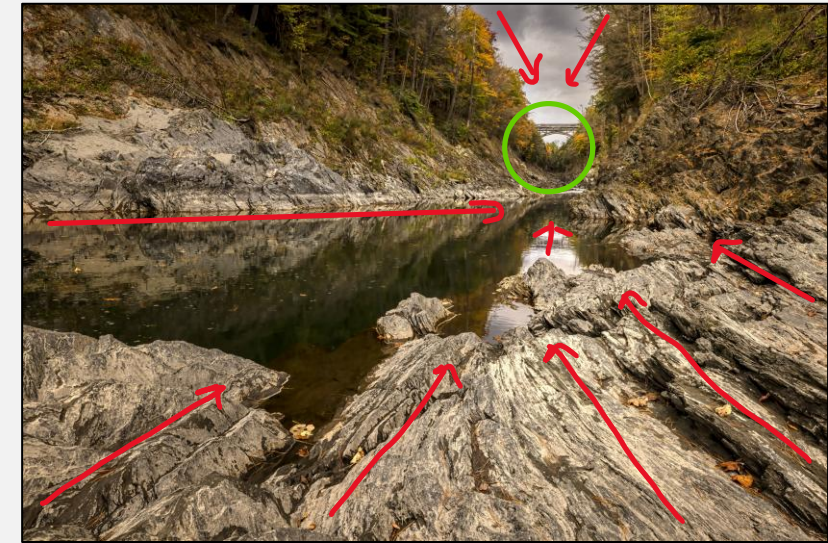
16-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/2 sec





Create visual movement using a big foreground, middle and background

Location: Quechee Gorge, Vermont



15-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/40 sec

# Composition Techniques

Location: Dolomites, Italy

The power of odd numbers make images more dynamic

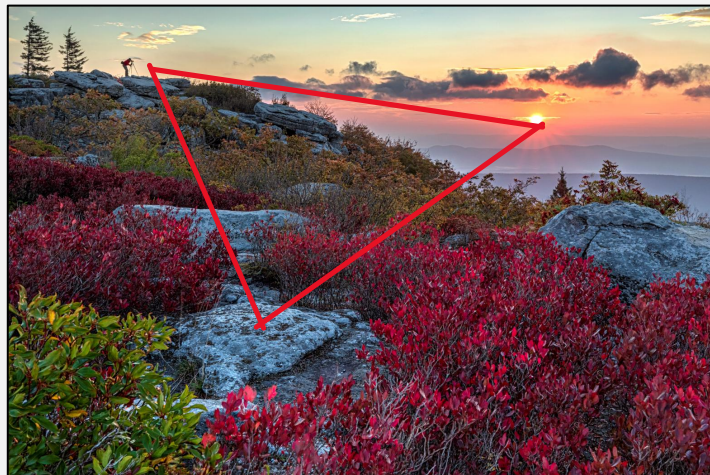
- Odd numbers create a sense of harmony, balance and intrigue
- A triangle is a powerful three-sided geometric shape

24-105mm  
ISO 400  
f/8  
1/800 sec



# Individual elements in a scene can create a visual triangle

Location: Dolly Sods, West Virginia

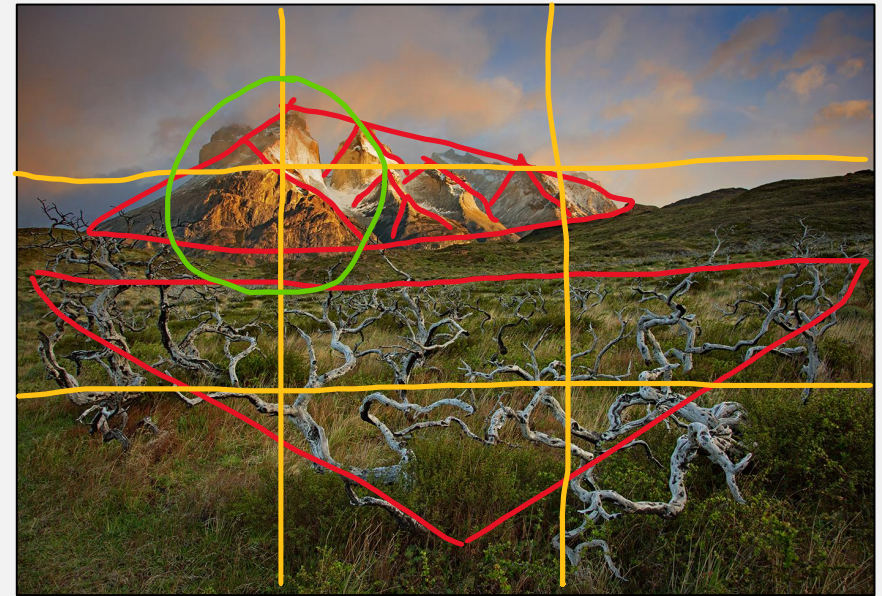


24-105mm  
ISO 800  
f/11  
1/100 sec



24-105mm  
ISO 400  
f/11  
1/200 sec

The power of triangles



and the rule of thirds

Location: Torres del Paine National Park, Chile

# Composition Techniques

## Leading and diagonal lines, and S, Z and C curves

- Lead the viewer's eye through the image to the subject
  - Avoid a line or curve that leads out of the photo
- They add depth and are more dynamic
- They might be a ...
  - River, stream, waterfall
  - Canyon
  - Path, road, bridge
  - Ripples in sand
  - Fallen logs
  - Rocks
  - Cracks in ice
  - Fence line

15-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/60 sec





## Example of a leading line

Location: Kauai, Hawaii

15-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/6 sec



# Example of a diagonal line

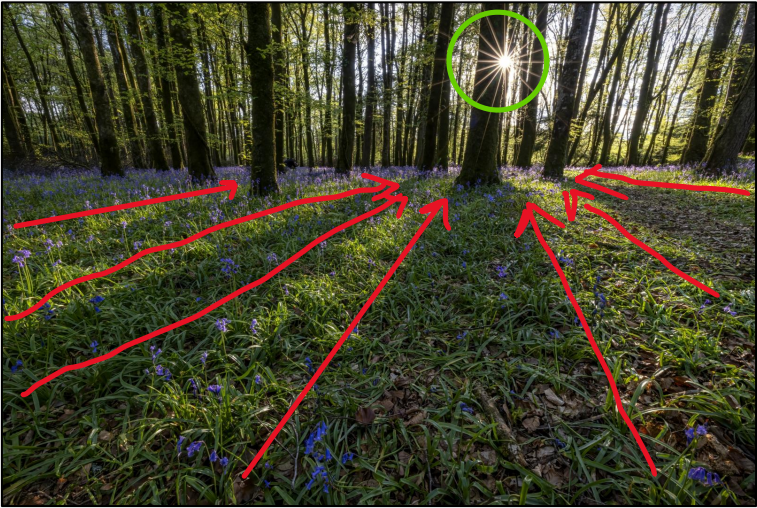
Location: Bruarfoss, Iceland



24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/8  
1/10 sec

# Example of multiple diagonal lines

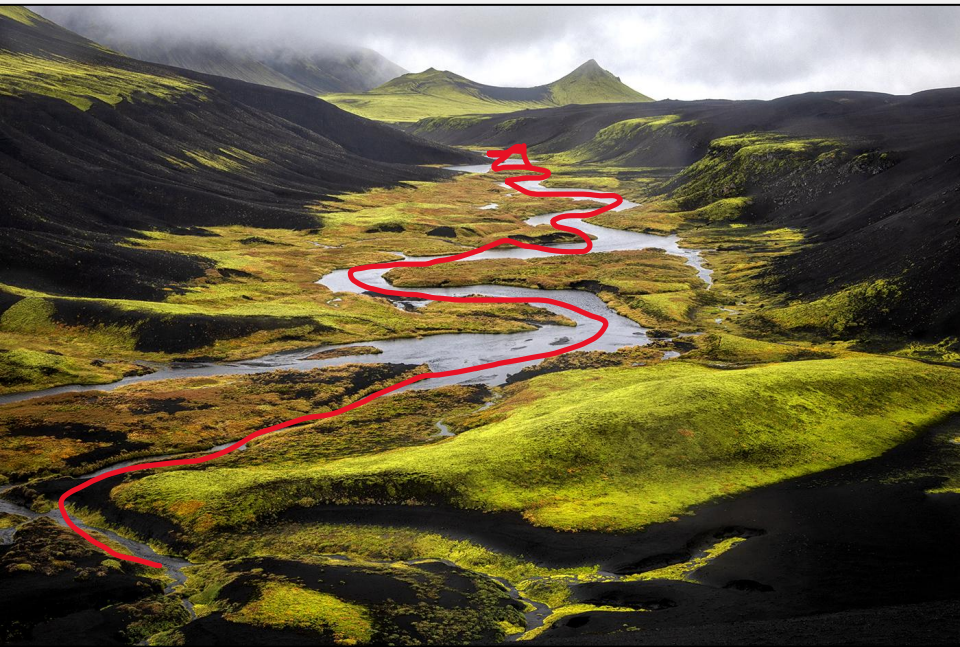
Location: Oakport Woodland, Northern Ireland



15-35mm  
ISO 400  
f/18  
1/10 sec

# Example of a 'S' curve

Location: The Highlands of Iceland



24-105mm  
f/8  
.25 sec  
ISO 100



24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/6 sec

## Example of a 'Z' curve

Location: Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia



# Example of a 'C' curve

Location: Location: Dyrholaey Lighthouse, Iceland



16-35mm  
f/16  
1/13 sec  
ISO 100

# Composition Techniques

- Fill the frame with the subject, and
- Make close ups of interesting elements
- Get close, zoom in, or use a telephoto lens to isolate elements

Location: Vermillion Cliffs Wilderness, Arizona

70-200mm  
ISO 100  
f/11  
1/50 sec





Add close ups to  
your portfolio for  
variety

Look for small  
details in the scene

24-105mm  
ISO 400  
f/8  
1/40 sec

Location: Glacier National Park, Montana

# Composition Technique

Location: Giant's Causeway  
Northern Ireland

## Slow your shutter

- Set your camera to the lowest ISO, experiment with different shutter speeds, such as 1/10 sec – 10 sec or more
- Use a neutral density filter, such as a 3-stop if unable to sufficiently slow shutter for desired effect
- Use a tripod
- Use a cable release or remote to reduce camera shake



ND 10, ISO 200, 15-35mm, f/16, 25 sec

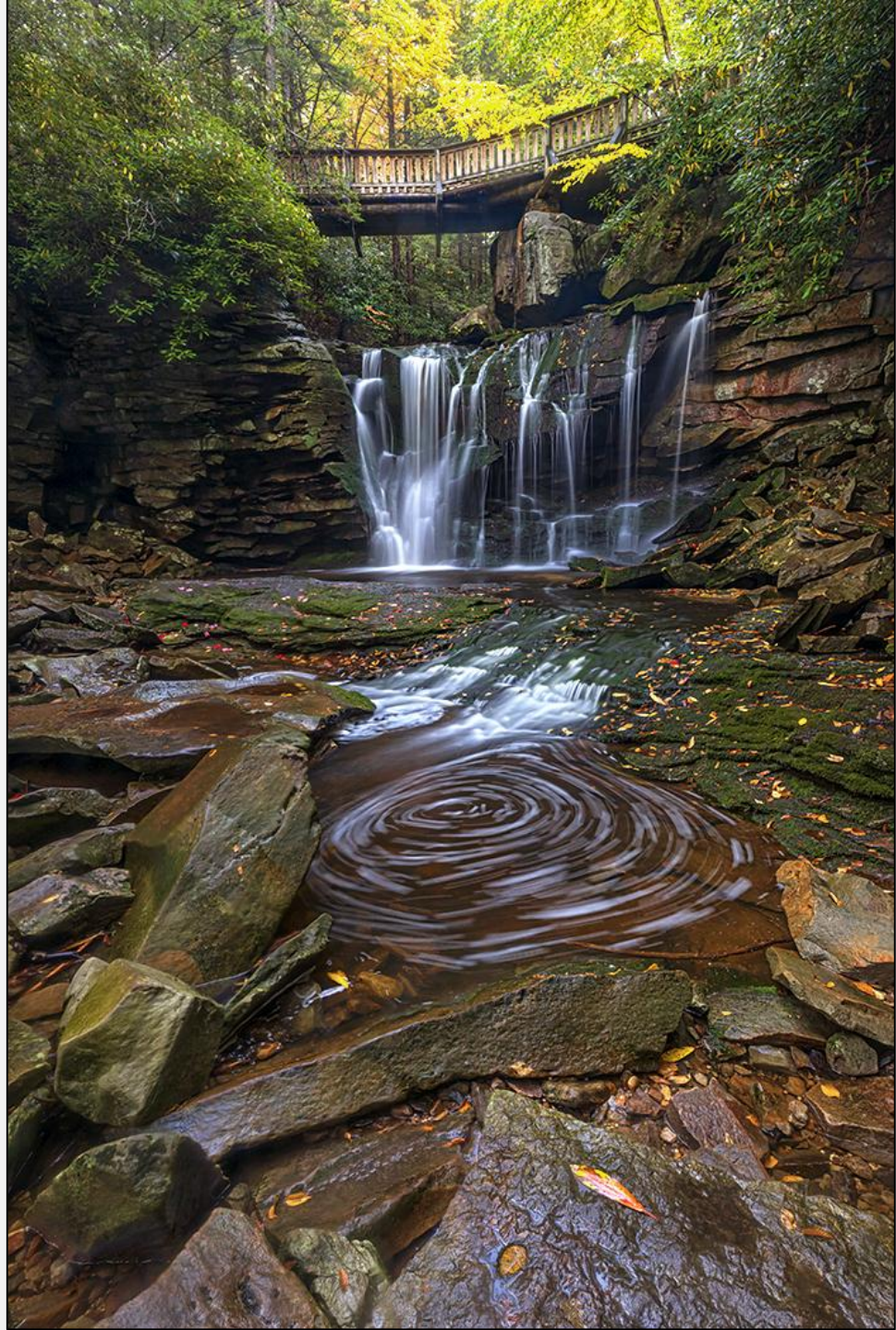
Location:  
Bruarfoss  
Waterfall,  
Iceland



Examples  
of slow  
shutter

16-35mm  
f/16  
.5 sec  
ISO 100

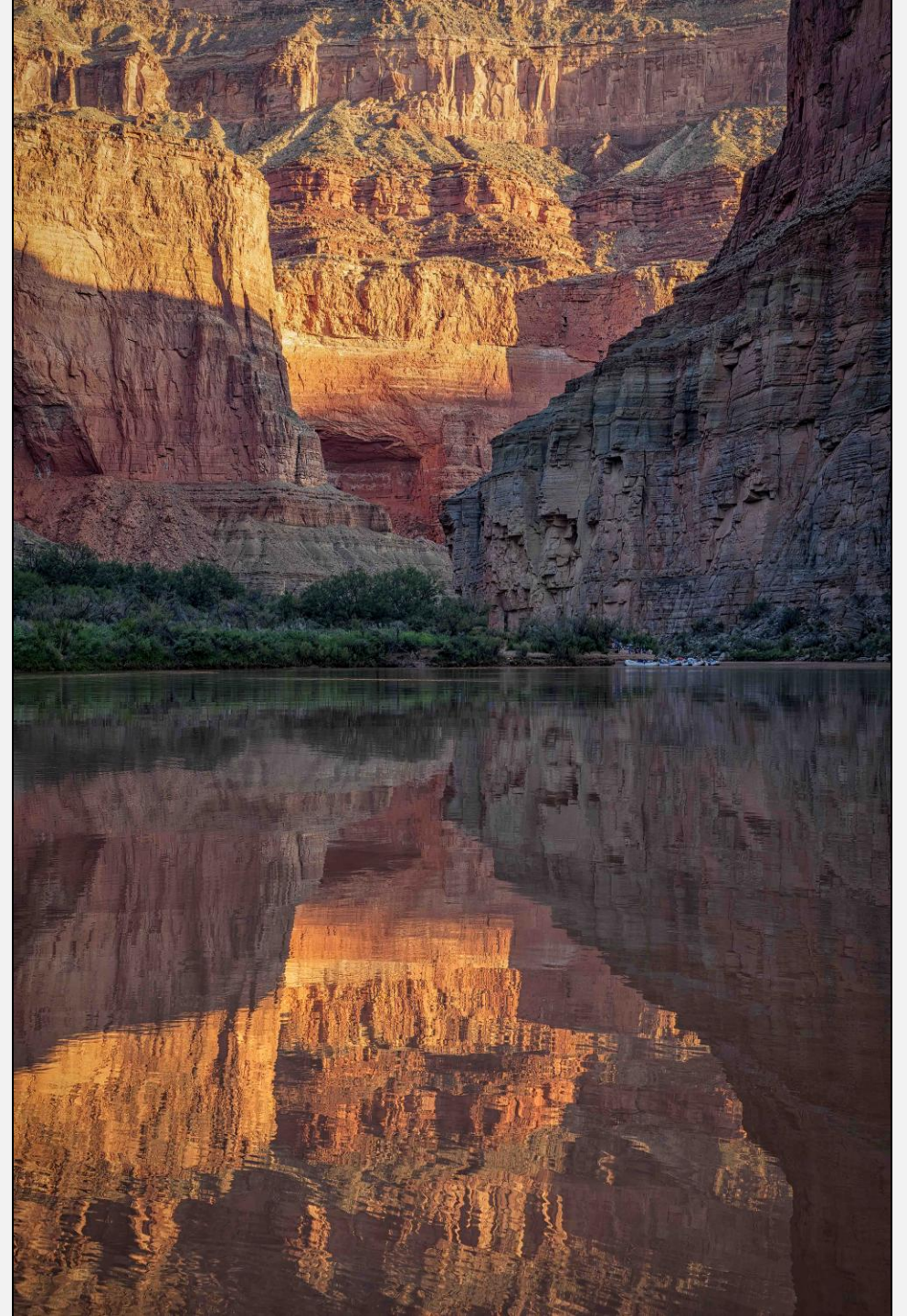
Location:  
Blackwater  
Falls State  
Park, WV



ND 3  
16-35mm  
f/16  
10 sec  
ISO 100

# Composition Techniques

- Shoot reflections
  - Break the Rule of Thirds by placing the horizon line in the center to achieve symmetry
  - Check polarizer
    - It may be more harmful than useful



24-105mm  
f/11  
1/30 sec  
ISO 200



## Example of reflections in a puddle

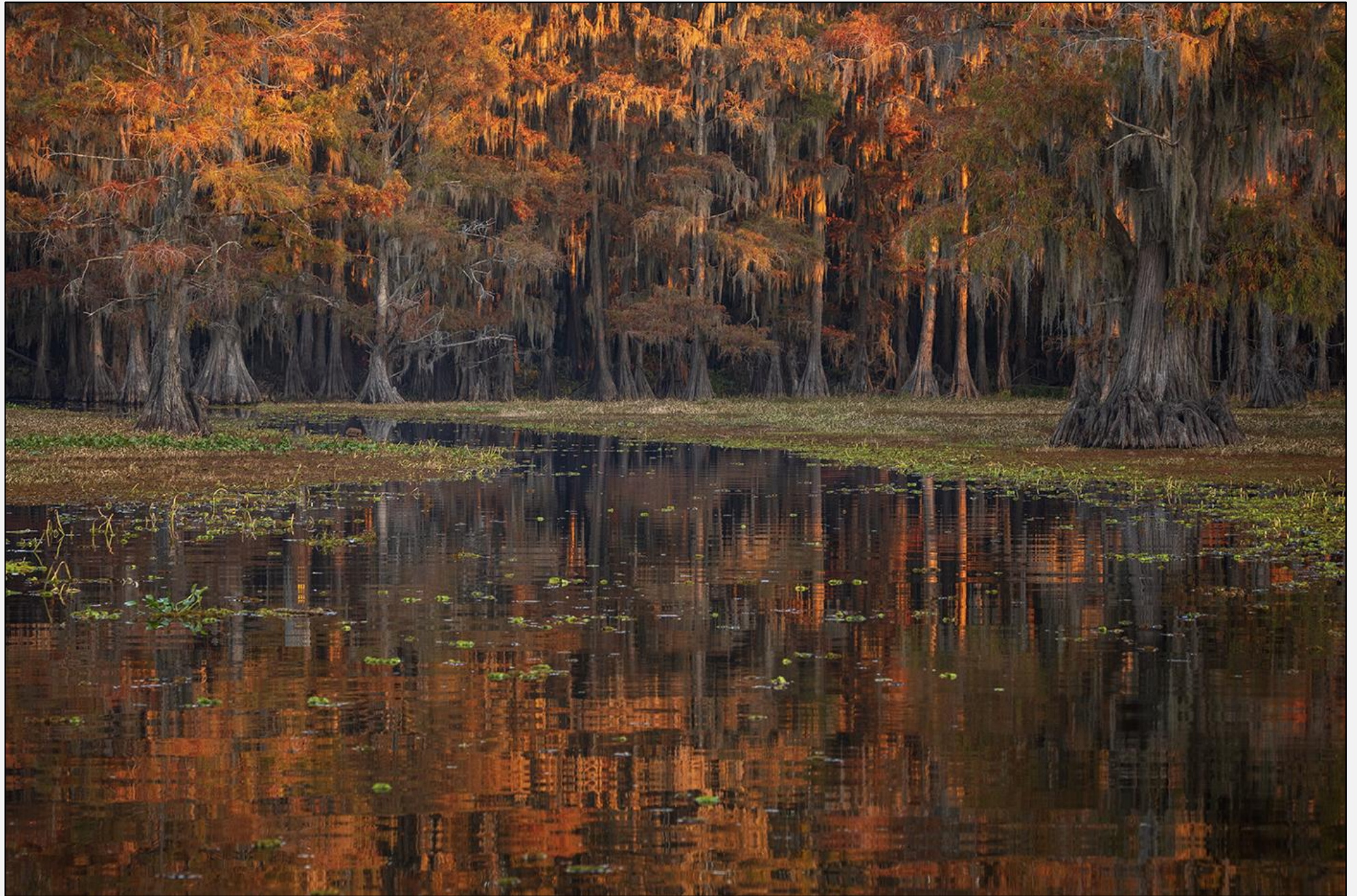
Location: Pemaquid Point Lighthouse, Maine

16-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1 sec

# Example of abstract reflections

Location: Caddo Lake,  
East Texas

100-400mm  
f/9  
1/40 sec  
ISO 400



# Composition Techniques

- Look for patterns in nature
  - Repetition, alternating hues, elements, textures, dark/light, shadows/sunlight whether random or ordered

Location: Cape Hatteras, North Carolina



3 ND  
ISO 100  
24-105mm  
f/20  
30 sec



# Example of patterns

Location: Smoky Mountain National Park, Tennessee



70-200mm  
f/8  
1/200 sec  
ISO 100

# Composition Techniques

Location: Death Valley National Park, California

- Photograph textures
  - They are visual details which convey the feel or surface quality of natural elements
  - They add realism, depth, and sensory engagement
  - Textures can be:
    - Rock layers
    - Tree bark
    - Smooth or rough water
    - Gritty sand
    - Soft moss
    - Cracked earth

16-35mm  
f/16  
1/10 sec  
ISO 100





# Examples of textures

Location: Badlands National Park,  
South Dakota

10-18mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/160 sec

15-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
.25 sec



# Composition Techniques

- Add a sunburst for flare
  - Set your aperture between  $f/16$  and  $f/22$
  - Partially block the sun with objects, such as a mountain peak or branches, to make the sunburst more pronounced

16-35mm  
 $f/22$   
1/20 sec  
ISO 100



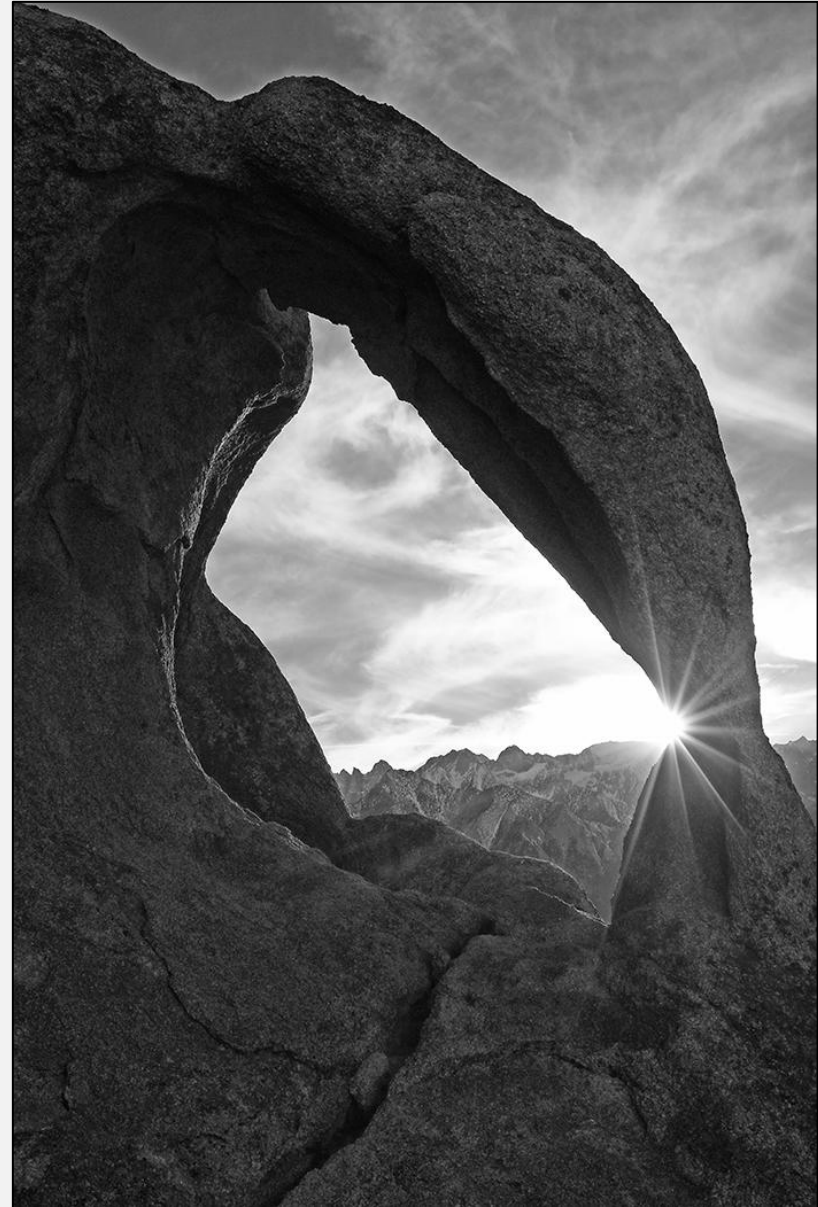
Location: Olympic National Park, Washington

Location:  
Olympic  
National  
Park,  
Washington



16-35mm  
f/20  
1/3 sec  
ISO 100

## Examples of sunbursts



Location:  
Alabama  
Hills,  
California

16-35mm  
f/13  
1/640 sec  
ISO 400

# Composition Techniques

## Experiment with intentional camera movement (ICM)

- An artistic technique where you deliberately move the camera during a long exposure
- The objective is to create abstract, painterly, or dreamlike images
- Slower shutter speeds are necessary such as 1 second to 1/20 of a second
- Techniques include vertical, horizontal, zooming, rotating motions, and panning



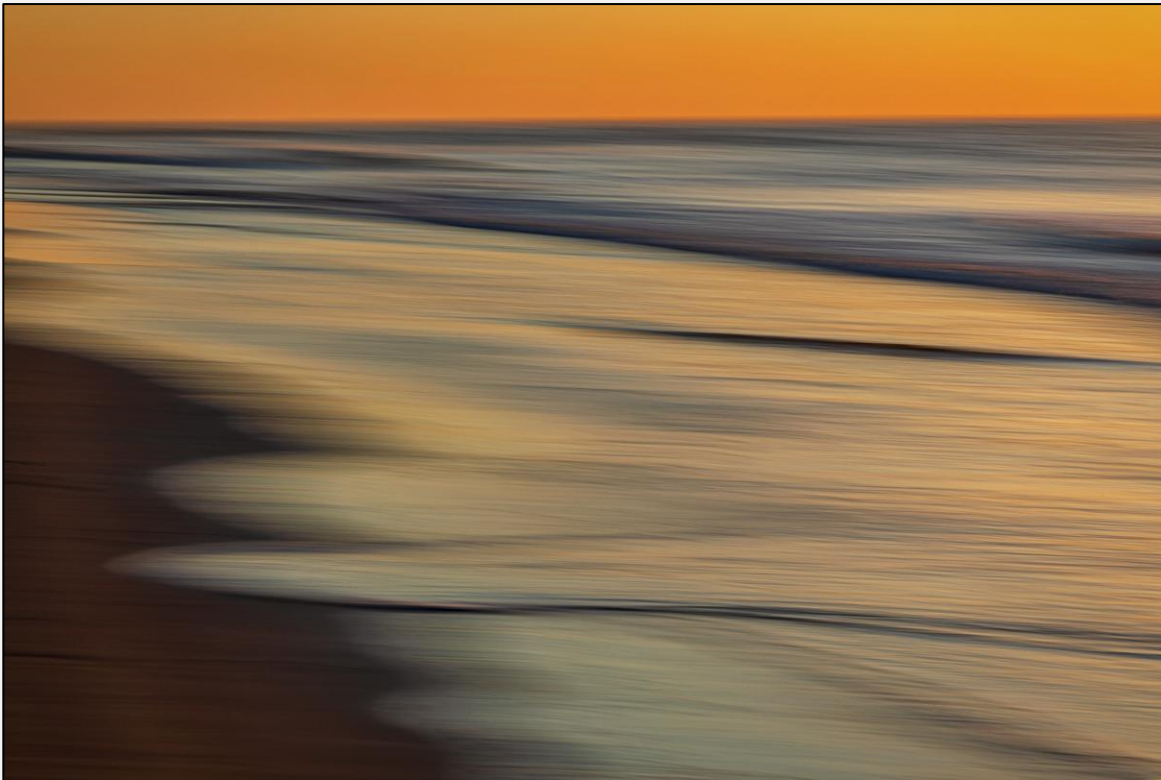
Location: Cannon Beach, Oregon

24-105mm  
ISO 50  
f/20  
1 sec

# Get creative with ICM

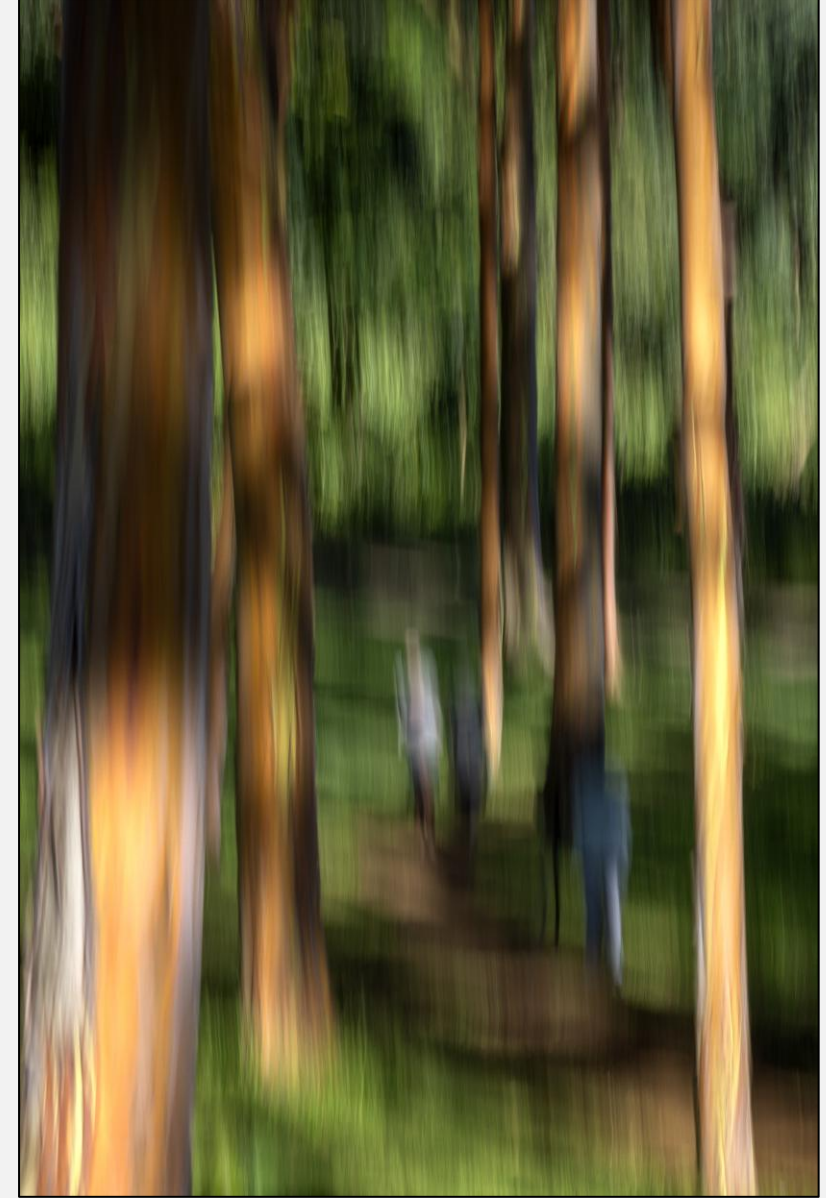
Match the movement direction to the subject

- Left or right for landscapes
- Up or down for trees



Location: Assateague Island, Virginia

24-105mm  
ISO 50  
f/11  
1/8 sec



Location: Kauai, Hawaii

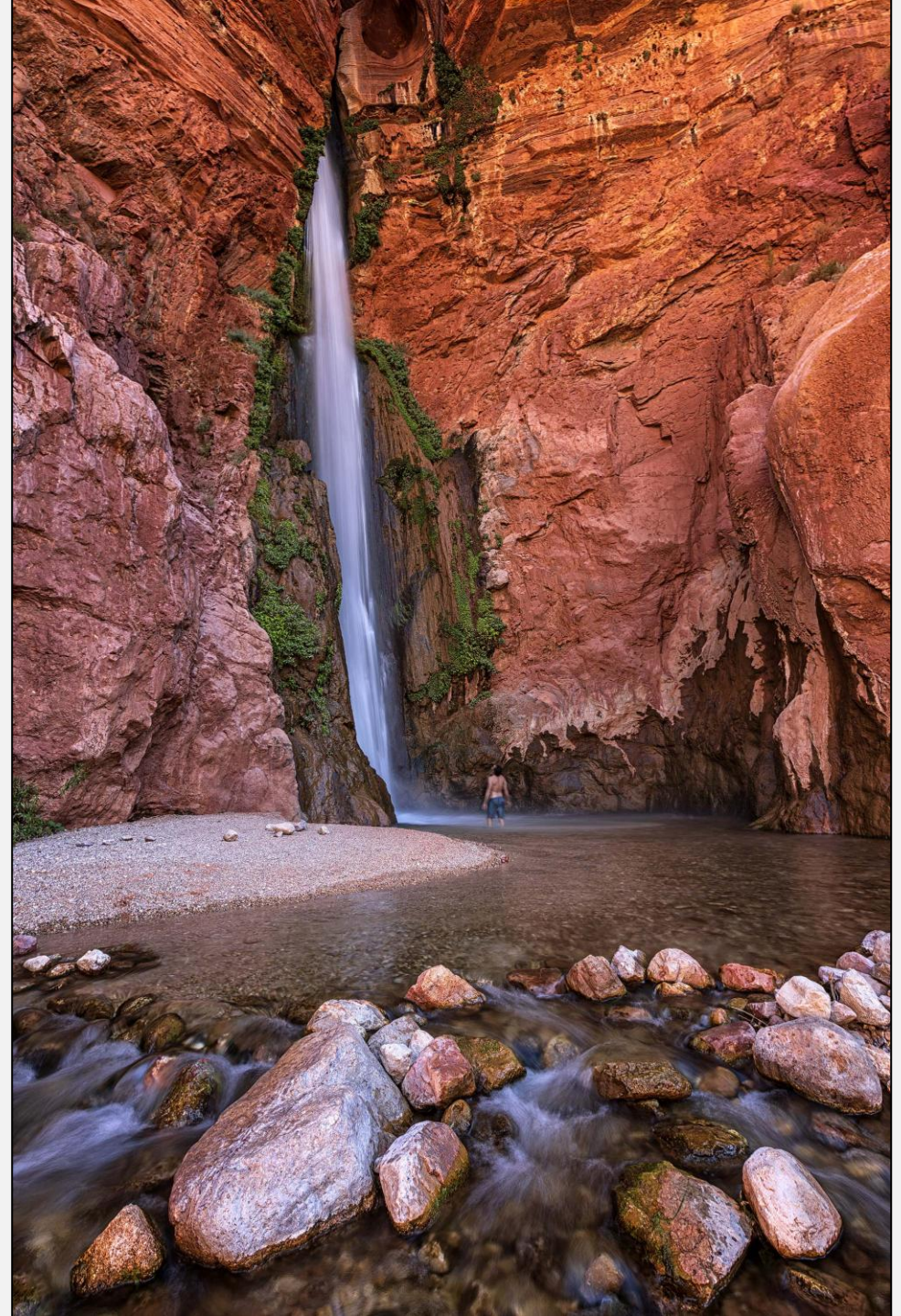
ND3  
70-200mm  
ISO 50  
f/11  
1/5 sec

# Composition Techniques

Include people, animals or manmade objects for scale and interest

Location: Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

16-35mm  
f/16  
.5 sec  
ISO 50





Including a person  
gives a sense of  
scale

Location: Moonscape Overlook, Utah

15-35mm  
ISO 200  
f/16  
1/100 sec

# Composition Techniques

## See Black & White in the field

- High contrast scenes
- Moody atmosphere and bad weather
- Artist expression

Location: Spruce Knob Lake, West Virginia

24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/200 sec





# Example of B&W

Location: Redwoods, Northern California

24-105mm

ISO 400

f/8

1/13 sec

# Composition Techniques

Location: Šerbinek Winery, Austria

If there is nothing happening in the sky, consider excluding it

- It might create a distraction for the viewer



24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/11  
2 sec

# Example of excluding the sky

Location: Lake Willoughby,  
Vermont

24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/8  
10 sec



# Composition Techniques

Make certain the horizon line is level in the field (or corrected in post)



Location: Lofoten Islands, Norway

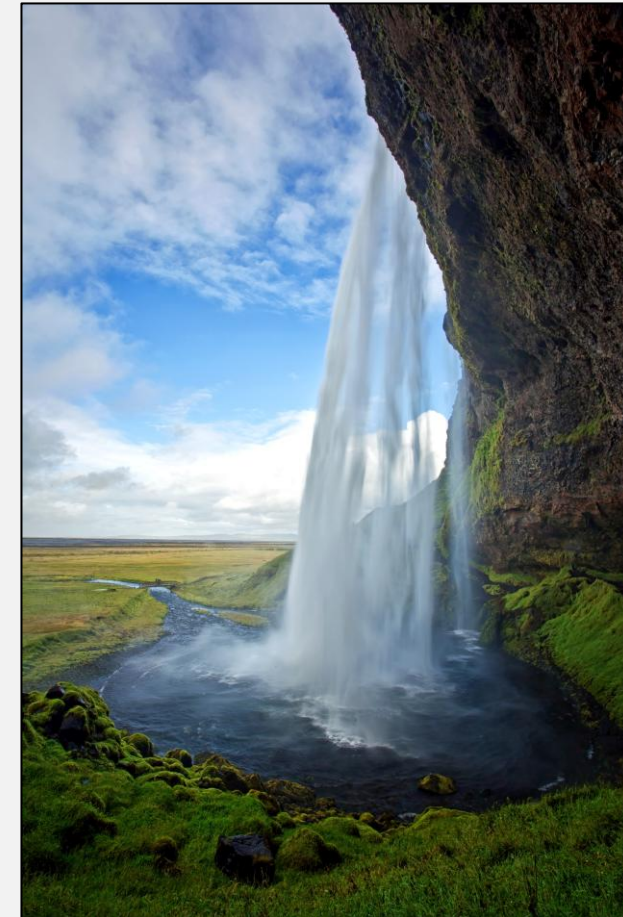
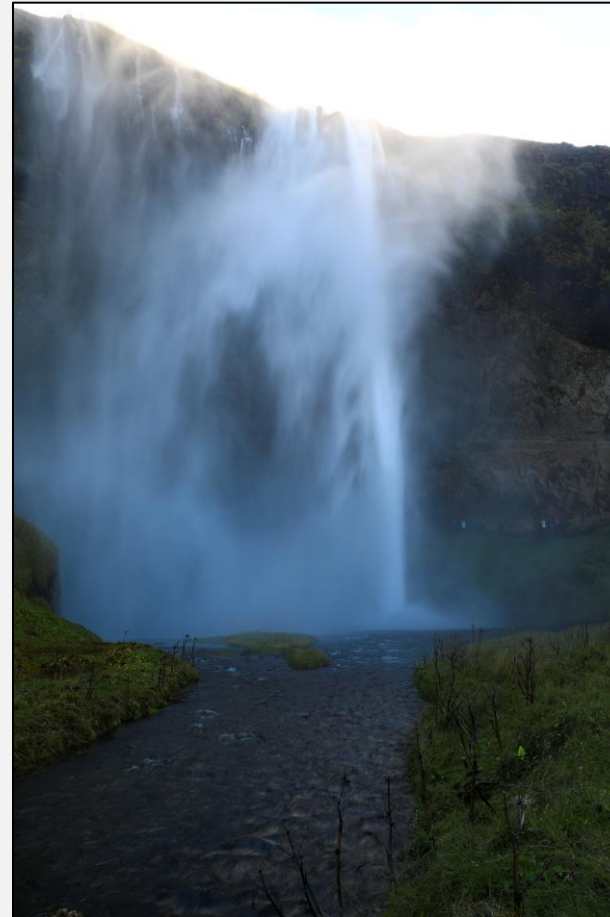


24-105mm, ISO 100, f/8, 1/80 sec

# On location

- Know the location
- Know the hours of operation
- Do research and some scouting ahead of time
- Think about seasonality
- Don't forget to check the weather conditions
- Safety first

Location: Skogafoss, Iceland



16-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/20  
1/8 sec

# On location

## Taking the image

- Don't just wait for the "right" light
- Maximize depth of field (aperture)
- Generally, focus a 1/3 of the way into the image
- Patrol your corners and edges
- Use bracketing for high dynamic range scenes (exposure blending in post)
- View the camera's histogram and adjust exposure as necessary

Location: Death Valley, National Park, California



# On location

## Work the scene

- Move your feet
- Try different compositions
- Change the camera angle
- Raise and lower your tripod height
- Switch lenses

1<sup>st</sup> composition



2<sup>nd</sup> composition



3<sup>rd</sup> composition



Location: Lofoten Islands, Norway

## Work the scene: Think in 3's

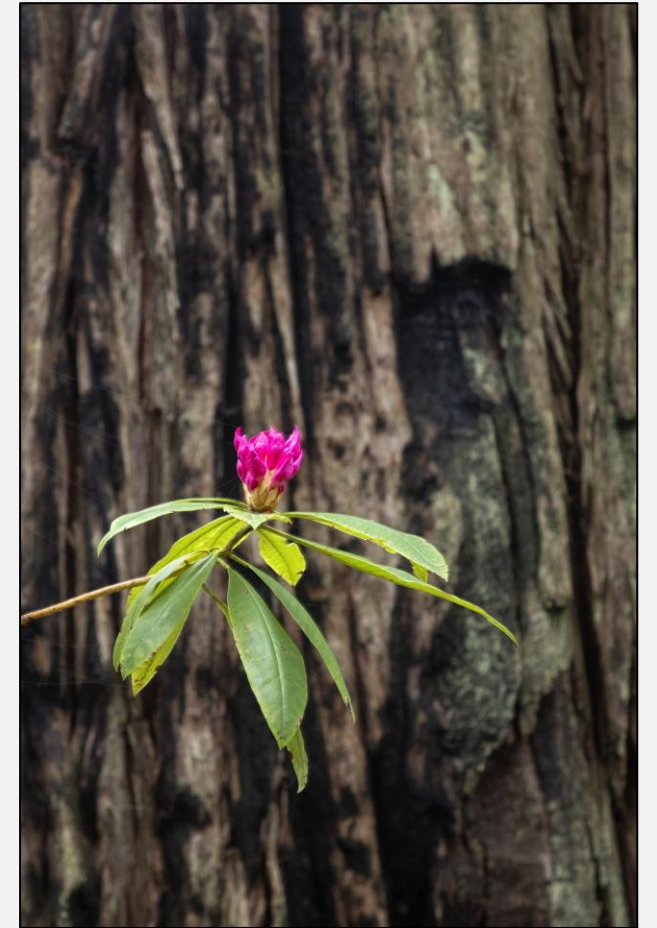
Isolate subjects from the larger scene by incrementally zooming in or getting closer



24-105mm, ISO 1250, @45mm, f/16, 1/60 sec



24-105mm, ISO 400, @105mm, f/8, 1/5 sec



24-105mm, ISO 400, @105mm, f/8, 1/8 sec



24-105mm  
ISO 100  
f/8  
1/40 sec

Work the scene  
Lens change from  
24-105mm to 100-500mm

Location: Dolomites, Italy



100-500mm  
ISO 100  
f/8  
1/80 sec

# Work the scene: Experiment by shooting the composition both horizontally and vertically

Location: Lofoten Islands, Norway

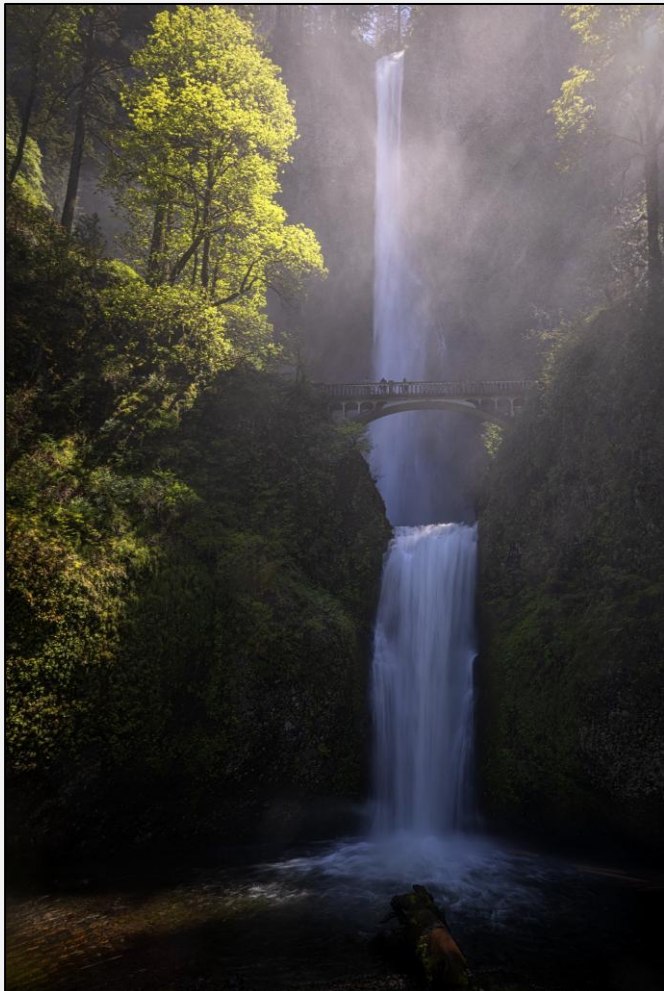


15-35mm  
ISO 50  
f/11  
1.3 sec



# Work the scene

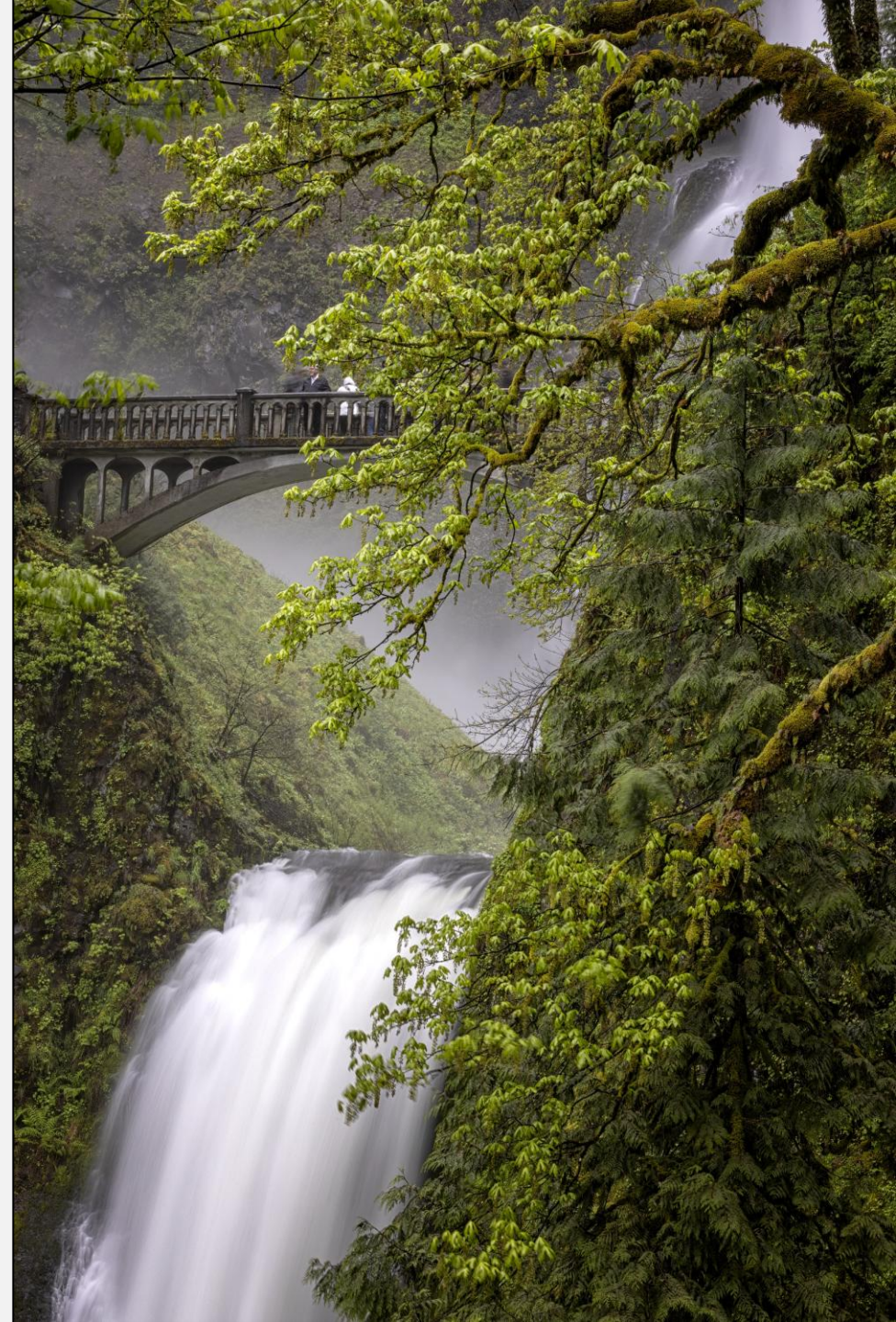
Find a different composition of a commonly photographed scene



Location: Multnomah Falls  
Oregon

15-35mm  
ISO 100  
f/16  
1/4 sec

70-200mm  
ISO 50  
f/18  
1/2 sec



# On Location

Have some fun, especially when you least expect it!



Location: Cannon Beach, Oregon

“That’s an awfully big dog coming down the beach!”, I exclaimed!

70-200mm  
ISO 800  
f/8  
1/1000 sec

# Thank you!

And thank you, PWPC, for the invite!

Website: [judygraham.photography](http://judygraham.photography)

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