

We've all witnessed a magical sunset. It often marks the end to a perfect day, with the sky simply ablaze with rich, warm colours. It's a romantic time and usually one to savour in the memory of happy times and a memorable day. Hopefully, if you do witness such a sight, you aren't feeling too romantic and have your camera with you to capture the special moment.

However, often is the case where the image we come home with just doesn't quite live up to the memory of the moment. There are many reasons for this and to return with a picture that truly captures the sunset, you need to remember a few simple techniques.



These of course apply to sunrises as well, but we will look at each to determine the difference in putting techniques into practise. If you just happen to be at a location at the end of the day and you are rewarded with a wonderful sunset then you need to make the most of it, but first lets look at some pre-planning tips to ensure the event goes well.

Compass

Now, we all know that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, but you must also remember that it also rises and sets at different degrees at different times of the year and it's important to remember this to get your timing right. The difference between sunsets in the winter and sunsets in the summer is as much as 70 degrees, so it plays a vital role in planning a sunset.

So, one of the first tools you need, is a good compass. Not only will this tell you where east and west are in relation to your chosen location, but also if you purchase a special sunrise/sunset compass, you can determine exactly where the sun will set. This means for instance, that on the south coast, the sun rises inland during summer and only out to sea during autumn and winter. An important point to remember for that coastal sunrise shot.

Arrive early

Once you have chosen the location and determined the right time of year, then you need to arrive early to prepare. Give yourself time to set up and find the ideal spot, one that will reward the best composition. Think about your foreground. Instead of a vivid sky and nothing else, you will give your picture much more depth and interest if you include a foreground object to balance the composition. By the sea, this could be a rock or the rippled sand at low tide, whilst inland you could have a field of crops or a gate leading into a field. Remember that at sunrise, the best time to actually take your exposures is before the sun appears over the horizon and of course the opposite applies at sunset, so wait for the sun to disappear below the horizon before shooting. This is when the colours are at their best and



The sun doesn't always rise directly in the east, so do your research before arriving at a location.

once the sun appears, the contrast levels go through the roof and you will have difficulty balancing the bright sky and darker foreground successfully. At sunset especially, these colours can often appear as long as 30 minutes after the sun has set, so it's worth hanging round to watch the sky and see how much the colour changes.

Filter it

In order to have any foreground subject correctly exposed, you will need to balance the bright sky with the darker land with a neutral density graduate filter. For sunsets, a 0.9 ND grad model is usually the right strength and allows you to capture the rich colour in the sky, whilst also capturing vital detail in the foreground and not leaving it underexposed. You can meter for a correct exposure in a number of ways, but the simplest method is to take a reading from the sky, then open up the exposure by three stops to get the foreground detail. With a three-stop ND grad in place, you will be guaranteed that the exposure will be balanced.



Water

Water is a huge bonus for a successful sunset, as it reflects any colour in the sky, therefore automatically adding an interesting foreground to the picture. At sunrise, another reason to shoot before the sun has risen with water in the composition, is because once the sun has come up, you will find that the wind will pick up and your perfectly still lake or river will ripple and the perfect mirror-like reflection that you have will



Silhouettes



The only way your picture of a sunset will work without some good foreground interest, is by composing a prominent subject to shoot as a silhouette against the colourful backdrop of the sky. The subject for these, need to be strong with a good outline. Things to look out for are trees, statues, buildings, windmills and anything else that is instantly recognisable by just their outline. Again, here the best technique is to take a reading from the sky, but without including the sun, lock this exposure or set it on the camera in manual mode and then recompose without changing the exposure.



With a strong outline, even a mundane subject can produce an interesting picture from an unexpected sunset.

Boosting a sunset

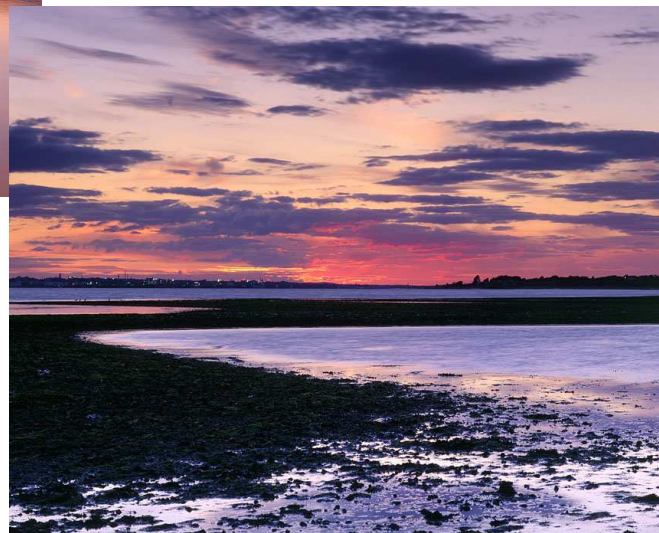
To enrich the colours of a sunset, you can add a warm-up filter, such as an 81d or ef over the lens and this will enhance the golden glow on the landscape or sea. If using digital, you could also change the white balance setting to cloudy and this will do the same effect as a warm-up filter.

Compact sunsets

Sunset Mode is an option on many compact cameras and will help saturate the colours of the sunset, as well as optimise depth-of-field for front to back sharpness in the image. This will of course influence the need for a good tripod or other solid support on which to place the camera. Set the camera on self-timer as well, to avoid contact with the camera and thus avoid camera shake during the exposure. This is a good technique to use for cameras that don't have a socket for a separate cable release.



Some of the most atmospheric and emotional pictures can be taken at the beginning or end of the day, so whilst you enjoy that wonderful sunset, remember these few techniques, so that you also come home with a picture that captures this unique time of the day.



Sunrise and sunset are special times of the day, so make the most of them in your photography