

Camera Corner - Good Composition



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Sunday, 13 January 2013 16:05



I touched upon this subject in last month's article on photographing people, children and pets, but having an eye for good composition is important for all types of picture. The first important point to make is that in terms of composition there are no absolute rules, only guidelines. However, the guidelines I refer to in this article will serve you well in most situations. Ignore them from time to time, but only do so when it is done deliberately for a particular reason.

Rule of Thirds

The most important guideline for landscape photography is the Rule of Thirds.

On almost all cameras there is an option to see a grid on the screen or in the viewfinder. The grid divides the scene into nine, with two horizontal lines dividing the height into thirds, and likewise two vertical dividing the width similarly. This grid serves two purposes. Firstly, it helps you to judge that you are holding the camera level, and secondly it helps you to place the subject of the photo according to the Rule of Thirds.

The Rule of Thirds says that you should place the main subject a third in from one side and a third up from the bottom or down from the top. One of the most striking examples of this from history is Michelangelo's painting of The Last Supper.

If you take a look at that picture you will see that the long table with Jesus and the Apostles is about a third up from the bottom of the painting. Imagine it if he had put them in the middle, dissecting the painting in half and you will realise why the Rule of Thirds works. So, for example, if you are taking a photo of a castle on a hill in the distance, don't put the castle smack in the centre. Look at the surrounding vista then decide to place it nearer the top or bottom, and slightly to the left or right, wherever you get the best result. If on the other hand you are taking close-up of an archway with statues each side you will have a balanced subject which can only go in the centre, so that would be a situation for deliberately ignoring the general rule.

Another important issue in a landscape photograph is where to place the horizon. In this respect you should always follow the Rule of Thirds, and never place it across the middle. If you consider the sky to be important, place the horizon on the lower third line, otherwise on the upper one. Similarly, if it is a photograph of sand and sea, place the edge of the sea on one of the third lines, depending which is the sea or beach is the point of more interest.

Landscape photographs are usually more interesting with people or animals in them. With people in the photo, again observe the rule and don't put them in the middle.

Using diagonals

When taking photos of flowers and many animals in particular, you can often achieve a more pleasing, dynamic photo by placing the subject diagonally in the picture.

Viewpoint

Selecting your viewpoint, the position from which you photograph the subject, is a very important part of composition and one that some people pay very little attention to.

The first consideration is the background, and if you are photographing an immovable object then you should walk around first to find the angle from which the background is best.

Look for, and avoid, unwanted items in the picture. Dustbins, notice boards, buckets etc. often spoil pictures, especially if brightly coloured, but unless you remember to check first it is easy to miss them.

When taking pictures of people, check for poles, branches, lampposts etc. that will seem to be coming out the back of the person's head

If you are outdoors you need to consider the way the sunlight falls on the subject. The old adage, that when photographing people the sun should be behind the camera, is bunkum. The light on their face will be harsh, and they will probably squint. Better to get people out of direct sun altogether, or maybe with the sun coming from one side to create a slight shadow effect on the other side of the face.

If you photograph a person full length from fairly close up, and you take it from a standing position, you are likely to find their head looks too big for their body. It is better to kneel down and shoot from waist height.

Cropping & Framing

One of the easiest ways to improve your photography is with careful attention to framing. Look into the corners of the screen or viewfinder to see what is there. Do you need all that background? Would it be better to get closer to your subject or zoom in? Would the picture look better as an upright or landscape?

The most common mistake people make when taking pictures other than landscapes, is not filling the frame sufficiently with the subject. If it is a picture of Aunty Mildred standing by the tree in her garden, take it portrait and fill the frame with her and the tree. Don't take it landscape, with next-door's garden shed on one side of her and the other neighbour's weedy back garden on the other.



The photographs above are from Photobucket. The one of the girl with the red scarf would be so much better if the photographer had zoomed in closer and the background hadn't taken up two-thirds of the picture (not to mention the elbow on the left). The young friend's photograph is much better, being cropped in close, although I would have gone a bit closer still to avoid the black patch at the top and the unit to the left. Why was the one of the Clintons taken landscape? Who wants to see the road and traffic?

Whole books have been written about composing good photographs, but I hope these few pointers will give you some cause for thought.

This article is one of a monthly series about digital photography, written for the CoastRider by David Stokes of Photogenics Costa Blanca. To enquire about our photography courses, Photography Group, or other services, please contact us by phone, e-mail or web. The next 'Know Your Camera – The Basics' will start today 15th January 2013 at La Herradura. We are running our 2 day course on enhancing your photographs with software 17th & 18th January, also at La Herradura.

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