

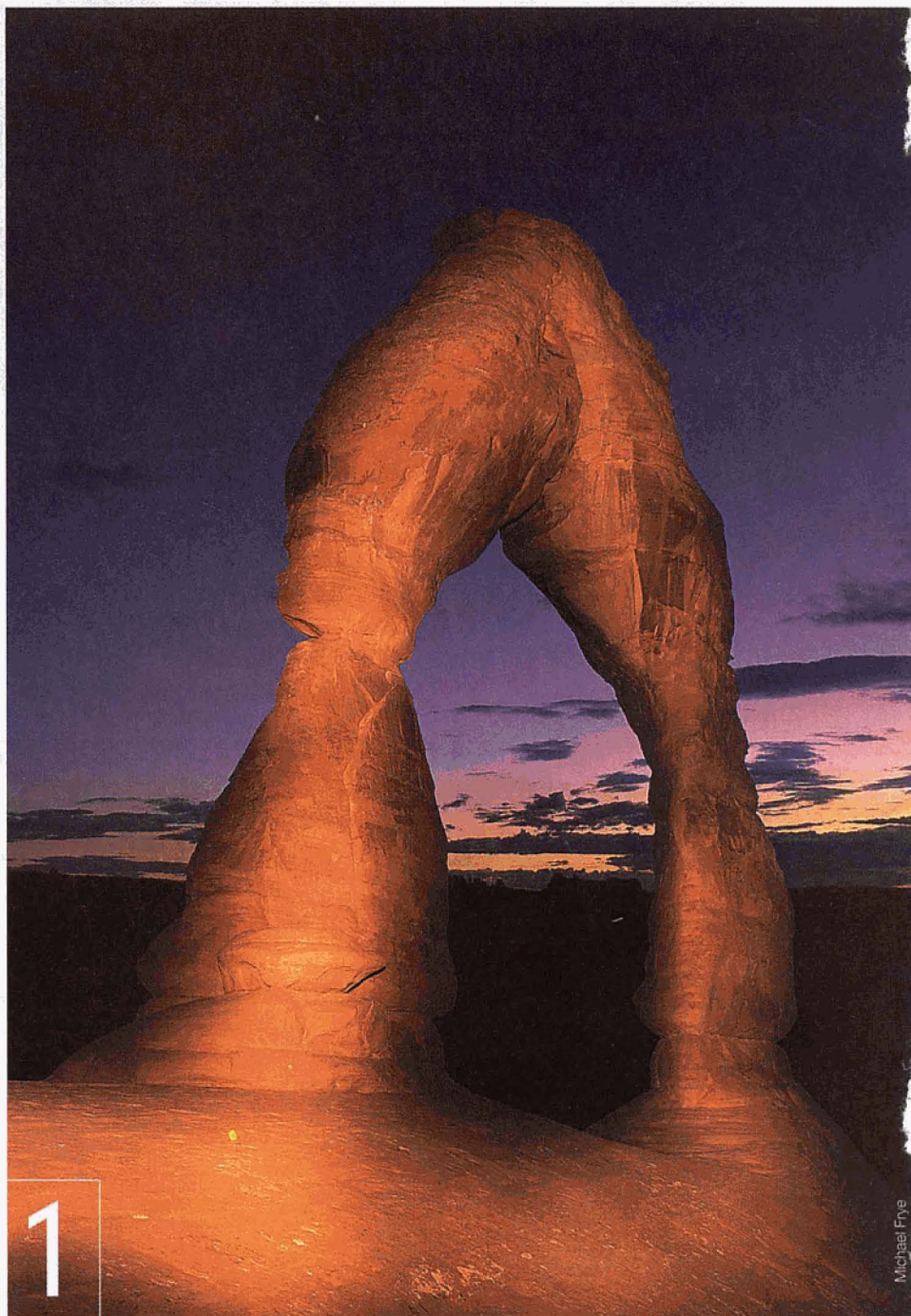
# Mastering

**W**hat makes one landscape image stand out from another? Is it location? We've all seen stale photographs from the most dramatic destinations, so location alone isn't enough. Is it composition? A well-composed image is essential, but it can look artificial if the scene isn't right.

It's the light. One thing we see here at *Outdoor Photographer* is how the use of light consistently distinguishes landscape images. Light can transform a scene from boring to evocative, giving a location atmosphere and mood.

As photographers, we're dependent on the whims of weather for our light, yet we have many choices. We can look for light that dramatizes a scene and learn to recognize the direction, color and quality of the light that makes a landscape look its most photogenic. Sometimes, as the sun sinks low in the sky, the light changes on the scene rapidly, so you must keep shooting since a single photo likely won't capture the best light on the scene. At other times, getting the most effective light may mean simply waiting for a cloud to move so the shadow/highlight relationships change on the landscape.

We've compiled a series of tips on how you might see and use light in your landscapes to get stronger images. Different locations, varied geographic conditions and other changes across the country will affect how you can apply these ideas to your specific locations.

**1**

Michael Frye

[ Set your scenic photography apart by learning to use light for



# Light [In The Landscape]



Rob Sheppard

## Backlight For Emphasis

◀ Because of challenges with flare and exposure, many photographers often avoid using backlight. However, a sun shade, a graduated neutral-density (ND) filter and a digital camera can make a difference. Backlighting causes colors to glow and separates forms and textures. In this image of scrubland along the California coast near Los Osos, the clouds broke long enough to light up the bushes dramatically, allowing viewers to appreciate the texture, form and color. The digital camera's LCD provided a check of light and exposure.

Backlight is always dramatic because of its contrast, which is why you see many pros use it, but that contrast can be difficult to manage. In this shot, two exposures were made—one for the bushes, then one for the sky—and the shots combined in the computer for a truer rendition of the scene than would be possible from a single exposure (a graduated ND filter would give a similar result).—RS

## Paint With Light

◀ Night photography can be interesting without any tricks, but it's the sky that usually draws our attention, as so many details of the landscape are lost. One way to light up the landscape for night photography is to use a standard flash, but have you considered "painting" with light? Use a flashlight during a long exposure to selectively illuminate landscape elements, particularly in the foreground of your composition.

Photographer Michael Frye is an expert at the technique, which can offer a new perspective of a familiar scene, as in this example of the often-photographed Delicate Arch in Utah. This image was made in two separate exposures with the camera stationary on a tripod. The first exposure was about four seconds at  $f/16$ , taken at dusk. The second exposure lasted about 10 minutes at  $f/4$ . During the second exposure, Frye "painted" in the details of Delicate Arch, moving the flashlight beam around the rock to evenly expose it.

This technique is more art than science, so try painting with light in your backyard or neighborhood park to get a feel for exposure times and aperture settings.—WP



Rob Sheppard

## Use "Bad" Weather

◀ Inclement weather can create dramatic light on the landscape, especially at either end of a storm when direct sunlight breaks through. Heavy clouds and fog can add atmosphere to a scene that might otherwise have little of interest in it. Stormy skies also act as a natural diffuser, casting even light across the scene. In this image, dense clouds are a graphic contrast to the verdant landscape and break up what might otherwise be a monotonous view.

When gearing up for rainy weather photography, remember your polarizing filter to help control reflections and reduce glare. Also, become accustomed to experimenting with white-balance settings if you're using a digital camera. Try a variety of white-balance modes and see which works best to capture the mood of the moment. For example, you may find you like the "cooling" effect of shooting in Tungsten mode or perhaps the warmer look created by a Cloudy white balance.—WP





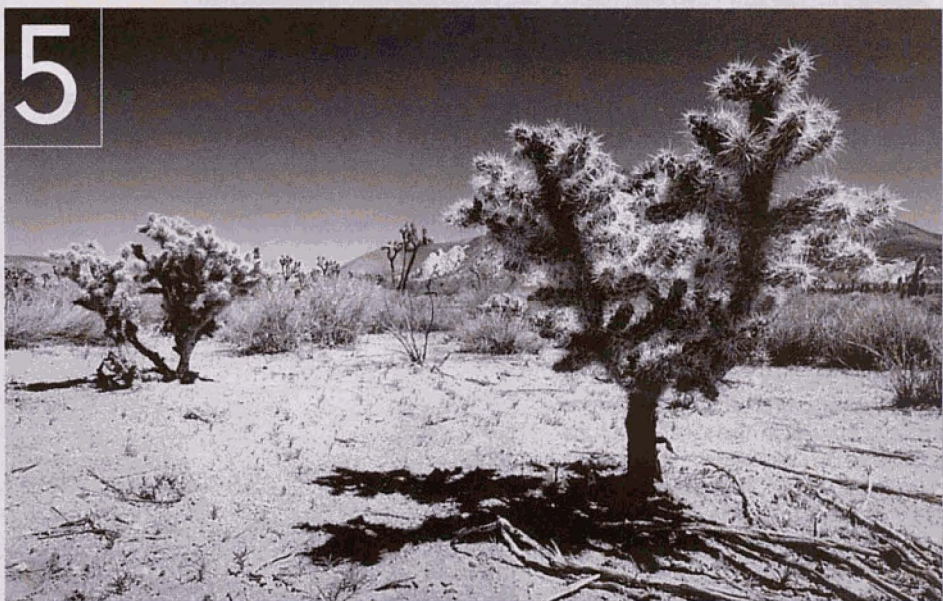
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## Use Natural Shadows

▲ Create strong, contrasty images by making compositions in which part of the scene is naturally shaded. Look for shadows caused by cliffs, boulders or a big bush. You'll most likely find these shadows in the early morning or late afternoon, when the sun is lower and the shadows are longer.

Clouds are a terrific source of shadows, too. Even on a bright, sunny day, one strategically placed cumulus can create an interesting dark patch on the landscape. If you wait, it may blow into position for you. You'll need to shoot more quickly with clouds than with cliffs because the lighting patterns can change rapidly and they won't be repeated.

If you're shooting transparency film, and especially if you shoot digital, make certain the shadows don't cause the metering system to overexpose your photos. While an extra stop's exposure is okay for color negatives, it's a problem for slides and a disaster for digital. To avoid this, meter from the brighter areas, and bracket if you're unsure of your exposure.—ZS



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## Backlight For Detail

▲ Departing from ordinary frontal lighting can interject some originality into your photography. When you compose with the sun behind trees or other subjects that exhibit fine detail, backlighting will bring that out. In the case of trees, colored leaves will positively glow and every nuance will pop. While not every subject is right for the backlighting treatment, try some experimentation and you'll come up with situations where it generates outstanding results.

To effectively create a backlit scene, be careful of the exposure. The most common problem is ending up with an overexposed photograph. Depending upon your subject, it's easy to fool your meter into blowing the exposure. If you're shooting digital, you can easily confirm that you've got it right by checking the histogram. As long as the histogram isn't cut off at the end, you should be fine, even if it looks a little skewed to one side. If you're shooting film, it's a good idea to bracket by at least a couple of stops. You might be going through a lot of film, but you'll be sure you got the shot.—CR

Zachary Singer

Christopher Robinson

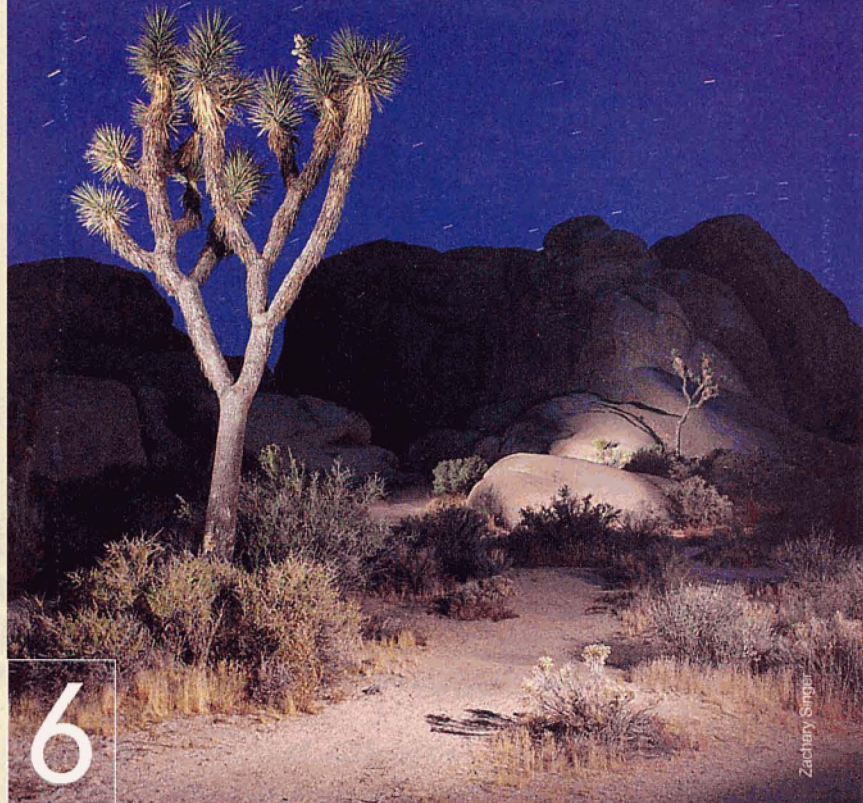


## Open Flash Techniques

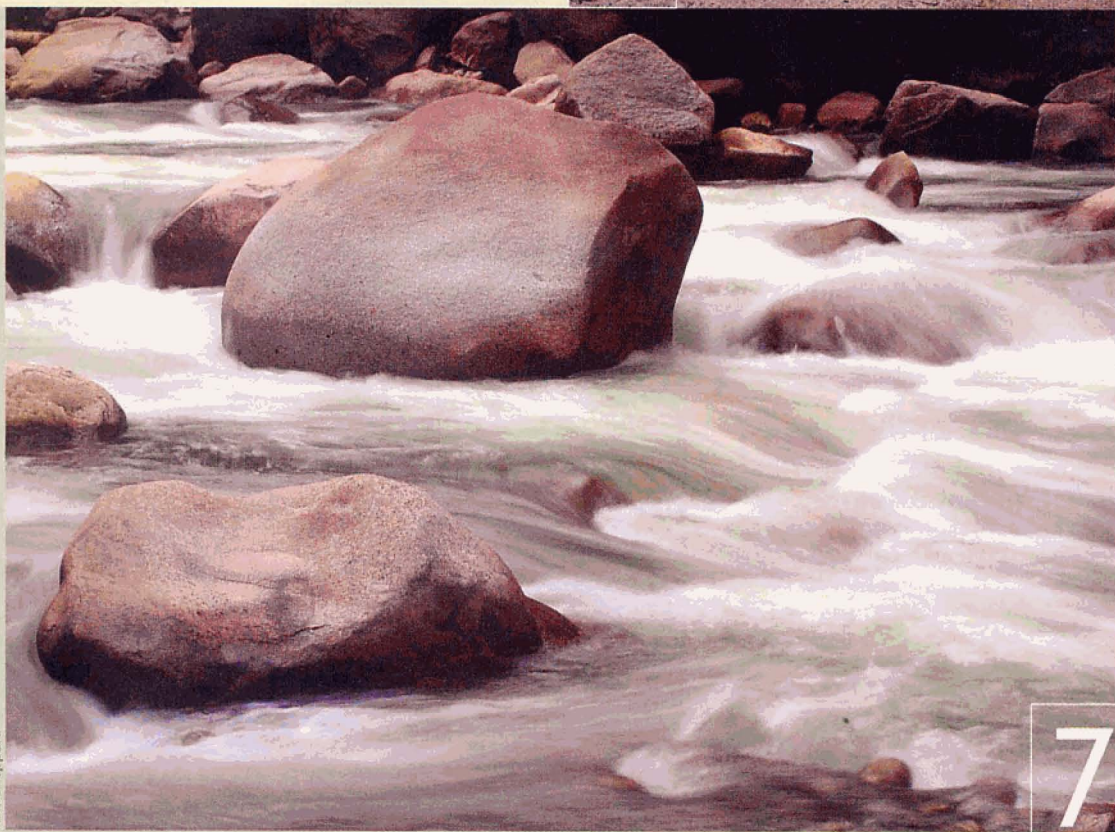
► For unusual photos after dark, use multiple bursts of flash to light up a foreground or highlight parts of a background. Leave the shutter open for a time exposure and walk around inside the area you're shooting, popping your flash as you go to light things up. Your camera will collect the light from each burst, giving a final image that appears to be lit by many flash units simultaneously. You can use the technique as a "main light" for areas that would otherwise be dark or just to add a little sparkle to areas already lit by ambient light during your long exposure.

Unless it's pitch-black, you must keep moving during the exposure to prevent recording a "ghost" image of yourself. Avoid pointing the strobe toward the camera lens to keep the flash tube from becoming a bright glare in your picture. And, most of all, when you aim the flash, don't stand between the area you're lighting up and the camera lens. You'll get silhouettes of yourself holding up your flash.

Be sure to use fresh batteries in your flash to keep recycle times short. With digital cameras, keep your exposures under a minute and turn on noise reduction.—ZS



Zachary Singer



Rob Sheppard

## Soft Light For Water

▲ Water can be challenging to photograph in bright sun, particularly running water. The sun can make whitewater too bright, create glare on tops of rocks, reflect as uncontrollable highlights and keep shadows very dark. On the other hand, soft light from an open sky or bright clouds can be effective (heavy clouds tend to dull water). This creates a large area of light that makes gentle gradations for shadows and gives form to rocks and other objects, yet keeps the water with smooth tonal transitions.

Clouds also will reduce the light, making it easier to shoot the flow patterns of a stream by using longer exposures. You may need an ND filter to cut the light. This image was composed using a Hoya Pol-Fader (a variable ND filter) to allow a full one-second exposure, even though the light was bright from light clouds. Notice the gentle tonalities on the rocks and the full range of tones in the water, all due to the soft light from the clouds. Photographed digitally with Cloudy white balance, the scene has warm tones.—RS



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## Off-Camera Flash

► The use of off-camera flash can enhance your sunset or sunrise images. By introducing flash on the foreground, you emphasize strong colors that complement the overall scene; by using the flash off-camera, you have greater control over the location of the flash rather than being limited to its mounted position on top of the camera. In this photograph, the exposure was set manually for the early-morning sky; then the flash, tethered to the camera via a TTL-sync cord, illuminated the yellow-flowered Scotch broom shrubs in the foreground.

The tethered flash allowed the isolation of light exclusively to the shrub. The flash output was reduced by two-thirds of a stop to be less pronounced. Although the automatic flash created a pleasant result, sometimes a more subtle look is preferred, with the bright colors of the sky and foreground bridged by the deep shadows of the mountain.—IP

(The flash technique described above also works at twilight times to balance foreground and colorful skies)

## Slow Sync For Vibrant Skies

Capturing a rich sky while maintaining good exposure on the foreground is a look that eludes many non-professional photographers. Just getting the sky to look right is the trickiest part of the shot. Once you can do that, the rest is easy.

Twilight is a tough time to shoot because of the high contrast between the ground and the sky. If you expose for the foreground, instead of a colorful, richly hued sky, you end up with a long exposure that blows out the sky and often leaves the foreground looking muddy. On the other hand, if you expose for the sky, the foreground is likely to end up as a featureless void. If you try to use your flash to expose for the foreground at normal flash settings, the sky tends to be completely black while the foreground is harshly lit. The solution is a compromise between these three techniques.

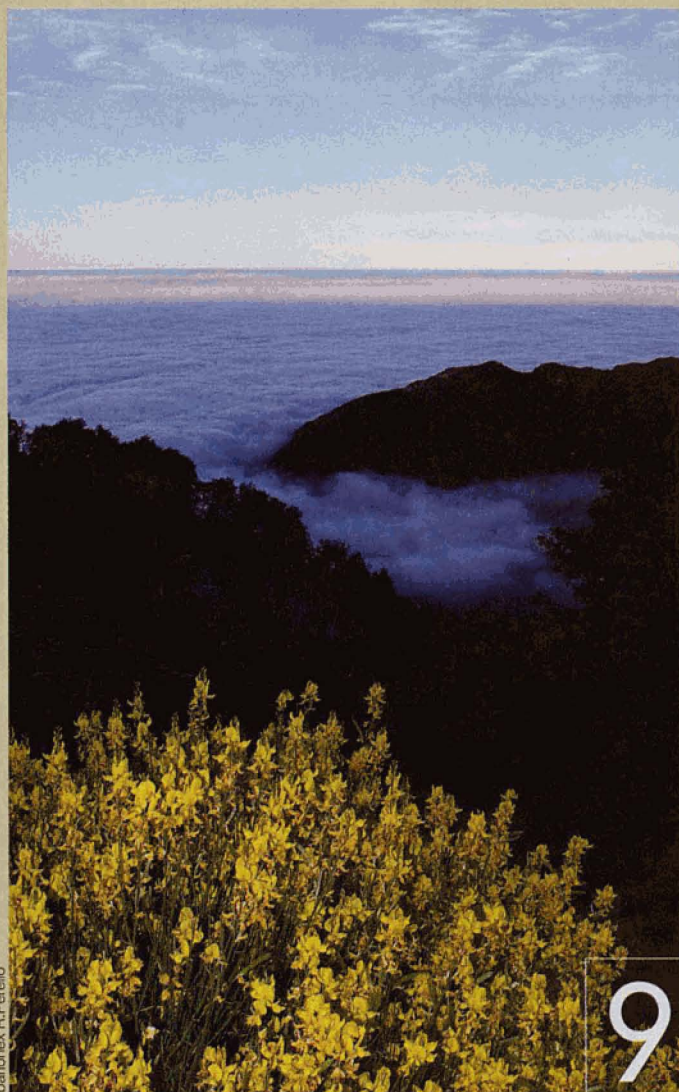
Set your exposure for the sky. If you meter on the sky, you should probably consider slightly underexposing what your meter says in order to add some punch to the colors. Next, set up your flash for the foreground, but dial it down about a stop to avoid an overly harsh look. On Manual, set your shutter speed for the sky exposure, being careful to have it below the sync speed. The flash will fire to illuminate the foreground while the slow shutter speed allows the sky to become colorful. Obviously, a tripod is an essential component for this kind of shot.—CR

OP

## Layering Tones

◀ Although sunsets present vivid and saturated colors, there are other elements that can lead to a strong image. With the varying tones of the mountain ranges and morning atmosphere, this photograph evokes an interesting array of subtle, but dramatic contrasts. By becoming aware of such gradual changes in lighting and tone, you have the opportunity to create splendid images that reveal the less-pronounced beauties of nature.

The compression provided by a moderate telephoto focal length produces proximity between apparent distant rises, creating both a series of repeating shapes and lines as well as enhancing a sense of depth. This brings attention to the difference in lighting and tone because they're made to appear closer than they actually are. A silhouetted tree is included on the edge of the image as a framing device. The blackness of the tree also establishes a reference point for the more neutral tones that dominate the frame. —IP



## OP ON THE WEB

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See: "Stroke Of Light" (Dec. '00)  
 "Fill-Flash Secrets" (Nov. '00)  
 "Color Creations" (Oct. '00)  
 "The Electric Landscape" (Jul./Aug. '00)