

Into the Sun

It goes against everything most photographers are taught, but shooting into the sun can really lift your images. Dale Morris explains some simple techniques to help you create beautiful backlit images.

Most photographers are taught as beginners that it's not good to shoot towards the sun. It's easy to see why, too. Compared to shooting with the sun at your back, backlit scenes (shooting into the sun) have a much greater contrast range. That means your images are more likely to show up with featureless silhouetted foregrounds or seriously overexposed backgrounds – or both. There are other issues too, like the risk of lens flare, a phenomena that superimposes repeating coloured shapes onto your images. Backlit scenes are also more likely to fool your camera's built-in metering and white balance systems. To put it simply, shooting into the sun is a bad idea. Or is it? Rules are meant to be broken and you don't have to look far to see that the 'don't shoot into the sun' rule is one that experienced photographers break all the time! Often with some fantastic results. The truth is, if you know what you're doing, shooting into the sun, or any other light source for that matter, can be a powerful way to add drama and impact to your images. With that in mind, here are some simple techniques to help you create beautiful images while shooting into the sun.

01 GET A GRADUATED FILTER

A graduated neutral-density filter is a square piece of glass or Perspex which is dark at the top and clear at the bottom, with a graduated transition in between. Graduated filters are often used to reduce the contrast between a shadowy foreground and a bright sky. A graduated ND is a 'must' for anyone who wants to take sunrise or sunset shots yet still retain some detail in their subject.

02 NO SCRATCHES

In most circumstances a few minor scratches, fingerprints and abrasions on the front element of your lens won't affect the final image. However, if you point a lens at a light source, even small





Mist is a great diffuser of light. This early morning shot was made possible by obscuring part of the rising sun with the trunk of the tree. Leaning a little left or right would have revealed more of the sun which may easily have blown the photo out. Nikon D700 with 28-75mm lens at 42mm, 1/320s @ f/16, ISO 160. Underexposed by half a stop.

HOW TO Shoot Stunning Backlit Photos

This venomous little Scorpion was very keen to take shelter from the desert sun in the nearest shadow, which, at the time, was mine! In order to get this photo I ran ahead of him, lay on the ground and shot directly into the sun with my flash held off to the left. The light of the flash prevented the scorpion from becoming a dark silhouette. Nikon D300 with 10.5mm fisheye lens, 1/320s @ f22, ISO 400. Off-camera flash set to rear curtain.





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ABOVE

A herd of backlit springbok in the Kalahari. Grasses glow and fur is ringed by halos in low-angled slanted light. I used an extended hood on my lens to cut out some (but not all) of the flare that was coming from the sun. Nikon D700 with 200-400mm lens @ 400mm, 1/1000s @ f4, ISO 400.

RIGHT

The sunshine glinting off dew drops on this patch of moss caught my eye. I used a macro lens and an off-camera flash positioned above and behind the moss to accentuate the glow. Setting the camera's white balance setting to tungsten gave the picture its blue colour. Nikon D300 with 105mm macro lens, 1/400s @ f/5.6, ISO 100. Off-camera flash set to rear curtain.





LEFT

For this image I set the metering to spot and exposed for the mid-tones in the sky in the space between the sun and the top of the sail. I then used the shadows and highlights tools in Photoshop to lighten up the dark details in the boat, which was almost a silhouette in the original photo. Nikon D200 with 200-400mm lens @ 280mm, 1/200s @ f/4, ISO 100.

marks will scatter the light and cause all sorts of messy blemishes on the final image. Protect your lenses with clear filters and make sure they are perfectly clean before shooting into the sun.

I actually keep a spare set of pristine filters in my bag which are reserved for shooting into the sun.

03 USE A LENS HOOD

Shooting into the sun increases the likelihood of lens flare showing up in your images. A lens hood or a carefully positioned hand can be used to cut out flare by shadowing the lens. I usually hold my camera in one hand and use my other hand to shade the lens (if needed) as this gives me complete control over the amount of flare on the image. It can be a bit of an arm strain if the camera is heavy, but with a little practice it's not a hard technique to master.

Of course, lens flare isn't always a bad thing and you can use it to add atmosphere to your images. Consider the scorpion photo on the previous spread – in this case the flare adds to our sense that this is a hot and dry environment.

04 THE SILHOUETTE

As we all know, the rich colours of sunset make for pretty nice pictures (sometimes even without a main subject). If you want to shoot a pure featureless silhouette you should expose for the mid-tones in the sky. Use spot metering if your camera has it – most do. Point the camera at the area you want to meter, then press and hold the exposure lock button, recompose and fire the shutter (check your manual for details). To get the photo of my friend silhouetted on Mount Kilimanjaro (page 34), I adopted a low angle so he stood out in profile against the lovely colours of the sky. Positioning myself so as to partly obscure the sun with the subject's body has created an eclipse effect as the light emerges from the right side of his body.

05 THE HALO EFFECT

Among other things, plants (like wispy grasses), feathery birds, and mammals with hair lend themselves very well to the corona effect. This occurs when a low-angled light source shines through at the edges, causing

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HOW TO Shoot Stunning Backlit Photos



ABOVE

Halfway up Mt. Kilimanjaro, looking out to Mt. Meru in Tanzania. Obscuring part of the sun with a foreground object will give you an eclipse effect complete with atmospheric flare. Exposing for the sky turned the foreground subject into a silhouette. Nikon D700 with 28-75mm lens @ 75mm, 1/400s @ f7.1, ISO 400.

TOP

A simple shot using a flash which I held below, pointing up at the mantis. This photograph was taken at night and I used a fairly high shutter speed so that any reflected light which may have bounced off nearby objects (such as background foliage) did not register on the camera's sensor. Nikon D700 with 105mm macro lens, 1/100s @ f/10, ISO 160, with off camera flash.

an attractive halo effect. Expose your photographs for the main subject (using spot metering if you have it) and you'll end up with a warm and 'haloed' image.

If you meter off the halo itself (rather than the subject), the image will likely come out as a featureless silhouette banded by a perfectly exposed rim of light.

06 INTO A MIDDAY SUN

Having a bright sun in your photo can create a very pleasing image, but it's usually very difficult to do this and retain any detail in the subject. Graduated neutral-density filters will help, but in some cases, the brightness of the sun just sends the camera's computer into a confused state. However, there are some cameras and lenses which just seem to do a great job of finding the correct balance.

My Nikon fisheye is one such lens, but the image of a scorpion scuttling across the Namibian desert (pages 30 and 31) would have been a disaster without using fill in flash to balance it out. I lay down on the ground, and set the exposure for rear-curtain flash. This is a setting most cameras have. The camera will program the flash to go off at the end of the shutter release (rather than at the beginning) so that the photo exposes for the ambient light (and not just for the light produced by the flash). Then I used a fill-in flash held off to the left of the image.

07 BACKLIT LAYERS

When backlit, materials like dust, smoke, mist, sea spray and even rain can create wonderful glowing layers which can either artfully mute a subject or make it stand out in profile. Early mornings are particularly good for misty scenes, which bring out the detail in an otherwise flat landscape. ☼