

# 10 Tips from the Pros: Improving Your Landscape Photography

From sprawling cityscapes lit up at night to sweeping coastlines and rolling country hills, landscape photography can be truly inspiring. For the beginner, there's not a lot of specialist equipment needed to get started, although a wide angle lens and a tripod can be very useful indeed. As you refine your style, experimenting with filters and post-processing techniques can yield really impressive results.

We asked four landscape photographers from different parts of the UK to give their advice on some key areas of this rewarding topic, from composition to scouting locations, to help you take your photos to the next level.

## Composition in the landscape: Tom Mackie

*Tom Mackie is recognised as one of the world's finest landscape photographers, his understanding of light, perspective and colour; the hallmark that has established his name both internationally and here in the UK. He has written several books and regularly contributes to Photography Monthly and Amateur Photographer Magazines. You can view more of his work at [www.tommackie.com](http://www.tommackie.com)*

**1. Many of us are familiar with the rule of thirds, but what other compositional elements should we consider to improve our landscape photos?**



Designing a landscape image is like telling a story. You need to draw your audience into the image and direct them around to the most important elements. When possible, if you can have a beginning, a middle part or the body of the story and a conclusion, then it will make a more compelling landscape image. Using compositional elements such as leading lines and interesting foregrounds will help to guide the viewer through the image making it a more visually enjoyable experience. The path in the image above takes your eye up to the tree. Lines entering the frame from a corner rather than from the side are more dynamic as diagonal lines portray the sense of action.

Having the subject positioned in the third of the frame is just a guideline. Knowing the rules allows you to break them. I often place a subject in the centre especially when there is symmetry and a strong point of reference as in this image of the tree with the foreground full of wildflowers.



2. Skies and seas (or bodies of water at least) are key features in many landscape photos. Do you have any tips for using composition to create something more visually interesting than the usual sea and sky photos we see so frequently?

It always helps to have an anchor point to the image rather than just sea and sky otherwise your eye would be floating around the frame with nothing to fix your eye to. Every pun intended. Use interesting elements in the foreground such as rocks or a boat to give the image a sense of depth.



## Gear to make life easier: Adrian Oakes

*Adrian Oakes is a Devon-based landscape photographer who specialises in images of Dartmoor and Devon. Over recent years he has worked with both the National Trust and the National Park Authority as well as running his own photography workshops in and around Dorset and the South and North Devon coastlines. You can view more of his work at [www.adrianoakes.com](http://www.adrianoakes.com)*

### **3. What item in your kit bag (other than your camera) could you not do without for landscape photography and why?**

Other than my camera I wouldn't be without my Circular Polariser. This amazing filter is the first one I recommend to photographers on workshops. It removes the silver reflection from the surface of water and glass allowing colours and detail from underneath to show through. They also remove surface reflections from leaves and foliage which is why the polariser saturates colours. Another two uses are to slow down water for the 'soft effect' as a polariser also reduces light by one and a half stops. The other benefit is to saturate colours in rainbows. All in all, an excellent purchase.



4. When you were developing your skills as a landscape photographer, what piece of photographic gear really helped you take your photography to the next level?

A decent tripod. People often overlook the importance of these as sharp images with decent depth of field often need small apertures and slow shutter speeds. A good camera needs a stable platform. I recommend Manfrotto as they have the quality/cost equation just right. I personally use the [055CXPRO3](#) carbon fibre version. For smaller DSLRs the [190XPROB](#) is perfect.



## Post-processing tips for landscape images: Karl Williams

*Karl Williams is an award-winning and internationally-published landscape photographer based near Glasgow in Scotland. See more of his work, and a selection of downloadable pdf tutorials on HDR*

*processing and a variety of Photoshop techniques, at [karlwilliamsphotography.co.uk](http://karlwilliamsphotography.co.uk) You can also find a previous Wex Blog post written by Karl on using [NDx1000 filters](#).*

### **5. Have there been any tools and techniques in your post-processing workflow that have really improved your landscape photography in general?**

Yes. HDR (High Dynamic Range) processing, which, with sensitive and thoughtful use, enables me to produce images which, I believe, more closely mirror the way we, as humans, see the world than do images which are effectively "straight out of the camera". More to the point, and based on a combination of experience and the pragmatic philosophy that potential customers are generally more interested in whether an image is eye-catching (and/or, of course, whether it matches the colour scheme of their interior decor!) than in how it was produced, HDR images generally have a greater sales potential than "conventional" images. A comparison between a "conventional" image and an HDR image of the same scene can be seen below:



'Conventional' single-image processing and HDR Image (3 exposures @ 2 EV spacing)

#### 6. What post-processing tools and techniques are worth becoming familiar with for someone wanting to make their landscape photos stand out?

If, as is advisable from the standpoint of retaining complete control over the processing of an image, all in-camera settings (contrast, saturation, white balance and sharpness) are zeroed, the “straight-out-of-the-camera” image will be as dull as ditchwater. Whilst any number of post-processing adjustments are available, I would think that the very minimum to apply would be contrast enhancement (I’ve found that the Photoshop “curves” adjustment gives the best results here) and vibrance/saturation enhancement – both of which can have a substantial effect on bringing an image to life. Consideration should also be given to the Photoshop “dodge” and “burn” tools, particularly the former. With all of these, and with the majority of other available adjustments, the use of layer masks (to restrict the adjustments to certain parts of an image) is absolutely invaluable.

Probably the most important post-processing adjustment to be carried out, and the one over which most care should be taken, is sharpening. Why? Because poor sharpening (usually over-sharpening) has the power to ruin an otherwise good image, but good sharpening has the power to turn a good image into a “WOW!” image.

## Scouting locations & finding inspiration: Mark Mullen

*Mark Mullen is a landscape photographer based in Scarborough in the North of England. His interest in landscape photography has taken him all over the country, although much of his work is around the hills, moors and coastline of his home in North Yorkshire. You can view more of his work at [www.markmullenphotography.co.uk](http://www.markmullenphotography.co.uk)*

#### 7. Do you actively scout for new photo-worthy locations or do you tend to stumble across them by chance?

I do look for locations. My work as Sales Manager for a Porsche dealer means I do travel a lot, I keep my satnav on all the time, when I see a spot that has potential but which needs a different light I’ll save it as a favourite place for future. If I am going on a specific photographic trip I’ll do my homework and prepare for it. My usual is to choose somewhere I know has potential and then do some homework, I will use Flickr’s mapping functions to find photos of the area and see what it has to offer. Next, I’ll use Google streetview if the location is near to the road, this allows you to look around in 360 degrees, invaluable when you’re planning a shoot 500 miles away. It also allows you to plan parking. Next, I use [The Photographers Ephemeris](#) which allows you to see where the sun will rise and set compared to the location, ideal for golden hour shoots. I consult weather forecasts and tide times if applicable. Finally a quick Google search often gives all sorts of useful knowledge. When I leave the house I know the shots I want to take. Once on location I get the shot or shots in the bag and from then on look for “bonus shots” which can often be as simple as turning around 360 degrees from my initial viewpoint. Sometimes the weather transpires against you and you’ve got to have a change of plan – half of the fun of being a landscape photographer is working with what nature gives you.



The image above is of the River Etive in Glencoe, Scotland. I'd scouted the location before I travelled up using Google Maps and streetview (view the link [here](#)). Although the river wasn't in spate when Google visited, it showed the area had potential.

**8. Do you have advice for anyone who may be lacking inspiration in their local area – any suggestions on how to find new photography locations?**

Go out without a camera, walk or drive around, look again at your area, there is always something to shoot, even if it isn't obvious. Look for details if the big vistas aren't apparent. Think about the light, good photography is all about the light. Amazing light can make an otherwise mundane scene look amazing, conversely a stunning scene can look dull if the light isn't working for you. Where will the sun come up? Or set?

Finally, get some photography friends. I've been tipped off to some amazing but well hidden locations from other photographers I've met through Flickr that I would have never found by accident and having someone with you when you're out on a remote beach or clifftop is often nice. You'll be surprised at how different the shots you come back with, even if you're at the same place at the same time.

## Using filters: Mark Mullen

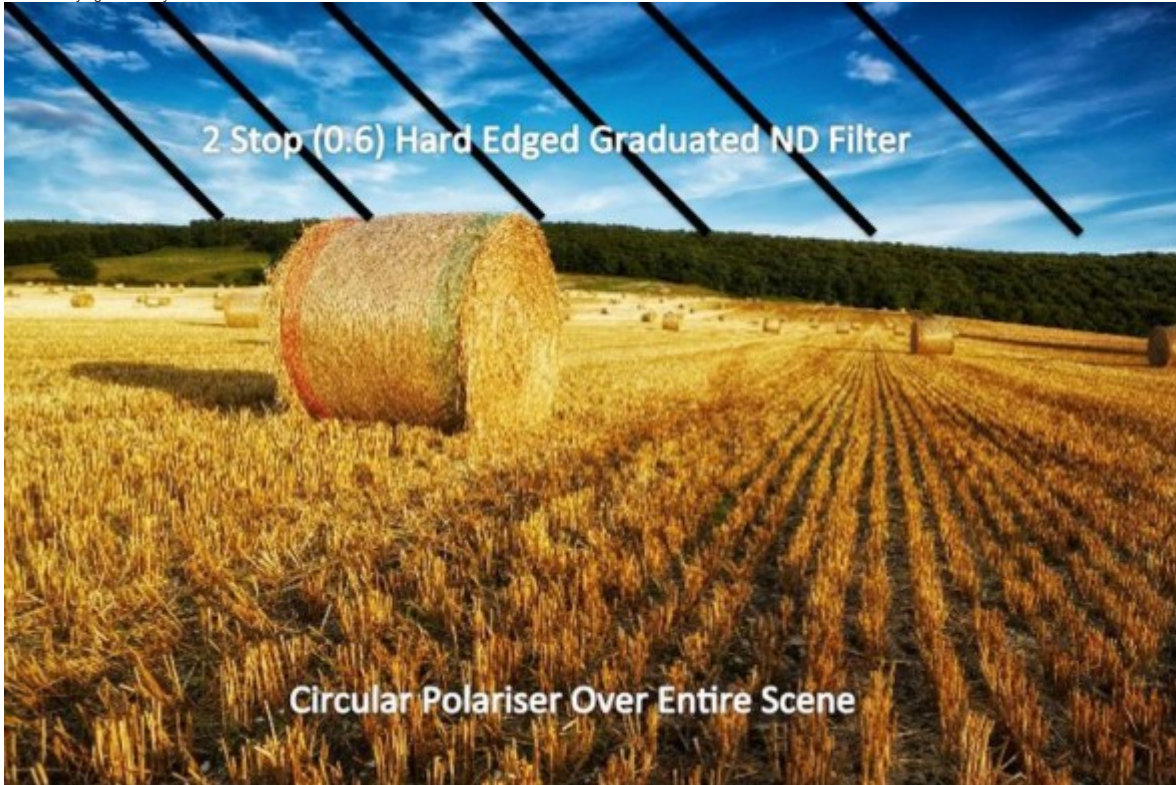
**9. What do you recommend is the best type of filter to start experimenting with for landscape photography?**

Starting out with filters for landscape photography can be daunting, looking on Flickr or 500px you'll see lots of photos with beautiful skies, just like you remember seeing when you decided to capture the shot. Unfortunately your camera has recorded a photo nothing like you remember, the sky just looks awful, plain bright white, no definition, no detail. The issue is that the camera can only record so much of the dynamic range, the difference between the lightest bits of the image and the darkest, much less than the human eye can. The best way around this situation is with a set of graduated neutral density filters,

usually referred to as [ND grads](#). These filters have a dark top level to bring the brightest part into an acceptable brightness compared to the foreground. Filters come in ranges of strengths, measured in stops, from the weakest, a one stop, right through to four or more stops, the darkest. Filters come in hard or soft edged varieties, on a soft edge the transition from dark to light is more gradual, ideal for landscapes without a clearly defined horizon, forests, mountains etc. Hard edged grads have a more pronounced transition, ideal for seascapes or other scenes with a clearly defined horizon. If you're shooting a scene with a really dark foreground and a really bright sky you might need to use more than one filter (stack them) to get the effect you need. Living on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors this is a situation I often find, the dark heather under a bright sky. Filters come in 85mm or 100mm widths, depending on how wide a focal length you're using. You'll need an adaptor ring for your lenses, a filter holder and the filter itself. If budget is limited I'd go for a 2 and 3 stop hard edge filter, the ones I use the most.

The easiest way to use filters is with liveview if your camera has it, it makes lining up the transition so much easier.

Another essential is a [Circular Polariser](#), these serve several purposes, cutting down reflections in water and glass and making skies much bluer with lovely fluffy clouds. They vary in price, as with most things it is worth buying the best you can afford.



The shot above was taken near my home in Scarborough, North Yorkshire. I had to sit in the field for 25 minutes for the sun to come back out from behind a cloud. I used a Circular Polariser Filter to enhance the blue sky and light clouds, being at 90 degrees to the sun the polariser was at its most effective. I also used a 2 stop hard edged graduated ND filter across the sky to ensure a deep rich blue.

**10. Which filter has had the most significant impact on your landscape photography and why?**

My set of ND grads has made the most impact, there are very few landscape shots I take which don't use them, they really improve a sky. I have a set of Lee soft and hard edged grads, I'll often use a combination of more than one. If I had to use just one it would be a 3 stop hard-edged grad.