

How to shoot landscapes in the rain

If the sound of pouring rain is your cue to stay indoors, then it may be time to change your thinking; James Osmond shows you how to capture refreshingly different pictures in even the wettest weather



Rain might not be everyone's cup of tea, but whether you love it or loathe it, one thing is for certain; it's inevitable. In Britain we have plenty of the stuff, so if your instinct is to avoid taking photos in the rain, you're missing out on an awful lot of opportunities. As lovely as it is to photograph a mountaintop panorama during an idyllic sunset, to capture the true character of the landscape you also have to embrace it in its wetter moods. This means learning to enjoy the aesthetic of a colour palette of subtle greens, greys and browns, as well as conquering the logistical difficulties involved with taking pictures in different types of rain. If you can succeed at this, the results can be surprisingly rewarding.

above Golitha Falls, Cornwall. Heavy rain adds depth to intimate spaces such as woodland. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 36mm, ISO 100, 2sec at f/13, polariser half-polarised, tripod

PERSISTENT HEAVY RAIN

W e might as well start by jumping straight in at the deep end. If you are anything like me, the reason you like taking landscape photographs so much is because you love being outdoors. Being outdoors in the sunshine, however, is a whole lot more enjoyable than being outdoors in the pouring rain. There is nothing more disheartening to a landscape photographer than a weather map covered in the little black clouds with two blue raindrops falling from them. Such conditions are usually to be endured rather than embraced, but it need not be like that. It is true that these are difficult working conditions, but in some circumstances, provided you are well equipped, these are in fact the best conditions.

Where to shoot

The main problem with heavy rain is that visibility is severely reduced. This limits your options somewhat, and big mountaintop vistas are definitely out. Enter some woods, however, and you'll notice that the rain has a transformative effect; and the heavier the rain the better. It is well known that photographing woodland in flat, diffuse light is far preferable to photographing it in bright sunshine, but heavy rain

provides more than just diffuse light, and it also provides depth. The woodland environment is so intimate and chaotic that it can sometimes be hard to describe the distance between trees in your photographs. The same visibility-reducing properties of heavy rain that prevent you from taking pictures of big views help reduce the definition of more distant objects in close spaces like woodland, exaggerating the depth of the scene.



above Beech Forset, Urewera National Park, New Zealand. Heavy rain provides a diffuse light source for landscape work. Pentax 67 with 55mm lens, f/16, Velvia 50, tripod

Overcoming the challenges

Another advantage to taking pictures in heavy rain is that rivers and waterfalls, which in dry conditions might only be an unimpressive trickle, flow fast and furious. Waterfalls in woodland settings in particular are often at their very best during heavy rain, but to actually capture such scenes can be a real challenge. It isn't so much that keeping your camera dry is particularly concerning or difficult; most SLRs are pretty weather-proof nowadays, and it's fairly straightforward to make a rain-proof cover using a freezer-bag and some gaffer tape. Keeping the front lens element dry is a different matter, however. You obviously can't cover it during the exposure, but at the same time it only takes a single drop of water to land on it at the wrong moment and the frame is ruined. If the rain is falling vertically then the answer is obvious; use an umbrella. I find it surprising that this doesn't occur to more photographers, and

I suppose that may be because it is cumbersome to set up a shoot while holding an umbrella. There are a few Heath Robinson-esque solutions that can free up both hands, allowing you to work more easily. First, you could mount your

umbrella directly to your tripod using an L-shaped steel bracket (widely available from hardware shops), and a roll of gaffer tape. The bracket attaches to your tripod head-mount screw, and you can tape your umbrella to it with

the gaffer tape (or come up with something more elegant). This makes setting up your shot a lot easier, but I would recommend removing the umbrella and holding it in your hand while you make your exposures, or the slightest gust of wind will cause the tripod to shake. The other option is to mount the umbrella to your camera bag and wear it on your back. You'll look ridiculous, but as it's pouring with rain no one else will be around to see!



above Korokoro Falls, Urewera National Park, New Zealand. Rain causes tricky waterfalls to flow with gusto. Pentax 67 with 55mm lens, Fuji Velvia 50, 2sec at f/16, polariser, tripod

PRO TIP

» The light is so diffuse in heavy rain that it is likely your Raw files will look washed out, with a very centre-heavy histogram. Try adjusting the Levels sliders and/or the Curves in Photoshop, but be mindful of how the scene actually looked and the effect you are trying to achieve. Overdo it and you risk losing the atmosphere you wanted to capture.

LIGHT DRIZZLE

The effect that light rain and drizzle has on the landscape is similar to that of heavy rain, only less extreme. Visibility is reduced, but not to the same extent as in heavy rain, which means that the depth-boosting effect that is so noticeable in woodland is not as pronounced. On the upside, you can take dramatic pictures of the wider landscape that would not be possible in heavier downpours.

Although I have made distinct categories of these two different types of rain, we all know that, in reality, rain is more of a spectrum of heaviness. The trick is to judge your subject by how heavy the rain is and how much visibility is limited as a consequence. Broadly speaking, the heavier the rain the more limited the visibility, and the more intimate your subject should be. It is still unlikely that far-reaching views are going to be at their best in drizzly conditions, but certain distinct features within the landscape may well be.

Accentuating scale

Rock formations, such as sea-stacks, or manmade structures that reach out into the distance, such as piers and bridges, can all be effectively interpreted in photographs taken in drizzle. As with heavy rain in woodland, the drizzle exaggerates the loss of definition over distance, thus accentuating the depth of the scene, only in this instance the effect takes place over a greater distance.



above Clevedon Pier, Somerset. Drizzle creates a palette of subtle colours and causes the pier to lose definition in the distance, increasing the sense of depth within the scene. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 22mm, ISO 50, 2sec at f/18, polariser, tripod



above Bells Falls, Egmont National Park, New Zealand. The drizzle created a wet texture on the rocks and shrouded the mountainside giving a sense of altitude and mystery, rather like Conan Doyle's Lost World. Pentax 67 with 55mm lens, Fuji Velvia 50, 1sec at f/16, polariser half-polarised, tripod

High drama

If you want your picture to describe the height of the subject – a steep mountainside or a looming cliff-face, for example – drizzle and low cloud can accentuate scale in a vertical direction. Taking a picture like this does have its problems, though. Pointing your camera up at a subject, even in the lightest rain, exposes the front lens element to droplets of water, and in this situation you cannot use an umbrella to protect it, as it would feature in the shot. This is where a dry, cotton cloth comes in handy. It's a crude solution, but there's no way around it. While composing your shot you just have to let the lens get wet; once you're happy with the framing and the tripod is firmly in position, dry the lens carefully and cover it with

either the lens cap, your hand or an umbrella. When you're ready, remove the protection and immediately take a couple of frames, stopping when the lens gets too wet. Repeat the process a few more times and, with any luck, one or two frames will be acceptable. The cotton cloth will soon become saturated so it's a good idea to have a plentiful supply kept dry in a re-sealable freezer bag. This may sound obvious, but I learned my lesson the hard way; I was once forced to use the underpants I was wearing, the only dry cotton I had on me, to dry my lens during a rainy shoot on a multi-day hike in New Zealand. I nearly caught hypothermia on the walk out, but I did get the shot (Korokoro Falls, previous page), and I learned a lot about taking pictures in the rain!



above Upper Hollyford Valley, New Zealand. The rain caused these temporary waterfalls to flow and shrouded the mountain tops, creating a sense of something of great height looming over the viewer. Pentax 67 with 55mm lens, 1sec at f/16, Fuji Velvia 50, polariser, 2-stop ND Grad filter, tripod

SHOWERS

If, having read this, the prospect of wall to wall heavy rain still fills you with dread, then the chance to take photos on a day of sunshine and showers should have the opposite effect. These are considered by many to be the very best conditions for landscape photography, and I'm inclined to agree. Such conditions offer an amazing variety of

moods and lighting effects, and often allow you to capture something truly unique. In persistent rain or unbroken sunshine, any particular scene from any particular spot might look exactly the same from one moment to the next, but in showery weather, things are changing all the time.



above Salt Marsh on the Ogmore River, Vale of Glamorgan. Textured skies and patches of light are some of the dramatic conditions that arise on showery days. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 1/13sec at f/13, polariser, tripod

Changeable conditions

Nimbus clouds, those which produce rain, are much darker in tone to other clouds, which means that on showery days, when there is a mixture of different cloud types in the sky, the cloudscape can be very dramatic. Added to this is the possibility of occasional breaks in the cloud, giving a splash of sunlight to selected areas of the scene. With everything changing so quickly, it is easy to become overwhelmed and to start running around like a headless chicken, chasing patches of light that have been and gone. This approach is likely, at best, to result in pictures of interesting light but with clumsy, hastily snatched compositions. It's far better to look for your composition and then try and anticipate the light by spotting breaks in the cloud or patches of light in the distance. This way you can judge where the wind might take the clouds, and whatever you get will be much better for being based on a good composition.



Into the rain

On a showery day, you also have the rare opportunity to take pictures of the rain (rather than just in the rain). Between showers, visibility is often good so you can take pictures of far-reaching views, including rain showers happening in the distance. If you

are shooting towards the light, then you should be able to pick out the shape of the bands of rain as they move across the landscape, but if you are shooting with sunlight coming from somewhere behind you, the chances are you'll see some sort of rainbow.

above Rain Showers over Langdale, Cumbria. These showers were happening in the far distance. Shooting into the light reveals the shape of the falling rain while the diptych presentation breaks up the elongated panorama into more manageable portions. Canon EOS 5D with 24-105mm lens at 80mm, ISO 100, 1/80sec at f/10, tripod; five frames stitched together

PRO TIP

» If you're really lucky, there might be some lightning about. You can buy a special lightning trigger, such as the NeroTrigger (nerotrigger.com), which detects the early phase of a lightning strike and triggers the shutter for you. If you don't have one of these, you can increase your chances of capturing a strike by using a wideangle lens and lengthening your shutter speed. Do this by reducing the ISO or by using a neutral density filter.



AFTER THE RAIN

Sooner or later the rain will stop. It may be that the sun breaks out immediately, in which case 'normal' landscape photography practices can resume, but be aware that wet surfaces are a lot more reflective than dry ones, so you might want to exploit the brief compositional opportunities that these provide before they dry out. If the rain was particularly heavy, there may be temporary puddles of water, which can allow you to capture unusual compositions of well-known landmarks.

More often than not, when the rain stops you are left with leaden skies and flat light. The obvious solution here is to do some close-up work, taking advantage of the diffuse light and wet surfaces, but might I also suggest that you don't ignore the wider landscape altogether. I know it goes against the grain of popular opinion in the world of landscape photography, but sometimes a bit of subtle diffuse light can be quite beautiful and refreshing in a big vista, a sort of sorbet for the eyes among the profusion of bright pink sunset

photographs. Granted, it doesn't always work, and your best chance of success is to aim for a strong geological feature or man-made structure as your subject. If you can't get on board with the subtle colour palette of soft greens, browns and greys, you can always wait until dusk and explore the urban landscape. The abundance of yellow-coloured tungsten lighting complements the overall blue cast of natural light at this time of day and with everything being reflected off the wet pavements, there are ample opportunities for great shots.



above Low Lighthouse, Burnham-on-Sea. A heavy shower created this pool of water on the beach, enabling me to capture the lighthouse's reflection once the rain had stopped. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 40mm, ISO 100, 1/250 sec at f/13, tripod; two exposures merged

If you can't get on board with the subtle colour palette of soft greens, browns and greys, you can always wait until dusk and explore the urban landscape



left Tower Bridge and City Hall at Dusk, London. With artificial light complementing the natural blueness, and wet pavements reflecting everything, cities are an ideal environment for post-rain photography at dusk. Canon EOS 5D with 24-105mm lens at 24mm, ISO 100, 13sec at f/20, tripod

PRO TIP

» Timing is crucial when photographing cityscapes at dusk. Too early and the ambient light will be too bright for any of the yellow artificial light to register, but too late and the light pollution from all the streetlamps begins to bounce off the clouds, causing an unsightly orange glow in the sky.

Smoothing it over

A bonus side effect of shooting in the rain is that, if it is heavy enough, it can smooth out all the imperfections on a sandy beach. Burnham Beach in Somerset is very popular with dog walkers, and unless you visit just after high tide, you have little chance of finding any pristine sand. This shot was taken just after a heavy shower, and you can see that the sand has been cleared of footprints, and has an unusual pockmarked texture where the raindrops have fallen.



above Burnham Beach, Somerset. The recent shower had created pockmarks in the sand and cleared away all the footprints. The last few drops of the shower can just be made out in the top right corner of the picture. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, f/13, tripod; three exposures merged



above Forth Rail Bridge, Scotland. A more muted colour palette can make a refreshing change, and still works when your subject is a strong natural feature or man-made structure. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 25mm, ISO 50, 2sec at f/18, tripod

10 STEPS TO SUCCESS

- 1 Use the Met Office website (metoffice.gov.uk) for the most accurate information on what sort of rain you're likely to encounter.
- 2 Invest in the best waterproof you can afford. Your own comfort is crucial. If you are wet and cold you are unlikely to stay out, and you'll miss photo opportunities.
- 3 Pack several clean cotton cloths in re-sealable freezer bags. I use babies' muslins (now that my children have grown up!).
- 4 If the rain is really heavy try shooting intimate spaces, such as woodland.
- 5 Take an umbrella, and if it's too fiddly to hold while adjusting your camera, make a homemade bracket to attach to your tripod.
- 6 If shooting waterfalls, try to keep your shutter speed below two seconds (under one second, if possible). This is easily long enough to capture the flow of the water; much longer than this and you risk getting raindrops on your lens during the exposure.
- 7 Use a polariser to take some of the glare off wet foliage and bring out the colour of the leaves, but use it carefully so you don't remove all evidence of that lovely wet texture.
- 8 If your Raw files look a bit too blue, try setting the white balance to the Cloudy setting for a more natural tone.
- 9 On a day of sunshine and showers, look out for rainbows; turn your back to the sun and keep an eye out for approaching rain.
- 10 When the rain has stopped, look out for reflections in the puddles left behind – these can make for interesting compositions.

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