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Techniques

The Art of Putting the Sun in Your Photographs

Text and Photos by Peter Smolens

When familiar subjects don't produce the desired results, try reaching into your photographic tool bag and using a favorite secret of photographers everywhere—the sun. Adding the light from the most powerful source known to man is a great way to improve the composition of your pictures. By including the sun behind your subject, you can produce a dramatic, bold graphic statement.

When using the sun as your main light source, you create a strong separation between a subject and the background. This technique creates a rim of light, silhouetting the main subject and emphasizing textures. It can also reveal the translucent quality of your subject.

This article will show you how to add the sun to your photography by using a rim-lighting effect. There are two basic ways to make natural rim lighting work effectively: Shooting directly into the sun, including it in your image; or shooting toward the sun without including the sun in the picture. Both methods can change and enhance any subject.

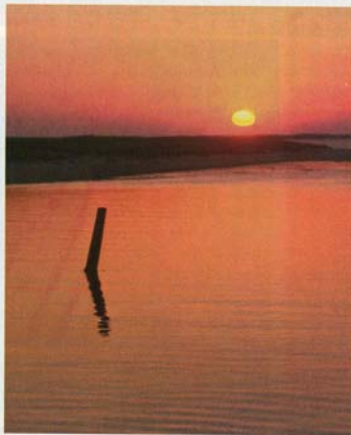
A Word of Caution

One cautionary note before we go any further: Care should be taken for your eyes when shooting into the mid-day sun. Contrary to some photographers' beliefs, placing a dark

filter over the lens before pointing your camera towards the sun does not remove the infrared radiation that can burn and permanently injure your eyes. According to the *Kodak Encyclopedia of Photography*, "You should not point an unfiltered lens at the sun unless you can look at the sun comfortably and without squinting." This includes using sunglasses, photographic neutral-density filters, polarizing filters, or processed color film, as these materials appear dark but still transmit infrared energy that can burn your eyes.



When you include the sun in your pictures, you can render your subject as a silhouette. By taking precautions to avoid damaging your eyes or your camera equipment, you can shoot directly into the sun and include it in your photo. The best—and safest—times to photograph the sun are during sunrise or sunset. When shooting at these times, you can also get some dramatic colors in the sky.



The best times to view the sun directly should be limited to sunrise and sunsets, and some bright overcast days where the clouds provide a veil of protection. One method some photographers use to look at the midday sun is to put either a processed piece of conventional (not chromogenic) black-and-white film or a specially aluminized plastic film over the viewfinder. A piece of graphic arts or microfilm product processed to maximum density, or the leader from a processed roll of black-and-white film works quite well in making a solar filter. According to *Kodak Tech Bits*, an even better method is to purchase an evaporated metal filter, which is available from Celestron International, P.O. Box 3578, Torrance, CA 90510; or Roger W. Tuthill Inc., Box 1086, Mountainside, NJ 07092. These filters reduce the sunlight intensity at all wavelengths by nearly 1,000,000 times.

Another area of concern should be for your camera. Do not point your camera continuously at the midday sun unless you're using an evaporated metal filter of at least density 5.0 to cover your lens. Be sure that any separate viewfinder or light-metering apertures are also covered. After taking your picture, move the camera away from direct sunlight. This will prevent damage to your equipment from the heat.

Direct Sun

You can use the sun as the main subject of your photograph. Many wonderful photos have been created

where the fiery orb is the center of attention. When photographing the sun as the main subject, all the usual compositional standards apply. Although the sun is a powerful subject, you will need to find ways to lead the viewer's eye toward the sun. For example, using cirrus clouds is a natural way to draw your viewer's eye to your subject.

The most popular use of the sun is as a counterbalance to the primary subject of the photo. Simply adding the light from the sun directly or indirectly to your picture changes the tone of the image. Your subject now becomes a silhouette, void of detail with light filtering around the edges. By using the sun to produce a rim of light, you produce a graphic quality out of your main subject.

To create a rim-lighting effect, move around until the sun is behind your subject. As you position the sun in the viewfinder, watch your subject. The key to rim light is to position the sun in relationship to your subject so that the sun peeks around its edge. As the sun moves farther behind your subject, the deeper the shadows become. Putting the sun directly behind your subject will create a silhouette.

Creating a starburst effect around your subject is another popular method of utilizing the sun within your picture. By using a wide-angle lens, you can get a natural star effect when shooting directly into the sun. To get this effect, you must use a small aperture—*f/11* or higher—for a well-defined starburst. Another way to get this effect is by adding a star, cross-screen, or scrim filter in front of your lens. This allows you to control and emphasize the starburst effect. Filter manufacturers now offer varying types of star filters that produce 4, 6, 8, or more points of light. While looking at the scene through the viewfinder, turn the filter

(Continued on page 104)

Sun (Continued from page 63)



Even when the sun isn't part of your composition, it can have a significant effect on your image.
Right: The setting sun casts a glow on the building.
Above: Although lens flare can sometimes be a problem, it can also be used for artistic effect, as in this photo.



until you get the star effect you want in your image.

If you want to render detail in your subject when shooting into the sun, you can use any reflective surface as a natural fill to reflect light back onto your subject. You can provide an alternative to the harshness of back light and highlight the front of your subject. Water or sand can be used as natural fills. Many professional photographers carry a large Fome-Cor board, commercial reflector, or other reflective surfaces that can be held in front of the subject by an assistant who's out of the picture.

Indirect Sunlight

Even if the sun is not directly part of your composition, it can have a powerful effect on your image. One way to do this is to use the sun's reflection. This can be accomplished by shifting the angle of the picture until the sun reflects off a shiny surface, such as water.

You can utilize many of the same techniques with reflective light as when the sun is actually in the frame. For example, you can create a star effect on the sun and/or the reflection by using a wide-angle lens and a small f-stop, like f/11 or f/16.

One of the biggest challenges you'll face when placing the sun behind your subject is lens flare. This occurs when unwanted stray light strikes the surface of the lens. The sun may not even be in the picture, but the effect can ruin an image. The most common result is light, aperture-shaped patterns in your photos. There may also be a loss of contrast, causing foggy or bleached-out looking images. When shooting in bright sunlight with the sun behind or to one side of the subject, you should always use a lens shade to

keep stray light from entering the lens. An alternative is to use your hand or a piece of cardboard to shade your lens.

As midday sunlight is bright, it's best to use slow film. My personal choice is Kodachrome 64, but I have created fine images with Kodak Elite Chrome 100 or Fujichrome Provia 100E. As the sun sinks lower in the sky, you may want to use faster film to capture the quickly changing light conditions. Kodak Ektachrome E200 can provide that extra stop you may need to capture that blazing orange ball as it sinks into the horizon.

Any time you photograph a backlit subject, expect to take many pictures. By exposing a lot of film, you'll have a better chance of capturing the image you want. Bracket exposures by using different f-stops and shutter speeds. A common standard exposure range is from two f-stops above the proper exposure to two f-stops below in 1/2-stop increments. By taking many pictures while changing the exposure, your chances of getting a properly exposed picture increase. Don't be surprised if you get some unexpected results. By shooting a range of exposures, you'll get a variety of effects and images that can sometimes be better than your original concept. I once discovered one of my favorite pictures while editing a set of slides. The sun provided an additional reflection that I didn't see during the original shoot of a young couple in front of the setting sun.

By adding illumination to your image from the most powerful light source known to man, you can improve the composition of your photographs. The sun often creates a perfect counterbalance to your main subject. By using these methods, you can turn a simple photograph into a work of art. ■