

How to Get the Ethereal Look in Coastal Landscapes

By Light Stalking on 14 Nov 2011 in Shooting

The big secret of getting that ghostly and ethereal look in landscape photography is that there is no big secret. In fact it's even easier if you're shooting on the coast provided you follow a few basic guidelines. Here is what you need to know for your next coast landscape shoot.

Time is Your Friend

There are two physical elements that will help you a lot to achieve the ethereal look in landscapes in general and in coastal landscape in particular. Those are the clouds and the water. Ideally you want to show movement in either or (preferably) both of these elements.

The simplest way to do this is to leave the camera shutter open long enough to capture that movement. How long largely depends on the intensity of the light at the time you are shooting and this can change very quickly if you are there at the right times. Often in the blue hour, I will leave the shutter open for at least 30 seconds. It's a quicker shutter speed during the golden hour, but often up to 15 seconds.

Get There Early or Late

The best times of day to shoot any type of landscape is usually around sunrise or sunset. No secrets there. Golden hour and blue hour both produce stunning lighting and the softer nature of the light will give you a better opportunity for longer exposure times. That in turn will really help you with that ghostly look.

If you're there at sunrise, then try to get there especially early so you can experiment with a few exposures when it's still dark – you might be surprised at the results. Same with sunset – stay until well after the sun has gone down. Oddly enough, even in popular photography spots, most of the photographers won't be here at these times. They're usually my favourite times to shoot!

ND Grad Filter

This is kind of the big secret for these ghostly and ethereal shots. Now don't get too hung up with this because you don't have to rush out and buy the whole expensive (but very good) Cokin filter series. In fact, these shots all used cheap filters off ebay. I liked the look of these shots so much that I continue to use the exact same filters to this day. The filter holder cost about \$4 and the filter itself (ND 3 Grad) was... wait for it.... \$1.95.

There's More?

Not really – those three tips will get you results that start to show this ethereal look. It's not terribly difficult, but there are a heap of other things you should also consider. These are more just good habits for landscape photography in general, but they shouldn't be forgotten.

Stabilise Your Camera

While movement is a big part of what you are looking to capture with shots like this, camera movement is your enemy. A nice solid tripod is the preferred method of stabilisation, but anything you can think of will work. Some folks even carry a small bag of sand that they use to perch their camera on top of in the position that they want and it works just fine.

Take Care of Composition

The ghostly look in landscapes is all well and good, but it won't save an otherwise poor shot. Make sure you think about your composition. There are general guidelines to follow like the rule of thirds, the s curve etc, but don't be afraid to go with your gut too.

Look Around

Don't forget to look around the WHOLE sky. Often light does strange things around the golden and blue hours and you can often get remarkable lighting in all parts of the sky – sometimes the exact opposite direction that the sun is rising or setting! Being aware of your environment and actually seeing what is around is a big part of getting good shots. The shot below was taken facing away from the sunset.