

Day 13: Find the Best Locations

Location matters!

A primary difference between the great pictures you see and yours is the time spent finding great locations and being there at the right time.

How to Find Locations

- Old school version of finding locations: physically scouting
 - This is still great - and you should use it when you can - but it is often impractical.
- New (easier) method of scouting: virtual scouting.
 - Enormous amounts of online information about the best photography locations.

Why Use Virtual Scouting?

- Make sure location suitable
- Check lighting, direction, shadows, etc.
- Saves time
- Plan logistics

Virtual Scouting: Things you probably already know -

- Guide books: Good examples are Fodors, Frommers, Rick Steves, Lonely Planet, etc.
- Internet - Images from simple Google search of your location.
- Other photographers' websites: many photographers specialize in one particular location.

Virtual Scouting: Some resources you may not already know about -

- The last decade has seen a surge in location specific photography guides
- World Maps on Flickr or 500px (no longer working)
- Google Street View
- Loaded Landscapes

Additional Commentary

In today's lesson we are going to talk about finding the best locations to take your photos. This matters whether you are a landscape shooter or just someone looking for backgrounds for your portraits. The location serves as the backdrop for your photo, and in some cases even as the subject.

At the same time, you've probably heard this phrase "*You can take a great photo anywhere.*" Is this true? I think so. I don't quarrel with it. In addition, it is often used by well-meaning pros to encourage others to just get out there and do some shooting when they might otherwise not do so. But to the extent that people use this phrase to overlook the importance of location, I take issue with it.

We shouldn't delude ourselves into thinking we can just stroll down to the local park and fire off some award-winning shots. As evidence of that, look at where pro photographers hold their workshops (even those who that say you can take a great picture anywhere): they are always in scenic locations. The fact of the matter is that while it is technically *possible* to get great shots anywhere, the odds change depending on your locations. The idea is to give yourself the best chance for success.

Good Versus Bad Locations

People have very little difficulty understanding the importance of subject matter when photographing people. If I have a horrible, slouchy, unattractive model, and you have a great model, then you will in all likelihood end up with better pictures. Think of your location as your model.

I always use the example of two photographers, with one shooting at Big Sur at sunset and the other shootings in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Midland, Texas at noon. Is there any doubt whose pictures will be better? One has beautiful scenery and lighting. The other is stuck with a parking lot of a desolate hellhole with harsh contrasts.

Those may be rather extreme examples, but they illustrate the point. We shouldn't just walk around with a camera over our shoulders thinking that we are going to stumble into perfect pictures. We need to find out where the great pictures actually are. The fact is that there are spots where you can get great pictures, and there are spots where you will probably *never* take great pictures. They are not necessarily where you think.

The Fishing Analogy

One more point before we get on to discussing actual locations. That point is that photography is analogous to fishing in a lot of ways. This topic is one such way. Here's how, at least from my perspective (this is taken from my Kindle book *Getting Started in Photography*):

When I was a kid, I would sometimes fish with my dad. I would cast and retrieve my lure two or three times and decide that no fish was ever going to eat that lure, but if I used a different one, all my fishing dreams would come true. This process would be repeated every few minutes. As I was fumbling around changing lures, my dad would frequently say to me, "If you don't have your bait in the water, you have a 0% chance of catching a fish."

And that was true. My experience bore that out, by the way, and I never caught any fish. The thing to remember is that, in fishing, if you have your bait in the water, you have *some* chance of catching fish. If not, you're screwed.

The same is true in photography. If you don't have your camera, you're screwed. You have a 0% chance of taking a good picture. Conversely, if you are walking around with your camera, you have *some* chance of getting a good photo.

Now, back to fishing, and here comes the part I want you to pay attention to. If you really want to catch fish, you have to know where the fish are. When I got older, I had a roommate who was a pretty serious fisherman. I used to go fishing with him, mainly as an excuse to drink beer in a boat. It used to irritate me that he was always moving the boat around to find the fish when I was trying to sit and drink beer. He used to say something like, "90% of the fish are in 10% of this lake."

Real fishermen know where the fish live. They have maps of the lake. They know the structures the fish gravitate towards. They have fish finders that show them where the fish are. If you just randomly throw your bait in the water, yes, you have some chance of catching a fish, but it's really just a fool's errand.

Similarly, those who get great pictures know where to go to get them. They have scouted it out (sometimes in person, sometimes virtually). They know where other great pictures have been taken. They know where the local pros and experts go. They know which way the light is coming from at different times of the day. They don't just go to a city and walk around to various tourist attractions, hoping to bump into a great picture.

With that in mind, let's take a look at some resources you can use to do the same thing.

Physical Scouting

In this lesson, we are going to spend our time looking at online resources for finding great locations. The reason for that is that online searching is the most convenient and easiest way to go. But that doesn't mean we should overlook the value of physically scouting your location.

If you have the opportunity to physically go to a location ahead of time, that is a great thing to do. You will become intimate with all aspects of the location. You'll see shooting angles. You'll see where the light might be coming from. You'll even get familiar with logistics like parking and where to set up.

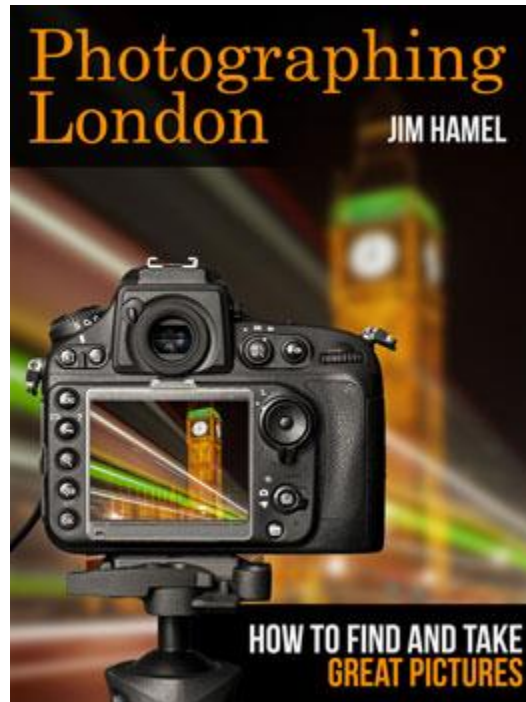
At the same time, physically scouting locations is difficult, time-consuming, and often impractical. If you are planning shots for an upcoming holiday/vacation, it might be completely impractical. Therefore, while there is a lot of value in this - and I encourage you to do so when you have the opportunity - I am going to focus on things you can do from home to scout your locations.

Virtual Scouting

There are a million resources, both online and offline, for finding out where you can get the best photos. I'm going to ignore most of them and focus on the very best ones. I'm approaching this like you're going on a trip, because, let's face it, most photography is done that way. But even if you're not on a trip, you can approach things in the same way.

Guide Books

The first thing to do is to see if there is a photography guidebook for your particular location. There won't always be one, but when there is one, that might be all you need. You will find these books for major cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, etc. You will also find similar guidebooks for major parks and scenic areas.



These are books written by photographers who specialize in these areas. They will cover all the major places and usually cue you into some places you never would have thought of. Even as to the major tourist attractions, they will show you when to go, what to shoot, what angles to try, etc. If there is a photography guidebook for your location, get it. Almost all of them that I have seen have been worth the money. In many cases, it is all you need.

World Maps

It is possible to go to databases of photos and use map features to search by location. There are a variety of photo communities on the web where people can post their pictures in galleries for viewing by others. The biggest one, which you may have heard of, is Flickr. But by far the best one is 500px. It has the highest quality of photography. The pictures posted to 500px are usually very good and quite often incredible.

People usually mark the location of the pictures they upload to Flickr or 500px. In fact, many cameras will do it for you now. This location will be shown if you go into the details of the picture. The sites maintain a world map with all the pictures in it. You can go into the map and look at the particular location you are interested in and see all the pictures taken there. There are sure to be some great examples for your inspiration.

In the case of Flickr, there is a clear [world map function](#). Use the link I have provided or else just go to the menu on Flickr. Oddly, 500px never publicized the world map function, but you could

get to it using this URL: <http://www.500px.com/map>. Lately, however, that link has not been working and it is unclear to me if it will ever work again.



Google Street View

Once you have your overall plan mapped out, go into Google Maps' Street View. This will not only give you views of the entire scene for the places you will be visiting, but it also lets you plan the logistics.

If you aren't familiar with Google Street View, just go to Google Maps. On the bottom right, you will see a little stick figure they call Pegman. Click and hold on Pegman, and you will see the streets light up with blue lines. Drag Pegman where you want to see and Google will show you a 360-degree view of that location. You can also move around from there. It is like a virtual walk. It is the next best thing to being there.



Obviously, this will give you a sneak peek of your location, and allow you to plan out shots. But usually 500px and any guidebook do a better job at that. Google Street view does a better job of nailing down the logistics for wherever you are going. It helps you get there. It will show you if there is some place to park. It will show you if it is the sort of place you can walk around. Use it to plan.

Local Pros/Experts

As the final step in your process, run a quick internet search for photographers specializing in the place you are going. You will have to wade through results of portrait and wedding photographers for that area, but you will also find photographers who specialize in photographing that place. Try it for the city or town, or the state/province. For smaller countries, you can even use the name of the country and photographer as your search terms.

Another way to find them is via the aforementioned Flickr or 500px. If you notice that you see a few shots from the same person, click through to their website and check it out. When you find them, check out their photography. They will almost always include location information.

But don't stop there. Send them an email or a message asking them for recommendations. I do this all the time and I usually get good responses. The worst that can happen is that they don't respond (which does occasionally happen), but even then it costs you nothing.

Day 13 Assignment

Find Your Location

Description:

Use the techniques described in this lesson to find a great spot to photograph within 15 minutes of where you live. There is a great spot for photographing near everyone. It might be at a lake, a scenic overlook, a historic area, or a downtown. If you can get out and photograph it, great! But if not, hold on to it for when conditions are just right.

Keys to Success:

- Virtually scout the location using the methods in the lesson.
- Since the location will be close to home, physically scout it next time you are in the area.
- Be sure you know the direction of the sun at different times of day.
- Sort out logistical issues such as parking, access, and any potential problems.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

You now have a go-to location. When you see conditions becoming optimal for your photographs - such as a magical sunset developing - head there. This will pay big dividends later.