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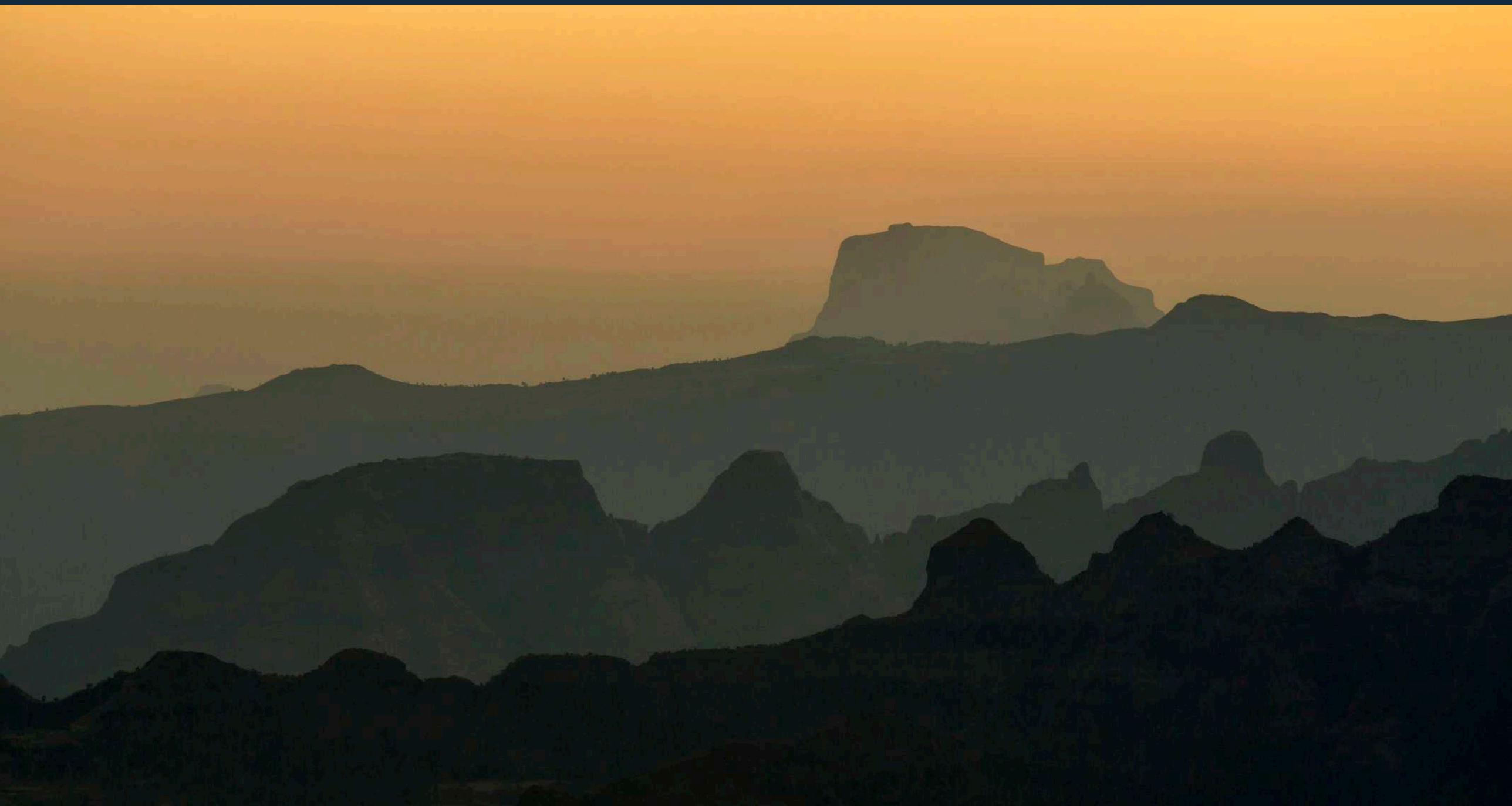
HOW TO USE LAYERING AND FOREGROUND INTEREST IN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide

Written by Robin Nichols



Photograph by Robin Nichols

One of my favorite shots taken in Kenya with the massive bulk of Mt Kilimanjaro in the distance. Weather controls much in the life of the landscape photographer. We can't control it, so we have to be patient, returning to the desired spot again and again until the light is 'right.' After several days of heavy cloud cover, Kilimanjaro revealed itself for ten minutes and was then lost again.

I usually ask all students coming through my photo classes about what subjects they like to shoot. Interestingly, I can almost predict what people are going to tell me before they reply: new mothers are obviously keen on getting great snaps of their **family**; younger students exhibit enthusiasm for **street photography;** and of course everyone travels these days, so a record of trips and vacations comes pretty high on the list. But that said, I think **landscape photography** probably still tops the list of responses.

Why so? I suspect it has something to do with the fact that landscapes are just 'there,' and to the uninitiated they are easy to capture. All you have to do is point and shoot, right?

David Bailey, a revolutionary fashion and social photographer from the '60s, famously said, "*It takes a lot of imagination to be a good photographer. You need less imagination to be a painter because you can invent things. But in photography everything is so ordinary, it takes a lot of looking before you learn to see the extraordinary…*".

Wise words, I think. Genres such as **people** and **street photography** are more challenging because you have to deal with the public – people who may or may not want to be photographed. It can get tricky. Regarding animals and babies, well we know what W. C Fields had to say on this topic, "*… never work with children or animals…,*" so I guess that leaves landscapes.

Image by Robin Nichols

Breaking this landscape down into its component layers, there's clearly a foreground, middle-to-distant region, and the cloudy sky region. It's reasonably interesting but fundamentally lacks foreground interest.

What I'd like to share with you in this guide is how to fine-tune your landscape shooting prowess by using a simple technique called **layering**. Now, don't panic; this has nothing to do with layers in Photoshop, although you certainly can use **software layers** to help enhance what was originally captured. But more on that later.

Landscapes are certainly very popular, but even though everyone travels to beautiful places, I still see a lot of very uninspiring work from quite seasoned photographers. Let's have a look at why this might be so.

When your landscape photos don't work, when they look distinctly underwhelming, it's likely because the result presented was shot in poor light. But it's equally likely that it has no clear foreground or middle ground. In fact, the least interesting landscapes I see are those where the entire composition contains nothing but background – and by that I mean distant features.

Now that's all good and well if you plan on printing the image to poster size or larger, but most of us don't do that, so it's important to include both foreground and middle ground details to bring a sense of depth and dimension to our work.

When you consider **layering** in landscape photography, we learn to look for a scene that has these distinct areas: foreground, middle ground, and far distance or background.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

Someone was obviously listening to my silent pleas for something 'interesting' in the front of the shot because along came a cranky old bull elephant, which just hung about between the mountain and me. This is an example of perfect timing: the right place at the right time. This is an unedited file. Take a look at the final edited version at the end of this guide to see how a bit of gentle software manipulation on these layers can radically improve what's already there.

What you'll learn in this guide:

- Identify the layered parts of any potential scene
- Use leading lines
- Frame tonal layers
- Develop post-processing tips
- Plus: recommended landscape lenses

Recommended Resource: If you'd like to learn more and improve your landscape photography, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: Complete Landscape Photography.

Image by Robin Nichols

This image displays a new layer sketch, which is now dividing the scene into four main areas. See the final edited version at the end of this guide.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

I was definitely in the right place, above an incredibly steep gorge in Ethiopia's Simien Mountains, but the light wasn't right and there was NO foreground simply because there was nothing there! The edge of the road fell away into the gorge. I even tried shooting three bracketed frames to see if creating an HDR image might help. It certainly reveals more detail in the shadow areas, but it's still a bit boring.

WHERE ARE WE GOING WRONG?

Anyone who has shot a big scene with a single image or by stitching a panorama together will undoubtedly agree that shooting them is easy enough, but landscapes are very hard to make interesting, even if the place you are shooting is beautiful. This is especially true when shooting a panorama.

Think about it. The process of adding more detail to the left and right of the subject, as one does with a wide format panorama, tends to make the subject appear even more distant. But don't take my word for it; open up some of your landscapes and check out the main subject and ask yourself if it's dominant or distant.

In my experience most tend to be distant, often with a lot of nothing very special in the foreground. Inevitably we get too taken up by the subject: the tall mountain range, a sweeping coastline, or a city skyline at night. We completely forget to fill other parts of the frame with interesting subject matter.

Let me explain a bit more. I see hundreds of landscapes that are snapped, from across a river, over a fence, off the back of a ferry, out of a car window, or from across a freeway, and in these you'll see that only 40% or 50% of the image content is really interesting. This interest inevitably sits in the middle or far distance and is surrounded by a sea of uninteresting details: choppy water, desert scrub, indistinct fields – that kind of thing.

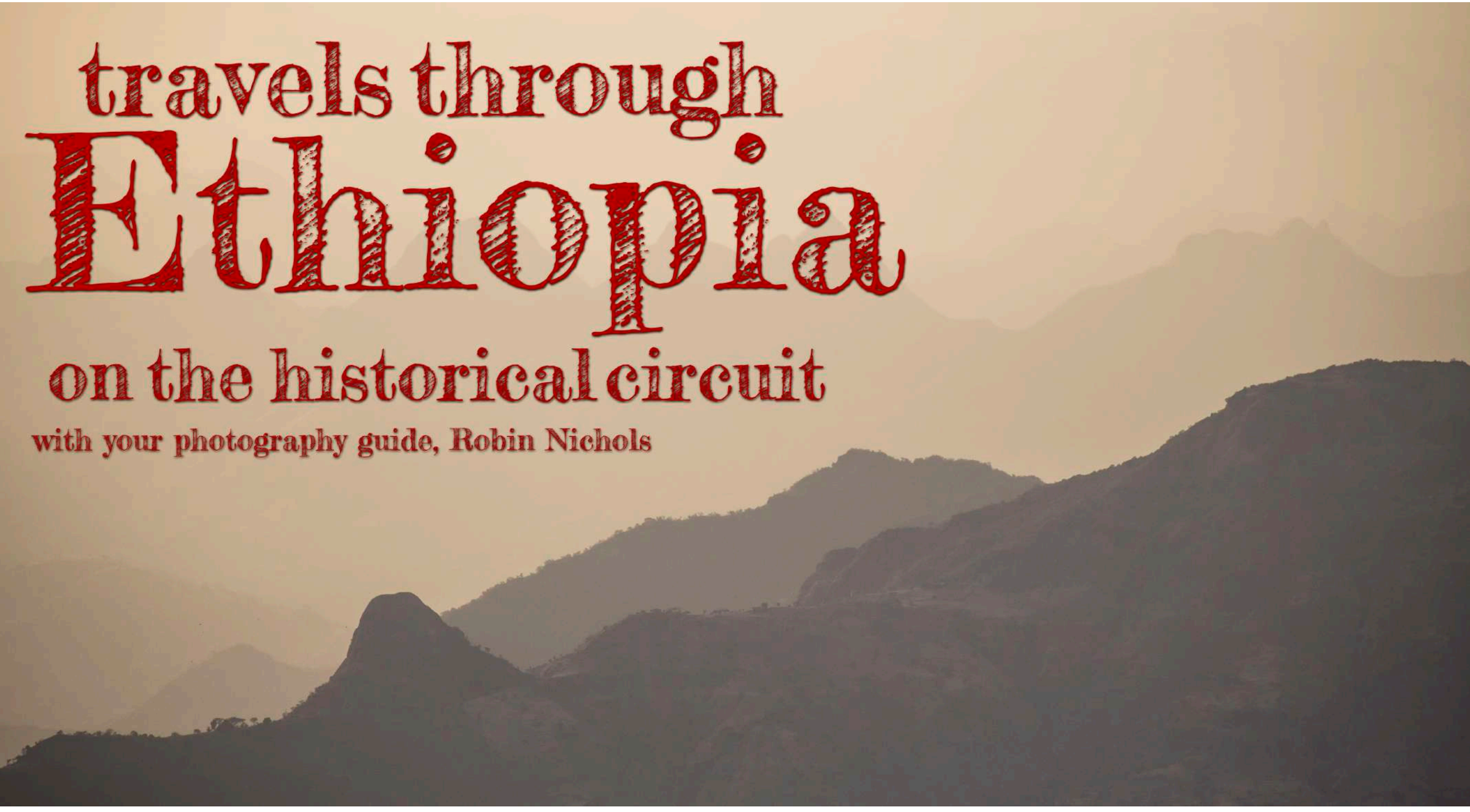
Photograph by Robin Nichols

Same location, just a bit further up the track. We were on a guided walk with these three charming fellows. While the rest of the group took snaps of the distant mountains, I asked the three if it was OK for me to take a portrait (always a good policy if they are the ones holding the weapons!). As a point of foreground interest, it works well because it puts the scene into some form of context – that foreigners can't travel anywhere in this country without the need for one or more guides, which was fine with us because they knew the land and it provided them with an additional income. And besides, I got the shot.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

Sometimes it's a good idea to shoot scenes like this even though there's no clear foreground interest present. It's not because they make fantastic landscapes – although the layers in this example are about as clear as you could possibly want (clearly sunset is a beautiful time of day), but I also see images such as this having the perfect mix of photographic detail and space, areas over which I can add text for a photo book (see next illustration).

What these images need is a **strong visual foreground**, a **point of focus** – something for the eye to lock on to. This has the effect of breaking up the endless monotony of a far-off subject. It's like any good composition: 'simple' images usually work a whole lot better than those that have everything crammed into the one frame, where a viewer can be so easily overwhelmed with both relevant and irrelevant details.



Photograph by Robin Nichols

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In a rather obvious example of a leading line, the sinuous road easily carves a pathway through this Icelandic landscape, pulling the eye into the frame from the right-hand side and exiting at the top left-hand side of the frame.

LAYERED FEATURES: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

So, point one is to try and include **foreground interest.** This is your first layer.

It might be something on the river bank where you are standing; it might be a gnarled, dead tree, an animal, a patch of colorful flowers, or a canoe pulled up on the shore. Almost anything will do. The more colorful, textured, or unusual, the better.

Behind this is your **mid-ground** which can act as the second layer with which to frame the content. This could be a lake, a river, a highway, or a just a forest path that forms a natural band across the composition, separating the immediate foreground from the distance.

Besides identifying layers in a landscape, you can also include **leading lines**. These work in much the same way that was used by landscape painters such as J. M. W. Turner, John Constable, Camille Pissaro, Claude Monet, and Vincent van Gogh, to name a few.

Painters would add a feature like a path or river that was used compositionally to lead the viewer's eyes through the relevant parts of the image construction; the foreground, the middle ground, and the background.

The humble photographer, however, must learn to discover these lines in the landscape and use the focal length to crop the composition so as to arrange such lines to your benefit. Sometimes it's just not going to work, sometimes it does. Above all, the trick is in learning to look and see.

Having isolated a foreground and a middle layer, the **background layer** can usually then be the city, the mountain range, the interesting rock formation, or whatever attracted you to the place in the first instance.

If this is shot in the right light at the right angle and with attention to the foreground and mid-ground layers, it should improve the interest level significantly. And if the climate and time of day is also working in your favor, your results should improve dramatically.

But as David Bailey told us back in the '60s, "If you are not looking, you won't see."

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Photograph by Robin Nichols

This is another landscape photograph from Iceland. In this example I was contemplating shooting a panorama to illustrate the bleakness of the land, when suddenly the distant cloud cleared revealing a much higher mountain in the far distance. I was in the right place at the right time. In post-production I used the Dodge and Burn brushes to help separate the layers: the darkness in the immediate foreground from the mid-ground ridges, and the distant high peaks.

TECHNIQUES FOR LANDSCAPE LAYERING

As already mentioned, the time of day, angle of the sun, and the weather all play a vital part in helping you to emphasize a layered result.

Shooting early on, or at the end of the day, helps exponentially to emphasize the depth of any scene simply because things near to you appear clear, while distant objects, such as ridges and landmasses, tend to fade the further away they are.

Good weather also helps in making, or breaking, a landscape. By 'good weather' I don't mean perfect blue skies; quite the opposite. A nice **stormy sky** opens up another dimension to your landscape composition, adding tension, visual drama, and yet another layer above and behind the middle and far distance layers.

Once identified, landscape layers can be enhanced using **simple software techniques** (see page 16).

Choice of lens is very important. I get asked all the time what the 'best' lens for landscapes is. It's a hard one to answer because there are 'small landscapes' as well as massive panoramas. Generally, I'd recommend a 24mm wide-angle lens. If you are shooting with an **APS-C-type camera**, then a lens with an 18mm focal length, or wider, might be best.

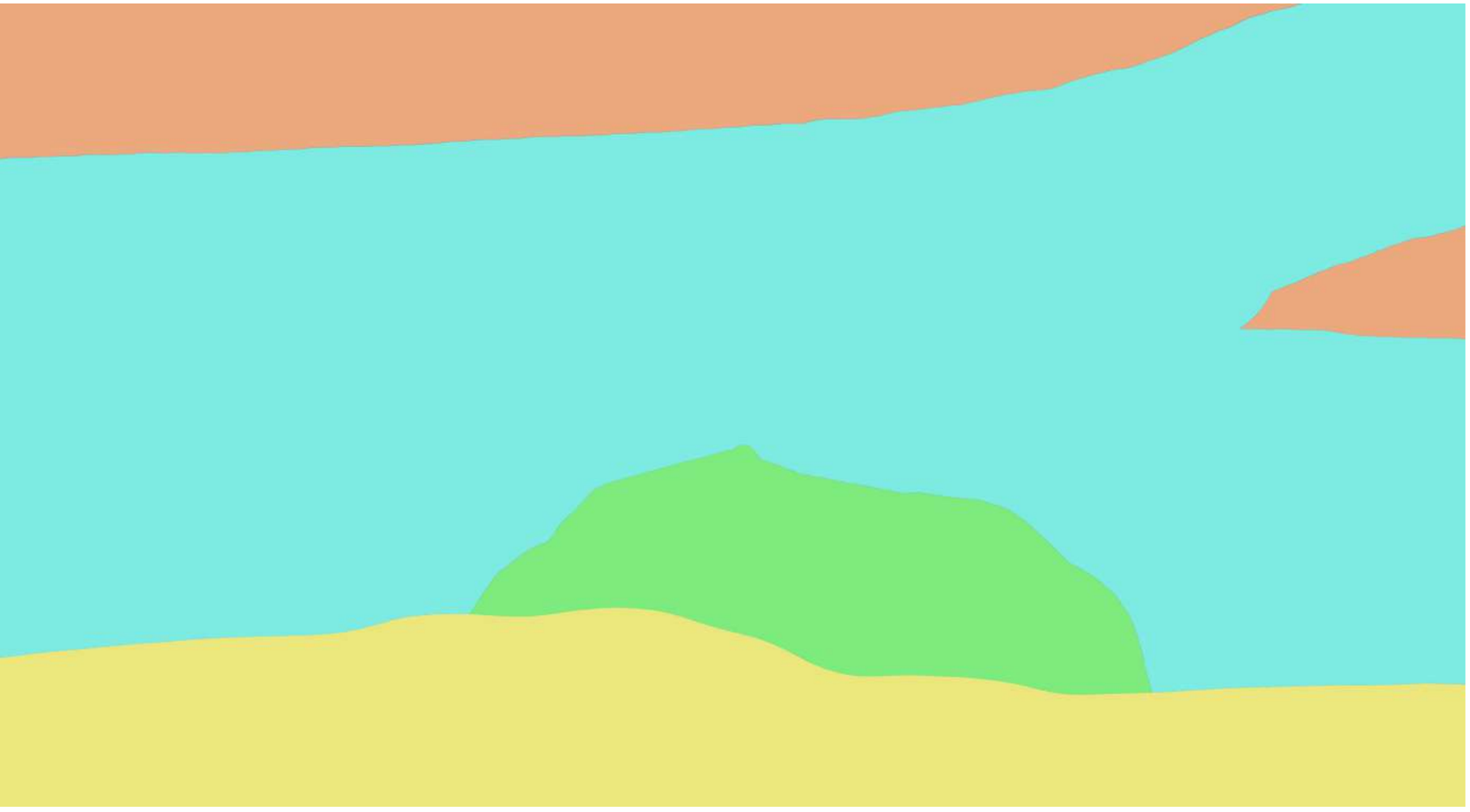

Image by Robin Nichols

A breakdown of the layers in this Icelandic landscape image.

I use a Canon EF17-40mm lens on my full-frame body and an EF-S 10-22mm lens on my APS-C camera body (this is equivalent to a 15-33mm focal length on a full-frame camera). I have also used a 300mm lens on occasion, which has the effect of compressing the layers closer together (see the shot of Namibian sand dunes on the next page).

Depth of field is also a feature worth considering. As a general rule, landscape photographers prefer to shoot using the maximum depth of field. They will choose f22 as a default aperture, even taking care to manually focus one third of the distance into the scene to maximize the depth of field (DOF). This is a technique called **Hyperfocal Distance,** where the DOF always falls one third in front of the point of focus (POF) and two thirds behind the POF.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

This image is another landscape example where the distant layer, this massive Namibian sand dune, forms the backdrop for its smaller cousin, adding an immediate sense of scale and texture to the scene. Interestingly, the layers here are also cleanly divided into dark shadow, smooth sand textures, and a knobbly textured background. All that was required in post-production was to darken the right-hand shadow area and increase the contrast in the background to emphasize its texture. I shot this using a 300mm telephoto lens to compress the distance between the foreground and the background details (Canon EF 300mm lens).

Stability is another important consideration. ISO 100 with a small aperture produces a long exposure; therefore there's a strong possibility of camera shake. So pack a **tripod**, and an **electronic cable release**. This is especially important if you further reduce the amount of light getting into the camera through the use of use of **special effects filters**.

I'd recommend the use of a **Polarising filter**. Depending on the angle of the light on the scene, you'll find these FX filters don't always work, but when they do, the added punch to blue skies and green foliage that they produce can be quite impressive.

I also recommend the use of **Neutral Density** (ND) filters whenever shooting around water. Typically ND filters cut out up to 10 exposure steps of light (depending on the type of ND filter you use), which forces the camera to expose for a long time. This has the effect of making rough water appear frozen and produces that wonderful smoky waterfall effect. Again, a tripod is a must.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

Climate and time of day plays a vital role in a photographer's creative palette. At any time, other than early morning or, as recorded here, late afternoon, this scene would not be worth shooting other than as a record of the place.

With the setting sun and a lot of atmospheric dust, the color of the sky intensifies and the ridges of the Simien Mountains in Northern Ethiopia stand out as magnificent layers that fade into the distance.

Photograph by Robin Nichols

Here's the final version of the bull elephant and Kilimanjaro picture. I added some saturation and shadow density into the foreground and darkened the mid-ground, which in turn emphasized the mountain peeking out of the cloud cover.

POST-PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

Software can be used to emphasize layering in a landscape. I personally recommend using the **Dodge** and **Burn** tools. You'll find these handy 'brushes' in most good-quality photo editing applications.

These tools give the photographer the ability to brush more or less density into specific tonal areas in the image. For example, with the Dodge brush you can 'paint' the highlights a bit brighter or lift the density of the mid-tones. With the Burn brush you can darken the mid-tones, shadows, or highlights individually, all without the need for any complex selections or masking. Providing you go slowly, it is easy enough to do.

I consider these to be one of software's **hero tools** because they can be so effective at bringing out detail in the landscape layers with little or no prior practice.

Another tool that's particularly good for **emphasizing color** in landscapes is the **Sponge tool**. Like the Burn and Dodge brushes, this tool is easy to use (again, it works best when set to a low speed) and enhances color that's already in the scene. Slowly, slowly works best.

Set it to reverse to reduce the color values in a scene. This is a particularly good technique for dimming down colors that distract attention from the main subject. You don't reduce the color to the point where it turns black and white, just enough to knock back the saturation to make that distraction blend into the background.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Nichols is a UK-born photographer. He has spent the past 30 years in Sydney, Australia, where he began work as a cameraman, then as a freelance photographer.

He worked as a freelance writer and then as a magazine editor for several photography publications for more than eight years. He also ran his own publishing business, producing two specialist magazines - *Better Photoshop Techniques* and *Better Digital Camera* magazine.

Aside from conducting photo tours and workshops, Robin teaches photography, video, and post-processing classes through the Centre for Continuing Education at Sydney University.

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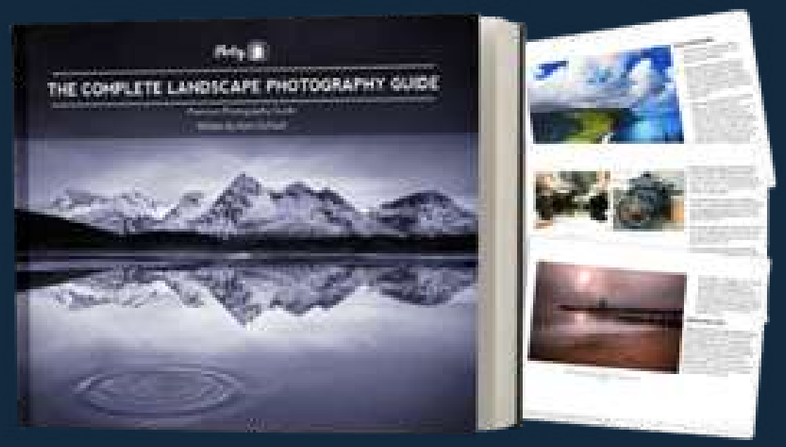

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