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HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH WATERFALLS

Short Guide

Written by Jason D. Little

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Waterfalls are one of our planet's most amazing natural features. Whether you're witnessing the sheer power and enormity of waterfalls such as Jim Jim Falls, Victoria Falls, or Niagara Falls, or enjoying the charm and serenity of one of the smaller falls to be located nearly anywhere in the world, waterfalls have always held the human imagination captive.

Capturing waterfalls photographically, however, has proven elusive for many individuals. And, as we all know, an elusive subject can easily lead to frustration. I would argue, though, that successfully photographing waterfalls is not so much defined by assessing a level of difficulty but, instead, comes about by knowing a handful of tricks and techniques that will help you get the job done.

Let's find out what it takes.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

It's possible that you've sought waterfall photography advice before and you were give gear-related recommendations that reached well beyond your means. The truth is that waterfall photography doesn't need to be any more expensive than any other genre of photography. A simple online search will reveal that there are people who have gotten good waterfall photos with a mobile device! We won't be concentrating on camera phone photography here, but just be aware that you don't need to spend a fortune to photograph a waterfall. Here are some basic recommendations.

- A camera capable of shutter speeds longer than 1 second. Long shutter speeds are required to get that prized silky smooth effect to the flowing water.
- A wide angle zoom lens. This will maximize your compositional flexibility and efficiency, but a long lens, or any lens for that matter, will work.
- A sturdy tripod.
- A polarizing filter. A circular polarizer is used to reduce glare and unwanted reflections from shiny surfaces; it will also cut down some of the light entering your lens, making it easier to lengthen exposure time.

Optional accessories:

- A remote shutter release to serve as an added layer of protection against camera shake.
- A neutral density filter. This will block more light (varies according to strength of the filter) than a circular polarizer alone, making it possible to work in sunny conditions.

SF Brit
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You don’t necessarily have to travel to such places just to find a waterfall.

WHERE TO FIND WATERFALLS

You don’t need to live in a particularly exotic place to find a waterfall. Likewise, you don’t necessarily have to travel to such places just to find a waterfall. Your area may not be littered with waterfalls, but if you do a little bit of research you should be able to find one relatively close to you. It may not match the majesty of Brazil’s Iguazu Falls, but something is better than nothing, right? If it’s your first time shooting waterfalls, start small so you’re not overwhelmed by the experience.

So how do you find out if there are any waterfalls near you?

- A waterfall guidebook/locator. There are both books and apps for this.
- A general travel/tourist guide will sometimes show waterfall locations.
- A visit to a national park. There are experts on hand who should be able to point you in the right direction.
- A Google search.
- A Flickr search.
- Waterfalls are not in short supply; you just have to know where to look.

Now let’s get to work.


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When you arrive at the waterfall, avoid the temptation to immediately begin clicking your shutter button.

SETUP AND COMPOSE

As the old saying goes, haste makes waste. When you arrive at the waterfall, avoid the temptation to immediately begin clicking your shutter button. Take some time to absorb the scene; walk around the area, examine the waterfall from a number of different angles, and study the surroundings.

Once you set up your camera and tripod, use the viewfinder to look at the scene from different angles and different positions. Consider the following before you shoot:

Don’t compose a head-on shot; shoot at an angle to the waterfall.

Include foreground elements to provide some depth and texture to the scene.

If you use a telephoto zoom lens, focus on a specific area of the waterfall instead of trying to back up and frame the whole thing.

Ian Sane
https://www.flickr.com/photos/31246066@N04/6297678022/

Including a waterfall's surroundings in the shot can work to wonderful effect.

Waterfall photography can be as daring and creative as any other style of photography.

If you only have one of the two filters, make sure it's a polarizer.

ATTACH AND ADJUST YOUR FILTERS

As alluded to above, you can use both a circular polarizer and a neutral density filter; if you only have one of the two filters, make sure it's a polarizer.

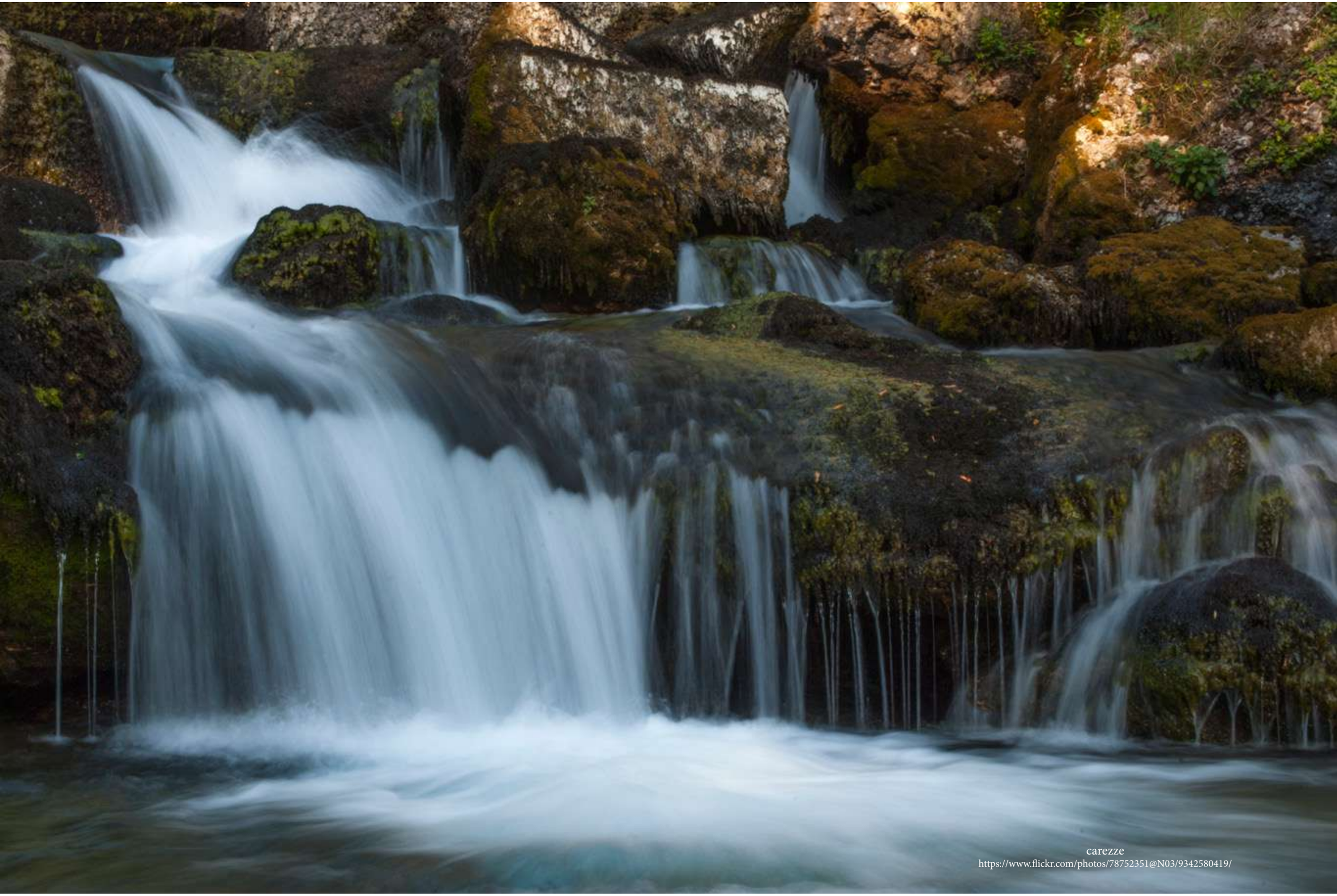
Attach the polarizer to the front of your lens and, as you look through the viewfinder, rotate the filter until you see any reflections start to disappear. As an added bonus, you'll notice that colors will also appear more saturated.

The use of a neutral density filter is less crucial, but you may still find it comes in handy, especially if you're working in the bright sun, as it decreases light entering your camera by several stops.

A neutral density filter marked as ND4, for example, reduces light by two stops; this is typically considered ideal for waterfall photography since it allows you to slow your shutter speed to great effect without going overboard.

To illustrate this point, if your camera gives you an initial reading of 1/4 second and you then attached an ND4 filter, the subsequent reading would be 1 second.

Use filters at your own discretion.



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Things can vary greatly from one environment to another, so you have to respond accordingly.

DIAL IN YOUR SETTINGS

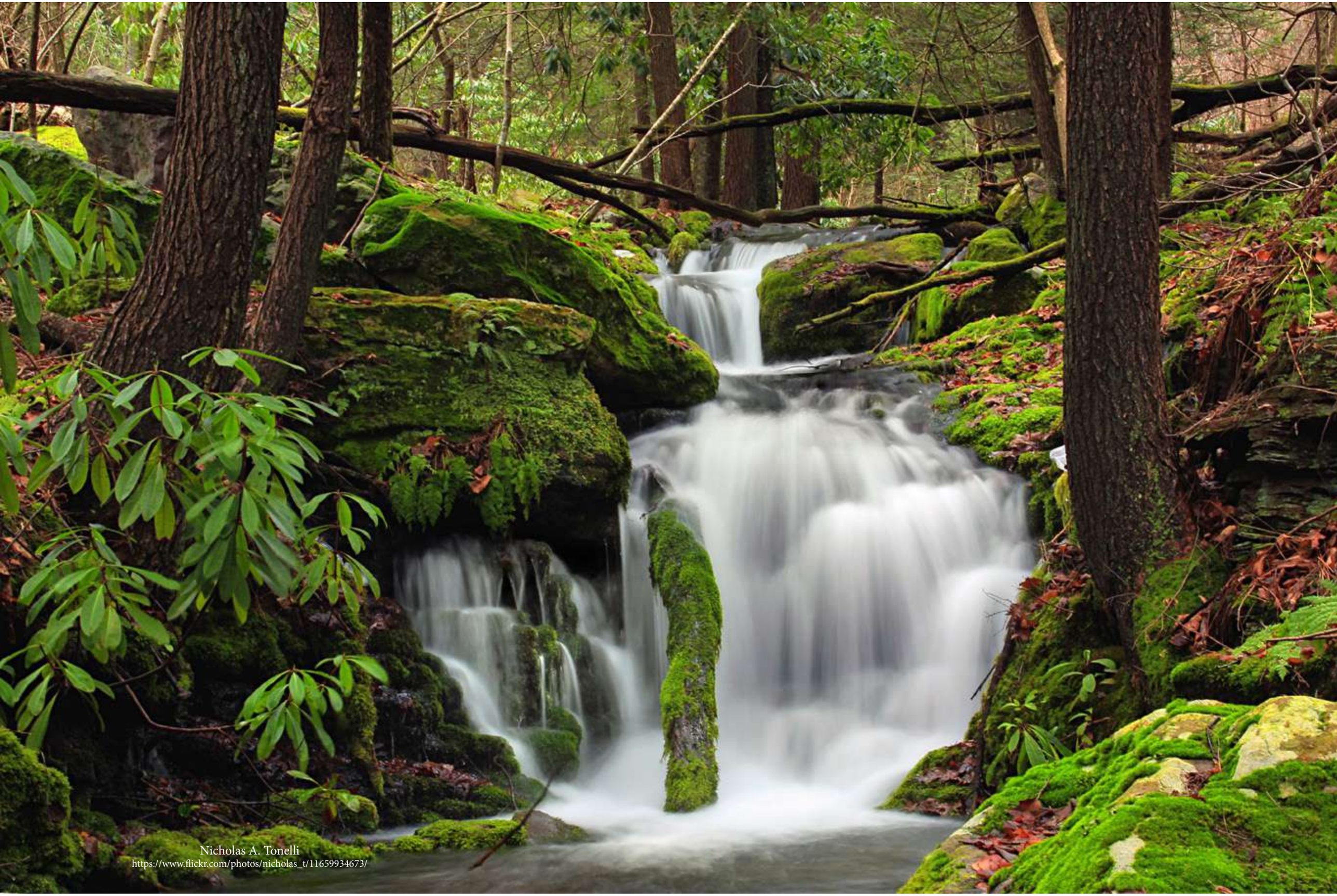
There are no concrete rules about exact exposure settings; things can vary greatly from one environment to another, so you have to respond accordingly. The settings below represent a good starting point; try them out and make adjustments as needed:

Shooting mode - Manual (M) will be the optimal shooting mode. Given the emphasis on shutter speed, you might attempt to work in shutter priority (Tv); if so, you'll quickly find that the camera won't always choose the best depth-of-field. Waterfall photography is yet another example of when it is best to not let your camera make too many decisions for you. Shooting in manual will likely turn out to be easier than you previously thought.

Aperture - Use a small aperture; f/16 is a good place to start. A small aperture lets in less light, thus allowing for longer shutter speeds, and helps keep everything in clear focus due to increased depth-of-field. You should avoid the minimum aperture (f/22 to f/32 on most lenses) as a type of distortion known as diffraction usually sets in at that point.

Shutter speed - As we've referenced a number of times in this guide, beautiful waterfall photography leans heavily on the use of a slow shutter speed. Finding precisely which shutter speed gives the effect you're looking for requires some trial and error, but 2 seconds is a reasonable starting point. You may, however, find yourself using shutter speeds up to 30 seconds — perhaps longer.

ISO - Use the lowest ISO setting available on your camera. The benefits are threefold: less noise, more dynamic range, and longer shutter speed (the lower the ISO, the less sensitive the sensor is to light).



Nicholas A. Tonelli
https://www.flickr.com/photos/nicholas_t/11659934673/

Paul Bicahttps://www.flickr.com/photos/dexxus/4137841698/

This 8 second exposure illustrates brilliantly what a long shutter speed can do to moving water.

If your photo is showing significant loss of detail in the shadows, try the shot again at a slower shutter speed.

TAKE THE SHOT

Now comes the easy part: press and release the shutter button.

Before you call it a day, take a good look at the image you've captured on your camera's LCD screen. Make sure you're happy with the framing and composition and overall exposure. Also examine the histogram, looking for problems in both shadows and highlights.

If your photo is showing significant loss of detail in the shadows, try the shot again at a slower shutter speed. Conversely, loss of highlight detail (blown out areas) suggests that you should reshoot with a faster shutter speed.

If your shutter speed is proving too fast to get that smooth look to the water and your exposure settings are all where they should be (small aperture, low ISO), then this is the perfect time to use a neutral density filter. Again, the ND4 should be adequate

Even Normann
https://www.flickr.com/photos/enor/517787281/

This waterfall image shows the effect of a faster shutter speed (1/125 sec.). The water appears to be “stopped” in time rather than flowing smoothly.

There’s no right or wrong — just know how the shutter speed will affect your photos.

Paulo Brandao
https://www.flickr.com/photos/paulobrandao/4420746506/

A waterfall doesn't have to be grand and imposing to be beautiful.

FINISHING TOUCHES

You will probably want to apply some sharpening, increase contrast and perhaps color saturation, all in an effort to maximize the beauty of the scene.

You've read it numerous times in these guides, but it needs repeating — post-processing is a highly subjective process. It's your image; you're free to do what you want with it. Of course, you will probably want to apply some sharpening, increase contrast and perhaps color saturation, all in an effort to maximize the beauty of the scene.

Something to keep in mind, especially as it applies to waterfall photography, is that even with a nicely exposed shot, you're likely to get a small area or two of blown out highlights.

There's no need to retake the shot in such an instance; just use one of the many options and techniques available in your post processing software to fix problem areas (the "burn" tool, for example).

Elliot Gilfix
https://www.flickr.com/photos/mothernaturephotos/4220184062/

When shooting waterfalls, balanced and diffused lighting is ideal.

ONE FINAL TIP

Weather conditions are something we obviously can’t control, but they can have a notable impact on our photography.

When shooting waterfalls, balanced and diffused lighting is ideal — traits most often associated with overcast skies.

So if you can wait for a cloudy day to do your waterfall photography, you will get the best results. Otherwise, shooting around the times of sunrise or sunset are good choices.

CONCLUSION

Chase all the waterfalls your heart desires; revisit them as often as possible, making a point of correcting mistakes you made previously, or capturing angles you didn’t try the time before. You will be an expert before you know it!

About the Author

Jason D. Little is a photographer (shooting macros, portraits, candids, and the occasional landscape), part time writer, and full time lover of music.
You can see Jason's photography on his *Photography Blog* or on *Flickr.*

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