

Photographing Waterfalls

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Waterfalls are some of the most beautiful natural features you will ever get the opportunity to photograph. Their elegance, movement, and ever-changing character make them beautiful to capture, but they do present a number of practical and technical challenges which can make them difficult to shoot.

The following are tips for waterfall photography using a dSLR or mirrorless camera that will help you snap stunning images, and master the technical and creative sides of photographing this fascinating subject.

Number 1 - Research

- Decide on which waterfall you want to photograph
- Then do as much research on the falls as possible
 - Where is the waterfall located?
 - How far will I have to hike to the falls?
 - What conditions can I expect on the trail?
 - Hiking conditions: easy, moderate, or strenuous (or a combination of all)
 - Where to research
 - The web: just type in the name of the falls (maybe you will have to include the state as well).
 - Waterfalls books: (Maybe someone has written a book about waterfalls in your area. (Ex. "North Carolina Waterfalls" by Kevin Adams is a ****great book****).
 - Talking with other photographers who have been to the falls.
- The best time of day to shoot the falls
- The more information you have the better prepared you will be

Number 2 - Photographing

You will need to decide how you want to shoot the waterfalls. This can be an interesting question. Do you want to show movement (slow the water down) or do you want to stop the water completely? This decision will determine your equipment needs. Most people today (basic non-photographers) like to see the motion of the water (blur – milky water or silky water). However, it is your photograph, so shoot the falls the way you want.

If all you want is a good shot of the falls and you don't care about camera setting, then just shoot on Automatic or Program mode. However, if you do care, then follow the information below.

- Basic Information
 - ISO

- Always shoot at the lowest ISO possible. If you are hand holding, your ISO will have to be higher to avoid camera shake.
 - If using a tripod, then use the lowest ISO your camera will allow.
- White Balance
 - Set your camera to either Auto, Cloudy or Shade
 - Cloudy will give your photos a warmer look.
 - If you are shooting your photos in RAW, then the White Balance can be changed in Post Processing.
- Shutter Speed
 - This camera function will help you determine how fast or slow the water will be. A low shutter speed will produce the silky water look, whereas a fast shutter speed will stop the water.
 - A fast shutter speed, 1/60 sec or higher, will stop the water.
 - A slow shutter speed, 1/5 sec, will produce milky water.
 - To get the type of movement you like, you will have to test your camera at various shutter speeds to make this determination.
 - When using Shutter Priority, the camera will make the decision on what aperture the camera will be shooting. Aperture determines Depth of Field (DOF).
- Manual Speed
 - In my opinion the best way to shoot water/waterfalls is in the Manual Mode. That way you have total control of your camera. You set the Shutter Speed as well as the Aperture to get your desired look.

Number 3 – Equipment

In discussing equipment, you may use what you already have. However, if you don't have the equipment listed below, you may want to consider purchasing. Equipment below is listed in priority order (my opinion).

- Camera
 - dSRL or Mirrorless interchangeable-lens
 - Both will allow you to set your own camera settings.
 - In some cases, the autofocus may not be able to focus on moving water. In that case, move to manual focus. However, don't forget to turn your autofocus back on when done.
- Lens
 - This will depend on what you have available and how you want to shoot the falls.

- Many people will use a wide angle lens (18-35mm). However, some will use a telephoto lens (70-200 or higher) to get up close and personal with the falls.
- The lens you use will depend on what you want to show
- Tripod
 - If using slow shutter speeds, it is essential that you use a tripod. Otherwise, you will end up with super blurry photos. When setting up your tripod, avoid using the center vertical column because it severely reduces the tripod's stability.
- Polarizing Filter
 - This filter will help reduce or eliminate reflections in the water and on wet rocks. It will also help reduce glare.
- Cable Release or Timer on your camera\
 - When shooting at slow shutter speeds, any movement on the camera or tripod may blur your photo.
 - To avoid this, use a cable release, so nothing touches the camera or tripod.
 - If you don't have a cable release, use the timer on your camera. This way nothing is touching your equipment.
 - Remember you want the sharpest picture you can get.
- A variable Neutral Density Filter
 - If you are photographing a waterfall on a bright sunny day, you may not be able to get your shutter speed down to the desired setting.
 - Using a variable Neutral Density will allow you to darken the light coming through your lens, which tricks your camera into requiring a long exposure time (slower shutter speed).
- Lens Cloth
 - To keep the mist and spray off your lens

Number 4 – General Information

- Photograph the waterfall at the right time
 - Your basic research will help
 - Best time of the day
 - West Facing – morning
 - East Facing – afternoon
 - Cloudy day – anytime
 - Midday – The worst time – the falls may be in half light and in half shade.
 - Water source of the falls will determine how much water flow.
 - How much rain has fallen recently

- If you are in a dry period, then there may not be any flow, or very little.
 - You may just have to go to falls to make this determination.
 - If you plan to do a slideshow on a specific waterfall(s), consider shooting the sign to the falls (if one is available) as well as shots along the trail.
- Wind
 - If there are trees in your photo and you are shooting at a slow shutter speed, the leaves will be blurred. This may or may not detract from your photo.
 - If the wind comes and goes, just wait till there is no wind and shoot.
 - If you have to shoot on a windy day, you may want to consider using a higher shutter speed.
- Composition
 - Photographing waterfalls is no different compositionally than any other landscape photograph.
 - Foreground elements can help add depth to your scene.
 - Consider walking down stream to include rocks in the water.
 - If you have waders available, get in the stream.
 - Waterfalls and their streams create natural lines.
 - If you can include a curve in the stream when photographing this, draw the viewer's eye throughout the image.
 - Shoot the waterfall from as many different angles as possible. The more shots you have the better chance of getting the one you want.
 - Look for an unusual viewpoint
 - Try photographing from high above.
 - Through trees
 - From behind the waterfall (if there is a safe way to do it)
 - Just above the stream for a more unusual and creative viewpoint.
 - Shoot the falls both vertically as well as horizontally
 - Shooting horizontally will force you to take in more of the surroundings and be more creative with the way you frame the scene.
 - Consider including people.
 - This will add interest to your photo
 - A well-placed person will create a focal point that might otherwise be lacking
 - People are also a great way to give your photo a sense of scale.
 - If you are in the right environment, sunrise or sunset photos of the falls can help add color to the scene.
- Safety
 - Use good **COMMON SENSE**
 - ***NEVER put yourself in danger!*** The shot is not worth it.

- Each year many people die or are seriously hurt around waterfalls.
- Go with a group or at least one other person.
- Wear proper footwear.
 - If you are hiking into the falls, I highly recommend hiking boots.
 - If you plan to get in the water, then carry a pair of old tennis shoes, river sandals or waders.
 - When stepping into a stream, avoid rocks with moss. They can be very slippery.
 - Also, when stepping on rocks, be sure they are stable.
 - If you do fall, be sure to hold your camera above your head, or you may be in for some costly repairs.
 - Anytime you are shooting around water, whether you are hand holding or on a tripod, I highly recommend you wear your camera strap around your neck. That way, if something does goes wrong, hopefully your camera will not end up in the water.
- Other non-camera gear
 - Insect Repellent
 - Hat
 - Layered clothing (if shooting where the temperature may change)

Number 5 – Post Processing

How much post-processing you need to do, will be determined by how well you shot the waterfall. There are many programs available from Photoshop, Lightroom, Photoshop Elements, Plixlr, etc.

Areas that may need help

- White Balance
- Exposure
- Shadows
- Highlights

How much post-processing you do will depend on you and what you want your final image to look like.

For information on various waterfalls to shoot in both North and South Carolina, see my website <http://www.bobspalding.net/Photography/Waterfalls.htm>