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Landscape and Nature Photography

I love nature photography. I love the patterns that nature produces, the colors—both vivid and muted, the awe-inspiring vistas of the grand outdoors, and the intimate details of a single flower. Some of my favorite photos are nature shots, with not a human being in site.

Nature photography presents its own challenges, of course. Few of the techniques you learned to create portraits and candid people shots apply to photographing landscapes and other scenery. You need the right lens and the right light to shoot great outdoors photos—as well as a good eye for the beauty of nature.

Finding the Right Light

We start our examination of nature photography by talking about the lighting. Of course we're talking natural light—whatever the sun is producing today. But there's good sunlight and bad sunlight, and which you work with determines the quality of your final photograph.

Shooting at the Golden Hours

Many pros prefer early morning over late afternoon, as the wind is normally calmer earlier in the day; this makes for less movement in the shot. (In addition, fewer people up are out and about that early, which means fewer human distractions.)

As you've learned throughout this book, the worst lighting to work with is direct lighting; it's harsh and unflattering. In terms of nature photography, direct lighting is what you get at midday, with the harsh sunlight shining straight down on you and the landscape. For that reason, you want to avoid shooting from midmorning to midafternoon.

You get much better light when you shoot in the early morning and late afternoon—the hours just after dawn and just before dusk. These are the golden hours for landscape photography.

The golden hours are golden for a number of reasons. First, the color of the sunlight is warmer, which puts a golden hue over the landscape. Second, the light is coming at a low angle, which creates flattering long shadows and reveals the texture of the scenery.

Bottom line, that scene that looks flat and washed out at noon comes alive when photographed in the early morning or late afternoon sun. For the professional landscape photographer, these are the only times of day to shoot.

Shooting Sunrises and Sunsets

Get up a little earlier or keep shooting a little later and you can capture some wonderful sunrise and sunset photos. Obviously, you need to be facing east to capture the scenery at sunrise, and west to capture the landscape at sunset. And you only get about a half hour of shooting, which means you have to be quick about it. But the results are worth the trouble, as you can see in Figure 23.1.

Here are some tips to get the most out of sunrise/sunset photography:

- Try to arrive about an hour before sunrise/sunset. This gives you a half hour or so to get everything positioned before the best shots present themselves.
- To capture a sweeping landscape in the rising/setting sun, use a wide-angle lens. To capture the sun itself dominant in the shot, use a telephoto lens.
- Use a tripod to ensure your camera doesn't move while you're shooting.

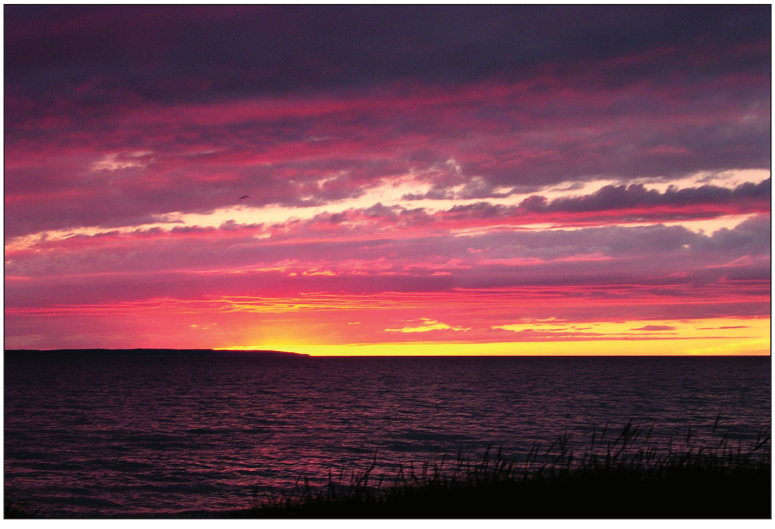

FIGURE 23.1
A dramatic shot of the setting sun—look at those colors!

- Turn off your camera's auto white balance mode. In the auto mode, you're likely to lose some of the warm golden tones of the sun. Instead, switch to the "shade" or "clouds" mode, usually used for cool lighting; this forces your camera to warm up the shot a tad.
- Position the horizon at the bottom rule-of-thirds horizontal line. This puts the sunset and sky in the top two thirds of the frame.
- Experiment with different manual exposures. Overexpose to see more of the foreground and blast the sky brighter; underexpose to capture richer colors from the sunrise/sunset itself.
- Shoot silhouettes against the sun, like the one shown in Figure 23.2. Expose for the sun itself, and all foreground subjects will be underexposed to black. The silhouette can be a person, place, or thing; it can even be the horizon itself.
- Don't just shoot the sunrise/sunset; look around you at how other aspects of the landscape are captured in the sun's new or dying rays. Often the best shot will be of some object in the gentle glow of the sun.
- Don't shoot just a single shot; a sunrise or sunset constantly changes over time. You'll capture different colors and different effects over the course of the sun's movement, so shoot a lot of photos to capture all the variety.

FIGURE 23.2
A sailboat silhouetted against the setting sun.

Photographing Landscapes

There are many different types of nature photography. We examine the three most common types—landscapes, flowers, and wildlife. Landscapes first.

Put simply, a landscape is that part of the scenery seen from a single viewpoint. A landscape can include any and all aspects of nature, including fields, trees, and water. You can have mountain landscapes, desert landscapes, ocean landscapes, and forest landscapes. A landscape shot can include structures (farmhouses, barns, fences, and the like) but seldom includes people or animals—unless they're very small in the frame and used to show scale.

Using the Right Equipment

You can use any digital camera to shoot landscapes, although a digital SLR (D-SLR) with a 3:2 aspect ratio produces better results than the squarer 4:3 frame of a point-and-shoot camera; the wider frame produces a more cinematic effect. A D-SLR also lets you shoot in aperture priority mode, which is necessary to set the small apertures necessary to capture a large depth of field.

It may seem odd to use a wide-angle lens to shoot distant scenery and a telephoto lens to shoot close-up portraits, but that's the way the world of photography works.

Whether you use a point-and-shoot or D-SLR, you want to add a polarizing filter to the lens, to help create richer colors in the sunlight. You may also want to consider a neutral density filter (to compensate for overbright scenes, especially when shooting water) or a graduated filter (to darken a bright sky).

You may also want to consider using a cable release or remote control for your camera. This lets you take the shot without physically pressing the shutter button.

As to the lens, the best lens for shooting wide landscapes is a slight wide-angle lens. A wide-angle lens lets you include more in the frame and opens up the perspective. It also keeps the entire shot in balance without introducing false perspective.

Also useful is a tripod. That's because you'll be using a small aperture, which requires a slow shutter speed. Slow shutter speeds can result in blurry shots if the camera moves during the exposure. Hence the need for a tripod to keep things steady.

Working with Depth of Field and Focus

A large depth of field is part and parcel in landscape photography. You want the entire shot, back to front, in sharp focus. You can contrast this approach with that of portrait photography, where you want the background deliberately blurred with a shallow depth of field.

To achieve the large depth of field desirable in landscape photography, shoot in aperture priority mode with a small aperture—that's a large f/stop, something in the f/8 to f/11 range. The smaller the aperture (larger the f/stop), the greater the depth of field.

To compensate for the small aperture, you'll be using a slow shutter speed and perhaps a high ISO. In addition, you'll want your camera's auto focus set at infinity—or switch to manual focus and focus on the middle distance.

Composing the Shot

Any good landscape photo consists of three distinct parts:

- **Foreground**. The part of the landscape closest to the camera. You give your photo a sense of depth by putting various points of interest into the foreground. These foreground elements can include small trees or shrubs, flowers, vines or roots, even man-made objects such as picnic benches, boats, or cars. These familiar objects help the viewer determine scale (size and distance).

- **Middle ground**. The part of the landscape between the nearest objects and the sky or distant scenery. Look for some interesting element—typically part of the scenery, such as a tree or a lake or something similar—to position in front of the background. (And remember, the middle ground is what you manually focus on with your camera.)

When you're shooting in a forest, you can leave out the foreground. Dead branches, leaves, and the like clutter the shot and distract from the beauty of the trees.

- **Background**. The farthest element in the frame. This may the sky itself, or a distant piece of scenery (mountains, hills, and so forth). All the other elements are framed against this background.

When all areas of a landscape photo are in focus, the viewer's eye wanders. To that end, you want to make sure that each area of the photo—foreground, middle ground, and background—contains some item of interest. Figure 23.3 provides a good example of this compositional strategy.

FIGURE 23.3

A landscape with interesting foreground, middle ground, and background.

You should shoot most of your landscapes in landscape or horizontal format. Use the rule of thirds to position the background (top third), middle ground (middle third), and foreground (bottom third) in the frame.

Working with the Horizon

Refresh your memory of the rule of thirds in Chapter 10, "Composition."

The rule of thirds is also used to position the horizon line—at the bottom third if you want to emphasize the sky or background elements, or at the top third if you want to emphasize foreground elements. Avoid having the horizon bisect the frame, where it doesn't emphasize anything.

And here's something equally important. When the horizon is in the frame, it must be level. I've ruined too many landscape shots by having the camera slightly tilted; nobody wants to see an ocean that runs uphill. Take the time to level the horizon in your camera's viewfinder; use the viewfinder's grid display, if necessary, to keep it straight.

Working with Lines

Because you typically don't have a dominant subject in a landscape photograph, lines are important.

Lines, you say? That's right, lines—lines created by the natural architecture of the landscape, or by individual pieces of scenery. Lines can be formed by a row of trees, patches of flowers, the ridges of a hillside or mountain range, or the breaking of ocean waves. Lines can even be man-made, such as the road moving into the distance in Figure 23.4. Look for the natural geometric shapes of the landscape, and use them to compose your photos.

FIGURE 23.4

Use lines to lead the eye and lend interest to a landscape photo.

Horizontal and vertical lines can help frame the scene or provide visual boundaries. They can also, however, serve as "speed bumps" for the viewer, keeping the eye from flowing across the picture. Use these types of static lines judiciously.

Diagonal lines are better; they're more dynamic than horizontal or vertical lines, and help the eye arc across the frame. Look for diagonals that serve as leading lines towards a dominant feature of the landscape, such as a tree or riverbank.

Even better are converging lines—two or more lines coming from different parts of the scene to converge on a single point. Converging lines function as powerful leading lines; make sure they converge to something of particular interest.

Curved lines are also interesting; they add aesthetic appeal to almost any nature shot. S-curves are particularly appealing, appearing in winding rivers and streams, twisting roads, swirling clouds, warped tree trunks and branches, and the like.

Working with Shapes and Frames

Lines aren't the only geometric elements that appear almost by design in nature. Elements of the landscape can create all manner of geometric shapes; you should be on the lookout for these shapes and use them to provide interest to your nature photos.

You can also use natural elements to frame your landscape shot. Look for overhanging branches to provide an upper frame, or a row of plants to provide a lower frame. These framing elements then draw attention to objects in the middle ground of the image, as demonstrated in Figure 23.5.

Provide a Focal Point

All this discussion of leading lines and frames reinforces the point that all photographs—even landscapes—need some sort of focal point. Without a center of attention (not literally centered in the frame, of course), the viewer's eyes wander through and out of the image, without stopping.

What is the focal point of a landscape photo? It can be any dominant element—a tree, flower, boulder, rock formation, building or other structure, fence, silhouette against the sky, you name it. It can be defined by size (largest element), shape (most interesting element), or color (brightest element). Whatever the focal point, all the lines and elements of the photograph should draw the eye to it, as illustrated in Figure 23.6.

FIGURE 23.5
Let nature frame your shot for you.

FIGURE 23.6
Draw attention to the focal point of the photograph.

As with other types of photography, you should position this main element using the rule of thirds. Try to place it at one of the four points where the rule of thirds lines intersect, or at least along one of the horizontal or vertical lines. Do not place the focal point dead center in the image.

Emphasizing the Sky

When you're shooting outdoors, the sky becomes an important element of your photographs. Unless you're shooting in a heavily wooded forest, most landscape shots will have a prominent sky, typically filling the top third of the frame.

As such, you want the sky to be as interesting as possible. A washed out mid-day sky is to be avoided; the early morning or late afternoon sky (enhanced with a polarizing filter) presents a much deeper color for your photograph's background. Equally if not more interesting are clouds, as you can see in Figure 23.7; in fact, if the cloud formations are dramatic enough, you might want to make the sky the focus of your shot, by lowering the horizon to the bottom third of the frame.

FIGURE 23.7
A dramatic sky can make for an interesting photo.

Dealing with the Elements

Outdoors photography entails dealing with the elements—both personally (don't get too wet on a rainy day!) and in your photographs.

It goes without saying that interesting weather can make for interesting shots. For example, low hanging clouds and fog create a soft, diffused effect, as demonstrated in Figure 23.8.

FIGURE 23.8
A foggy landscape.

Some weather is less interesting. For example, when you shoot on a cloudy day (which creates a nice diffuse lighting effect for your foreground subjects), try to keep the sky out of your shot. Gray skies aren't appealing, even if the resulting diffused light is.

Shooting in the wintertime presents interesting challenges. Avoid underexposure caused by the bright white stuff. Bring up the exposure so that the foreground or other subjects aren't in shadow; Figure 23.9 shows how it should look.

The same advice that works for snow scenes also applies to shooting at the beach. The bright sand presents the same challenges as does the white snow.

FIGURE 23.9
Step up the exposure when shooting in the snow.

Photographing Flowers

One important subset of nature photography is the flower shot. I'm not talking the typical indoor still life shot; the focus here is on photographing flowers outdoors, in their natural environment or in a flower garden. Let's face it; the most colorful outdoors shots always have flowers in them.

Using the Right Equipment

Shooting a flower or group of flowers is almost the opposite of shooting a scenic vista. Instead of using a wide-angle lens, you want to use a telephoto lens, to get the small flower as large as possible in the shot. A tripod is still helpful, of course, to keep the camera steady. And a polarizing filter is always valuable.

As to the camera, you again want to shoot in aperture priority mode. For this type of photography, you want a large aperture (lower f/stop number) to create a shallow depth of field; you want the background blurry behind the flower. You may need to

We discuss floral still lifes in Chapter 25, "Still Life Photography."

focus manually if the lens is close enough to the camera to fool your camera's auto focus system.

Of course, the key to shooting flowers is to get the plant large in the frame. This means getting physically close to the subject (or using a zoom or telephoto lens to achieve the same effect), at the "eye level" of the flower.

You may want to experiment shooting with your camera's macro mode, which lets you get closer to small subjects. Learn more about macro mode in Chapter 26, "Macro Photography."

Isolating the Subject

Shooting a single flower is different from shooting a patch of flowers in a landscape photo. For this type of shot, you need to somehow isolate that single flower from its background; otherwise, all the other flowers and stems will distract from the main subject.

You may be able to isolate the subject by manipulating depth of field, as shown in Figure 23.10. By blurring everything behind the subject with a shallow depth of field, the flower itself stands out. This is made easier when the background consists of green leaves and stems, rather than similarly colored flowers.

FIGURE 23.10
Use a shallow depth of field to isolate the flower from its background.

Another approach is to place an artificial background behind the flower. This can be accomplished with a simple sheet of black or colored cardboard, without disturbing the natural flower arrangement.

If a flower is being tossed around in the wind, use a piece of cardboard to block the wind. Just make sure the cardboard doesn't show in the frame!

Using Creative Lighting

Natural lighting might not be the best choice when shooting flowers outdoors. Direct sunlight can wash out a flower's colors; the softer lighting of a cloudy day might be a better choice.

Also worth considering is some sort of backlighting, either natural or artificial. As you can see in Figure 23.11, light shining through the petals can really make a flower shine. You can accomplish this by shooting into the sun, or by using a reflector card to bounce the sunlight from behind the flower. Make sure you adjust the exposure to compensate for a strong backlight.

FIGURE 23.11

Let backlighting shine through the translucent flower petals. (Dig that rainbow effect!)

Shooting Raindrops

Here's one of the best reasons to shoot flowers in the natural environment. When you shoot just after a rain shower, you can capture raindrops on the

petals and leaves. There's something especially appealing about raindrops in close-up, whether on flowers, grasses, leaves, tree trunks, or the like. Get as close as you can and work with the lighting to make those raindrops gleam; the effect, as shown in Figure 23.12, really makes the shot.

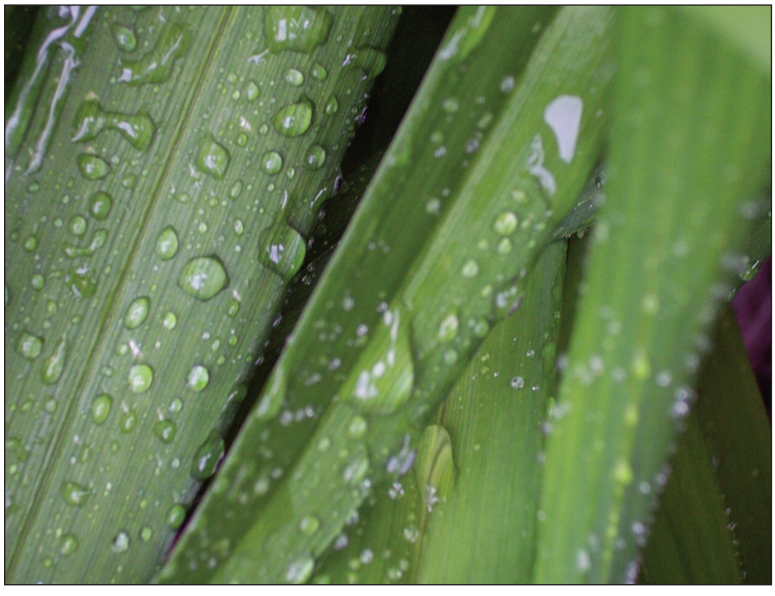

FIGURE 23.12
Photograph just after a rain shower to capture beaded raindrops.

Photographing Wildlife

One interesting subset of nature photography is wildlife photography. It takes a lot of patience and a fair amount of luck, but capturing a great photograph of a wild animal is particularly rewarding.

It's also somewhat challenging, if only because wild animals don't just sit around waiting to be photographed. Animals in the wild try to avoid human beings, which means you have to seek them out—most often at a distance. It's a matter of knowing where and when to look, but also of being in the right place at the right time.

Using the Right Equipment

I don't recommend using a standard point-and-shoot camera for wildlife photography; the standard 3X zoom just doesn't cut it. You need a much longer

zoom or telephoto lens, as you probably will be some distance from the animals. That argues for a prosumer camera with a 12X or 15X zoom, or a D-SLR with a long zoom or telephoto lens; I'd recommend a 200mm lens at minimum.

Naturally, you want a polarizing filter on that lens. And, if the lens is long enough, you might need a tripod to steady it. That said, you may need the flexibility of handheld shooting, so a tripod isn't mandatory.

Instead of using a tripod, try shooting at a fast shutter speed—the fastest your camera and lens are capable of. This minimizes the effect of camera shake if you're going handheld and also helps to capture the animal in motion.

Of course, the fast shutter speed dictates a wide aperture (small f/stop). You'll also want to shoot at a relatively high ISO setting.

Be Patient—And Plan

The key to capturing a wild animal in its element, as in the shot in Figure 23.13, is to be patient. Very patient. Extremely patient. You may have to wait for hours before that animal appears; be prepared for a long wait and for a flurry of action when the time is right.

FIGURE 23.13
Capturing a shot like this requires patience—and planning.

When the animal appears, you need to be prepared and ready to shoot at a moment's notice. Don't be caught unaware.

Keep your distance from wild animals. Even an animal that appears tame can be dangerous if it thinks it's cornered. There's a reason to use a long telephoto lens when photographing wildlife—it lets you shoot from a safe distance.

Because you might only have a second or two to capture a shot of an animal in the wild, you probably want to prefocus your camera. Here is where manual focus is handy. Manually focus your camera on an object near where you think the animal will appear—a tree or fence or whatever. Then, when the animal appears, you're prepared.

Also try to frame your shot beforehand. If at all possible, you want an unobstructed shot of the animal. That means positioning yourself at an angle that minimizes tree branches, leaves, and such between you and the animal. Work it out ahead of time, because you might not have a chance to move after the animal appears.

Shooting Animals in Their Natural Environment

When you're photographing small animals, you need to lower the camera. Don't shoot standing up from above; hunker down to get the shot at their level.

When composing the shot, you don't need to fill the frame with the animal. In fact, you might create a better photo by including some of the surrounding environment in the shot. This also helps to provide a sense of scale.

To avoid blurring the shot of an animal in motion, practice panning your camera. You want to follow the path of the animal as it moves; you may create a bit of a blurred background, but that's a nice effect when the animal is moving.

And here's one final, important tip. If you can, focus on the animal's eyes. Photographing an animal from the rear isn't very interesting, but if you can capture the animal looking at the camera, with the eyes in focus, you have your shot right there. As you can see in Figure 23.14, when you capture the animal looking at you (or at the camera, as it were), you create an emotional connection for the viewer. The eyes are the key.

FIGURE 23.14
Focus on the animal's eyes for a more dramatic shot.

Enhancing Nature Photos in Photoshop

Photoshop is the nature photographer's friend. While you're at the mercy of the elements when you're shooting outdoors, you can correct for nature's mistakes when you get back inside, at your computer.

Cropping Wildlife Shots

Photoshop's Crop tool is useful when you're shooting wildlife shots. With active animals, it isn't always possible to keep them properly framed; you may not be able to get close enough to them for a proper composition. As you can see in Figure 23.15, this is where the Crop tool comes in. Crop the photo to make the animal larger in the frame, or to provide better composition. It's not cheating.

Correcting Exposure in Landscapes

Cropping generally isn't a problem with landscape photography, but exposure is. Here's the problem—if you expose for the sky, the foreground is too dark; if you expose for the foreground, the sky is too bright. Unless you use a graduated filter on your camera, you end up with half your photo either under- or overexposed.

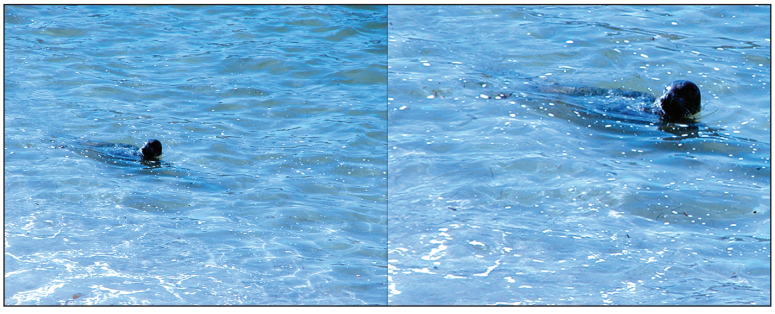

FIGURE 23.15
Crop a shot to better frame an animal—in this case, a seal at play in the ocean.

The solution is to adjust the exposure for the bad part of the shot in Photoshop. Select that area of the photo you need to fix, and then add an adjustment layer to adjust either exposure, brightness/contrast, or levels.

As in previous chapters, we use Photoshop CS for these examples, but you can make most of the same fixes in any photo editing program.

I prefer to adjust the exposure. After selecting the area to fix (using whatever selection tool you prefer), select Layers > New Adjustment Layer > Exposure; when the Exposure dialog box appears, move the Exposure slider to the left (to decrease the exposure and darken the selected area) or to the right (to increase the exposure and lighten the selected area). Figure 23.16 shows the before and after effect, in this instance adjusting the exposure for an overexposed background.

Depending on the particular photograph, you may get better results by adjusting the levels of the selected area. In this instance, select Layers > New Adjustment Layer > Levels; when the Levels dialog box appears, adjust the shadows and highlights sliders as necessary.

FIGURE 23.16
Fix an overexposed background (top) by editing only that area of the photograph (bottom).

PHOTOGRAPHING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

Not all landscapes are natural; when you're in a big city, you can capture the hustle and bustle of the urban landscape.

An urban landscape can be captured in shades of gray (via black-and-white photography), in the muted colors of its architecture, or in the surprisingly brilliant colors of its signs and vehicles (especially at night). Figures 23.17 through 23.19 illustrate all three types of shots.

Know, however, that it's not really an urban landscape photo if there are people in it; that's another type of photography, as we discussed in the previous chapter. Although, to be fair, the *evidence* of people can sometimes add interest to an otherwise impersonal shot; use your own best judgment.

Some urban cityscape shots work best with a wide-angle lens; others require a telephoto. To that end, a general-purpose zoom might do the trick. Because you'll be traversing the city on foot, you probably don't need a tripod.

FIGURE 23.17
An urban landscape in black and white.

FIGURE 23.18
The muted colors of an urban landscape.

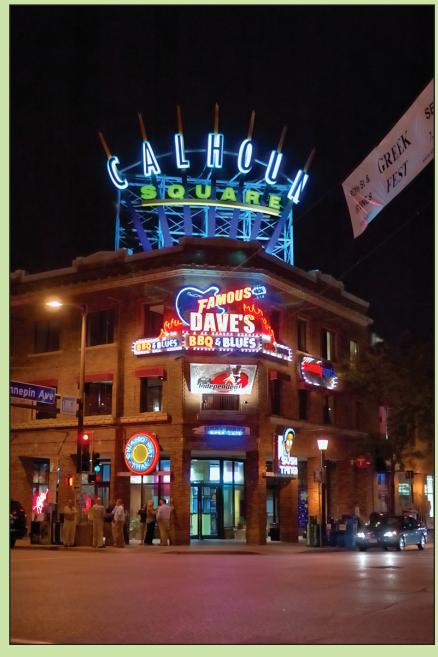

FIGURE 23.19
Bright lights, big city.

Depth of field is totally up to you. Some shots work best with the subject in focus and the rest of the scene not (shallow depth of field); other shots dictate a deeper focus (large depth of field). As I said, let the shot decide.

As in all outdoors photography, natural light is the best light; in an urban canyon, you don't have to worry about direct sunlight washing out the shot. Look for interesting shadows created by the nearby buildings, and play off them. And don't neglect night shooting; the vibe of a city changes tremendously when the sun goes down and the lights go on. A cityscape at night can be a truly beautiful thing.