

Understanding Light

Good light is paramount to any photograph, especially for landscapes. Given that we rely on natural light for almost every landscape shot we make, good light can be the difference between a snapshot and a great shot. Recognizing good light is a skill that all photographers must learn, but equally important is understanding what kind of light works best for different subjects. When we talk about natural light, obviously we are referring to the sun as our light source. The two primary qualities of sunlight are its color and direction. Both of these properties are governed by the time of day and also the time of year.

Dusk and dawn

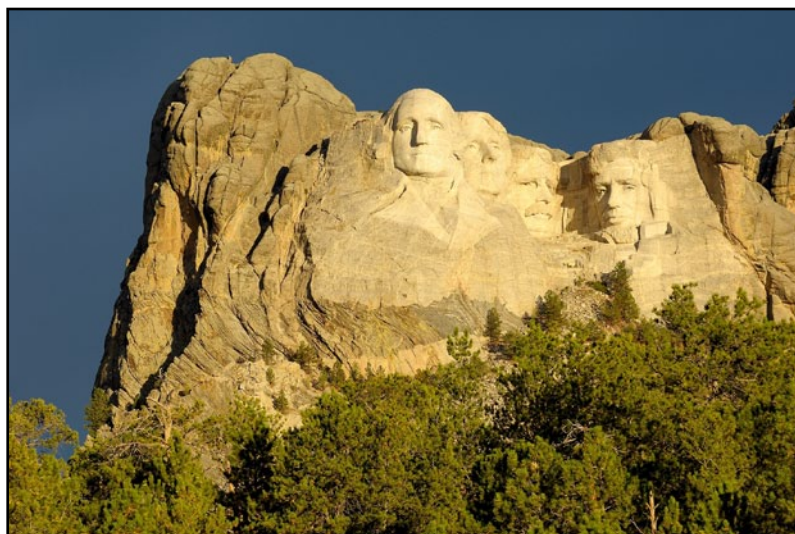
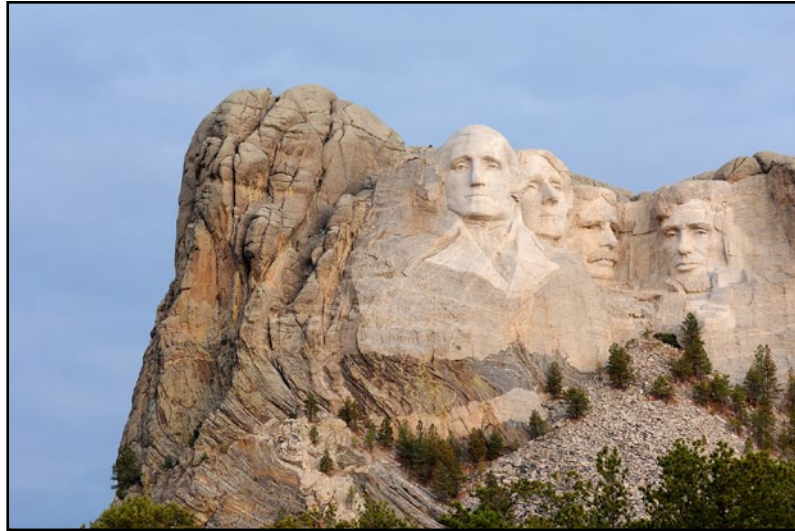
Another great time to find magical light is right before sunrise and right after sunset. When the sun is below the horizon, you'll see pastel skies and very soft lighting. The colors of the landscape are transformed with shades of pinks and blues. In addition, because the light at dawn and dusk is diffuse, you won't have the harsh shadows that come with direct sunlight.

The golden hour

For roughly an hour (sometimes less) right after sunrise and prior to sunset, the sun is low in the sky and the quality of light changes from white to nearly golden. This is the "golden hour," and it's one of the best times to take landscape photographs. Because the sun is low in the sky, objects in the landscape are lit from the side. Side-lighting also helps accentuate textures and patterns that are not easily visible under mid-day light.

Mid-day light

Once the golden hour has past, the sun is high in the sky and the light becomes harsher and bluish. Usually, this is the time of day that landscape photographers avoid making photographs. There are, however, some scenes that can work well in mid-day light; you can get intense blue skies and great contrast in clouds, especially if you use a polarizing filter. Most of the time, however, the high position of the sun in the sky renders landscapes flat and lifeless during the middle of the day.



The same subject can be rendered quite differently within over the course of an hour, just by the changing quality and direction of light. Here is Mt. Rushmore, before sunrise (top), two minutes after sunrise (middle) and 45 minutes after sunrise (bottom). Before sunrise, the light is diffuse and shadows are not strong. At sunrise, the light is very warm, and the sky is rendered in pastels. During the golden hour after sunrise the light is still very directional, but it has a warm yellow cast to it.