

Simplify the Landscape

By Gary W. Stanley

I'm leading another tour to Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks in southern Utah with a group of first-timers to these parks. I find myself once again staring up in awe at the high canyon walls of Zion. **(Image # 1)**



Image #1 - Courtyard of the Patriarchs, Zion NP
Nikon D200 and 24-200 lens at 200mm f/22 at 1/4th sec

The look on their face is very familiar, they're all smiling. I asked them if they thought they might be able to find something to photograph here, and they just laughed. I was thinking to myself "wait 'til they see Bryce!"

We had just arrived in Zion. We did a quick drive down to the end of the canyon road so that the group could get a feel for what was here, and then headed west through Springdale to shoot sunset. First thing in the morning, we'll photograph around the park entrance and up near

the canyon road. I related to the group the story of my first experience here. Several years ago, I stood staring at these same canyon walls trying to figure out how in the world any photographer could possibly capture this beauty. I spent the better part of our first morning trying to figure out how to photograph that all-encompassing landscape.

Finally, I came to the realization that I had better simplify my composition if I were going to come away with some decent images. Having already experienced that first feeling of awe, wonder, and confusion, I was smiling, knowing those people were now experiencing the same thing I did several years ago. Of course, I was hearing things like: "it's all beautiful, where do we start?" "Oh man, they don't make a lens wide enough for this place!"

Monday morning, we headed out for our sunrise shoot. I let everyone get set up, and as the sun began to light up the peaks of the canyon, the shutters start to click. Okay, the initial excitement had passed, now it was time to work that composition. I begin looking through their viewfinders to see what kind of shots they had composed, and then invited them to look through my viewfinder. Soon they realized that I didn't try to photograph the whole canyon, but instead I had looked for a way to "*Simplify the Landscape.*"

(Image #2)

Get creative: You'll need to use your imagination and experiment a little. Most of us have at least several lenses in our arsenal. Folks on the tours I lead have lenses at least in the 28-200 range and wider, 17-35mm lenses at the wide range and up to 400mm lenses are common in the telephoto range. Lens selection will play an important part as you try to *simplify the landscape*.



Image #2 - East Temple Sunrise Zion NP
Nikon D200 and 24-120mm lens at 70mm f/22 at 1/3rd sec

Common misconceptions

about lens selection: Often, when we are confronted by incredible landscapes, we tend to think that we should use a very wide angle lens to capture that landscape. The problem with that line of thinking is that *a wide angle lens expands the apparent distance between objects*, so even though you are able to include a large amount of sweeping landscape, those images in that landscape may appear very small in the final picture. To overcome that problem, you may want to look for a good strong foreground subject in order to add depth and scale to your subject, or move closer either optically or physically (**Image #3**).

As a simple guideline, I'll ask myself "will the scene that I've composed hold the interest of the viewer, making him or her feel as though they were there experiencing what I was feeling at that moment in time?"

Is the subject so far away that the viewer will miss the point of the shot? When photographing a wildlife subject that is very small in the final image, we jokingly call it a



Image #3 - Morning in Bryce Canyon NP
Nikon D 200 and 80-400 VR at 80mm f/22 at 1/20th sec

"record shot" instead of a wildlife image. So too with a landscape, we have to make sure that is more than just a "record shot." We really want to capture that "Wow" factor in our images. We certainly realize how important lighting, the right lens, filter, and a sturdy tripod are when composing a landscape. We also need to decide when composing the image, how much of the landscape should we include or exclude in that composition in order to keep it simple, clear and concise.

What about using telephoto lenses? We often forget how important a telephoto lens can be to help us *simplify the landscape*. Unlike a wide angle lens, a *telephoto lens compresses the apparent distance between objects*. A telephoto lens can often help you define your subject, and even tell a stronger story about your chosen subject. Often when I find myself overwhelmed by the grandeur of a given location, I'll take my wide shot, then put my wide angle lens away and replace it with my 80-400mm (**Images #4, 5, 6 and 7**). I'll then begin to systematically scope the landscape for interesting subject matter, something that I think will help the viewer feel the power of the image. I look for strong graphic lines with either variances in color, contrast, shadows or light.



Image # 4 - West Temple Sunrise Zion NP
Nikon D200 and 24-120mm at 24mm f/11 at 1/20th sec



Image # 5

Work Your Subject: Keep in mind that just because you've chosen a wide angle lens over a telephoto or vice versa, doesn't mean that you cannot do both. Don't be afraid to work your subject by shooting both the grand landscape and the strong graphic or more intimate landscapes.

I'm sure you will be pleasantly surprised at how well you can *simplify the landscape* when you are willing to try this. Don't forget to try a vertical composition too! (**Image # 7**)



Image #6 - Towers of the Virgin
Nikon D200 and 24-120 lens at 85mm f/22 at 30th sec

No matter which lens you choose, the physical placement of your camera and lens can help you bring out the strength of your composition, adding drama. Just be careful here, I prefer to keep the landscape looking natural and believable.

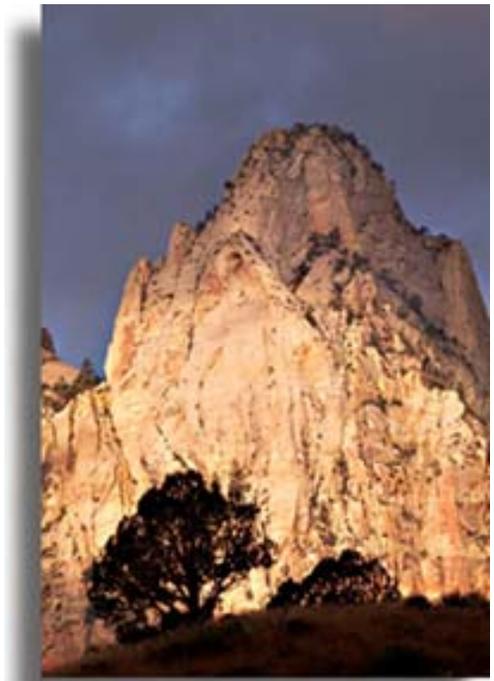


Image #7 - Towers of the Virgin
Nikon D200 and 80-400VR lens at
240mm f/11 at 1/50th sec

I work with very few filters, though I still use a polarizing filter. The other filter worth carrying is the Graduated Neutral Density filter (**Image #8**). I use it in difficult lighting situations where there is a great deal of contrast between my foreground and sky. When I feel that I have adequate detail in the sky even after I've exposed for the foreground area, I will add the ND Grad affect later in the computer, with my Nik filter system. If you've ever photographed out west you know just how hard it is to keep



Image # 8

particles of dust and dirt off an acrylic ND grad filter. I capture the best possible exposure in camera then apply any additional filtration when I edit. It's cleaner and I can control exactly where I want the graduation of the ND grad filter to be (more on that in up-coming articles). Of course there will be folks out there who wish to remain pure

to their photography choosing only to use filters on the front of their lens. I'm attempting to be true to my artistic vision by using the tools needed to best interpret that vision.

Filtration before or after is not as important to me as the end result. Some folks choose to combine several images, one for the highlights, one for shadow detail, and maybe one for midtones in order to achieve a better final exposure. This can be done in-camera on some Digital SLRs or in Photoshop in the editing process known as HDR (High Dynamic Range). Remember that the camera is only a tool used to capture the image; it is not the final word on how that image should look!

Simplify the Landscape:

Make more effective use of the equipment available to you. You've spent time and money getting to your shooting destination, so why not expand your creative thinking process, have fun, and continue to grow photographically. I tell folks that I believe my best work is still out there waiting for me to capture it. I continue to learn new things about photography, about myself, and why I do what I do for a living.



Image #9 - Red Butte Lower Kolob Canyon, Utah
Nikon D200 and 24-120 at 75mm f/22 at 1/8th sec

For our group, it certainly didn't hurt to have great weather. Our fall trip to both Zion and Bryce Canyon provided us with not only great light, but some spectacular clouds (**Image #9**). The cooler than average weather kept the air clear and crisp as well, giving us little reason not to come home with some great images.

Gary

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