

7 Tips for Breathtaking Skyline Photography

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8-10 minutes



Skyline photography often looks *incredible*, and photographing the skyline is a great way to preserve the appearance and feel of a city.

However, creating top-notch skyline shots involves more than simply pointing your camera and hitting the shutter button. For the best images, you'll need to pay careful

attention to your vantage point, your camera settings, the time of day, and more.

That's where this article comes in handy; I share seven tips designed to level up your photos, so that – by the time you've finished reading – you'll be ready to capture the grandeur of London, New York City, Tokyo, or any other city!

Let's dive right in.

1. Find a good vantage point *outside* the city



If you want to create a stunning image that really encapsulates the city skyline, you must start – paradoxically – by *escaping* it. You see, one surefire way to capture a city skyline is to leave the city itself.

If the city is sitting on a river, hop across. If the city is in a valley, climb the surrounding mountains. You can also find other fantastic vantage points outside cities, such as hills, islands, and even boats, but they'll generally involve a fair bit of travel time and some physical stamina, plus you'll need to keep moving until you find a sufficiently distant point of view.

Consider, for example, downtown Los Angeles. To capture this magnificent skyline, most photographers would hike up a nearby hill or visit Griffith Observatory. But if you want to

include major buildings in your shot, you'll need to go even further, which will likely involve significant driving and creativity.

You'll often have to put in some real effort to find these perspectives, but at the end of the day, it'll be worth it. Of course, if you don't have time to determine a [powerful vantage point](#), that's okay; you can still capture a nice image from just outside or even within the city. But more distance is generally better!

2. Use manual focus to keep your images sharp



When you're shooting from a vantage point a few miles away from your city skyline – from the other side of a river, perhaps – you may struggle to find the right point of focus, especially in low light. If you try to lock focus on a distant building or the sky, your camera will often hunt back and forth (and may completely fail to acquire focus).

So I have two recommendations.

First, try using your camera's autofocus to lock on the corner of a tall building. The contrast between the dark building and the brighter sky may be enough to engage the AF system, even in low light.

If that approach fails, switch your lens to [manual focus](#), then activate your camera's [Live View mode](#) and use the LCD screen to zoom in on the corner of a building. Adjust the

focus ring until the building corner is crisp, then take your shot!

Using that technique, you can be confident your skyline will come out looking crisp.

3. Shoot during the blue hour

Photographers love to photograph city skylines during the [golden hour](#) – the time just after sunrise and just before sunset – and for good reason. Golden hour illuminates buildings with warm light, creates stunning shadows, and (depending on your position) can result in breathtaking silhouettes.

But while the golden hour is great, don't neglect the time just before sunrise and just after sunset, known as the [blue hour](#).

You see, during this time, there's a wonderful moment when the sky is still blue but the city lights turn on. Shooting in pitch-blackness makes it hard to get good results (and visually stimulating results, too, assuming you're working in color). But the blue hour will give your skyline a hearty azure backdrop, and it'll make your images that much more interesting!



4. Go as wide as you can

You can capture amazing skyline shots working with a midrange – or even a telephoto – lens. For instance, at 200mm, you can often capture interesting window details and abstract silhouettes that feature building spires.

But in my experience, if you want to really capture the *whole* city and the feel of its expanse, focal lengths between 12mm and 35mm are the way to go. You might consider grabbing an ultra-wide [prime](#), such as a 12mm, 14mm, or 16mm f/2.8 lens, or a slightly tighter (but less expensive) model, such as a 24mm f/2.8 lens.

Wide-angle zooms are another option – such as a 12-24mm f/2.8 lens – though these can be insanely expensive. If you prefer working with zooms, consider a nice [24-70mm f/4 lens](#), which will get you a range of wide focal lengths without breaking the bank.



5. Choose settings to keep your skyline images sharp

The best city skyline photos tend to display each and every building in tack-sharp detail, so it's important you adjust your settings accordingly.

First, make sure you use a narrow [aperture](#) – such as f/8, f/11, or even f/16 – to keep the entire shot sharp from foreground to background. You'll also want to make sure you're focusing about a third of the way into the shot (in other words, don't set your point of focus on a distant cloud if you're trying to capture a few buildings in the foreground).

If you're shooting in good light, you can use a low [ISO](#) and a fast [shutter speed](#) without issue. But when the light starts to drop, I encourage you to mount your camera on a [tripod](#), keep the ISO low (to prevent noise), then drop the shutter speed down to 1/30s and beyond.

As long as the tripod is sturdy and keeps your camera from shaking, you'll get well-exposed images that are *also* sharp (and you won't have to worry about degradation due to [noise](#)).

Pro tip: To prevent vibrations caused by your finger pressing the shutter button, use your camera's [two-second self-timer mode](#) or purchase a [remote release](#).



6. Consider capturing a panorama

If your goal is to capture an entire skyline, you may encounter scenarios where you simply cannot fit every building into the photo (especially if you're forced to shoot relatively close to the city or you're using a longer lens).

When that's the case, I highly recommend trying to photograph the skyline as a [panorama](#), which will let you render ultra-wide scenes without issue. A panorama will also allow you to avoid adding in too much sky or ground.

Make sure you mount your camera to a sturdy tripod, then slowly rotate the tripod head, taking photos as your camera moves incrementally across the scene. When you get home, you can use a program like Lightroom or Photoshop to stitch the images together and create a breathtaking final shot!

Pro tip: Make sure that each new image overlaps the previous one by at least a third; otherwise, the software will struggle to produce a good result.



7. If you're shooting at night, make sure you bracket

When I'm photographing skylines after dark, I always make sure to [bracket](#) (that is, capture a series of shots with various exposures).

Why is this necessary? First, simply because the lighting situation at night can be tough, and it's easy to overexpose or underexpose your images without realizing it.

However, bracketing is also the technique you use to create [HDR images](#). If you make sure to bracket your images carefully, you can blend them together during post-processing to create a file with an enormous amount of detail in the highlights and the shadows.



I'd recommend taking five bracketed shots just after sundown, but later in the evening, you might drop to three. The darker the skyline gets, the longer your shutter speeds will become, and a five-shot bracketing process will require quite a few minutes to execute.

As I discussed in a previous tip, make sure you use a two-second self-timer or a remote release; that way, you can avoid any blur due to [camera shake](#)!

Skyline photography tips: final words

Well, there you have it:

My top tips for stunning skyline shots. Capturing amazing photos doesn't have to be difficult – just follow the advice I've shared, pay careful attention to your compositions, settings, and vantage point, and you'll be creating awesome images in no time at all!

Now over to you:

Do you have any additional tips for beautiful skyline photography? Share your thoughts in the comments below!

