



8 Sunrise Photography Tips for Breathtaking Results

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SUNRISE PHOTOS

Capturing stunning sunrise photos – the kind that will impress even a professional – might *seem* difficult, but it's not as hard as you'd think.

I've been doing sunrise photography for years, and over time, I've developed plenty of tips and tricks that guarantee great results, including:

- The sunrise camera settings that rarely fail

- The must-have gear for every sunrise photoshoot
- The key steps you should take before you arrive on location
- Much more!

So if you're looking to get started with sunrise photography or you simply want a few tips to enhance your photos, then read on!

1. Start by scouting the location

As tempting as it is to just show up at a convenient location and start shooting, you greatly increase your chances of success by planning your sunrise photoshoot in advance.

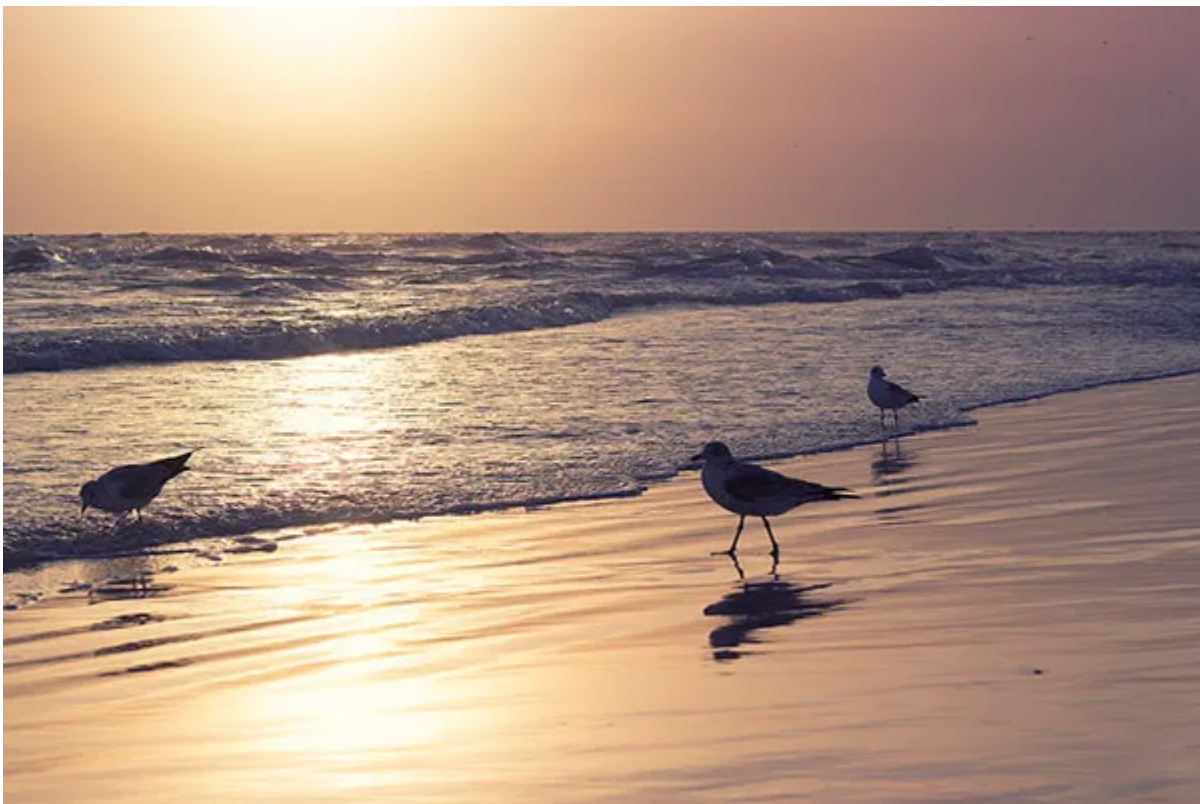
First, you'll need to determine the best location from which to capture your image. Pick an area that is out of the way of road and foot traffic, where you're unlikely to be disturbed. If you can, head to the location a few days before the shoot and ensure your view of the horizon will be unobstructed and free of any hazards. (Also make sure that you'll be able to easily access the location; you'll be walking around with your camera in the dark, after all!)



As the photoshoot nears, frequently check the [weather](#). If your shooting time coincides with an approaching or recently ended storm, the results can be staggering. Rain and storm clouds can add a dramatic layer of dimension to the scene. But you should also take steps to stay safe; don't go out if lightning is visible, and make sure you carry a flashlight to help you find your way in the dark.

It's also important that you pay careful attention to the sunrise time. You don't want to arrive on location only to find that the sun is already above the horizon! I'd recommend pinpointing the perfect time to shoot by using an online tool or smartphone app that displays precise sunrise times for your location. Many low-cost (and sometimes free) solutions are available, including PhotoPills (for [Android](#) and [iOS](#)) and The Photographer's Ephemeris (for [Android](#) and [iOS](#)).

2. Use the light to your advantage



As you probably already know, sunrise light looks incredible; it's soft, it's warm, and it creates long shadows that can add a sense of three-dimensionality to your subjects.

So as soon as the sun peeks over the horizon, *use the light to your advantage*. You can shoot straight into the sunrise, yes – but you can also try turning your camera until you get beautiful texture and drama in the **foreground elements** (e.g., rocks, trees, or ocean waves).

You should also try turning around completely; for one, the display to the west is often equally stunning, plus the area behind you will be **front lit** rather than **backlit** and therefore offer a completely different sense of atmosphere.

By the way, if you're after ethereal, even *surreal* photos, make sure you start shooting before the sun rises. The time just before the sun comes up is known as the **blue hour**, and it's a favorite of **landscape photographers**.

Also, bear in mind that your camera will try to neutralize the warming effect produced by sunrise lighting. If you **shoot in RAW**, you can always remove this **white balance setting** in post-processing – but it's often a good idea to adjust your in-camera white balance options so you can get an accurate image preview on your LCD. Try setting the camera to one of its cooler presets (such as Shade) and see whether you like the results.

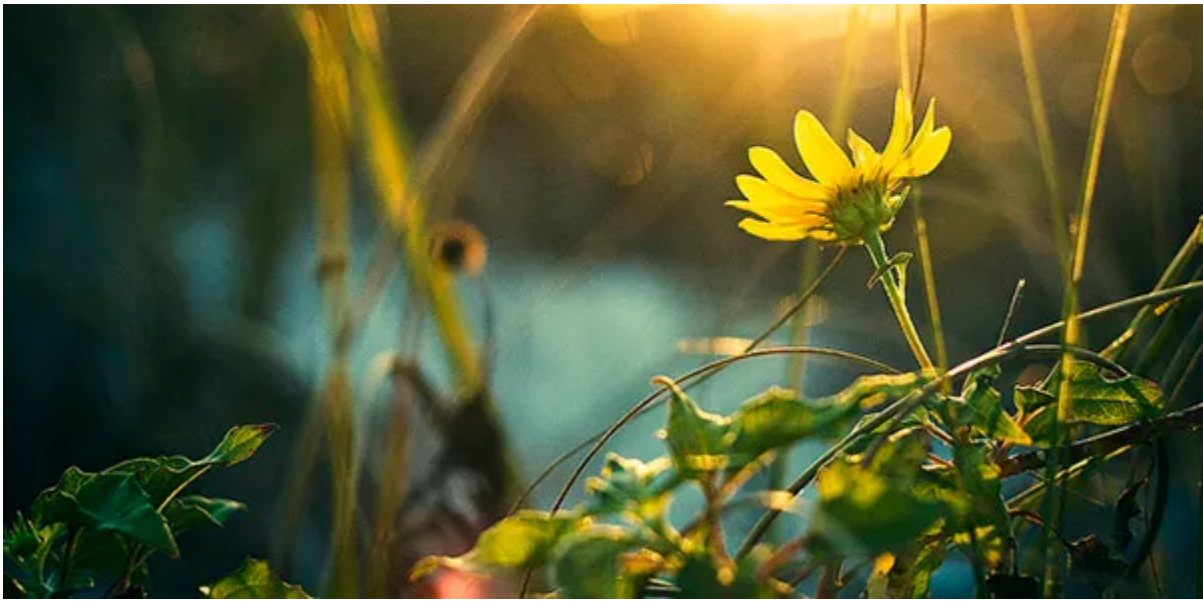
3. Plan your sunrise photos in advance

While it's **good to do general scouting** – where you establish the viability of the location, check the weather, and determine the sunrise time – it's important to *also* think about your image specifics before you arrive on location.

Ask yourself:

What look am I after? Do I want to capture a clear subject lit by the sunlight? Or will the sunrise itself be the star of the show? You don't have to commit to an approach in advance – and you can always try out multiple options once you're in position – but the sunrise will occur quickly, and if you're not prepared, you'll miss out on the action.





When planning beforehand, you should also think about any other special considerations. Will you use **neutral density filters** to lengthen your **shutter speed**? Will you use a **graduated neutral density filter** to balance the foreground and background? Will you use an **HDR technique**? Make sure you have all relevant filters on hand and be ready to quickly capture bracketed shots as needed.

4. Gather the proper gear

You can't capture a great sunrise shot without the right gear, so make sure you have everything ready to go before you head out. (I'd recommend packing your bag the night before; that way, you don't accidentally forget any equipment in the rush to leave!)

First and foremost, you'll want to bring your **tripod**. The first handful of minutes before the sun has fully risen won't offer much light, so you'll need a steady base for your camera. This is even more important if you plan to shoot in the blue hour before sunrise or if you need to do HDR bracketing.

Second, you'll want to bring the **right lens** for the shoot. While beautiful landscapes can be captured using a 50mm to 85mm focal length, a **wide-angle lens** is generally best. If you're just starting out, a kit zoom lens (such as an 18-55mm model) will get the job done, but if you have a prime lens in the 12mm to 24mm range, you'll have a better chance of capturing a sharper image, and you'll be able to capture a vast, sweeping portion of the scene.

Finally, although using filters can subtly degrade image quality, some can be useful for sunrise photography. As I mentioned above, a GND (graduated neutral density) filter will balance the scene by darkening the upper portion of the sky so you can capture a well-exposed and dramatic shot. And a neutral density filter will block out light, which is helpful if you want to use **long-exposure techniques** to blur clouds and/or water.



5. Use the right sunrise camera settings

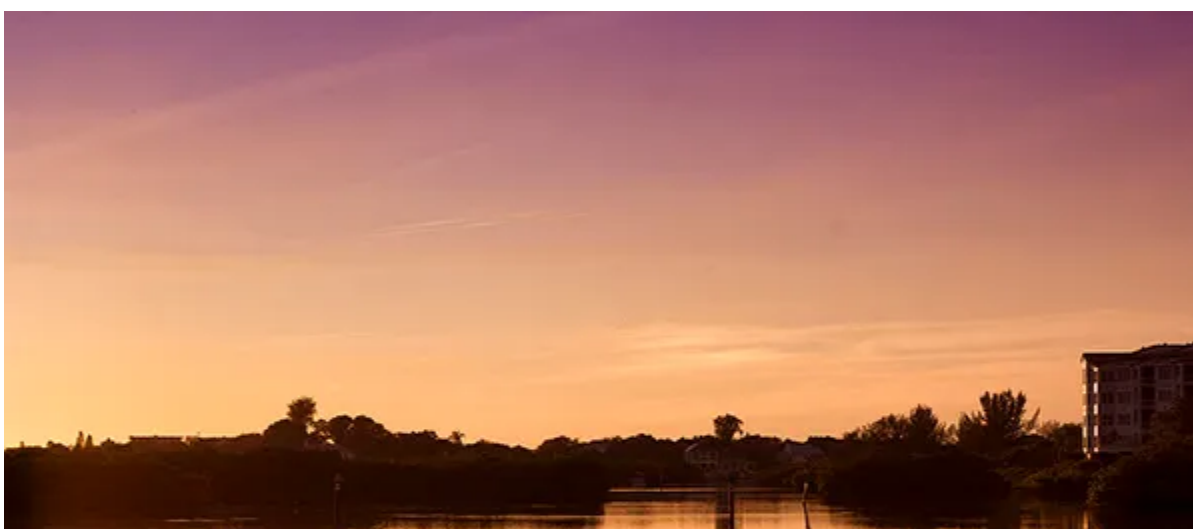
The **right camera settings** will ensure you capture beautiful colors as well as plenty of detail in both the sky and the foreground. I encourage you to select most of these settings before you even arrive at your photoshoot destination; that way, when the sunrise begins, you're ready to start shooting!

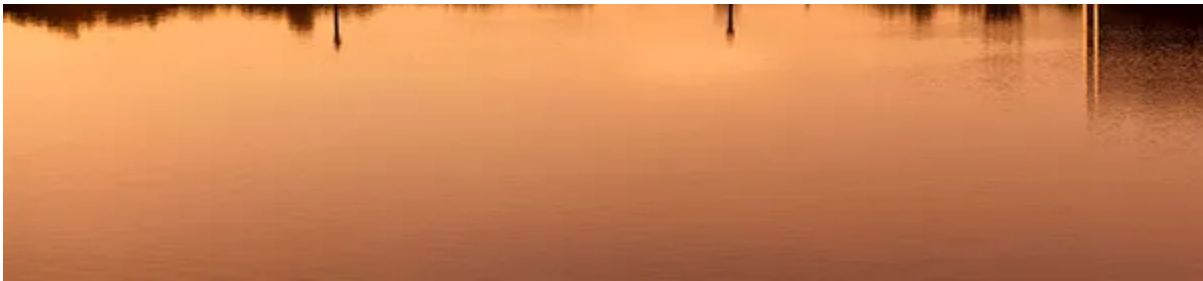
So what settings are best for sunrise photoshoots?

I'd recommend using a smaller **aperture**, such as f/8 or f/11, to maximize the **depth of field** and capture sharp detail throughout the image. If you're using a tripod, this shouldn't be a problem!

If possible, use a low **ISO** such as 100 or 200 to avoid noise in the final file. As with smaller apertures, this shouldn't be a problem if you're using a tripod, but if you're handholding your camera, you'll need to bump up the ISO to get a shutter speed fast enough to avoid a blurry photo (generally at least 1/60s).

And although you can shoot in **Manual mode**, I personally prefer to shoot almost everything in **Aperture Priority**. That way, I can lock my aperture and let the camera choose the shutter speed that will create a balanced exposure. Since low-light situations can confuse the camera and cause overexposure, you can always use your camera's **exposure compensation** to subtly reduce the brightness.





I also recommend choosing your white balance in advance. As I mentioned above, you can use this setting to boost (or reduce) the warmth of your shot. If you're after a warm, orangish image, set your white balance to Shade or Daylight. If you're after a cooler effect, try using the Tungsten preset.

And, of course, *always* shoot in RAW! That way, you can adjust the white balance in post-processing, and you can even recover missing shadows and highlights after the fact.

6. Compose to add interest

Once you're on location and are ready to take the shot, you must carefully position your camera to create a **pleasing composition**.

A common error when shooting sunrises is positioning the horizon right in the middle of the frame. While this *can* make for a nice photo, it normally creates too much symmetry and can make the picture seem static and boring. An alternative is to **use the rule of thirds**, which encourages you to position the horizon a third of the way into the scene; that way, you end up with a more dynamic, engaging shot.

Don't just apply the rule of thirds thoughtlessly, however. Take a moment to look your scene over. Ask yourself: What part of the sunrise or sunset is the most dramatic? Are there any parts that aren't that interesting?

Once you've done this, simply compose the shot to include *more* of the most dramatic scenery. If you have an angry, cloudy sky that accentuates the sunlight, let that occupy the upper two-thirds of the scene. If you have an interesting foreground but a less intriguing sky, let that occupy the bottom two-thirds of the image.

It's generally best to *draw* the viewer into the composition, then let their eyes slowly move toward the stunning sunrise.



7. Wait for the right shot

In sunrise photography, you'll sometimes get lucky and encounter a stunning scene right from the get-go. Other times, however, waiting is the name of the game. Due to the dynamics of natural lighting, a scene can completely change from one hour to the next (sometimes even from one *minute* to the next).

That's why you should arrive on location before the sunrise starts and stay until the sunrise ends. Sure, you'll be there for a while, but you can spend that time testing out different settings and being creative. Try different exposure times and play with your aperture. Let the clouds and sun change positions or move your camera higher or lower for a slightly different angle. And include additional subjects in the frame; put them in the foreground so they contrast with the sunrise.



The longer you're on location shooting, the more variety you'll end up with – and the better your chances of capturing an *incredible* shot.

8. Come back to the same location

Every sunrise is different – so even once you've shot the sunrise at a location, try to come back every so often and see what you can capture.

Consider creating a series of images that examine a location in different conditions. Shoot the location in both winter and summer; shoot just before sunrise, at the moment the sun comes up, and a few minutes after the sun has risen. Try out different compositions.

And, above all, have fun!



Sunrise photography: final words

Now that you've finished this article, you should be ready to capture some stunning images at sunrise. You know the best sunrise settings, you know how to use the light to your advantage, and you know how to create amazing compositions.

So get up early and create some gorgeous photos!





Now over to you:

Do you have any beautiful sunrise photography you'd like to share? Post it in the comments below!

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