

Golden Hour Photography: A Complete Guide (+ 10 Tips)

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**GOLDEN HOUR
PHOTOGRAPHY**

PHOTOGRAPHY: A GUIDE (PLUS 10 TIPS!)



What is the golden hour in photography? When is golden hour? And how can you use it to capture beautiful photos?

Golden hour is a special time for photographers. The sun is low in the sky, and the light looks soft, warm, and absolutely *magical*. By combining proper photographic technique with golden

hour lighting, you're practically guaranteed to capture stunning images – which is what this article is all about.

Below, I'm going to share everything you need to know about golden hour photography. I'll answer all your burning questions, and I'll explain how to improve your golden hour images with a few expert tips and techniques.

Let's dive right in!

What is the golden hour in photography?

The golden hour refers to (roughly) the first hour after sunrise and the last hour before sunset. It's a time that's great for photography; hence, the golden hour is also referred to as the *magic hour*.

During the golden hour, the sun hits the world at a lower angle – and because the light must travel a greater distance to reach the earth, it looks softer, more flattering, and redder.

(Compare this to sunny midday lighting, which beams down from directly overhead to produce hard, generally unflattering illumination.)

Here's a typical golden hour photo:





Notice the beautiful yellow hues and unbelievably flattering light? That's what golden hour offers for photographers.

When is the golden hour?

While the standard definition of the golden hour – see above! – emphasizes the hour or two before sunset and after sunrise, the golden hour actually fluctuates over the year, and its length depends on your geographical location.

If you live near the equator, the golden hour tends to last one or two hours, and the time won't change too much as you go from winter to summer and back. But if you live closer to the North or South Pole, you'll notice a massive change in the golden hour timing, *and* the golden hours often last far longer.

Really, if you're serious about taking advantage of beautiful golden hour light, I'd just recommend paying careful attention to the sun for a few days. Ask yourself: When does it rise? When does it set? When does the light start to get warm and soft in the evening? And when does the light start to get hard in the morning? While you can calculate exact golden hour times using astronomical charts, it's often best to simply observe the light; pretty soon, you'll be very attuned to the sun's changes, and you'll know when you can (and can't) expect magic-hour lighting.

Why is the golden hour so special?

I've already emphasized the low, soft, warm light produced by a magic-hour sun – but what makes it so great for photography?

Well, generally speaking, **soft light** is a photographer's best friend. It doesn't create harsh shadows and it tends to decrease the **dynamic range** of a scene, so the resulting images don't feature dark shadows or bright highlights.

Plus, the **warm color temperature** produced by the golden hours can look beautiful and flattering, as shown in this next photo:





And a low sun hits the subject more directly, so there are fewer shadows produced under subjects' eyes, noses, and chins.

That said, the golden hour isn't great for all types of photography. While portrait photographers, wildlife photographers, and landscape photographers love magic-hour light, street photographers generally prefer to shoot around midday, when the hard light of the sun produces lots of crunchy contrast and shadows. And many macro photographers prefer to shoot when the sky is overcast; that way, they can capture saturated colors and lots of detail.

So don't feel like you *must* work during the golden hour. Just know that it's a great way to enhance many types of photos. Got it?

The golden hours vs the blue hour

If you're just diving into photographic lighting, you may have come across the term "blue hour" in addition to "golden hour." So what's the difference?

While the golden hour is the hour *after* sunrise and the hour *before* sunset, the blue hour is the opposite: It's the hour *before* sunrise and the hour *after* sunset.

In other words, the blue hour refers to the time when the sun is just below the horizon. During the blue hour, the sky turns beautiful *cool* colors – blues and purples – which look great in landscape and even portrait photos. Unfortunately, the lack of strong light during the blue hour can cause technical problems, but if you choose the right gear, set your ISO carefully, and/or use a tripod, your photos will be spectacular.

Five key lighting techniques for golden hour photography

The golden hour offers five powerful lighting techniques:

Front light

Front lighting is when your subject faces directly into the sun:





During the golden hours, front light offers a warm, flattering effect that's perfect for photographing people, wildlife, and birds. (And because the sun isn't too bright, portrait subjects won't need to squint!)

Just point your shadow at your subject, let the sun fall over your shoulder, and have fun shooting.



Backlight

Backlight occurs when the sun is behind your subject. And during the golden hours, backlight creates a soft, warm, hazy, glowing effect, like this:





Golden hour backlight works great, but you need to be careful; it's easy to accidentally underexpose your subject and end up with a partial silhouette. To avoid this problem, make sure to meter off your subject, *not* the background.

Rim light

Rim lighting is when the sun creates a halo around your subject:



(This halo will be especially prevalent when your subject is positioned against a dark background.)

While you can create rim lighting with backlight, the sun doesn't need to sit directly behind your subject. The background just needs to be (relatively) dark, and the sun just needs to come from (roughly) a back angle. You'll have to move around until you find a sweet spot, though getting down low is a good start.

Sun flare

When stray light hits your lens, you'll often get a **sun flare effect**, like this:





And during the golden hour, the sun is at the optimal height for beautiful flare.

How does it work? Simply angle your camera and lens so that your subject is partially covering the sun. Then move around (sometimes you only need to move an inch or two left or right) until you can see flare coming out from around your subject:



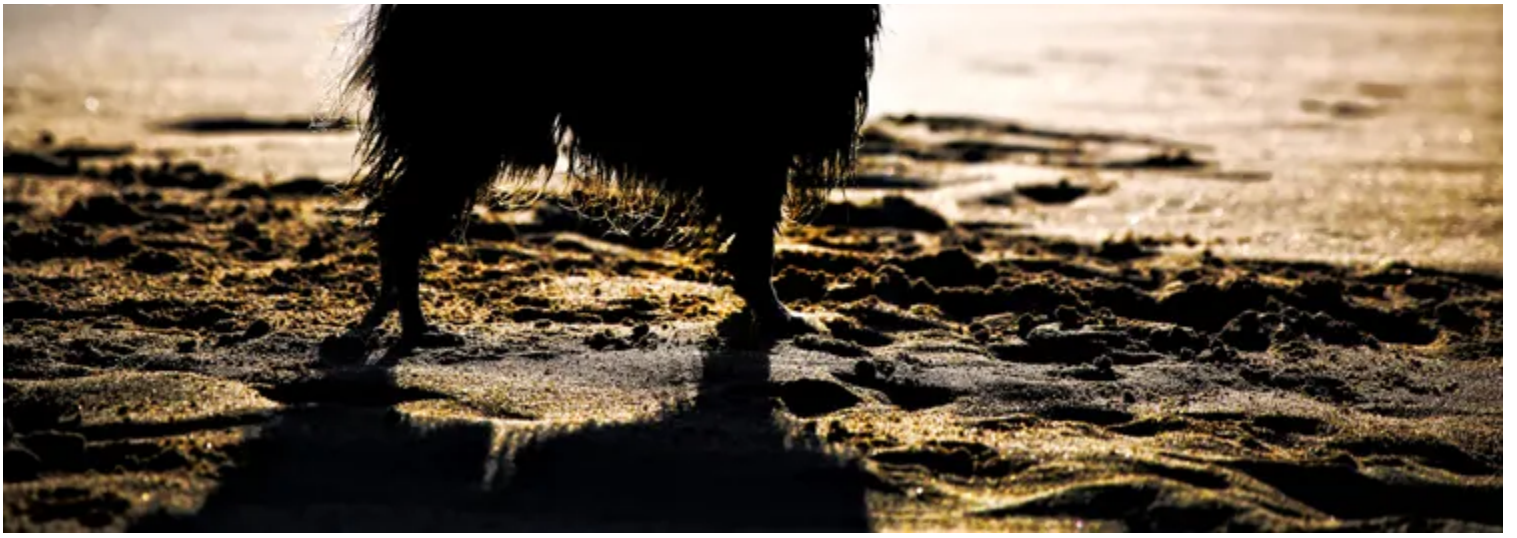


(Another way to achieve a flare is to position your lens and camera so the sun is just outside of the frame.)

Silhouette

A **silhouette** is created when your subject is rendered black against a bright background:





It's pretty easy to achieve a silhouette during the golden hours. Just get down low, and photograph your subject directly against the light. (Make sure to expose for the *background*, not the subject, and don't be afraid to add extra contrast in post-processing!)

10 golden hour photography tips

There are several ways to take advantage of the golden hours and achieve consistently stunning images. Here are my best tips to help you out:

1. Observe the sky the day before your photoshoot

As I mentioned in a previous section, the best way to figure out when the golden hour will be at its peak is through simple observation!

So the day before your scheduled photoshoot, peek out of the window. See how the sun moves and how the light changes. The sun's position and timing change very little from one day to the next, so you can assume that two back-to-back days will feature fairly similar lighting angles.

Then make sure you're on location and are ready to shoot when the light looks its best.



2. Plan your shoot in advance

No one wants to feel stressed, anxious, or rushed when doing photography, so be sure to plan your golden hour photoshoot well in advance.

If you can, begin setting up for your shoot at least 60 minutes before the golden hour starts. That way, you have plenty of time to ensure that your subject is feeling relaxed and your equipment is ready for that perfect moment.



3. Watch out for clouds!

Depending on the level of cloud coverage in the sky, the golden hours can change or even fail to appear. Clouds can enhance the brilliant sunrise and sunset, or they can block the light entirely.

So before you head out, check the weather forecast. And when you're shooting, be sure to frequently analyze the light. Make careful decisions that take into account the volume of the cloud cover! (Pro tip: If you're shooting quickly and the sun keeps passing behind clouds, consider using a semi-automatic shooting mode such as Aperture Priority or Shutter Priority. It'll help keep the exposure even as the light changes.)





4. Set your white balance to *Cloudy* or *Shade*

Your camera's white balance is designed to correct for color casts – but did you know that you can actually use white balancing to create artistic effects? You see, by shifting your white balance, you can *emphasize* the warm colors of the golden hour.

Both the *Cloudy* and *Shade* white balance settings will add more warmth to your photos. Don't be afraid to use them to enhance that stunning magic-hour look. (And if you forget to apply a warmth-enhancing white balance setting while shooting, you can always add the effect in post-processing!)

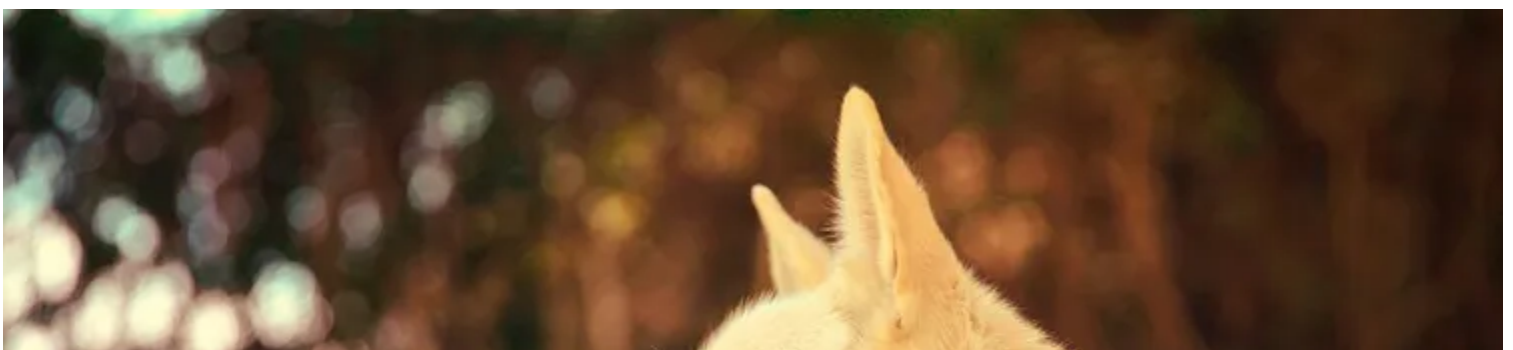




5. Shoot with a wide aperture

Golden hour light can create incredible background blur (i.e., bokeh). But you'll need to use a wide **aperture**, such as $f/1.8$, $f/2.8$, or $f/4$ (which will require a relatively fast lens; here, prime lenses are your friend!).

A wide aperture, combined with the dazzling yellows, reds, and oranges of the golden hour, will produce a rather exceptional backdrop:





6. Don't stop photographing

During the golden hour, the sun is setting...

...and as the sun sinks on the horizon, the light changes *constantly*.

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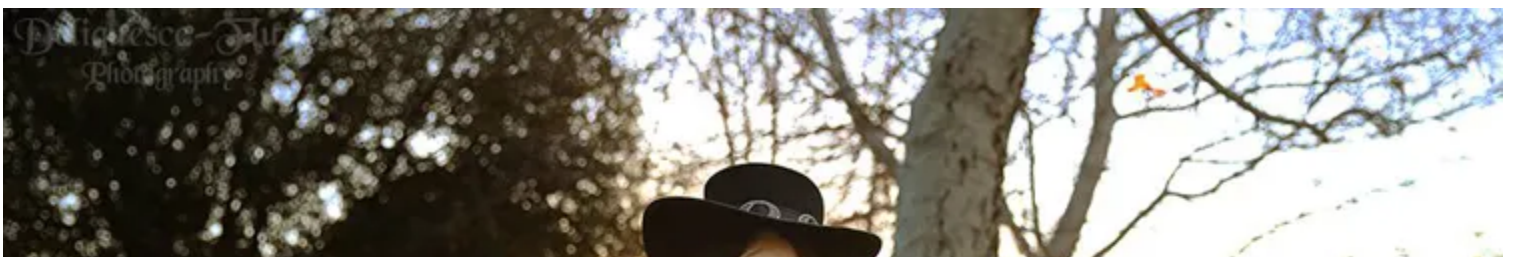


Light at the start of the golden hour can look wildly different from light at the end – so once you bring out your camera, keep shooting and don't stop! Pay careful attention to the quality of the light, and try to savor each new moment.

7. Try different angles and positions

The sun flares, colors, and intensity of the light are all affected by how you angle your lens.

So experiment constantly. Try as many different positions as humanly possible. To get the most out of the golden hours, manipulate the light as much as you can!



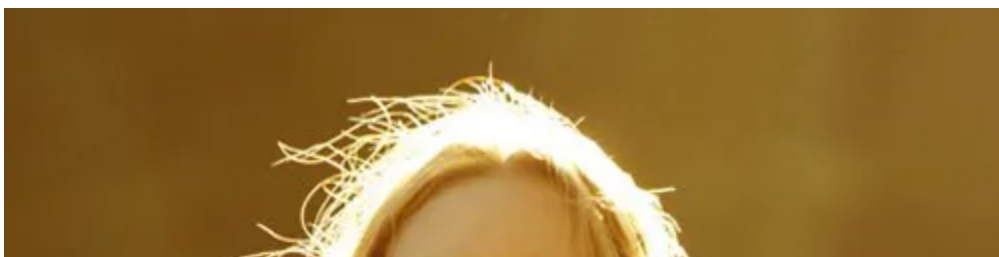


8. Subtly underexpose to add more vibrance

Did you know that it's harder to darken an *overexposed* image than to lighten an *underexposed* image?

It's true. It's easy to recover lost details in a too-dark shot, but if you overexpose dramatically, then you'll lose lots of detail. Plus, brighter images tend to look washed out.

So if you want to guarantee plenty of detail, *and* you want to bring out the beautiful vibrancy of sunset or sunrise, then don't be afraid to subtly underexpose.





9. Explore HDR photography

HDR photography involves capturing multiple exposures, then layering them on top of one another in post-processing. The idea is to preserve detail in the shadows and highlights, and the results can look amazing!

One tip: Make sure you use a tripod, and if you're photographing people, make sure they remain as still as possible. When you blend together the images, excessive movement can cause major problems.



10. Experiment in post-processing

I've offered lots of tips and tricks to help you get great results while shooting – but a lot of the magic happens behind the scenes, during the post-processing period.

So use your favorite editing program to **enhance the colors** in your images. Have fun bringing out hues and adding elaborate color grades!





Golden hour photography: final words

The golden hours are full of limitless possibilities, and no two files will look the same.

So get out during golden hour – and take plenty of shots!

How do you plan to use the golden hour? What subjects will you shoot? Share your thoughts – and images! – in the comments below.

What is so special about the golden hour?

The golden hour features a low sun, which produces warm, soft, and flattering light. Golden hour light is a great way to capture stunning silhouettes, beautiful sun flare effects, gorgeous landscapes, amazing portraits, and more!

What time is the golden hour?

The golden hour changes over the year. It's generally the hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset, but depending on your location, this may occur at 12 PM – or it may occur at 12 AM!

Is the golden hour actually an hour?

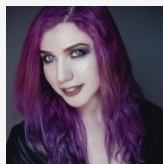
Not necessarily. In certain locations – generally closer to the equator – the golden hour does last an hour. But in other locations, such as Alaska, the golden hour lasts far longer!

What is the difference between the golden hour and the blue hour?

The golden hour refers to the time just after sunrise and just before sunset, while the blue hour refers to the time just before sunrise and just after sunset.



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Anabel DFlux

is a published photographer in Los Angeles, California. Having started her photography business at the age of 15, Anabel has dedicated her life to her photographic passion. From canine sports to exotic animals, to some of the biggest musicians in the world – **Anabel's work** doesn't fall into any specific niche. She believes there are no limits to what you can create, and to photograph everything that gives you that spark of inspiration.

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