

# Making the Best of the Bad Weather

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You're on a photography trip, and you wake up early in the morning to see what the weather is like. It's socked-in with clouds and fog. You have several options: roll over and go back to sleep, fix a leisurely breakfast, go scouting, or grab your gear and high-tail it out to get some shots while the condition still exists.

Bad weather is a situation many photographers find frustrating, but anyone who has shot film during "bad" conditions can tell you the best option is the last one. After all, storms can play a key part in some of the most dramatic shots you've ever taken, whether they're landscapes or wildlife.

Different times of year provide different settings. In spring and summer, thunderstorms and rain gushers offer incredible cloud formations that can be incorporated into landscapes. Naturally, some subjects work better during rainstorms than others. However, no matter what the scene, viewers can look at your photo and have a feel for being there in the moment during those conditions.

Two photography advantages to look for include a storm on the horizon opposite from the sun, or breaks in the clouds around the sun. With warm light hitting your subject and dark storm clouds behind it, your subject has more impact than it might otherwise have had. In addition, if heavy gray storm clouds surround the sun when it breaks through, the light it casts on the subject can be more intense than normal. If clouds cover the sky, you need only a minute or two of sun sneaking through a break to provide a great opportunity. Being



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**The sun sneaking through storm clouds helps intensify the already warm colors**

set up and ready makes the difference between getting a great shot or merely witnessing a terrific scene. This is when watching the sky comes into play. As much as photographers are in the field, if we pay enough attention, we should have a good idea what the clouds are going to do. A good location for shots such as these is Arches National Park in Utah. If the sun is at a low angle, the colors of the rock formations appear a deeper red. Add dark clouds in the sky, and the sunlight bouncing off the clouds intensifies the color even more.

Another fringe benefit of "bad weather," rainbows typically occur at the trailing edge of a storm where there are water particles in the air and the sun, at 42 degrees or lower to the horizon, is opposite the clouds. When the sun hits the particles, a rainbow appears, adding an extra 'WOW!' to a shot. The lower the sun is to the horizon, (i.e. a 200mm) will help enlarge the rainbow more than a shorter length lens. To expose for a rainbow, meter on the sky right at the rainbow. If the sky at that location is quite dark, close down about one stop to keep the dark feel while not overexposing the rainbow itself.

Midday is another time when storm clouds can enhance an otherwise slow shooting day. A good example can be found in the mountains. If the peaks in the scene have great character by their shape, dramatic clouds over them can create impact in the shot. To intensify the feel for the storm clouds in this setting, you can underexpose the shot by  $-1/2$  to  $-2/3$  of a stop to darken the sky more. Tight shots of the peaks and surrounding clouds tend to bring out the feel of an impending storm more than a very wide view. If there's heavy rain in part of the scene, the wall of water can really show the impact. (These are great images for stock photography as many places look for images of storms.)

Another way to handle images with lots of dramatic clouds is to have the clouds dominate the shot. Unlike a scene under a clear sky where it's best to minimize the sky, dramatic clouds can be the main focus of the shot and take up two-thirds or more of the frame. Anyone who has ever seen Ansel Adams' shots in which clouds are prominent knows the feeling he was trying to impart in each photo.

Fog creates an environment in which either landscapes or wildlife can be incorporated into the shot. If the subject is wildlife, you can use fog to add moodiness to the overall scene. If you shoot a single animal in the fog, it can make the animal seem lonely, or if the animal is active, it adds an extra touch of drama to the image. Ideally, when shooting an animal in the fog, you can get a good reading off of the animal itself. But if you think your meter reading is being altered by the fog, you can do one of two things to get a good reading: One is to take a reading of the ground in front of you and use that as the setting. The other is to use the reading off of the animal, or whatever the subject is, and open up between one-half to one full stop. Just like all other phases of photography, the more you shoot a particular subject, the more

comfortable you'll be when you encounter it again. Shooting through fog, however, you're dealing with varying degrees of thickness and visibility. The thicker the fog, the more likely the necessity that you'll have to compensate.



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**Coming in tight shows the intensity of the clouds**

the other peaks, the fog lends an illusion that the mountaintops are islands in a misty sea. Great places to find shots like this are the Appalachian and Smokey Mountains.

If you happen to be right on a lake or river, shooting through fog can provide new shots for your collection. Fall is a good time to look for images like these, because you'll be able to incorporate color in the fog or mist. However, more often than not, you won't have a long time to take advantage of the fog. It disappears as the sun rises and warms the ground.

Isolating subjects in fog is a great exercise. Finding a solitary subject that's shrouded in fog will help bring your viewer into the shot. For your image to work well, the lone subject needs to be strong in terms of impact. A lone tree in fall after it has lost its leaves or a section of a bridge is a good example.



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**Varying cloud types makes the viewer feel they are in the scene**



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**Thick fog isolates the subject and creates mood.**



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**A bit of fog adds mystery to this bridge on the Oregon coast**

No matter what weather conditions present themselves to you, take advantage of them and make the most of the circumstance. There are great photos waiting to be discovered in any and every type of weather.