

Photographing Waterfalls: Exposure (Part 3 of 3)

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In parts one and two of this series, Jim Altengarten has given his insight into framing waterfalls and choosing shutter speed. In this third and final segment, Jim answers the question: "How do I expose my waterfall scene?"



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In many situations, the waterfall in your image will not dominate the scene. Consider the image above. The white waterfall and waves take up only a small portion of the scene. When composing by showing the waterfall in its environment, you probably need to meter normally if you have multi-segmented (matrix, evaluative, honeycomb, etc) metering. The same is true with the earlier image of the waterfall and the footbridge.

However, more careful metering is necessary when the waterfall dominates, or takes up a large portion of the frame. Of primary concern is the total contrast in the scene. This is especially important on sunny days.

When the sun strikes the water, it dramatically increases the contrast in the scene. Try using your spot or partial metering mode to check the contrast range between the bright water and the dark surrounding rocks or vegetation. If you have more than a four-stop range, you're probably not going to be able to take the picture successfully.

Here are two strategies that you can use to photograph waterfalls that dominate the frame:

- Use your spot or partial metering mode to isolate the exposure reading on just the water. Since the camera will try to make the water medium tone in this scenario, add a stop or a stop-and-a-half of exposure to make the water come out white. If the scene is within the four-stop range described above, the other elements in the scene will be properly exposed.
- Believing that the scene is within the four-stop range, you can take your exposure reading from some medium tone subject (even if it's outside the portion you're framing), lock in those values, and re-compose the shot. Green vegetation near the falls is often a good medium tone subject, as long as it's in the same light as the water. Any element in the shade is usually about one stop darker than the same element in the sunlight. Since you're basing your exposure reading on a medium tone, no exposure adjustment is required.

Ideally, photograph your waterfalls on overcast days if the waterfall dominates the frame. This is the best situation for getting the correct exposure, because the tonal range of the scene is at its lowest. On sunny days, especially when the sun is striking the falls, be sure to check for the total tonal range in the detail elements that you want to maintain.

On your next trip shooting waterfalls, remember to determine how much of the falls you want to include, use the guidelines to select a shutter speed, and plan your exposure. Most important of all, take at least five shots of every scene!

Here is another one of Jim's great waterfall shots:



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