

# LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHER'S CHEAT SHEET

IAN PLANT



**OPTIMIZED  
FOR MOBILE**



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A man wearing sunglasses and a light blue shirt, carrying a camera and gear on his shoulders, stands in a desert landscape. The background is a bright, hazy sky and a sandy ground.

# I'm here to help you become the best landscape photographer you can be!

I'm Ian Plant. For 15 years as a professional photographer, I've shared my knowledge with hundreds of thousands of people around the world through workshops, photo conferences and events, dozens of books, and as a frequent contributor to many leading photo publications. This "cheat sheet" is designed to be a basic reference and to help you make smart decisions when you are in the field. If you want to learn more about landscape photography, check out my **Ultimate Landscape Photography Course** at [shuttermonkeys.com](https://www.shuttermonkeys.com/landscape-photography-course).

<https://www.shuttermonkeys.com/landscape-photography-course>

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# Landscape Equipment Checklist

Always remember that your personal creative vision matters more than your equipment. That said, here are a few items (in addition to your digital camera, of course) that are useful for landscape photography:

- **Wide-angle zoom:** These lenses are used for bold “near-far” landscape compositions. *Examples: 16-35mm (full frame), 10-18mm (APS-C).*
- **Standard zoom:** The mid-range zooms are useful for a more traditional approach. *Examples: 24-70mm (full frame), 18-55mm (APS-C).*
- **Short telephoto zoom:** For when you want to isolate a discreet portion of the overall landscape scene or zoom in on distant features. *Examples: 70-200mm (full frame), 55-200mm (APS-C).*
- **Tripod:** Necessary for stability and maximizing image sharpness, especially when working in low light at sunrise and sunset.
- **Filters:** Useful filters for landscape photography are discussed later on in this guide (Page 15).



# Field Workflow Checklist

Not every landscape photo requires you to check every box listed below, and the exact order isn't really important. That said, this checklist provides a useful workflow when in the field. These are described in more detail over the next few pages:

- ☐ **Scene Selection**
- ☐ **Find a Good Foreground**
- ☐ **Determine the Sun's Position**
- ☐ **Check the Weather Forecast**
- ☐ **Size Your Scene**
- ☐ **Get Stabilized**
- ☐ **Determine Optimal Focus**
- ☐ **Level the Horizon**
- ☐ **Check Your Exposure**
- ☐ **Apply Filters**
- ☐ **Take the Photo!**

# Scene Selection

Scouting begins with selecting your background scenery. Sometimes this can be an easy task, as you might know exactly what you want to photograph. Other times, however, selection of background scenery might be more challenging, involving advanced research, planning and time spent in the field exploring the landscape to assess the best options. Chose a background that will catch good light at sunrise or sunset. If you are planning a wide-angle shot, then you need to select a background that is large or close to you.



*Canaima National Park, Venezuela.*



# Find a Good Foreground

A good foreground anchors the composition, giving the viewer a logical starting point as they explore the image and a sense of "being there." Look for foreground objects that create shapes that will help lead the viewer's eye into the scene, enhance the feeling of depth in the photo, and complement other shapes in the composition. Wildflowers, boulders in streams, flowing water, ripples in sand, and rock formations can all be effective as foregrounds. Foreground is arguably the most important part of a landscape photo, so choose wisely!

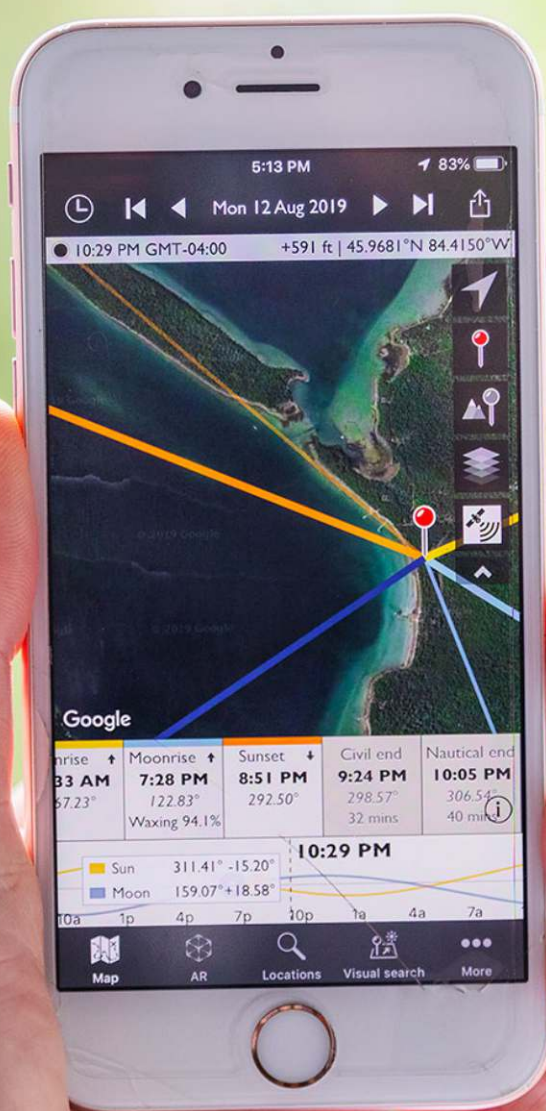


*Badlands National Park, USA.*



# Determine the Sun's Position

Check where the sun will be rising and setting to help you determine which compositions you have scouted will work best for each. Also check sunrise and sunset times, so you can ensure you are at the right place at the right time. Typically, you will want to be on location about an hour before sunrise or sunset to ensure you have enough time to find your composition and get set up, and to shoot through the changing light.



*The Photographer's Ephemeris (TPE) app.*



# Check the Weather Forecast

Weather is incredibly important for landscape photography. Once you have settled on some potential compositions, research the weather. Weather forecasts and satellite imagery can help you determine when and where to be for the best chances to get great skies at sunrise and sunset. Weather apps put forecasts right at your fingertips! Clear skies are preferred by tourists, but usually aren't great for landscape photos; partly to mostly cloudy skies offer the best chances for photogenic sunrises and sunsets.



*Victoria Falls, Zambia.*



# Size Your Scene

When working with a zoom lens, you can change your focal length to alter the size of the background scenery until it optimally fits within the image frame. Then, you can adjust the size of your foreground by getting closer or moving farther away. Typically, ensuring that your foreground is prominent within the composition makes your landscape compositions more compelling. Experiment with different focal lengths and positions relative to your foreground until you achieve the balance between foreground and background that you find most pleasing.



*Uummannaq Bay, Greenland.*



# Get Stabilized

A sturdy tripod will ensure maximum image sharpness, keep your camera steady during long exposures, and allow you to be more precise when composing your landscape photos. You don't need a tripod that is unduly large, heavy, and burdensome, but it should be tall enough to go almost to eye level when the legs are fully extended (without having to resort to extending your center column). Also, use a remote electronic shutter switch, which eliminates vibrations caused by triggering the shutter button by hand.



*Torres del Paine National Park, Chile.*



# Determine Optimal Focus

For wide angle near-far shots, estimate the distance from the lens to the closest part of the scene that you want in focus. Then double that distance, and focus on that point (this corresponds to what is known as the *hyperfocal point*). So, for example, if the closest object is 3 feet away, focus at 6 feet. Stop down to a small aperture (f/11 or f/16 as necessary) to ensure enough depth of field to cover everything from front to back in the composition.



**Zone of sharp focus**





# Level the Horizon

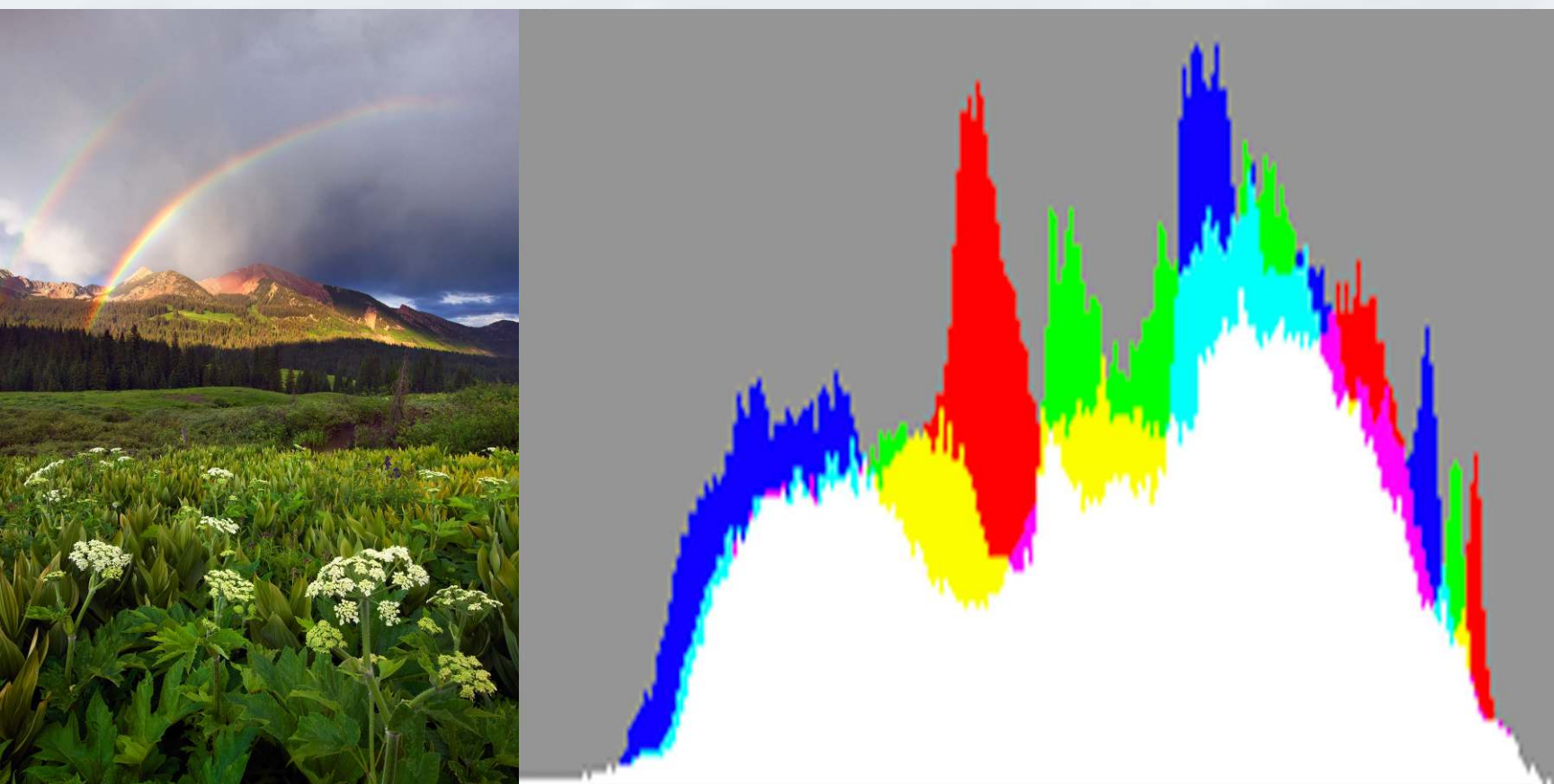
It's worth taking a few seconds to get things straightened out before you start shooting (you can level the horizon later on the computer, but you'll lose some of the image to cropping). Most modern digital cameras have an electronic level, but if your camera is lacking, consider buying an inexpensive bubble-level that attaches to your camera's flash hot shoe mount.



*Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, USA.*

# Check Your Exposure

Digital files capture more detail in bright areas of the photograph than in dark areas, so increasing the exposure so that as much of the image file as possible is on the right side of the histogram will result in higher quality image files. A properly exposed image will avoid spikes on the left and the right of the histogram, with the histogram pushed as far to the right as possible without overexposing your highlights. One helpful playback option on digital cameras is the **highlight exposure warning**, which shows you when you have overexposed any highlights. If you can't capture the full range from light to dark in the scene in a single exposure, try balancing your exposure with filters or exposure blending.

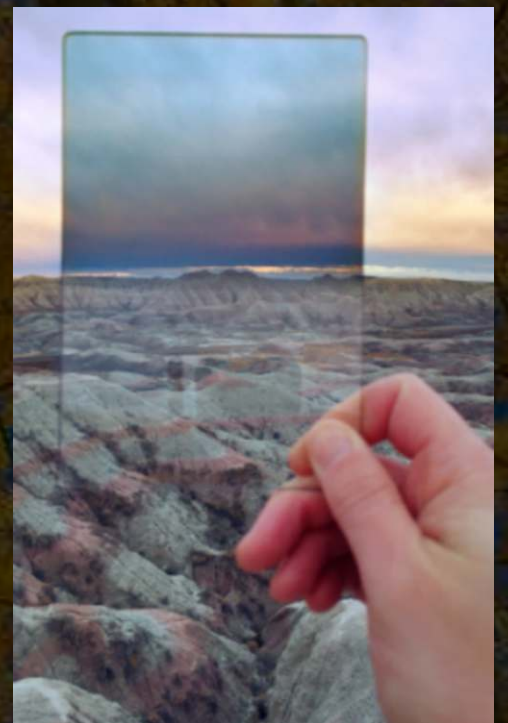


*An example of a properly exposed image file.*



# Apply Filters

Filters aren't necessary for all landscape photos, but the following three filters are often used. **Polarizer filters** are designed to remove glare and reflections, primarily for waterfall and stream scenes. **Neutral density filters** reduce the light coming through the lens and are used for lengthening exposure times for long exposure effects. **Graduated neutral density filters** are dark on top and clear on the bottom, with a graduated transition between the two. Grad filters are used for balancing exposures between bright skies and shadowed landscapes.



*(Left) Polarizer filter. (Center) Neutral density filter. (Right) Graduated neutral density filter.*



# Take the Photo!

All your hard work has finally paid off, and it's time to start shooting. Hopefully, you'll get stunning light! *Colorado Plateau, USA.*





# Landscape Scene “Recipes”

Master chefs have the right idea, writing easy-to-follow recipe books that allow even beginners to create masterpiece meals. This section follows the same idea, providing quick “recipes” for a few common landscape scenes. Of course, not all landscape scenes fit snugly into cookie-cutter solutions. Rather than giving you templates, instead I’m providing general principles to help organize your thinking and to inspire you to push your creative boundaries. But each landscape scene is different, and each will require a unique approach tailored to local conditions.



*Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina.*



# Sand Dunes

Wind is the key to successful sand dune photography: wind forms sand dunes; creates patterns, shapes, and ripples in the sand; and removes footprints. Try to time your visit to the dunes after a windy day. Sand dunes look best in strong, colorful, angled light. The best times to photograph dunes are near sunrise and sunset, when the light is colorful but also when the sun is high enough in the sky to form shadows. Dunes look best when they have a mix of well-defined areas of light and shadow, with the tops of dune crests or rippled sand in the light and “valley” areas in shadow.



*Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia.*



# Waterfalls

Overcast light often works best, helping to prevent distracting “hot spots” from forming in the water and on rocks. A polarizer filter can be used to remove glare from wet foliage and rocks. Splash water over nearby dry rocks and logs, as they will look better when soaked. Use sandals or waders to (safely) get into the water, allowing you to get closer to boulders or rapids for dramatic near-far compositions. Use long exposures (half-second or longer) to create a pleasing blurred water effect, but don’t go too long—it’s best to keep some texture in the water.

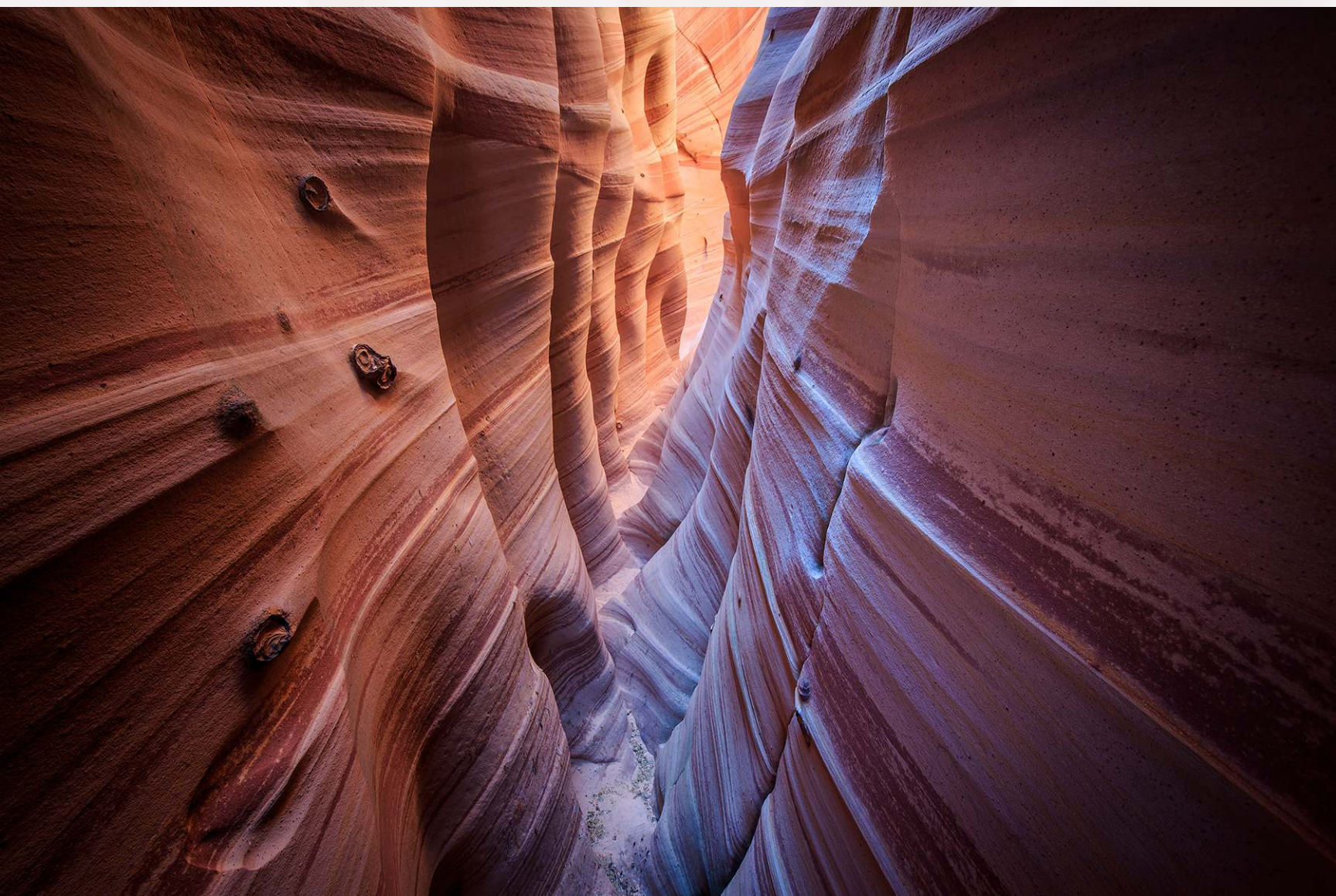


*Skogafoss, Iceland.*



# Slot Canyons

Bright sunny days are best for slot canyon photography. The key to photographing slot canyons is **bounce light**, which is indirect light that makes its way into the canyon's shady interior by reflecting off of sunlit rocks at the top of the canyon and the blue sky above. The first light is warm, while the second is cool; the combination of these give slot canyons extraordinary color. Experiment with white balance settings that are cooler than Daylight to bring out the full range of complementary colors. Usually, the best light for slots occurs late morning through early afternoon.



*Grand Staircase-Escalante, USA.*



# Mountain Wildflowers

Every summer, alpine flowers explode in the high elevation mountain meadows of the world. Early mornings are often the best time for shooting due to the lack of wind and presence of morning dew or frost. At sunrise or sunset, shoot when the flowers are in shadow and the sky and mountain peaks are bathed in light. For sweeping wide-angle compositions, find an attractive group of wildflowers and use it as a foreground element. If it is breezy, increase your ISO as necessary to shoot at a fast shutter speed to stop the motion of wind-blown flowers.



*Grand Teton National Park, USA.*



# Landscape Composition Styles

Weather and light are important, but composition is where you really can stand out. The next pages have examples of some landscape composition styles.

*Redwood National Park, USA.*





# Layering

Look to create multiple layers of visual interest in your landscape photos, starting at the bottom of the image frame and working towards the top. This helps enhance the feeling of depth and encourages the viewer to explore the entire composition. Layers should be visually distinct with sufficient visual separation between each layer, naturally leading the viewer's eye from one layer to the next as a visual progression.



*Grand Teton National Park, USA.*



# Near-Far

Juxtapose a nearby foreground feature with attractive background scenery. Wide-angle lenses are typically preferred for near-far. *Joshua Tree National Park, USA.*





# Telephoto Intimates

Longer focal lengths are perfect when you want to isolate a discreet portion of the overall landscape scene, focus attention on a pattern, or zoom in on distant features. Telephoto zooms give you more flexibility when choosing which visual elements to include within your composition, and which to exclude.



*Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia.*



# Leading Lines

Lines or curves stretching from foreground to background help draw the viewer's eye deeper into the composition. *Olympic National Park, USA.*





# Further Inspiration

The next pages have examples of landscape photos from around the world. Hopefully, these will inspire your own photo adventures! *Puna region, Argentina.*



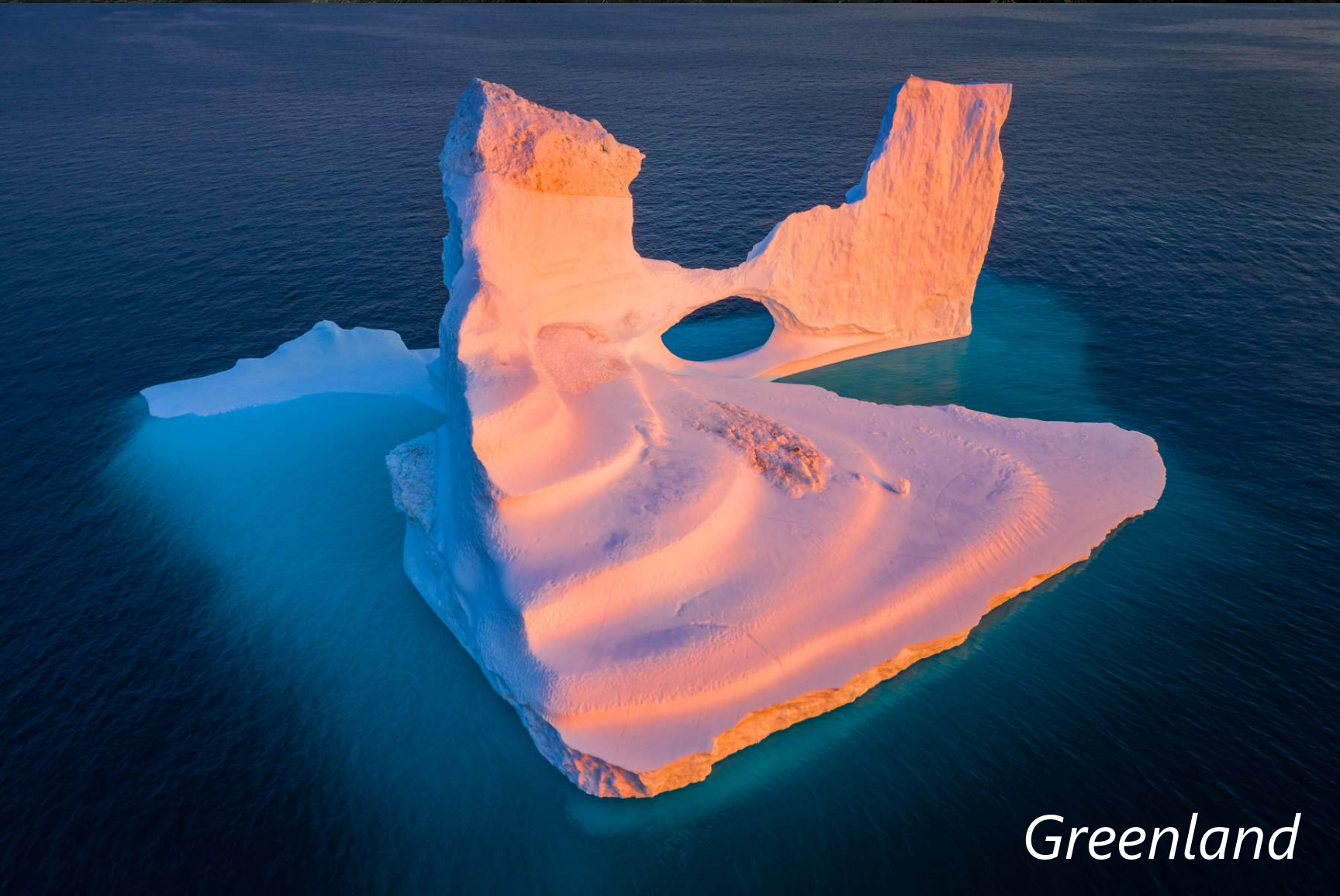




*Ethiopia*



*Iceland*



*Greenland*





*Vanuatu*



*USA*



*Chile*





## Learn more!

True mastery of landscape photography requires more than just the handful of pages in this basic guide. Luckily, my **Ultimate Landscape Photography Course** has over three hours of video and a 120+ page ebook, teaching you the core techniques that will allow you to take mind-blowing landscape photos!

**Learn more at [shuttermonkeys.com](https://www.shuttermonkeys.com)**



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