

# Blue Hour

## By Marilyn Nieves

Also known as the blue hour, twilight is what I call the magical hour of the day. As winter settles in and we experience shorter days, it's the perfect time to have some fun with night photography.

The blue hour comes twice a day. It's called the blue "hour" but in reality, the average time frame is about 30 minutes, depending on your location. It happens just before sunrise and then again right after sunset.

I typically go out to capture it in the evening as the sky's blue deepens and you see hints of purple and magenta. As city lights turn on, their golden hues seem even more vibrant and eye-catching in contrast with the sky. No matter where you are, there's just something wonderful and magical in blue hour images. It's a sliver of the day that transforms everything we see.



## Twilight Images as Stock



Blue hour images are not only eye-catching but they can create a mood of wonder, mystery, and exploration among viewers. Think of destinations from the perspective of the traveler and what would feel inviting and make you want to explore that place. Blue hour light can create some

stunning stock images useful for travel related advertising projects.

From a slightly more abstract point of view, with the aperture wide open to give you just a hint of the city, this image can be used in so many ways. For example, other than as a travel concept it can also be used as a broader conceptual business theme about looking towards the future and unlimited possibilities.

Including people in your blue hour photos is another great way to create images with a sense of wanderlust, mystery, and emotion that will appeal to stock buyers.



## Shooting Tips

You are almost guaranteed to take a fantastic photograph if you just follow a few tips for shooting during the blue hour.

### **Timing is everything.**

Trying to head out in the middle of traffic and find parking while racing the sun is not a fun experience. Too much is left to chance. Avoid the stress. Head

out early and set up by the time the sun starts to go down, if not sooner. Who knows, you might even catch an amazing sunset if you arrive early enough.

### **Your tripod is your best friend.**

In most daylight situations, you can shoot just fine without a tripod, but during twilight you'll be shooting in

hardly any light — which means much slower shutter speeds as well. And when you're shooting at slower shutter speeds, it's almost impossible to hand hold your camera without getting blurry shots from camera shake. Using a tripod will fix that issue.



### **Look for artificial lights.**

The thing that makes the blue hour so magical for photos is capturing artificial lights within the scene. Most artificial lights – street lights, city lights, candles and windows – cast a warmer, yellow hue. With the blue in the sky, this creates a beautiful contrast of warm and cool colors.



### **QUICK TIP:**

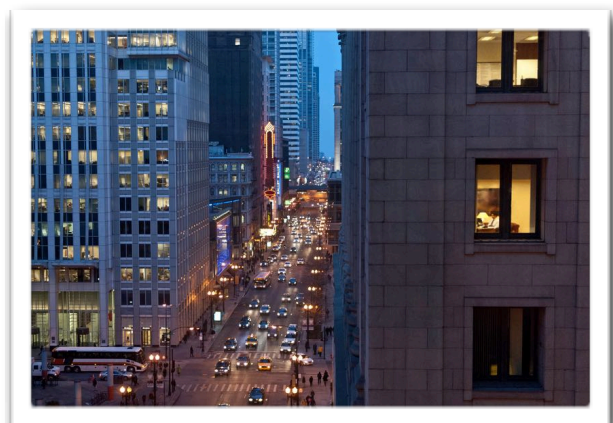
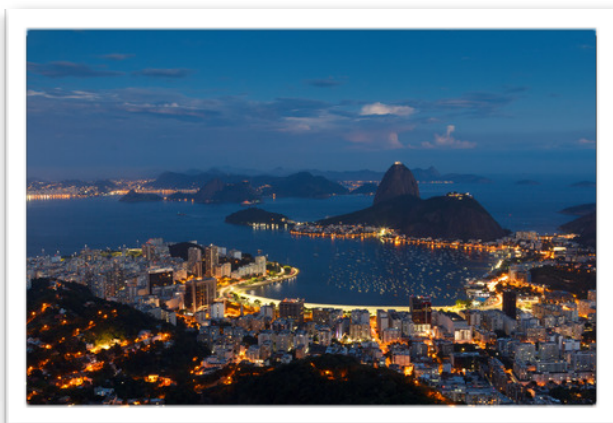
If you hadn't planned to be out during that magical hour and find yourself without a tripod, but just can't pass up the opportunity to capture the scene, you will still need to steady your camera somehow. Try anchoring your position or leaning against something to hold still while holding your breath and pushing the trigger, or find a steady surface you can set your camera on. If you can't find a steady position for it, open up your aperture and bump up your ISO to help you speed up the shutter, because it's easy to get your image out of focus with any movement. You will likely get grain in your image due to the higher ISO, but that's not always such a bad thing. How high you can bring your ISO will depend on how your camera handles it, but you will need to adjust it so that your shutter speed increases enough to produce a sharp image. This is only likely to work for the first few minutes of blue hour. Once the twilight has really kicked in, and the light levels have dimmed, you really need to use a tripod to get sharp images.



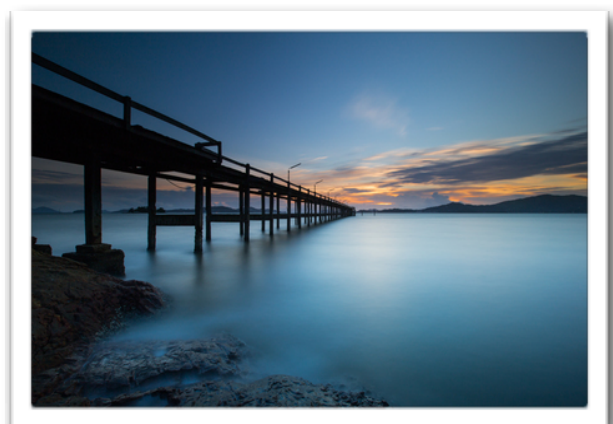
I especially love cityscapes, as they make for amazing blue hour subjects, but you certainly are not limited to them. For example, this dramatic image of a mountain peak has the added glow coming from the cabin on the left.



**Keep it wide.** A wide angle lens will be your best lens to capture these types of dramatic landscapes. Most of the time, you will want to have part of the sky in your image whether it's expansive or just enough for context.



**Look for interesting clouds.** Clouds can add lots of drama to your blue hour landscapes as well, so don't worry if you don't have perfectly clear skies.



# Camera Settings

## Be aware of your ISO.

For the cleanest, sharpest (noise-free) images, set your ISO at 100 or 200. This is typically the ISO we use for bright daylight conditions, but as long as you're using a steady tripod, you'll be okay. However, if your subject is moving around, you'll need to raise your ISO to allow for a fast enough shutter speed to stop the motion. In a nutshell, keep your ISO as low as possible, but certainly raise it when it's necessary.



## Experiment with the aperture.

My favorite part of shooting in the city during the blue hour is capturing movement. Setting the aperture to around f/11, f/16, or higher will slow down your exposure significantly to create abstract movements such as light streaks from passing cars, provided you have your ISO set to 100 or 200. By using a slow shutter speed, you've suddenly added another element to make your image dynamic.



A small aperture opening such as f/11 or f/16 will not only slow down your shutter but it will also create a star effect with points of light such as the street lights in the example on the left.





### Quick Tip:

If you are like me and use glasses or contacts, you'll want to take a moment to focus on a sharp edge using autofocus and then adjust the diopter on the camera to make sure it is also in focus. That way, when I switch to manual focus, I'm more certain that I'm getting proper focus. Check your camera manual if you aren't sure where the diopter is on your camera. It's usually a little scroll wheel near the viewfinder's eyepiece.

In this long exposure image at Sutro Baths, the ocean water crashing against the rocks appears silky and dreamy as if you are in the clouds.

### White balance:

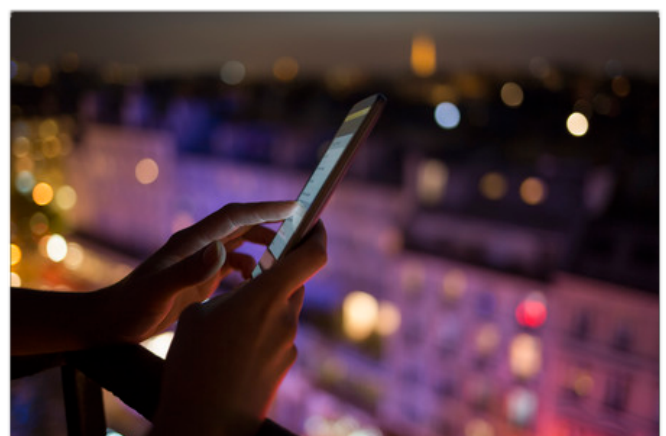
I typically set the white balance to Auto and it usually does a great job. If I really want to change the tone I'll make that small adjustment in Lightroom during the editing process.

### Getting sharp focus:

At the start of blue hour, you can find your focus point easily if you have an area of contrast to focus on. As the minutes pass, your autofocus may start to struggle to find its focus in the dark. Once this happens you will need to switch your camera to manual focus.

## Planning for Blue Hour

Planning things out ahead of time is essential to a successful photoshoot. I cannot stress this enough. In addition to checking the weather and knowing your city's traffic conditions, there are some helpful tools you can use whether you are headed just a few miles away or are planning to shoot in a completely new location.



You can totally geek out with [The Photographer's Ephemeris](#). They make it available free for your desktop. Or, you can keep it simple and check what time you need to be out there with a tool like [Blue Hour Site](#), which is free and what you need is listed conveniently on the home page. I personally love using their [BlueHour App](#). It's simple and convenient to have ready to go on my phone. I just pull it up and see the times for morning blue hour, evening blue hour, sunrise, and sunset for my location. If I'll be traveling and already

know where I'll be shooting from, I can enter the date and location to get my times for that city so I can plan accordingly. Another popular app is [PhotoPills](#). I recommend taking some time to explore and get to know these very helpful apps.

One last tool I've found quite helpful is Google Earth. You can use it to find places to scout before shooting and it gives you a pretty good idea of the view you'll get. I've used it to find parking garages with an open top to shoot from.

## Equipment for Blue Hour

As mentioned above, a steady tripod or some way to stabilize your camera is one of the key pieces of equipment needed for photographing blue hour, but there are a couple more things that you may also find useful.

### **Remote trigger (cable release).**

Though not required, this will help you keep your camera as steady as possible when firing because you will avoid any physical contact with your camera's trigger button. These are available to attach to your camera wirelessly or via cable. If you don't have one, I'd recommend using the self-timer that's built into your camera to fire the shot.

### **Intervalometer.**

Many newer cameras are now starting to integrate this feature but if your

camera doesn't have it, you can pick one up and start experimenting with time-lapse photography during the blue hour. I'd recommend this for when you are comfortable shooting blue hour images and are ready for an additional challenge. An added bonus of most intervalometers is that it can also act as a cable release saving you from keeping track of two separate triggers.

### **Miscellaneous items.**

Consider bringing a small flashlight, a foldable chair and a water bottle. Bringing these things can make your experience a bit more comfortable depending on how long you'll be out there. I definitely add these when I'm shooting time-lapse. Also keep in mind the temperature change as night falls and dress accordingly.

# Keywording

Keywording is essential to selling your images because it's how potential customers will find them. Think about the broad theme the image conveys.

**Is there a strong concept?** Individuality, teamwork, growth, etc.

**Who's in it?** Men, women, children, group, one person, no people, etc.

**What are they doing?** Running, sitting, laughing, serious, smiling, etc.

**Where is it located?** USA, Asia, beach, forest, cabin, indoors, etc.

**What time of day is it?** Daytime, blue hour, dusk, night, etc.

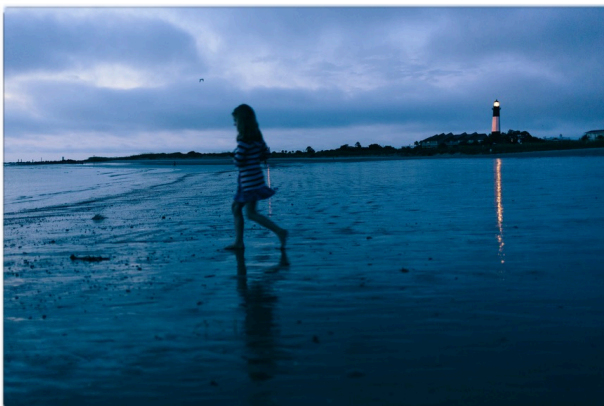
## QUICK TIP:

If your image is regional, make sure you add the location. This helps customers who are looking for very specific local images to select accurately. As examples this could be an image of a location, product, people or animals among other things that are local to the area.

Let's review a couple of images as examples.



This dynamic photo on the left is quite striking and has a futuristic feel. Architecture, twilight, blue hour, bridge, transportation, city life, light streak, perspective, Asia and Bangkok are a few excellent keywords to use for it.



Some keywords I would use for this next image are: young girl, child, lighthouse, twilight, blue hour, beach, Atlantic, Tybee Island, and playful.

Keep your keywords relevant. Don't get creative with stretching what's really going on in the image because that will simply frustrate your potential customers.

For your next shoot, try photographing a favorite spot or subject during blue hour, and watch it come to life!