

How to Save a Rainy Day

Rain, rain, don't go away -- not when it means photos this good!

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So, you've been planning a photo vacation for a year. Everything's set. Only problem? Now that the day has come and your plane's touched down, the weather's not cooperating: Rain, rain, rain. A disaster, right?

Not really. Step up and embrace the challenge. The photos you can capture in inclement conditions can be photos that are every bit as exciting as what you'd get from sunshine.

Ricocheting rain drops, roiling clouds, stabs of lightning, and billowing wisps of mist are the ingredients of highly evocative photography, and can give your images a "you-are-there" atmospheric punch. Gray, rainy day pictures often have their own sweet romance. And photos of neon-lit street scenes after dark are as boldly chromatic as any colors captured on a bright summer's day.

So don't mope -- change your game plan and shoot! Here are tips to help you pull photo victory from the jaws of what others might see as meteorological defeat.

WORK THE NIGHT SHIFT. Rainy conditions are the best for photographing neon-lit city scenes after dark. Check with your hotel concierge, or study city maps for commercial, entertainment, and industrial districts ablaze with artificial light after the sun goes down. Rain turns black asphalt streets into blazing mirrors of color.

BE READY FOR LOW LIGHT. Under raincloud-darkened skies, use all the usual low-light techniques: Dial in higher ISOs -- start with ISO 800, and go up if necessary. Use a tripod or monopod. Rain clouds also cool down daylight's color temperature, so compensate by spinning your digital camera off its auto white-balance setting, and dial in the Overcast or Cloudy preset. The results not to your liking? Set a custom white balance.

LET THE WEATHER BE YOUR SUBJECT. Go for the bigger picture, too: Shoot looming cloudscapes, shafts of lightning, and rolling banks of mist. (Tip: Don't expect much from rainbows. They rarely look as magical in photos as they do in real life.)

Speaking of lightning, try using it as your light source at night. In the midst of a lightning storm, set your (covered) camera on a tripod, and aim it at, say, a famous landmark. Set an appropriate aperture (wide for a dark subject, closed down for a brightly lit subject), and open the shutter in the camera's bulb mode. When lightning flashes, close the shutter. The photo may not always be successful, but it's guaranteed to be different from 99.9% of the photos made of that landmark!

EXAGGERATE THE WET.

Often photographers are in denial about nasty weather. They will overexpose to brighten outdoor scenes and tweak color saturation for sunnier color palettes. The results are rarely worth the effort, and no one is fooled.



BEFORE THE STORM: On-rushing storm clouds that define the line between good weather and bad often make for dramatic images. Ask Angela Georges, who popped off this last-minute picture with her Nikon D70 and 18-70mm f/3.5-4.5 kit lens before scooping up her oblivious daughter from Indian Rocks Beach, FL. Moments later, the looming downpour commenced.

Bad weather can be beautiful, so go for it. Capture dark, dismal rainy days by dialing down exposure compensation by a half or even a full stop. Make the most of the dark. Go in close. Capture raindrops in midair (lit by your on-camera flash), or bouncing off surfaces, or clustered on panes of glass. Look for the concentric circles raindrops create in puddles.

Try focusing on the human response to rain: umbrellas shot from above, pedestrians huddled in raincoats, dashing between raindrops, and leaping over puddles.

FOLLOW THE FORECASTS

Weather reports can tell you when and where impending storms will begin (to get dramatic, contrasting cloudscapes), peak (for windy drama), and finish (with pristine, rain-rinsed vistas). They can also clue you in to the speed and location of moving weather fronts, the existence of colliding warm and cold fronts (always dramatic), and the times of sunrise and sunsets.

ELECTRIFYING! The tricks to shooting lightning? Wait for darkness, and listen to weather reports for the direction and timing of approaching storm tracks. Plan your shot well in advance, scouting for foreground objects that add a sense of place and scale. An hour before the storm, mount your camera on a tripod, compose the shot, and weatherproof the camera. When the fun starts, select manual exposure mode, set the smallest aperture (you can bracket exposures up from there), and use a shutter release cable to hold the shutter open in its bulb mode. After lightning strikes, close the shutter and set up your next shot.

KEEP DRY. The best rainy day scenes ever will be lost if moisture makes your camera freeze up. Keep your gear in working order by:

- Investing in an all-weather camera bag or backpack.
- Carrying quart- and gallon-sized self-sealing storage bags, one for each camera body and lens, as well as for your memory cards and batteries.
- Bringing microfiber cloths to wipe raindrops from your gear.
- Using a slicker or poncho large enough to cover you, your bag, and a monopod-mounted camera rig. Get a rain shield for your camera from Aquatech, Lightware, Tenba, or others.
- Shooting protected. Unless you're deep in the backcountry, it's often possible to organize your outings around locations that offer protection from rain. This might be as simple as shooting from the driver's seat of a rental car. (Try creative shots through a rain-dappled windshield, for example.) Many world-famous neighborhoods can easily be photographed from behind the wheel, or you can park to capture city scenes from the relative dryness of awnings and archways.

So if rain clouds threaten your photography, with creative planning, it's easy to find the silver linings.



APRÈS LE DÉLUGE: The sweetest moments of any tempest are its final heartbeats, as daylight strengthens, streets reappear rinsed clean, winds die to gentle breezes, and the last few scattered rain drops fall. Wilson Tsoi's view of a cobblestone street in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in the aftermath of a storm is as visually evocative as the drama of the storm at its peak. Moral? Be prepared to continue shooting even after the lightning subsides and the storm clouds have rolled on.