



Finding Inspiration in Ordinary Landscapes



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From the deepest ocean floors to the highest mountain peaks, our natural world had given us a multitude of scenic treasures to capture on-camera. From creeks to canyons, from shorelines to summits, we can contemplate nature's splendour and communicate our vision of the world through our eyes and our viewfinders. This vision is informed by the way we select our subjects and arrange their lines, shapes and colors.

Landscapes have always been an important source of inspiration among many artists and photographers. As image makers, we seek landscapes to document natural wonders but also, in an unsuspected way, reveal about ourselves to others. Yes, in landscape also lies our autobiography.

The kind of subject matter we choose reflects our tastes, our values and our aspirations in visible form. In landscapes, we can find our inspiration and be ourselves.

Unfortunately, not everyone can enjoy the beauty of scenic wonders like the Grand Canyon near their backyards, nor have the budget to travel to such areas. With that in mind, is it possible to spark our emotions with more common, ordinary landscapes? The answer is definitively "yes." Let us focus on three common subjects in landscapes: rivers, trees and clouds. Each one has its own particularity and



can be exploited to its maximum potential if we know what, where and when to look for.

Rivers have always been and are still today a lifeline to numerous cities and communities bordering them. Life and activities flourish along. In the same way, subject matters abound along the waterways, regardless of their size. Traveling along rivers offers to photographers plenty of occasions to stop for a shoot: from



hay bales in a bordering hilly field to a tree on a twisted curve or contemplating a spectacular early morning fog on the river at sunrise. Rivers don't advance continuously on a straight line, the twisting plus the up and down drive along them offers interesting subjects as do their connecting roads. Less traffic in such rural roads allows the photographer to slow down at almost a horse's pace in some areas where keen observation becomes necessary in order to stop, leave the car and capture that perfect picture.

During the summer, or when water levels are lower, smaller river beds can be seen. The rocks emerging out of the water and the rushing waters that are sometimes created bring magnificent compositions. When the weather starts to cool down during the fall season, mornings along the river can become magical moments. Emerging fog over the river, stretching its "arms" on surrounding fields, can become spectacular to see. Be prepared to leave home very early to arrive on location before sunrise and watch for important differences of day and night temperatures. Increased chances to meet with the mystical will be the result. Fog can fade



branches adds a spectacular dimension in visual impact, stretching out their “hands” and trying to reach for the stars. In some cases leafless trees can uncover hidden treasures that cannot be seen otherwise, like an old shed surrounded by small trees, invisible in summer but appearing once the leaves fall down.

In addition to providing visual anchors in compositions, trees also communicate our deepest feelings. How? As a first example, a thin and leafless tree in a huge field, photographed on a grey, cloudy day may suggest loneliness, despair. On the other hand, another tree, round, lush, taken on a sunny day near a stream will convey serenity and well-being.

Another aspect- human life and its ordeals can be compared to the four seasons of a tree. Year after year it survives changing seasons, from the budding in spring, becoming a lush tree in summer to end up in total desolation in winter, being exposed to rigorous conditions and finally budding again the following spring. As for the tree which must adapt to the forces of nature in action, human beings must pass through ordeals and profit from such experiences to strengthen themselves allowing to grow in wisdom and maturity. It is then possible to underline such events in our lives, sometimes happy, sometimes rough, by selecting the type of tree, its appearance and environment which correspond the best according to our state of mind.

So far, we have worked “under the heavens.” Now consider reaching higher grounds for inspiration. Yes, the answer is not only under

away quickly after sunrise, so use time wisely. Also part of the river scene may include bridges, which can bring an architectural and more human presence into a landscape. Covered bridges are precious gems and are an important heritage worldwide. Many of them, with their reddish color and their unique structures, can enhance magnificently a countryside and bring more stability when combined with blue skies and even more, to include fall foliage.

From the tall and majestic to the smaller ones, trees are ideal subjects to inspire oneself along rivers, in fields or on top of rocky cliffs. With their deep roots and known for their longevity, trees are seen as standing proud and stable elements. They come in different sizes, shapes, colors and blends in perfect harmony with the other two elements discussed here. For example, in maple tree- country, fall foliage with blue skies colors magnificently the landscape and the dead leaves carpet the area with a mosaic of red, yellow and orange tones -a delight to our eyes and hearts.

Even without their leaves, don’t be fooled to believe that there is nothing to get from leafless trees. Lines and curves generated from trees



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the sun but also above in the skies. Clouds are as much a part of any landscape that the landscape itself. They are a powerful expressive tool for any photographer. Against the blue background sky, the lines and shapes of cloud patterns can bring drama to common subjects. Use a polarizing filter to deepen the blue of the sky and to achieve a stronger contrast between clouds and sky. Polarization is at its strongest at 90 degrees to the solar beam and when the sun is lower in the sky.

A little warning to would-be cloud chasers: you need lots of patience and keen observation to capture the ideal cloud formation at the right time and location and you will probably be spending more time checking weather forecasts! Clouds may be moving slowly, but are nevertheless in constant motion. Hence, the window of opportunity for the perfect cloud positioned with the ideal subject may be short lived because of such movement in the skies and their ephemeral nature.

Cloudscapes can be spectacular by themselves without any other subject included. However, as humans we are more comfortable standing on a solid footing rather than floating around in thin air. Consequently, our vision of clouds will generally tend to include subjects emerging from the lower part of the picture frame.

Selective use of clouds with increased perspective can depict a need for space, the desire to blossom internally. And careful selection of the proper visual elements in clouds with appropriate subjects will allow us to feel more strength and more stability relative to our place in the world around us. My favorites are the high-altitude or cirrus clouds; the strong predominance of thin

lines and powerful shapes they tend to create fit well with my vision of self-expression.

Skies can bring a more spiritual dimension to our pictures. With trees, rivers and fields, they can engender a mood of meditation upon nature's majesty and harmony. They are excellent subjects for those who seek beauty, serenity and an opportunity to slow down the pace for a brief moment, to suspend time and enjoy the simpler things in life.

What has been said here may apply more or less depending on the area and climate in which the reader lives. (Most of my photographs have been taken in my native province of Quebec with some captured in Eastern Ontario.)

Nonetheless, wherever you are, visual treasures are waiting to be found and with some patience, you will find them. While making a quest to new heights in self-expression, make yours the following and concluding words from Marcel Proust, French writer, "The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." Yes! Go out there, look around and maybe not that far away, you will find new inspiration in ordinary landscapes. ☸

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