Lighting Outdoor Images

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Light

Light is obviously the most important ingredient in any image. Lighting indoors can have its own difficulties but when you need to work outdoors, the problems multiply. Indoors, you can usually overpower most light sources with a small, handheld/camera mounted flash. Outdoors it just aint that simple.   It's tough trying to outshine the sun with 4 AA batteries and a good idea.

Light has several properties that need to be identified. Among the most important are,

1) **Intensity**   How much light is there that I need to be concerned with?
2) **Direction**   Where is it coming from? Left? Right? Above? Behind? etc
3) **Quality**   Is the light hard, or soft?
4) **Color**   Is the color of the light warm, or cool?

Understanding your available light.

The first step to creating excellent images outdoors is to identify what light you have immediately available in the form of existing or ambient light. Typically you'll have less than optimal conditions. However, with a few items, you can ease, move, or even eliminate the sun.

Diffusion panels can help you ease the mid day sun's intensity into a more useable light. The same panel with an opaque cover can block out the majority of the sunlight falling on your subject allowing you to put the main light, ie, the new sun, anywhere we want, direction wise. Use a reflector or small flash and you can relight the subject in a more pleasing way. I'm a huge fan of putting the real sun directly behind the subject. Completely contrary to what we've been taught forever. Stop down the camera lens, move the flash(es) and reflectors, in close and viola, a new and interesting lighting solution.

Direction is one of the make it or break it properties of light in any image. A high single light, or unmodified sunlight at high noon is about as bad as it gets. Think about all the hero photos you've seen with that great big, nasty shadow right through the hunters face. It's so simple to minimize or eliminate that shadow that its stupid. The simplest way for most of those that use a hot shoe flash on their

camera is to turn the camera upside down! Really? Yeah, really. Basically what you are doing is to place the light source below the brim of the hat. Shadow gone. Told ya it was stupid simple. Another, better way would be to use a reflector below the subject to bounce the existing light back up into the face.

Quality is something that is often forgotten about but can be sort of the icing on the cake. Direct light, whether from the sun or flash is "Hard", meaning it is very contrasty and makes deep shadows opposite the light source. **"Soft"** light is what you might recognize on an overcast day. Soft shadows which create a more pleasing effect on your subject. The best way to understand how soft or hard a light source is, is to consider this. The effective **working distance of a light modifier**, ie, umbrella, diffusion panel, soft box, or reflector is the diameter or the diagonal of the modifier. Hence, once you move a 12" reflector more than 12"s from the subject, you've lost most if not all of it's good benefits. **"Hard"** light does have its role in photography and you need to be able to use it effectively to make unique photos. I love using hard light(s) as rim or kicker lights to separate the subject from the background.

Color of light is often over looked but can at times be remedied in photoshop through the color or white balance settings. When you address it on location though, your results will be better and more natural looking. Everyone knows about the "Golden Hours", immediately before and after sunrise and sunset. The light is broad, (soft), low, (directional), and orange/red in color, (warm). Shooting midday or early/late morning/afternoon, and or in snow, typically produces very bluish colors, (cool), highly directional, unflattering, and hard. In many situations warm makes for the most pleasing color, at least I think so. However cool screams cold temps. The perfect environment for products designed to be used in cold, cold climates. You also need to concern yourself with the mixing of color sources. You may not recognize a photo as having mixed light/color sources, but something will just look "off". If you're enhancing existing warm light, use warm fill light. Dealing with ambient cool light, use cool fill light. Once identified, this is easily solved.