

Lose the Legs

How ditching the tripod has never been easier for landscape photographers

Text & Photography by Josh Miller

In starting this column, I hope to bring readers along on some of my photographic adventures around the world and share a few insights into my creative process and the photographic lessons I've learned along the way. The column's title "Chasing Light" comes from my desire to move as fast and unencumbered as possible throughout the landscape while in search of the best photographic light.

I'll be sharing more of these ideas as the column takes shape in the coming issues. In that spirit, I'd like to start by sharing my experiences shooting landscapes without a tripod.

The Glory Days?

Thinking back to the glory days of black-and-white landscape photography and photographers hiding under black cloths with their huge view cameras, tripods have always been a mainstay of the genre. When I first started out, there was a joke that you could tell how serious – or "professional" – a photographer was by the size of their tripod. Bigger was better and bigger meant sharper photos at slower shutter speeds.

Fast forward to today's mirrorless camera bodies, and that's no longer the case. Years ago, I traded in my 6-pound carbon-fiber tripod and heavy ball head for a much lighter 4-pound tripod/head combo that was easier to pack and carry in the field. But these days, aside from sunrise and sunset photography or long exposures, I rarely even use that tripod. Not only has this lightened my pack, but it's made photography more fun and more dynamic. I can compose more quickly and move through the landscape less encumbered, helping me

find more unique compositions.

The real eye-opener came several years ago while I was photographing brown bears in Alaska. After spending two weeks in a wildlife photography mindset – fast shutter speeds and action shooting – I was suddenly presented with a dramatic sunset landscape that exceeded the dynamic range of my camera sensor (time for an HDR), but it also included two bears wrestling.

I know I was a bit late to the party on this, but I realized that by keeping my ISO high, I could use a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the bears in all three bracketed frames. And if I employed the fastest frame rate of my newest mirrorless camera, there would be nearly no movement between frames – even though I was handholding the camera. At that moment, I entered the world of action HDR, and I began to reevaluate all my techniques and preconceived ideas about when a tripod was truly necessary.

Handholding

Fast forward a few more years, and with the amazing image stabilization and improved high ISO performance in today's cameras, I now routinely handhold landscape images I wouldn't have even attempted just a few years ago. I handhold multiple-frame panoramas (pro tip: use the in-viewfinder level to help keep your horizon lined up between frames), and I regularly handhold bracketed exposures for future HDR images (just make sure your slowest shutter speed is still fast enough to handhold).

Yes, there's a small loss of dynamic range and some increased noise when shooting at higher ISOs, but I find the trade-off worth it to lighten my pack. And don't forget – with



today's AI-powered noise reduction tools, high ISOs are more usable than ever.

One Big Drawback

The biggest drawback, for me, of leaving the tripod at home isn't the loss of image quality – it's the loss of compositional refinement. While ditching the tripod lets you explore a scene more quickly, that often comes at the expense of a carefully refined composition. As Ansel Adams once said, "There

is nothing worse than a sharp photo of a fuzzy concept."

By their nature, tripods force a slow, methodical approach to composition. Handheld shooters often don't take the time to fully refine their framing before moving on to the next shot. While I don't think that's a dealbreaker, it's something to be aware of. As you explore your composition, take the time to recheck your frame: Is there balance? Are there lines that lead out of the image? Are

there distracting elements like branches or blades of grass that don't belong?

As we often hear, there's never been a better time to be a photographer. We've come a long way from the days of tripod-mounted view cameras and black cloths over our heads. As our tools continue to evolve, the real challenge is evolving with them – and embracing the new creative possibilities they bring. By ditching our tripods and lightening our loads, we allow ourselves

to explore the landscape more freely and fully. The only question is: Can our creativity keep up? **OP**

See more of Josh Miller's work at joshmillerphotography.com.

>>> Nikon Z9, NIKKOR Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S at 100mm, handheld. Exposure: Three shots bracketed: 1/4000 sec., 1/1000 sec., 1/250 sec., f/5.6, ISO 3200.