

Become a professional landscape photographer

Turn your love of landscapes into a viable source of income with the help of our panel of pros

You only need to take a look around the many online forums and galleries to get a feel for the immense popularity of landscapes among aspiring photographers. For many, this is the whole reason why they have a passion for photography in the first place – few other genres, if any, inspire the level of interest and enthusiasm that landscape photography does.

It's no surprise, then, that many of the serious amateurs who are considering a career in photography are planning to specialise as landscape photographers. Owing to a combination of internet-based inspiration and digital imaging, this number has only increased in recent years.

This now means that there are more photographers than ever taking excellent landscape images. "Digital technology has made photography more democratic and accessible, which is a good thing, but it's also increased the competition," explains landscape photographer David Taylor (www.davidtaylorphotography.co.uk). Fellow professional Mark Bauer (www.markbauerphotography.com) agrees with this. "Modern technology has made it extremely easy to take technically competent photographs," he states. "Photographers are able to experiment more and really push their creative abilities. As a result, the standard of landscape photography has risen dramatically."

This doesn't mean that aspiring landscape photographers should be put off. "It's a challenge to professionals to lift their game and produce work that isn't available elsewhere," says Peter Eastway (www.petereastway.com), who has built a career as a landscape, travel, portraiture and commercial photographer.

Simply put, with so much competition, you have to be the best you can possibly be. Chip Phillips (www.chipphillipsphotography.com), a landscape photographer based in the USA, has some simple advice for developing a strong body of work. "After you have a body of work, get some critiques," he suggests. "Post images online and ask for constructive feedback. www.naturephotographers.net, 500px, Flickr, Facebook, G+ – anywhere you can get your work out and get comments."

These websites are an equally convenient and plentiful means of sourcing inspiration from other photographers, both in terms of shooting skills and fertile locations. However, it's vital that you find your own style. "The biggest mistake is not thinking creatively enough and not being original enough," says Bauer. "It's simply not enough to copy other people's ideas and then try to sell them in the same places." Professional photographer Ian Rolfe (www.ianrolfelightsapes.com) also stresses the need to be original. "Don't copy someone else's style," he says. "Develop your own, unique, signature vision."

Phillips says that the problem of imitation is becoming more, rather than less, frequent. "One mistake I often see more and more now is photographers who copy other people's work all the way down to the processing and are aspiring to become a professional at the same time," he says. "Imitating others is a very important step in the process of developing your own personal style, but if that is all you do, then it is hard to separate yourself from the bunch that way."

You can further separate yourself from your competitors by taking the extra steps

necessary to achieve the very best quality. Australian landscape photographer Christian Fletcher (www.christianfletcher.com.au) explains that he always invests time and effort into ensuring that everything he produces is as strong as he can possibly make it. "Do not accept second best," he says. "If you have halos around something in your image from sloppy brushwork in Photoshop, fix it. If you are out shooting, make sure your images are sharp. I do this by taking multiple shots of the same scene, focusing between each shot. One is likely to be sharper than the others. Go for that nth degree and your work will improve dramatically. Basically refine your techniques to a point where it becomes automatic."

Opposite

Outside the box

Chip Phillips: "If there is a [shot] I know has already been done, I will try and stay away from it"

Below

Weather watching

"One of the main priorities is to keep an eye on weather forecasts," advises Andy Farrer



© Andy Farrer



© Chip Phillips

Once you are satisfied with the work you are producing and have confidence that it is of a sufficiently professional standard, building a strong, professional reputation is the next step. Fletcher believes you need to avoid “showing off all your work – the good, bad and the ugly... Any photographer should only put their best work out there,” he explains. “If you show the public ten brilliant photos and the [next] is a total dog, that is the one they will remember and then, all of a sudden, you aren’t such a good photographer after all.”

Developing a name for yourself isn’t easy, but can be done if you are willing to investigate all the available avenues, a number of which are often overlooked, says Rolfe. “You need to be part of the photographic community from the start,” he says. “[There’s a] myriad of Salons and exhibitions held in most countries every year... Enter your work and see if it’s accepted. It might mean doing the camera club and photographic society circuit.”

Workshops and one-on-one tutoring sessions are a hugely popular avenue for photographers to earn a living today. “Workshops are a great source of income, especially if you specialise in a certain area,”

“A lot of people assume running workshops is an easy way to make money, but if done properly, it’s very demanding”

says Phillips. It’s important to remember, however, that you will need to have developed a sufficient reputation before you can lead workshops, and you’ll need a diverse range of skills at your disposal if you are going to succeed. “A lot of people assume running workshops is an easy way to make money, but if done properly, it’s very demanding and requires many skills beyond being a good photographer,” says Bauer. “Unless you have an established reputation, it can be difficult to pick up business in the first place. So you really need to establish yourself through the traditional routes – magazines, books and so on – before you can run a successful workshop business. Your profile can be further enhanced by the intelligent use of social media.”

Use sites and apps such as Facebook and Twitter to create a presence. “Get your work out there in the public eye,” says Fletcher. “Keep it up on social media, but also make

prints, have exhibitions, show off the work you have created. You are not going to be the best if no one knows who you are.”

One of the most vital steps you can take is to think of yourself as a businessperson as much as a photographer, as Eastway explains. “It has less to do with photography than with business,” he says. “Take a look around the world at the most famous landscape photographers. Some of them earn big dollars, others a very modest income. The difference isn’t in the quality of their photography, but in the way they market and sell themselves, plus what they sell and where they sell it.”

If you are serious about wanting to succeed in the competitive world of landscape photography, you need to be ready to spend at least as much time working on your business as you do out shooting. “Produce a business plan,” says Eastway. “It doesn’t have to be complicated, even a single sheet of paper with



© Mark Bauer

some simple goals and steps will be enough. Most landscape photographers have a dream that comprises of travelling the world and taking great photographs. It’s a great dream to have, but don’t forget the business side. Sit down and say, I want to earn \$100,000 a year as a landscape photographer. That means, I need to earn \$2,000 a week, 50 weeks a year. How many prints do I have to sell a week to earn \$2,000? What sort of photos do people want to buy? Where do I find these people? It’s basic stuff, but unless you’ve done a course in business, few photographers are aware of it.”

Like photographers of all disciplines, landscape photographers are creative people who generally prefer to shoot what they feel inspired to shoot – and this is something that you can no longer do, at least not all the time, if you want to work as a professional. “One mistake to avoid is not listening to your clients,” explains Taylor. “If they want apples, don’t give them oranges! You may prefer oranges, but that’s not what you’re being paid to deliver. It’s a tricky balancing act. You have to shoot in a way that pleases both you and your client. It’s important to discuss with your client where the boundaries are before you start.”

Above all, you’ll need to have patience and perseverance if you want to be a professional landscape photographer. Rather like landscape photography itself, building a career in this field can be something of a waiting game. “Don’t expect to make your full living income for many years,” advises Rolfe. “This kind of specialist photographic profession takes time and patience.” Eastway agrees with this. “How long will it take you to build a business that makes

Opposite
Get advice
According to Chip Phillips, one of the best ways to develop your skills is to seek critique

Above
Facing the competition
“One of the challenges you’ll face is the intensity of the competition, so give yourself every advantage you can,” says Mark Bauer

you a good living? I think five years minimum and many friends of mine have taken 10 to 15 years to become self-sufficient in landscape work as their primary income source,” he says.

Professional landscape photographer Andy Farrer (www.andyfarrer.co.uk) says that it’s important that you are still able to genuinely love what you do once you’ve made it your source of income. “Make sure you still enjoy it once it’s your job. Running your photography as a business can take all the fun out of it,” he says. “It can be an emotional rollercoaster when you don’t sell a print for a while. You can lose your mojo. Most people set up a website and get things going before giving up the day job. It’s certainly the wisest way forward.”

Farrer explains that you need to be happy with an irregular income. “The unpredictability of income isn’t everyone’s bag,” he says. “I can imagine that being a deal breaker for some.” However, he says the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. “We’re lucky people who have the benefit of not being restricted by set work hours and so are able to make the most of unusual weather or get great colourful mornings by simply being out for more of them than people with day jobs.”

DP

Sources of income

Discover the options available for making money in landscape photography and the benefits and drawbacks of each

GALLERY

PROS

If people see a print hanging somewhere, they may order one for themselves. Framed prints usually result in profitable margins.

CONS

The initial outlay costs will be high to stock a gallery. Anything that you print and frame, but fail to sell, is a significant loss.

STOCK

PROS

Many used to make a sizeable proportion of their profit from stock, as it’s a straightforward way of earning from pre-existing images.

CONS

Stock isn’t nearly as profitable as it used to be and many who once relied on this income source have since had to look elsewhere.

BOOKS

PROS

Having a book enhances your reputation and, once it’s finished and printed, is a product that can be sold at workshops.

CONS

Profit margins aren’t likely to be big when it comes to books – there will be costs involved in producing the book in the first place.

CARDS AND CALENDARS

PROS

Provided that the images are relevant to the area, these can be sold in shops catering to tourists and can be self-published.

CONS

This is an avenue of income that’s explored by many photographers, so expect a high amount of competition.

COMMERCIAL COMMISSIONS

PROS

These can pay exceptionally well and are a huge testament to your reputation and the quality of the work you are producing.

CONS

These are not easy to get and even if you are approached, you may have to bid against other photographers to get the job.

TOURS AND WORKSHOPS

PROS

This can be financially rewarding with a good profit margin, as you get to earn money showing others how to improve their skills.

CONS

There’s a lot of work and responsibility involved and you’ll need a lot more than photographic talent to cope.

EDITORIAL WORK

PROS

This raises your profile and cements your reputation among other photographers who may book a place on a workshop or tour.

CONS

You need to be able to write well and take great photos, as most editorial commissions involve text as well as images.