

THE COASTAL PHOTOGRAPHER'S FIELD GUIDE
A five-step method, built in the field

Tide, Light & Timing

BY PHOTOVAG

How to never miss a coastal photography outing again
— after forty years on the shore.

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INTRODUCTION

The 5-Step Method to Never Miss a Coastal Outing Again

You already know the basics. You know your camera, you understand light, you know what a long exposure is. And yet, you've probably come back from a coastal shoot with that frustrating feeling of having missed something. The light wasn't there. The tide wasn't what you hoped for. The foreground you'd scouted on Google Maps was completely submerged.

That's not a technique problem.

That's a preparation problem.

Coastal landscape photography is one of the most demanding disciplines there is. The sea doesn't negotiate. The light won't wait for you. A rising tide can turn the perfect spot into an inaccessible zone in under twenty minutes. Unlike mountain or forest photography, the coastline adds a constraint many underestimate: everything happens within a very narrow window — often very early in the morning, often in the cold and the wind.

What separates an ordinary image from one that stops people in their tracks isn't gear. It isn't luck. It's preparation.

In this guide, I'm sharing the method I've built over forty years of practice. Not a theoretical method. A field method — the one I apply before every single outing, whether it's a spot I know by heart or new.

01 CHOOSING YOUR MOMENT **02 READING YOUR SPOT** **03 GEAR FOR THE COAST** **04 IN THE FIELD** **05 AFTER THE OUTING**

If you're ready to stop enduring your outings and start building them, let's go.

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PART ONE

Choosing Your Moment

The most common mistake in coastal photography isn't a technical one. It's showing up at the wrong time — not the wrong time of day, but the wrong combination of time, tide, light, and season, all at once.

The golden hours aren't enough

You've heard it a thousand times: shoot at golden hour. Sunrise, sunset. The light is warm, the shadows are long, the magic happens. And it's true — but only half true. At the coast, golden hour without the right tide is often worthless. A beautiful sunrise over a beach completely covered by water — no rocks, no pools, no foreground texture — is just a nice sky. Technically correct. Emotionally empty.

The real sweet spot is when golden light and a retreating tide coincide. That's when the image builds itself in front of you.

Reading the tidal cycle

A tidal cycle lasts roughly 12 hours 25 minutes. Within that cycle, two windows matter most: the two hours around low tide, and — less obvious — the last hour of the incoming tide, when water is still moving fast over exposed surfaces. Low tide reveals. High tide simplifies. Neither is inherently better.

LOW TIDE WINDOW **INCOMING SURGE** **TARGET COEFF.**

±2h

Rocks revealed, pools formed. Max foreground.

-1h

Fast water over surfaces. Motion blur potent.

>70

Guarantees sufficient foreground for compelling images.

The tidal coefficient

Not all low tides are equal. The tidal coefficient — a number between 20 and 120 — tells you the amplitude. A coefficient of 95 will expose rocks that a coefficient of 45 leaves submerged.

COEFFICIENT	TYPE	WHAT IT REVEALS	BEST USE
20–40	Neap tide	Minimal exposure	High-water abstracts
40–70	Moderate	Partial rocks, wet sand	Selective spots
70–95	Strong	Full reef exposure	Peak conditions
95–120	Spring tide	Maximum low water	Exceptional access

KEY INSIGHT

- Target coefficient 70 or above to guarantee foreground interest
- Pair with sunrise or sunset within ±2 hours of low tide
- Plan 3–4 weeks ahead — ideal alignments are rare and fully predictable

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PART TWO

Choosing Your Spot

Knowing when to shoot is half the work. Knowing where to stand is the other half. The coast offers an almost infinite variety of locations — but not all of them will reward you the same way, at the same time, with the same conditions.

Identifying your spots

Each type of coastal environment has its own photographic logic. Cliffs offer drama and scale, but limit foreground options. Sandy beaches give reflections and leading lines — but only at low tide. Rock formations anchor the image, create texture, and remain interesting at any tide. Harbours and lighthouses add a human element and work well in flat light.

Cliffs & headlands <i>Drama, scale, wide angles.</i>	Sandy beaches <i>Reflections & leading lines.</i>
Rock formations <i>Texture, anchor points, always interesting.</i>	Harbours & lighthouses <i>Human scale, works in flat light.</i>

Scouting remotely

Before visiting a new spot I use: satellite view to understand terrain; PhotoPills or The Photographer's Ephemeris to check azimuth; and Instagram geotags to understand what others have found.

Orientation matters more than beauty

A spectacular cliff facing west offers nothing at sunrise. A modest beach facing east can be extraordinary at 6am in January. Before committing to a location, always check its orientation relative to the day's light window. A beautiful location in the wrong direction is a wasted outing.

The best coastal spots aren't the most dramatic.

They're the ones that work with your conditions.

Know your spot before you shoot it

The first visit to any location is always reconnaissance. Don't go expecting a great image — go expecting to learn. Walk the full area. Note where the water reaches at different tide states. Mark the strongest foreground elements. Note the access paths for night or pre-dawn arrivals.

REMOTESCOUTING CHECKLIST

- Confirm sunrise/sunset azimuth — does it align with the location?
- Check satellite view — understand tidal reach and terrain
- Identify access paths — can you arrive safely before dawn?
- Find the foreground — rocks, pools, reef, sand patterns?

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PART THREE

Gear for the Coast

The coast is one of the most demanding environments for photographic equipment. Salt spray, sand, wind, and moisture are constant threats. Your gear selection isn't about status or budgets — it's about what survives and performs in conditions that are actively trying to break it.

The essential kit

A sturdy tripod is non-negotiable. Carbon fibre is lighter; aluminium is more stable in wind. The legs must lock solidly — a tripod that creeps under load is worse than no tripod at all. Hang your bag from the centre column when working in exposed positions.

ND filters are the coastal photographer's second most important tool after the tripod. A 6-stop ND gives you motion in moderate light; a 10-stop opens up daylight long exposures. A polariser reduces glare and deepens the blues — use it on overcast days when others give up.

Camera body <i>Weather-sealed preferred. Any serious mirrorless or DSLR works.</i>	Wide-angle lens <i>14–24mm range. The sea rewards wide perspectives.</i>
Solid tripod <i>Carbon fibre or aluminium. No ball-head flex allowed.</i>	Remote release <i>Eliminates shutter vibration in long exposures.</i>
ND filter set <i>6-stop + 10-stop as minimum. Polariser as bonus.</i>	Lens cloths <i>In a sealed bag. You will need them. More than once.</i>

Protecting your gear

After every coastal session, wipe down all exposed metal and glass with a damp cloth followed by a dry one. Salt deposits are invisible until they corrode. Rinse your tripod feet. Store filters dry. Never put wet gear in a sealed bag — moisture trapped inside does more damage than the spray.

Before you leave the house

GEAR CHECKLIST

- Camera body charged + memory card formatted
- Two spare batteries — cold kills battery life fast
- Tripod + remote release + ND filter set + polariser
- Lens cloths in sealed waterproof bag
- Headlamp (red-light mode preserves night vision)
- Waterproof boots, neoprene gloves, rain cover

The best camera bag for the coast is the one that keeps your gear dry, accessible, and ready — in that order.

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PART FOUR

In the Field

You've done the preparation. You're on location before light. Now the real work begins — and it has almost nothing to do with camera settings.

Arrive before the light

The golden rule: arrive at least 30 to 45 minutes before sunrise or sunset. Not to shoot — to explore. Use that time to walk the shore, test angles, identify your foreground, and position your tripod. When the light finally arrives, you should already be set up, composed, and ready to press the shutter.

The order of operations

- 45 min** **Arrive and walk first**
Don't set up yet. Walk the location, feel the light, find your foreground element.
- 20 min** **Set up with intent**
Choose your position based on what you saw. Commit. Don't swander once you've decided.
- 0 min** **Golden light begins**
15–25 minute window. You are on tripod, composition set, focus confirmed.
- +30 min** **Adapt and explore**
As light changes, move. Secondary shots, intimate details, different perspectives.

WHENTHINGS DON'T GO TO PLAN

- Flat light -> details, textures, abstracts in the foreground
- Tide too high -> cliffs or elevated viewpoints, shoot the power
- Strong wind -> bag from tripod centre column for ballast
- No colour -> embrace monochrome — grey light is deeply underrated

Safety — non-negotiable rules

The sea is beautiful and entirely indifferent to your presence. Rogue waves on calm days have claimed experienced photographers. These rules are not suggestions.

SAFETY RULES

- Never turn your back on the sea. Always watch incoming waves.
- Check tide times before stepping onto any exposed platform or reef.
- Tell someone where you are going and when to expect you back.
- Wear footwear with grip. Wet rock and seaweed are treacherous.
- No image is worth a risk you cannot fully assess.

The best photographers on the coast are not the most daring.

They're the ones who come back.

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PART FIVE

After the Outing

The outing ends when you get home. Not when the light fades. What you do in the hours and days after a session determines how much value you extract from it — both in images and in knowledge.

Sort and select with a clear eye

Don't edit the same evening. Give it a night. When you return to your images the next morning with fresh eyes, the keepers and the rejects become obvious far more quickly.

Use a three-pass system: first pass for technical rejects (focus, blur, exposure errors). Second pass for compositional rejects. Third pass to identify your top five — the images worth investing time in. Be ruthless.

Post-processing for seascapes

Post-images benefit from a restrained, natural treatment. The goal is to render what you experienced — not to construct something artificial.

KEY PROCESSING STEPS

- 1. Exposure + white balance — set the emotional tone first
- 2. Horizon correction — always check for tilt before anything else
- 3. Graduated filter on sky — recover highlights, add depth
- 4. Clarity + texture on rocks and water — presence, not crumb
- 5. Colour grading — coastal light is cool-blue or warm-amber, rarely both

Archive and name your files

A simple naming convention saves hours over a career. Use date-first format: YYYY-MM-DD_Location_Session. Example:

2025-01-14_CapFrehel_Sunrise_001.RAF

Back up immediately to a second drive. The coast is unforgiving enough in the field — don't let a hard drive failure erase it afterwards.

Capitalise on every outing

After each session, take five minutes to record what mattered: the exact conditions (wind, cloud cover, swell height), the tidal coefficient and timing, what worked and — more importantly — what didn't. Note GPS coordinates of any spot worth revisiting. Over time, this log becomes one of the most valuable tools you own — a living guide to your coastline.

Every outing — even a failed one — is data. The photographers who improve fastest are the ones who learn from every trip.

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CONCLUSION

Ready to Shoot

You now have the five pillars of a successful coastal outing: the right moment, the right spot, the right gear, the right mindset in the field, and the discipline to learn from every session afterwards.

This method won't guarantee perfect conditions. Nothing will. But it will guarantee that you arrive prepared — and prepared photographers make better images. Consistently. Not just when luck is on their side.

The Master Pre-Outing Checklist

MOMENT

- Tidal coefficient checked (target: above 70)
- Low tide noted — arrival 45 min before light
- Sunrise / sunset time confirmed for the date
- Access route confirmed — safe at arrival tide
- Foreground elements identified on satellite

GEAR

- Battery charged + spare / memory card formatted
- Tripod + remote release + ND filter set
- Headlamp, waterproof boots, gloves, rain cover

FIELD

- Arrive before light — walk first, set up second
- Someone knows where I am and when I return
- Plan B location identified if conditions shift

AFTER

- Files backed up to second drive on return
- Session notes recorded (conditions, tide, results)
- Tripod and gear rinsed / dried

Every outing — even a failed one — is data. See you on the shore. — Photovag

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