

BLUE HOUR

By Kent DuFault

The Golden Hour is often discussed as the 'Holy Grail' of outdoor photography. But don't be fooled. The Blue Hour is just as exciting, and it offers a little wider opportunity than the Golden Hour.

The Golden Hour can drastically vary based upon atmospheric conditions. However, the Blue Hour happens every day as it isn't tied to the same lighting requirements.

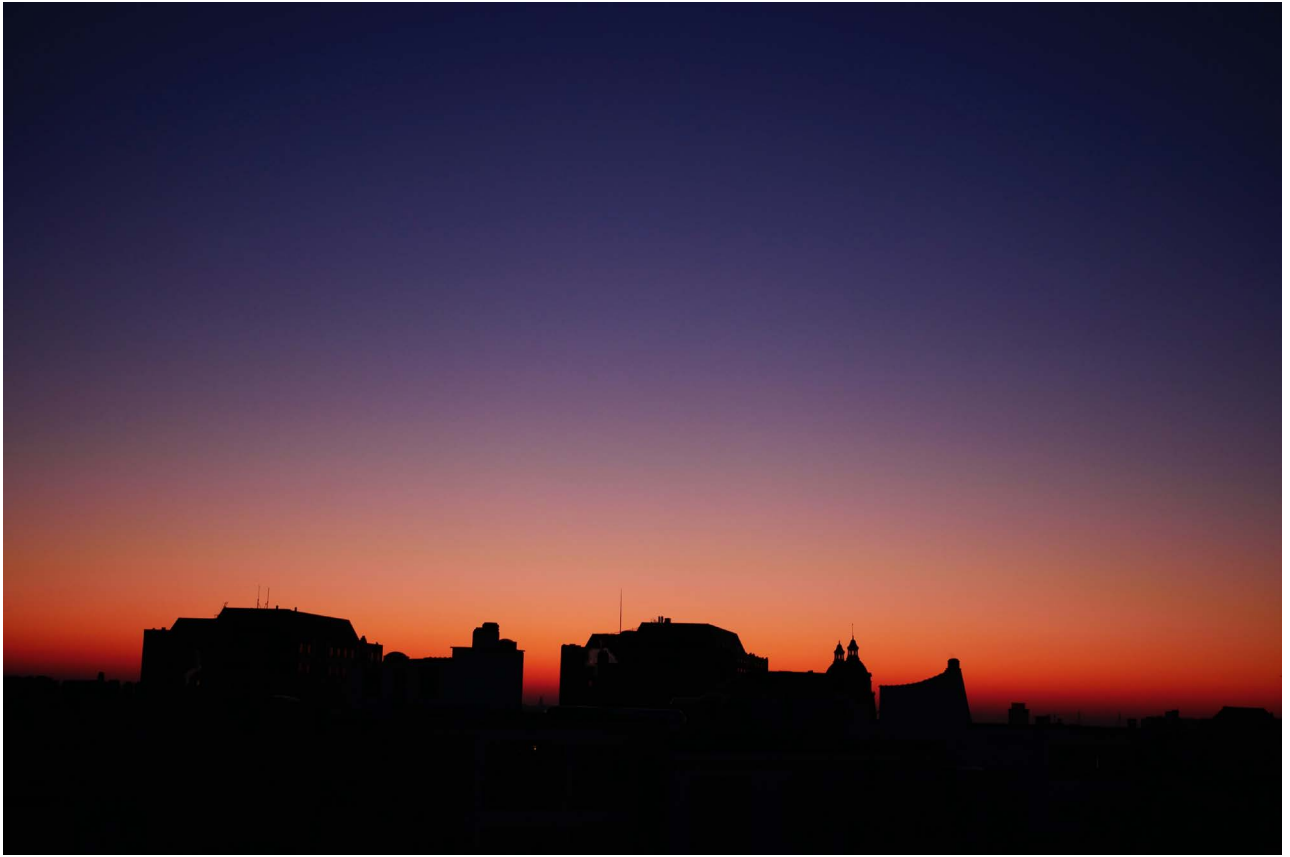
In fact, the day can be completely overcast, and the Blue Hour will still emerge. This is because the Blue Hour is created by an excess of ultraviolet light, which happens whenever sunlight is missing.

Sometimes, we can actually 'see' the blueness of the ambient Blue Hour light. And digital cameras are extremely sensitive to ultraviolet light, so they tend to enhance the blue coloration.



https://unsplash.com/photos/0zs_-cL8DwE

Ian Simmonds – Canon EOS 5DS R, 24mm lens, f/13, 270 seconds, ISO 800



<https://unsplash.com/photos/uwkGxwQqyh>

Christian Lischka SJ – Panasonic DMC-G70, 25mm lens, f/1.8, 1/100th, ISO 200

The Blue Hour occurs from the moment the sun has set for your chosen subject. This time of day can vary based upon location, the time of the year, and the surrounding structures or landscape.

The effect will also vary based upon whether the camera is pointed at the sunset or in any other direction.

This example photo depicts the Blue Hour when the camera is pointed straight at the post-sunset sky. At the horizon, the sun is still warming up the light while the upper level of the sky is already into the Blue Hour.



Assignment:

Select an architectural structure with a good camera perspective that positions the setting sun directly behind your subject. After the sun dips below the horizon, start shooting pictures. Remember, **your subject will be backlit**. There will likely be little detail in the foreground until the lights turn on. Plan on using a silhouette, and if the lights do come on, that's an added bonus. The idea is to get you thinking and using a sky, similar to the one depicted in the example photo, in some of your architectural pictures.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/2SP6Myp0DeM>

cs_on_tour – Xiaomi Mi Note 10, 8.2mm lens, f/2, 1/630th, ISO 100

When Does the Blue Hour Begin?

There is no exact time that one can predict when the Blue Hour will exactly start. What kicks it off is a lacking warming light from the sun.

In this sunset at the beach, you can see the Blue Hour creeping into the color scheme even though the sun hasn't quite set yet. This is due to the cloud cover near the horizon. If it were a completely clear day, the Blue Hour wouldn't begin until after the sun dropped below the horizon.



Assignment:

Go out on several days, over a period of time, and photograph architecture at the Blue Hour. Keep good notes as to the time of year, weather conditions, and when the Blue Hour first appeared, as well as how it changed in the hour that followed sunset.

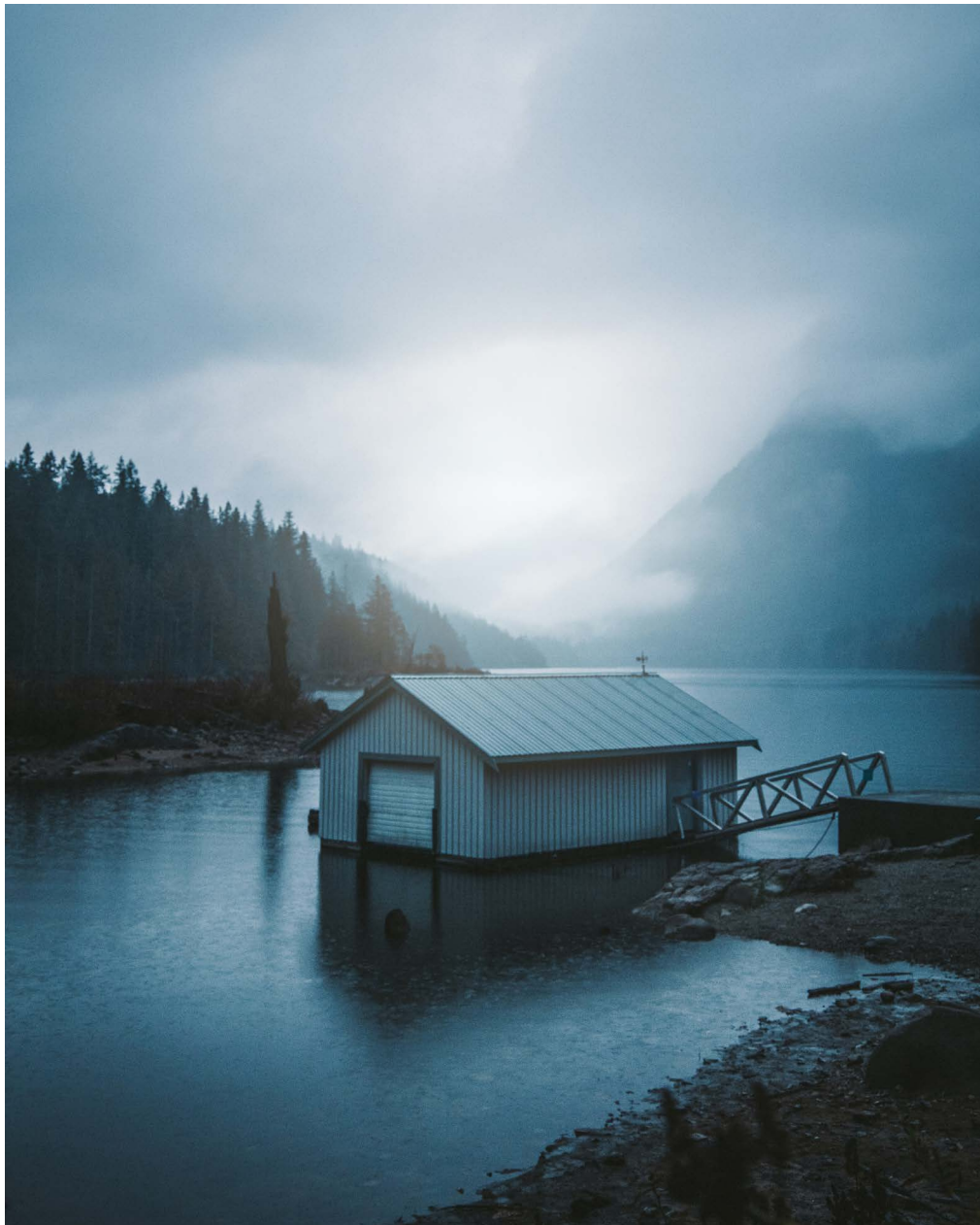


<https://unsplash.com/photos/roZhx0GNcnQ>

Zan Janzekovic – Nikon D5300, 105mm lens, f/6.3, 6 seconds, ISO 100

It is important to note that the starting time of the Blue Hour will change based upon the location.

Suppose your subject architecture is surrounded by mountains and sits in a valley. In that case, the Blue Hour may begin as early as mid-afternoon.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/Ceh6yQjzYoQ>

Zachary Kyra-Derksen – Canon EOS R, 37mm lens, f/4, 1/80th, ISO 1600

The opening moments of the Blue Hour will also change based upon the weather.

Critical point: The Blue Hour is entirely dependent upon how much warm light comes from the sun. When little or no light comes from the sun, the Blue Hour will begin earlier and it will generally last longer.



Assignment:

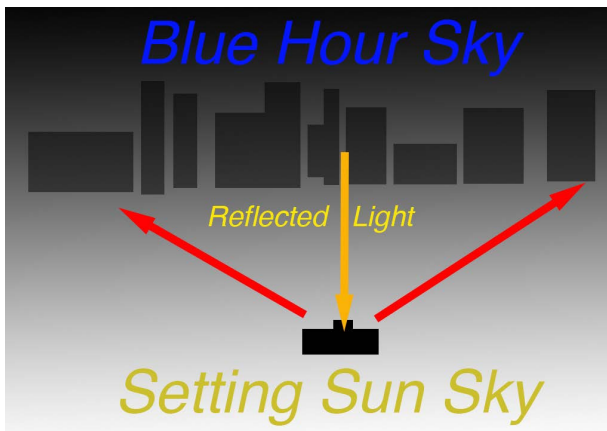
Find various architectural subjects with varying topographical land masses around them. Experiment with how the Blue Hour changes based upon geography and subject positioning.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/AmDpa21cwJM>

Kristina Delp – Fujifilm X100F, 23mm lens, f/2, 1/500th, ISO 400

Previously we touched upon the POV of the camera influencing the Blue Hour. A favorite technique among experienced architectural photographers is to shoot the Blue Hour with the post-sunset sky at their back. This will often create interesting reflections in glass structures in front of the camera while creating a complementary color contrast with a deep blue sky and surrounding landscape. This photo (above) is one example.



Graphic by Kent DuFault



Assignment:

Find a glass structure with a good camera POV that places the sunset sky behind your back. You may have to maneuver around to find the best angle for a reflection of the post-sunset sky. Try to make your subject architecture pop from the surrounding area by combining the Blue Hour with a warm sunset reflection. Remember, the sun must be obscured or below the horizon. Otherwise, the warm sunlight will flood onto the entire picture!



<https://unsplash.com/photos/KQCLehkpAPU>

Jack B – Canon EOS R, 51mm lens, f/4, 1/6th, ISO 400

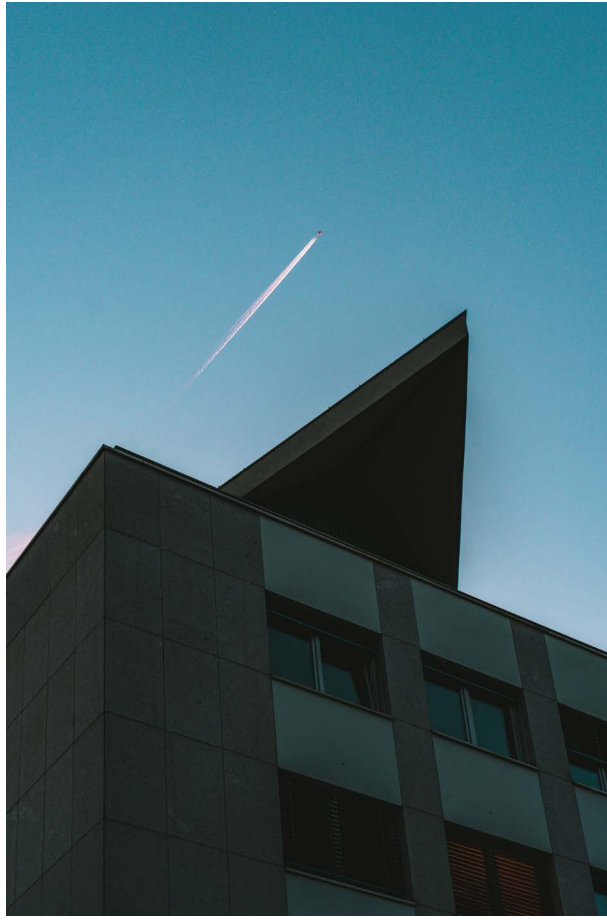
When choosing a camera POV that places the subject in front of the post-sunset sky, look for strong shapes within the architecture to add visual interest.

The advantage to this angle is the deep rich colors that can be captured in the sky. The disadvantage is that the building will likely show little or no detail, so you must adjust your thinking.



Assignment:

Photograph architecture with exciting shapes and highlight those shapes by placing the post-sunset Blue Hour sky behind your subject.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/wzXPKMEQ-PU>

*Tim Rubmann – Sony ILCE-7M2, 46mm
lens, f/4.5, 1/60th, ISO 320*

As mentioned earlier, the Blue Hour is triggered by a lack of warming sunlight. This can occur at varying times based upon the positioning of the architecture and your chosen camera position.

In this example photo, the timing was well before sunset. However, the chosen camera POV depicted **the shadow side** of the subject.

Important Thought: You can create amazing Blue Hour architectural photos by playing the Blue Hour light against the setting sunlight. This creates a complementary color scheme and can be highly dramatic.

In the example photo, the airplane contrail is still illuminated by the light of the setting sun. As such, it added a dramatic color scheme and a fascinating focal point to the subject.

Also, note how photographing on the shadow side maintains details in the subject architecture while still providing the Blue Hour effect. This is a result of a higher ambient lighting presence, and it can be helpful when you want the Blue Hour effect but still want to see details in the subject versus a silhouette.



Assignment:

Research and locate architecture that you can photograph on the shadow side for earlier Blue Hour lighting while also catching another object with sunset light. Use the secondary object as a focal point.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/HInAgB7YQq0>

Thomas Millot – Fujifilm X-T1, 35mm lens, f/1.4, 1/60th, ISO 1250

Another variation occurs when shooting toward the post-sunset sky and your subject has artificial lighting already turned on.



Assignment:

Find and photograph an architectural subject where you place the deeply colored hues of the post-sunset sky behind the subject, and the camera side is lit with artificial lighting. Try to balance the exposure values to get the best possible color saturation and density throughout the entire image.



<https://unsplash.com/photos/uasHaM-WUug>

Patrick Humm – Fujifilm X-E2, 35mm lens, f/1.4, 1/60th, ISO 320

The Blue Hour lends itself well to abstract or semi-abstract architectural photography. You can also bring a blue glass filter to place over your lens and deepen the bluing effect.



Assignment:

Either use a blue filter on your lens or find a piece of blue glass that you can shoot through and create some abstract and or semi-abstract architectural photography artwork. Make it blue!

Evaluation: Did you enjoy exploring the Blue Hour with architecture? Are you now better acquainted with the often less discussed cousin of the Golden Hour? Did you find a particular time of day that worked best for your area? Did you try enhancing the Blue Hour effect either with glass filters or in post-production? Are you excited to continue exploring this unusual lighting event that occurs daily?