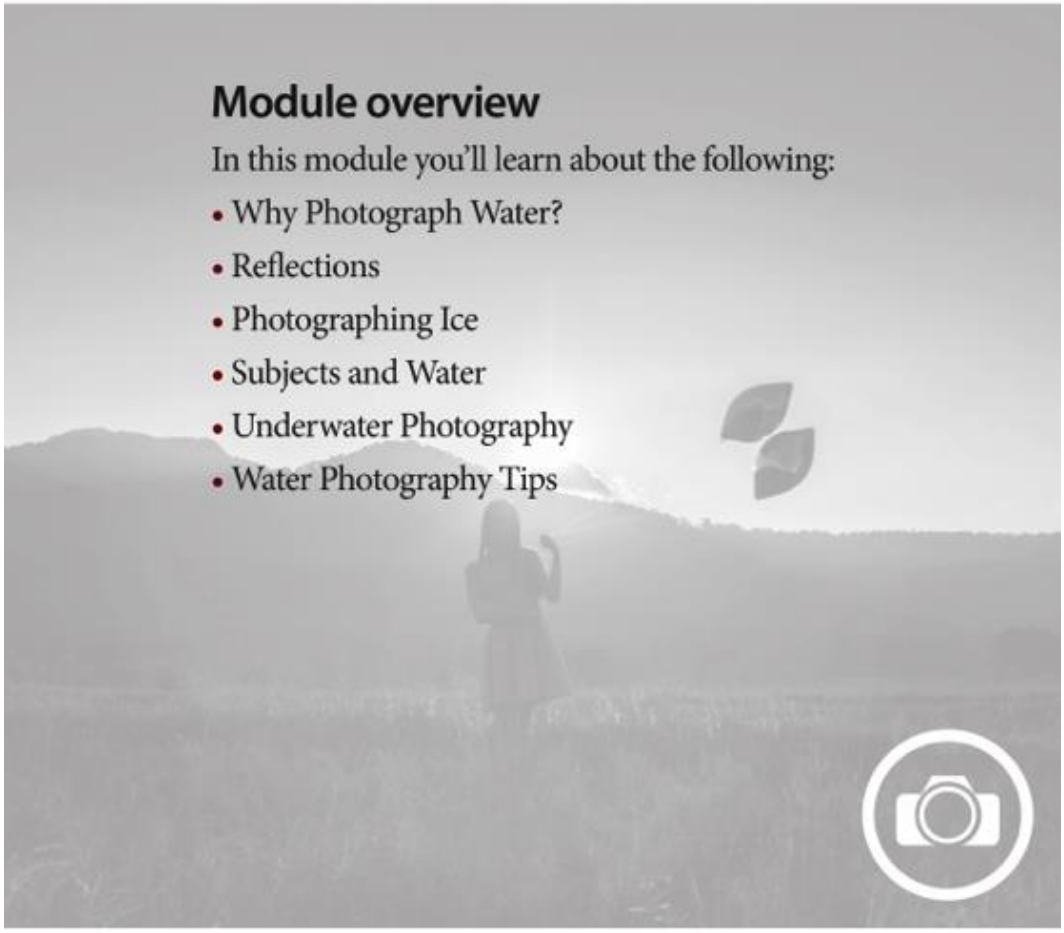
Module 15: Water



"Which of my photographs is my favourite?
The one I'm going to take tomorrow."

Imogen Cunningham
(1883 – 1976)

Tip: if you're near any large body of water, take precautions for yourself and your equipment.

If you're shooting on the coast, be aware of the tides, watch out for slippery rocks and keep your equipment covered up as much as you can; and bring a lens cleaning cloth in case you get water on your lens.

15.1 Why Photograph Water?

Photographing water is far more interesting than it sounds. There are so many things you can do with it: it can be frozen (sometimes literally) in time with fast shutter speeds; it can be smoothed out by slow shutter speeds; it can be used to reflect or distort your subjects; or your subjects can be in or on the water.

Using a shutter speed of 1/500s (one five-hundredth of a second) freezes the water and creates a slightly abstract image.

Using a much slower shutter speed of 1.8s creates motion blur and gives the impression of flowing water by creating motion blur.

Tip: if you're shooting at the beach on a windy be very careful with your camera, sand and sea spray can do serious damage to your equipment, especially your lens.

You can buy protective cases to guard against the elements but they're only worth buying if you plan on doing a lot of outdoor photography in bad weather.

Both techniques are equally valid and which one you use will depend on the situation. There's no set rules, but usually artificial water features, like fountains and sprinklers, look better using a fast shutter speed, while natural water features, like waterfalls, rivers and streams, look better with a slower shutter speed. However, try using both and see which one you think looks best.

As with any slow shutter speed it helps to use a tripod and a shutter release to minimise the movement of the camera. If your camera has the mirror lock feature, this will also reduce movement; but remember that you won't be able to look through the viewfinder because the mirror will not be reflecting the image through the pentaprism.

When using slower shutter speeds, there is a danger of overexposing the water. In this example, the shutter speed was too long and the image has lost most of its detail. It's not easy to fix using editing software, because once the highlights are "blown out", meaning they are completely white, it's difficult to get that detail back.

One way to fix this problem is to use a neutral density filter; this limits the amount of light into the camera, which requires using slower shutter speeds.

Another option is to use exposure bracketing and then combine the shots (usually 3) into an HDR image.

Your camera will also have a highlights warning in the live view mode. You will need to check your camera's instructions to find out how to activate it, but it's not the best thing to use for long exposures and is generally used as a guide to avoiding blown-out highlights using medium to fast shutter speeds. You can also check the histogram function, but again this will not account for longer exposures.

Tip: sometimes it's easy to forget that you have a filter on your lens.

When using a neutral density filter remember to remove it if you want to freeze the water. This will allow you to use faster shutter speeds.

Using the HDR technique retains the tonal range and detail without losing the motion blur of the water.

The decision whether to freeze or blur will depend on a number of factors, usually related to the amount of available light as well the mood you're trying to capture. For example, if you're shooting the sea on a stormy day and large waves are hitting the rocks on the shore or a sea wall, it's better to freeze this action. Smoothing out the waves will lessen their impact on the image.

If you want to capture a large wave hitting the shore, you will want to capture it at its highest point. If your timing isn't quite right, then try using continuous shooting mode.

Tip: shutter priority mode is usually the best setting for shooting water. If depth of field is also a consideration, then use manual mode.

If the waves are less dramatic, the slow shutter speed technique will work better by creating a sense of movement.

15.2 Reflections

Water can be very reflective in the right conditions and this effect can be used in several ways. Here we see a tree reflected in the water; because the water is not still, the reflection becomes distorted, thereby creating an abstract image.

Tip: when capturing reflections in the water, do not use a slow shutter if the water is not still. This will create motion blur and completely obscure the subject.

In another example, we see a building reflected in the water. This time the image has been flipped, so the building is being viewed the right way up which creates a surreal effect.

Here the water has been used to create symmetry. The high vantage point and wide angle gives the image visual impact.

15.3 Photographing Ice

A fast shutter speed will freeze water in time; but when nature freezes water, the effects can be equally dramatic.

Shutter speed becomes less of an issue, so concentrate on using your aperture to adjust your depth of field.

Tip: do you need to be reminded of the dangers of ice?

Take precautions and wear appropriate clothing. If you know another photographer who is interested in shooting ice and snow, then it makes sense to go together.

Also, watch out for extreme temperature differences. If you go from a cold location to a warm location (your house or car), this can cause condensation inside your lens.

15.4 Subjects and Water

Tip: photographing dirty or polluted water is not recommended. Unless your images are designed to show the pollution, the results are usually unsatisfactory.

There's nothing visually appealing about brown water.

Always be on the look-out for animals and people, as they can provide you with an interesting focal point for your composition. In most cases, faster shutter speeds will be required to avoid motion blur and camera shake, so shutter priority mode is recommended.

Tip: does your camera have a strap? Do you use it?

Many photographers don't use the strap, especially around the neck; some will wrap it around their wrist.

When you're shooting near any water, use your camera strap. If you camera goes in the water, it's probably finished – the same goes for the lens.

Using the sun as backlight gives your subjects a strong silhouette, but only use this when the silhouette would be recognisable, like a swan or people.

Think about depth and perspective when shooting still water. Extremely low or high angles can provide more compositional interest.

Tip: if you have bought an underwater housing for your DSLR, try it out on dry land first.

Get used to operating your camera this way and you'll be more prepared for shooting with the housing attached.

15.5 Underwater Photography

Underwater photography opens up a whole new world; but before you go rushing off to book a diving holiday, there's one thing you need to know. Underwater housings for DSLR cameras are ridiculously expensive. In some instances, they cost more than the camera itself.

Therefore, an underwater housing is only recommended if you have the money and an interest in diving. If you feel uncomfortable in the water, trying to operate a camera is probably not the best idea.

Tip: if you don't have any diving experience but are still interested in underwater photography, it's good idea to go on a few dives without a camera.

This will get you acclimatised to being underwater.

If you have your underwater housing and feel comfortable in the water, then try using auto mode. As you gain more experience and get used to operating your camera in this way, you can start to experiment with the manual setting.

More backlighting works particularly well underwater; but unlike photographing on land, the best time to shoot this is midday when the sun is at its highest point.

15.6 Summary

- Water can be your subject or the medium with which to frame your subject.
- Think about your shutter speed; do you want to freeze the movement or imply movement?
- When using long shutter speeds, try not to overexpose the water.
- Use the reflective nature of water in your composition.
- Ice can be an interesting subject – but exercise caution.
- If your subjects are in or on the water, faster shutter speed will usually be required.
- Underwater photography is expensive; but if you have the opportunity to try it out, the results can be amazing.

Assessment 15

1) If you're shooting a waterfall using a two-second shutter speed, what will happen to the water in your photograph?

2) If you're shooting a waterfall using a five-hundredth of a second shutter speed, what will happen to the water in your photograph?

3) If you're shooting reflections in water, what would happen if you were using a polarisng filter?

4) Can you think of an example when a polarising filter would be useful for photographing water?

5) True or False? Photographing ice requires a slow shutter speed.

6) If your subject is in or on the water, would you use a slow shutter speed?

7) Why would you use a neutral density filter for photographing water?

8) True or False? Aperture settings are never a priority when photographing water.

9) Can using a long lens be a safety precaution?

10) Explain your answer to Question 9.

15.8 Assignment

Find a natural body of water in your local area – a stream, lake, pond, river, waterfall or the sea. Look for movement and reflections, and try different compositions, like wide shots and close-ups. If something interesting is being reflected in the water, look for horizontal symmetry and also try to photograph the reflection on its own. What will it look like when flipped upside down?

If the water is moving, try different shutter speeds. If the water is still, try photographing it from a low angle and use different apertures to create various depths of field.