When to Shoot Horizontal? Vertical?

by Ed Knepley

Q – When is the best time to shoot a vertical image?

A – Immediately before or after shooting a horizontal.

It may sound like a joke, but it has a serious element. Shooting everything (or nearly so) in both formats has many benefits – and can’t hurt in the least. One of the most obvious reasons is when an image is to be used in a publication. Depending on the page layout sometimes a landscape orientation works best and other times it’s a portrait.

Oh – you never shoot for publication? Trust me – you never know when someone might want to use one of your images. If that day comes and you can’t provide what they need, you’re out of luck. I once entered a magazine photo contest with an image that I had no plans for when I made it. It won the grand prize but was displayed inside the magazine while a runner up made the cover. Mine was numero uno! Why no cover? Because – mine didn’t fit the cover’s requirements. The next year, having learned my lesson, my image did make the cover.

Besides practical reasons like publication, shooting both ways is good for developing your technique, your eye and your compositional skills. You’ll be surprised at how often the orientation you thought was best when shooting the scene isn’t the “keeper” of the pair.

What keeps people from shooting verticals? Force of habit is probably reason #1 and bad habits are hard to break. If the person uses a tripod – which they should – another obstacle surfaces which is the fact that cameras attach to tripods in the horizontal position. With a tripod, changing the camera from horizontal to vertical is more trouble than it’s worth in the opinion of most shooters and so they don’t – big mistake.

With a tripod, there are two options for going vertical – one being far superior to the other.
1. Inferior – tilt the camera 90 degrees (assuming that you are using a tripod head that allows this to be done).
2. Superior – get an L-plate for your camera. This assumes that you’re using a tripod head that has a quick release bracket. This arrangement allows you to release the camera, turn it 90 degrees, and reconnect it to the tripod – all done quicker than it took to write this.
3. Option 2 is superior in many ways including stability of camera support and eliminating the need for major recomposing of the image.
4. Read here (http://reallyrightstuff.com/QR/05.html) for details on the ball heads and camera plates you should consider if you’re serious about photography.
5. When I bought my first L-plate (every camera body now has one), my percentage of vertical shots jumped from maybe 10% to almost 50%.

Here’s a slide show with 21 paired examples. Notice how some pairs tell a quite different story when shifting formats.

Click the center of the slide show shown below to open a new window. In the new window, click on Full Screen.

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