

THE ART OF COMPOSITE PHOTOGRAPHY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TECHNIQUES



WORDS & IMAGES BY **ANGEL FOX**
CAPTURE THE ATLAS ALUMNI

Composite photography sparks debate between traditional and experimental photographers. Some see it as misleading, while others view it as a path to creative freedom. The key is understanding your reason for using (or avoiding) these techniques.

For those who aren't familiar with the term, let me explain it briefly. Composite photography is the art and practice of taking several individual photographs and putting them together, whether they align in reality or not. This process is done today digitally with tools like Photoshop, but it's not new to the field. It actually started in the 19th century in the early days of photography itself. It can be as simple as a sky replacement or as complex as adding intricate details together on a single frame.

The reason I decided to dive into composite landscape photography is because I started feeling limited with single shots. Even before getting into the medium, photography for me was not about depicting reality but rather playing with aesthetics from nature. I would already push my edits to a point where it looked less "real" but pleasing to my eyes, tweaking the colors and enhancing shadows and

contrasts. And so, compositing became an obvious choice for me, especially when astrophotography came into play.

This process and its techniques allow photographers and digital artists to craft scenes that transcend the ordinary, combining elements from various sources to create imagery that might be impossible to capture in a single shot. It offers artists the freedom to construct surreal scenes or realistic environments with elements that were not present together in reality. The art of composite photography requires not just an eye for composition and detail but also a deep understanding of lighting, color theory, and perspective.

Now, compositing doesn't mean creating something that looks far from reality, either. This is why, to make it look as realistic as possible, you need to carefully angle and capture your elements so that when you put them back together, the difference is almost indiscernible. Each element must be carefully selected and adjusted to match the lighting conditions, angles, and scale of the base image to ensure a believable and harmonious result. This meticulous attention to detail sets high-quality composite





Captured during the Capture the Atlas – Huayhuash Peru Photo Tour in June 2023

images apart, making them appear as if every component was part of the original scene.

For photographers, composite photography opens up endless creative possibilities. It allows them to convey messages, evoke emotions, or simply create beauty that goes beyond the limitations of traditional photography. In this article, we'll dive into certain compositing techniques that you can apply with your camera.

1. FOCAL LENGTH BLENDING

One of the most common techniques I use is blending different focal lengths. This is because, with landscape photography, you might encounter different subjects that have different scales and levels of detail. If you enjoy both the details of smaller subjects, as well as the majestic peaks some locations provide, it can sometimes be impossible to have the two together in a single shot. This is when focal length blending becomes interesting.

In the image above, I used a 14-24mm for the flowers in the foreground and switched to my 24-70mm to capture the



Captured during the Capture the Atlas – Huayhuash Peru Photo Tour in June 2023

peaks and the moon. If I had stuck to the wide-angle lens for the landscape, I would have ended up with flatter mountains and a moon too small to appreciate its presence in the frame, which didn't coincide with my vision for this shot.

2. EXPOSURE BLENDING

Blending exposures is the main reason why many astrophotographers get into composites. The settings, particularly the exposure part, are drastically different if you're shooting the night sky, as opposed to a landscape at sunrise or sunset. Without the use of a star-tracker, you'll usually leave the shutter open for 15 to 30 seconds at best. Whereas if you're shooting a landscape when the sun is still up (let's leave long exposures here), you typically won't go beyond 5 seconds. The other settings (ISO and Aperture) will be very different from nighttime shooting.

Something I would like to clarify here is that the exposure blending technique does not necessarily mean compositing. It is only if, in post-processing, the sky part of your image is in a different position or location than where it was in reality

compared to your landscape. This is usually the distinction that makes pure astrophotographers non-composite artists.

The example below is a composite image. Although the Milky Way was captured on the same night that preceded the blue hour sunrise when the landscape was captured, it

was not arching in that exact direction compared to the mountains. This was a personal creative decision of mine. Here are the settings for each part of the image:

- **Landscape:** ISO 500, 26mm, 1/250sec, f/4.5
- **Tent:** ISO 3200, 14mm, 3sec, f/2.8
- **Tracked Sky Panorama:** ISO 1600, 20mm, 60sec, f/2.2



*Captured during the Capture the
Atlas – Huayhuash Peru Photo Tour
in June 2023*



3. DIFFERENT SHOOTING HOURS

Another technique used for compositing is to put elements captured at different hours together. It might not look as obvious with a blue hour shot composed with a night sky because the colors and tones are quite similar, but it's a composite nevertheless. The blending is much more apparent in the image on the right, which has the mountains taken at sunrise golden hour, mixed with a night sky.

Most of the time, the decision to blend images from different hours is purely aesthetic. It's a relatively common practice when doing astrophotography because:

- When it comes to the landscape, you get more light and, thus, more details at blue hour than in the middle of the night.
- If you're using a star-tracker, your foreground is going to be blurry and unusable anyway.

4. BLENDING PHOTOGRAPHY "TECHNIQUES"

This one might be less obvious, but to give you an example, the image below mixes both a typical landscape image with a more sophisticated technique to create what you call a star trail. Star trails take several hours of shooting to capture the night sky "moving" due to Earth's rotation. While the landscape may be a single shot, you have to stack all your sky images together in post-processing to get this effect. It requires both a different way of shooting (leaving the camera out for hours) and of editing (stacking all the images together to get the desired outcome) than a typical landscape image.

// THE THING WITH COMPOSITING IS THAT IT OPENS UP A WORLD WHERE THERE ARE NO BOUNDARIES. //

It's an incredible opportunity and a problem at the same time. Some people will go wild and mix elements that have absolutely nothing to do with each other, sometimes leaving a "cheap" impression of the medium. I noticed that for such images to be appreciated, they need to bear certain ethical points. For me, this means:

- Taking my images in the same region, if not the exact same location.
- Taking my images within the shortest timeframe possible; usually from sunset to sunrise.

And there are those points where I allow myself some freedom to achieve a vision:

- Blending focal lengths.
- Blending exposures.



*Both images captured during the
Capture the Atlas – Huayhuash Peru
Photo Tour in June 2023*



Peru Photo Tour, June 2023

- Blending images from different hours (blue hour landscape with night sky images).
- Blending elements that are not captured in the same direction necessarily (for example, below, the MW was higher up in the sky).

If you feel these rules don't apply to you, there's no pressure to follow them. They work for me because I get more creative freedom and control, while still being challenged to create. I still have to play with what I have at hand, and if it means a cloudy sky, either I accept it or return to the same location on another day. Setting those "limiting" rules on purpose makes the final image so much more satisfying, precisely because it didn't feel easy. It's been a great way for me to build meaning in my work.

The advice I will leave you with is the following: if composite photography draws your attention, try it. You won't regret at least trying. The result won't look great at first, but if you enjoy the process, don't let this discourage you.



You can see more of Angel's work at www.angelfux.com



Although this image is a composite, the Milky Way was actually in that exact direction. The reason I went with compositing is because I wanted to blend the night sky (tracked) with the landscape at nautical hour (right before blue hour) when the landscape gets that pinkish color. Captured during the Capture the Atlas – Huayhuash Peru Photo Tour in August 2024.