



# 5 Tips for Shooting Waterfront Cityscapes at Blue Hour

A Post By: [Joey J](#)



When you hear the term “cityscape photography,” what kind of image comes to your mind? It could be those photographed from elevated viewpoints or [light trail](#) of city traffic. To me, nothing beats the beauty of waterfront cityscapes – especially those photographed at [blue hour](#).

Hong Kong skyline (18mm, f/10, 199 seconds, ISO100)

Gyeongbokgung Palace (Korea) (24mm, f/8, 30 seconds, ISO100);

Shanghai skyline (18mm, f/11, 164 seconds, ISO100).

In order to capture stunning waterfront cityscape photography, there are a few key points to get right.

## Shooting Waterfront Cityscapes at Blue Hour

# 1. Good sky and light

Michael Freeman, the author of [Capturing Light: The Heart of Photography](#), has this to say.

“In almost all photography it’s the quality of light that makes or breaks the shot.”

This is very true with waterfront cityscape photography as well. If you want your photo to look good, only shoot on a (mostly) clear evening (dark clouds are our nemesis!). The quality of light on sunny evenings is much nicer than that of cloudy evenings, which can be easily noticeable in the resulting photos.

## 2. Sunset direction

Over the years of shooting cityscapes at [blue hour](#), I’ve come to realize one thing affects the results rather significantly – where the sun has set. If the sun has set towards the direction you’re shooting, you typically see beautiful twilight hues leftover from the fading sun, which makes your blue hour photos extra special.

Singapore skyline (18mm, f/5.6, 409 seconds, ISO100). The sun went down on the right edge of the frame, adding a beautiful gradient of colors ranging from reddish-orange to deep blue.

On the contrary, your cityscape photos at blue hour will look dull and monotonous if the sun sets behind you (i.e., you’re shooting towards the sky that is 180-degrees opposite of where the sun has set).

In such a scenario, the quality of light is inevitably affected. The sky lacks the beautiful hues you typically see in the sun-setting side of the sky. With the sky like that, your photos won’t get much better no matter how hard you try editing

in post-production.

Shanghai (China) skyline (18mm, f/13, 163 seconds, ISO100). Despite shooting on a clear evening, the sky looks noticeably dull, as this is the sky that is 180-degrees opposite of where the sun went down (the sunset occurred behind me shooting).

### 3. Long exposure

What I particularly like about waterfront cityscapes is it lets me create silky smooth water effects by doing a **long exposure**. As seen in the photo below, such smoothed-out water adds a dreamy feel that is very distinctive to long exposure photography. It's the very reason I fell in love with waterfront cityscapes.

Marina Bay (Singapore) (35mm, f/11, 194 seconds, ISO100).

By default, the limited available light at blue hour allows your shutter speed to naturally get longer, especially with the use of a small aperture like f/13. That said, without using a **neutral density (ND) filter**, the shutter speed probably won't go beyond several seconds. This isn't long enough to achieve a silky smooth water effect that you see in the photos above.

Marina Bay (Singapore) shot with 2 seconds of exposure (at f/13) without using any neutral density filter. This is way too short to create silky smooth water effect.

If you don't own an **ND filter** yet, get yourself one! There are different densities available (2, 3, 6 and **10-stops** are popular), but I'll recommend a **6-stop ND filter** (especially if you're only getting one), as it hits a sweet spot for photographers shooting waterfront cityscapes.

Let's say that you get a base shutter speed (when no filter is attached) of 2 seconds, which is quite a typical scenario around 10 minutes before the end of dusk (check your local dusk time at [gaisma.com](https://gaisma.com)).

As seen in the photo above, 2 seconds of exposure hardly smooths out the water, but by attaching 6-stop ND filter, the exposure gets extended to 128 seconds (2 minutes 8 seconds). Each "stop" of ND filter approximately doubles the exposure time (2 seconds > 4 seconds [1-stop] > 8 seconds [2-stops] > 15 seconds [3-stops] > 30 seconds [4-stops] > 64 seconds [5-stops] > 128 seconds [6-stops]), which is long enough to create silky smooth water effect.

Neutral density (ND) filters help extend shutter speed lengths by reducing light entering the camera lens.

I own 3 and 10-stop ND filters as well, but the 3-stop is too mild (2-second exposure can be extended to 15 seconds only) while 10-stops is way too strong (2-second exposure can be extended to a whopping 34 minutes, 8 seconds).

I have found 2 to 3 minutes of exposure is enough to create a silky smooth water effect. You could go longer like 5 to 6 minutes (I won't go beyond 7 minutes, as

long exposure noise starts to creep in), but it won't change much beyond 2 to 3 minutes.

## 4. Reflections on water

**Colorful reflections** of city lights reflected on the water are one thing that gives your blue hour photos a "WOW" feeling. That said, this doesn't always happen. Even when you shoot the same city view from the same spot for two evenings in a row, you may get completely different results when it comes to the clarity of reflections on the water.

To achieve good photographic results, like in the first photo below, the water has to be relatively still. If the water surface is rough, you hardly get any reflections (the second photo below). Unfortunately, this isn't something we can control, so we need a bit of luck here.

Marina Bay (Singapore) (TOP: 18mm, f/13, 142 seconds, ISO100;





19mm, f/13, 162 seconds, ISO100).

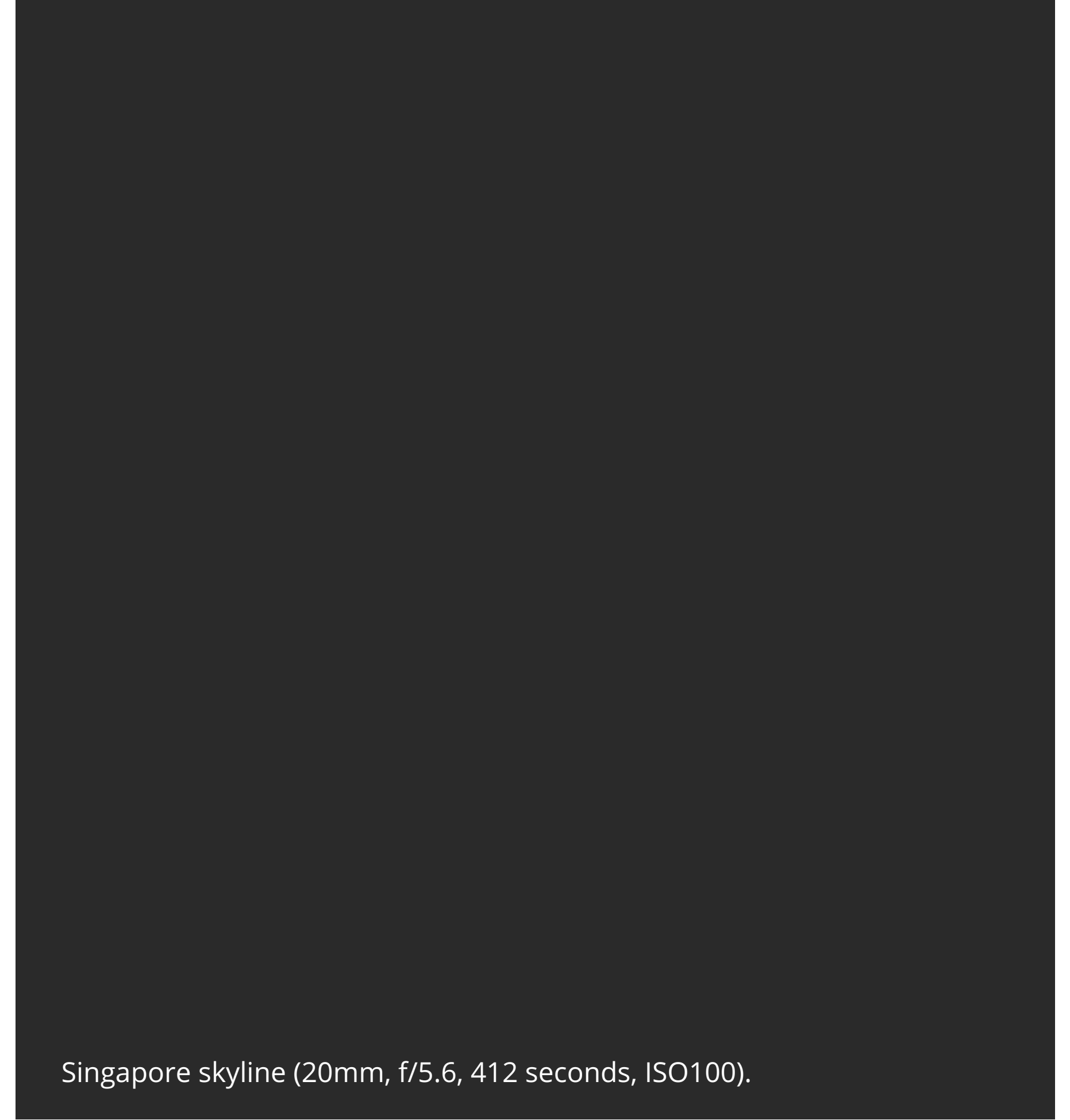
## 5. Having thin clouds

While long exposure works best with water, it also works well with clouds, too. This might not be as important as other points above, but if the sky has some clouds, long exposure helps get them rushing across the sky. It adds interesting movement to your photos, as seen below.



Singapore skyline (18mm, f/10, 257 seconds, ISO100).

Alternatively, if you want a greater effect, try evenings with more clouds. That said, if too cloudy, your photos will look just flat and ugly (as the quality of light is severely affected) or might come out crazy like the photo below. I prefer a clear sky with no clouds or just a little bit of thin clouds.



Singapore skyline (20mm, f/5.6, 412 seconds, ISO100).

## Conclusion

I hope these tips help you capture epic waterfront cityscape photos at blue hour! Looking back, my love for waterfront cityscapes comes from earlier days shooting sunny beachscapes, which was the primary reason I got into photography a decade ago.

Over the years, my interest has shifted from sunny daytime [beachscapes](#) to cityscapes at blue hour, but I'm still in love with water! I frequent cityscape photography spots located at the waterfront locally as well as on trips abroad.

Lastly, if you have any questions or info to share about shooting waterfront cityscapes at blue hour, feel free to do so in the comments below.



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**Joey J** is a Singapore based enthusiast photographer primarily shooting cityscapes at twilight and dusk (a.k.a. blue hour). Get his **free eBook Taking Your First Long Exposure Photos at Blue Hour**. Or visit **his website LASTLIGHTS.NET** where he posts his best photos (from Singapore, Brunei, Southeast Asia, and beyond) and shares his experience photographing cityscape photos with long exposure at blue hour.

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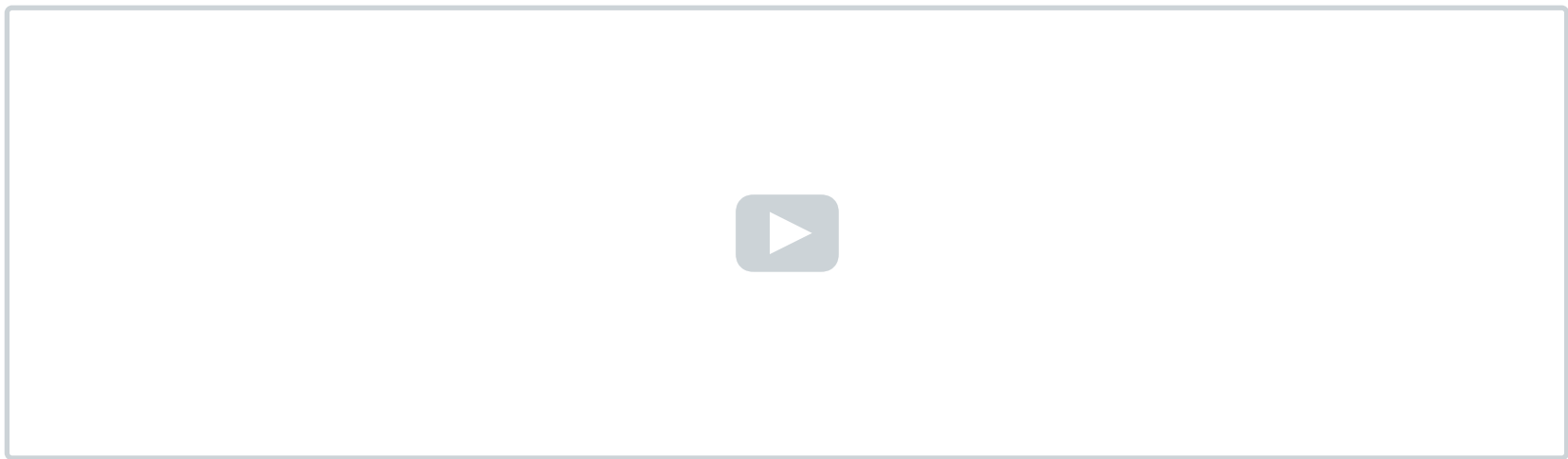


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