

# 10

## Essential Tips for Stunning Astro-Landscape Photography

by Mihail Minkov  
Award-Winning  
Astrophotographer



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## “Astrophotography makes visible what is invisible to the eye and reveals the beauty of the starry sky.”

**My name is Mihail Minkov and I love the night sky.**

I have always been fascinated by the stars. I can even say that as a child I was in awe of the night sky. Over the past few years, I have dedicated much of my free time to capturing the magic of the night sky and the Milky Way in particular.

The peace and seclusion that the night affords me as I shoot makes me feel intoxicated by the beauty and mystery of the glowing stars and planets overhead, but also humbled and grateful. It turns out that many people have never seen the Milky Way with their own eyes, which is infinitely sad. Standing under the Milky Way Arch on a warm summer night, surrounded by the sounds of crickets and the scent of lavender, is an experience that is hard to describe or forget.

What continues to motivate me to shoot night photography is the element of surprise. Our eyes are too imperfect to catch the colours and shapes that hide in the darkness of night. When I press the button on the camera and wait for the exposure

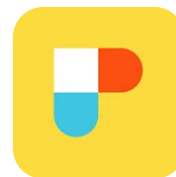
time, I get excited like a little kid. Then comes the surprise and the WOW effect, to see on the camera display in colours and shapes what is invisible to our eyes. This feeling of uncovering the hidden treasures of the night sky and the world around us in the gentleness of the night is a feeling that keeps me alive and truly happy.

I am the winner of many prestigious international astro and night photography competitions. In 2020, NASA's Astronomy Picture of the Day featured my work on May 20th. In 2022, four of my photos were selected for the globally renowned Astronomy Photographer of the Year competition hosted by the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London—one of them earning a second-place award. In both 2023 and 2024, I was named one of the world's top 25 Milky Way photographers in the Milky Way Photographer of the Year competition. My work has been featured by prominent media outlets, including National Geographic, Forbes, The Times, The Guardian, BBC Earth, Daily Mail, SkyNews, Bored Panda, and many others.



# 1. Plan with Purpose

Use apps like PhotoPills or Stellarium to plan your shoot. These tools allow you to visualize the night sky at any given date, time, and location, making it easier to determine the exact position of the Milky Way, moon phases, and celestial events. Planning ahead is essential in astrophotography, as the conditions change throughout the year and even hour by hour. Know when and where the Milky Way rises, especially the galactic core, which is visible only during certain months. Use augmented reality or night AR features in these apps to scout your composition even during the day. Align it with your chosen foreground, whether it's a mountain peak, a lone tree, or an architectural element, to create a powerful and well-balanced image. Proper alignment can elevate your shot from ordinary to exceptional, and it all starts with precise planning.



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## 2. Scout in Daylight

Visit your location before dark to scout the scene and plan your composition with intention. Exploring the area in daylight allows you to assess the terrain safely, understand the layout, and identify compelling foreground elements that will enhance your final image. Look for features like solitary trees, unique rock formations, reflective water surfaces, or interesting man-made structures. These elements add depth, scale, and context when combined with the night sky, transforming a simple star photo into a captivating visual story. Take note of how these foreground subjects relate to the direction where the Milky Way or other celestial objects will appear. Use tools like a compass or augmented reality features in planning apps to align your vision. By pre-visualizing the scene and framing your composition before night falls, you'll be better prepared to capture the moment when the stars align, both literally and creatively.

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# 3. Use Leading Lines

Incorporate leading lines such as roads, rivers, fences, or natural shadows to guide the viewer's eye from the foreground into the night sky. These elements act as visual pathways that draw attention deeper into the frame, creating a sense of direction and flow. A winding road can lead the viewer's gaze toward the Milky Way, while a river can reflect the stars and add symmetry and depth. Fences or walls can create rhythm and perspective, while shadows cast by moonlight or ambient light can introduce subtle contrasts that add mood and drama. When composed thoughtfully, these lines help anchor your image, providing structure and guiding the viewer through the scene, from the earth to the stars. This visual connection between the terrestrial and celestial creates a more immersive and emotionally resonant photograph.

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# 4. Shoot During New Moon

Avoid moonlight when capturing the Milky Way, as even a small amount of lunar illumination can significantly reduce the visibility of stars and galactic detail. The Milky Way is best photographed under truly dark skies, far from city lights and during a new moon or when the moon is below the horizon. Moonlight acts like natural light pollution, washing out the subtle contrast and delicate structures within the galaxy, especially the bright galactic core. To capture the full richness of the Milky Way including the dust lanes, star clusters, and nebulae plan your session around the moon's phase and position. Apps like PhotoPills and Stellarium can help you determine moonrise and moonset times so you can shoot during the darkest possible window. The darker the sky, the more stars and fine cosmic textures your camera will be able to detect, allowing for a more vivid and dramatic final image.

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# 5. Mind Your Focus

Use manual focus to achieve precise sharpness when photographing the night sky. Autofocus systems struggle in low light and are often unreliable in astrophotography, especially when aiming at stars. Switch your lens to manual focus mode, then use your camera's live view feature to zoom in digitally on a bright star or distant light source. Slowly and carefully adjust the focus ring until the star appears as small and sharp as possible ideally a fine, crisp point of light without any glow or halo. This process may take some time and patience, but it's essential for capturing sharp, high-quality images. Be sure to double-check your focus after taking a few test shots, especially if you've changed your composition or bumped your equipment. Even slight shifts in focus can ruin an otherwise perfect exposure, so it's worth verifying before every final shot. Precision in focus is critical your stars should be pin-sharp, not soft or bloated.

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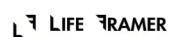


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# 6. Master Your Exposure Settings

We use the “Rule of 300” as a simple guideline to determine the maximum exposure time based on the focal length of your lens. This helps prevent star trails those streaks or lines created by the Earth’s rotation instead of capturing stars as sharp, pinpoint dots. The rule states that you divide 300 by your lens’s focal length to get the approximate maximum exposure time in seconds before star trails become noticeable. For example, if you are shooting with a 14mm lens, dividing 300 by 14 gives you about 21 seconds of exposure time. This means you can expose your shot for roughly 21 seconds without the stars appearing as trails. Keep in mind that this is a general rule of thumb, and factors like your camera’s sensor size and resolution can also affect the ideal exposure time. Still, it’s a useful starting point for capturing crisp, clear star images without motion blur.

## Start with:

- Use wider lens, 14mm is best for beginners
- Shutter: 15–25 seconds
- Aperture: f/2.8 or wider if it’s possible
- ISO: 1600–3200

Adjust based on your lens, sensor capabilities, and the level of light pollution. Avoid pushing ISO beyond 3200, as it can significantly reduce dynamic range, desaturate star colors, and introduce excessive noise.

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# 7. Use a Sturdy Tripod

A stable base is absolutely essential for capturing sharp, pinpoint stars in astrophotography. Even the slightest vibration can ruin a long exposure by introducing blur, so investing in a solid, high-quality tripod is a must. Avoid touching your camera during the shot use a remote shutter release or your camera's built-in timer to trigger the exposure without physical contact. This minimizes the risk of movement and helps ensure crisp results, especially when shooting at long focal lengths or in windy conditions.

As an official partner of **Sunwayfoto**, I highly recommend their tripods for their exceptional build quality, precision engineering, and durability in demanding outdoor conditions. If you're in need of a reliable tripod for astrophotography, you can take advantage of an exclusive 10% discount when purchasing Sunwayfoto gear through my referral. It's a great opportunity to upgrade your setup and capture the night sky with greater stability and confidence.

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# 8. Balance the Foreground and Sky

Expose for the sky, but don't lose the landscape—balancing both elements is key to a compelling nightscape. In astrophotography, the dynamic range between the bright stars and the often dark foreground can be extreme. If you expose only for the sky, the landscape may turn completely black and lack detail. On the other hand, exposing for the foreground can easily blow out the stars or wash out the Milky Way.

To achieve a well-balanced final image, consider capturing multiple exposures—one optimized for the night sky and another for the foreground. This technique, often called exposure blending, allows you to retain detail in both areas by combining the best parts of each exposure during post-processing. It's especially useful in scenes where the foreground includes important visual elements like mountains, trees, or architectural structures.

Blending exposures not only preserves the natural beauty of the landscape but also enhances the storytelling aspect of your photograph, grounding the viewer in a real place beneath the stars. Tools like Photoshop or specialized astrophotography software make this process more seamless, allowing for precise control over contrast, detail, and tonal balance.

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# 9. Add Human Presence

Including a silhouetted figure or a subtle light source, such as a headlamp, can add emotion, scale, and a human connection to your nightscape. When photographing vast, star-filled skies, the scene can sometimes feel distant or abstract. By placing a person in the frame especially in silhouette you introduce a relatable focal point that helps viewers connect with the image on an emotional level. It evokes feelings of wonder, solitude, and exploration, drawing the viewer into the experience.

A softly glowing headlamp or handheld light can enhance this effect, gently illuminating part of the figure or the surrounding environment without overpowering the stars. This touch of light adds depth, dimension, and mood while subtly guiding the viewer's eye through the composition. It also provides a sense of scale, emphasizing the grandeur of the night sky in contrast to the smallness of the human form beneath it.

Used thoughtfully, these elements can transform a technically strong image into a visually and emotionally compelling story one that not only showcases the cosmos but also reflects our place within it.

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# 10. Post-Process with Care

Use software like Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop to enhance your astrophotography by bringing out color, contrast, and detail—but strive to maintain a natural and authentic look. Post-processing is an essential part of the astrophotography workflow, allowing you to reveal the subtle beauty hidden in the raw data captured by your camera. Adjustments to white balance, contrast, clarity, and color can help emphasize the structure of the Milky Way, the richness of the night sky, and the mood of your foreground.

However, it's important to edit with restraint. Overuse of tools like noise reduction can soften details and give the image an unnatural, plasticky appearance, while excessive saturation can make the stars and sky appear overly artificial. Aim to strike a balance enhancing what is already there, without pushing the image beyond. Subtle, thoughtful adjustments can elevate your photo while preserving the realism and emotional impact of the scene.

**If you'd like to improve your editing skills further, you can book a 1:1 personal session with me, where I'll walk you through my full workflow and show you how to process your landscape astrophotography step by step. Alternatively, you can join my online masterclass, where I cover advanced techniques for achieving natural-looking, high-impact nightscape edits. Whether you're a beginner or looking to refine your style, I'd be happy to help you take your post-processing to the next level.**

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