

The Magic Hour

For portraits, the warmth, depth, texture, form, contrast, and color in photographs are dramatically affected by the angle of sunlight as the sun crosses the sky. When the sun is low on the horizon in the early morning or late afternoon, photographers are gifted with a diffused light that's often gold or orange in hue and ideal for portraits. Since the sun is in this position for a relatively short period of time, photographers call these two times of day--near sunrise and sunset--the "magic hour."

In the morning hours, as the sun begins to climb across the sky, the sun becomes a harsh light source--and harsh light sources aren't generally very complementary for portrait photography. This "hard" light causes deep, dark, and distinct shadows on facial features and underneath the eyes. Although problems with harsh light can sometimes be addressed using open shade or flash photography, these techniques don't create the same visually pleasing effects you'll see when I'm using the natural warm natural sunlight found during and near the magic hour.

The sunrise magic hour generally begins fifteen minute to thirty minutes after sunrise while the sunset magic hour usually ends about fifteen minutes before sunset. In both cases, the "magic hour" only lasts thirty to forty-five minutes. Because of this limited timeframe, it's helpful to stay on schedule to take best advantage of the light. Generally speaking, the farther away you move from the magic hour, the less complementary unobstructed light becomes for portrait photography.

I'm often asked about two other timing and weather related conditions in terms of light and photography. If you're interested in spectacular sunset skies in your photos, you'll find that the sunrise / sunset "effect" typically appears ten minutes before the published sunrise time and ten minutes after the published sunset time. However, if there are no clouds or dissipating marine layer, sunrise and sunset skies are often brief and unspectacular.

Another weather-related condition that affects photography is seen on days with overcast conditions. With overcast skies, sunlight is highly diffused. And diffused light is often excellent for portrait and wedding photographers. Although the sky may not be particularly interesting for your photos, the evenly diffused light is extremely complementary to most subjects.

As a closing comment, I want to mention that I realize not all important events can be scheduled around the availability of the "magic hour." As a professional photographer, I'm expert in the various techniques needed to mitigate problems related to harsh lighting conditions. That being said, when possible, I strongly recommend that you take this "magic hour" information into consideration when scheduling the time frame for your events or portraits.