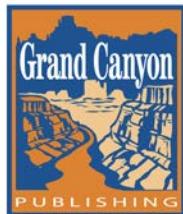


# American Photo Tours

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## *Photographing Lighthouses*

*By Greg Smith*

Lighthouses have a long and very interesting history and have been built on every continent in the world except Antarctica. From the time of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East and Africa, to Europe and the Far East they have saved countless ships and thousands of lives from certain death by their beacons of light and in later ages, by their bellowing sounds from fog horns heard miles away at sea. For photographers, they offer a great variety of potential visual relief to seascapes and coastal landscapes that no other element can offer. As one of those vagabonds with a camera who has an itch to travel, they have always been a welcome sight, and have brought tremendous rewards when they are located on journeys far and wide.

From experience, two of the most prolific places to find and photograph lighthouses are Newfoundland in the Canadian Maritimes, and the Maine coast in the Northeastern US. Both of these regions have very craggy coastlines and during the heyday of sailing ships in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they represented serious hazards to all who sailed there. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as more sophisticated mechanically powered

ships became the norm, and eventually with the addition of radar and more advanced navigation systems, the need for lighthouses waned and in the past one hundred years the vast majority of them have been decommissioned or abandoned all together. But that does not diminish their aesthetic appeal as elements of that mystical realm where the land meets the sea.

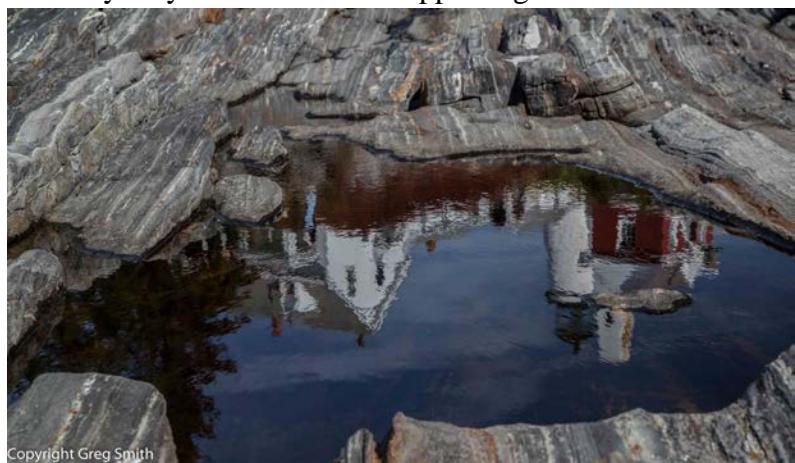
The technical aspect of photographing lighthouses involves research in finding where lighthouses still occur, and then determining which ones are worthy of the effort to seek them out



and capture them as photographs. When that is accomplished, the fine tuning of what season of the year is most advantageous, and what time of day they are at their most appealing becomes important. Then the fun begins as we are challenged to find the best approach to the subject in order to present the lighthouse at its best advantage, and that can be the best part of the real creative process. So, here are some ideas from an intrepid lighthouse photographer about the pursuit of these wonderful sentinels of the sea.

## Light

Though it seems obvious that what we are seeking in any photograph, the way the scene is being illuminated is the essence of what will determine its appeal to our audience. Lighthouses by design are tall structures as a rule, though there are some that are quite squat in stature, but they tend to be seen as vertical subjects and most often they are photographed that way. That said, they also are more often than not an early morning or late afternoon subject, and lighthouses on an eastern shore tend to do better in the morning, where those on a western shore are often at their best in the afternoon to enhance the ocean or sea that surrounds them, or at least has the potential to be included in the image. This is certainly true of most sites in the US. But like all things, there are exceptions, and some of those turn out to be the anomalies that win prizes and become stand outs for our audience.



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The image on page one in the lower right is one such exception. It is the Green Point Light in the center of Capetown South Africa, and the image was taken in very strong wind, a staple of Capetown, near noon. Seen from the seaside, there are a number of buildings that obstruct the view of this striking red and white striped lighthouse. While walking around the entire structure, a view looking west and standing close to the building yielded a very bright and stunning shot while still maintaining its true function to anyone seeing the image. The bright reflected light from the lower roofs and the building itself, along with the brilliant clear light of the Cape illuminated the entire structure eliminating any harsh shadows or other strong contrasts that would diminish the appeal of the lighthouse itself.

The first image on page one is of a lighthouse east of Cape Town along the coast called Slangkop. The clouds were blowing very rapidly across the sky and allowing only glimpses of fairly bright sun on this wonderful decommissioned light tower. Here the path leading to the tower was more interesting and dramatic than the gray sea off to the south from this location, and green ice plants provide interesting elements to the dramatic sky and the strong tower itself. There are three lighthouses on the Cape Peninsula road; two requiring some hiking to gain access, but all of them are excellent examples of this stunning photographic subject.

The top image on page two is one that every veteran photographer of lighthouses seems to cherish – the reflection in a tide pool of an interesting lighthouse. Here is a reflection of the Stonington Light along the coast of Maine at low tide. Every time you visit a lighthouse the light will be different and it requires a bit of planning if you want to try to capture this sort of reelection using tide tables and weather forecasts. A cloudy day is not a good recommendation for this unique affect.



The second image is from a decommissioned lighthouse in the middle of Swakopmund in Namibia in southern Africa. It is a rare light along that Skeleton Coast, and was only found by chance while killing time waiting for a motel to open in town. But it has one of the most picturesque settings of any lighthouse in Africa. Looking out to sea, perhaps two hundred yards away is distracting and not at all worthwhile.

## Variety

One of the key considerations in acquiring a collection of great images is to mix up the lighthouse images you develop through the angles and overall appearance of them in your photographs. Often you will be able to get great early morning shots like this one near the top of the page of Portland Head Light in Portland, Maine which often resembles a post card sort of idyllic image, with the waves crashing, the light on the white tower, the all important light in the lighthouse tower shining in the picture, and an interesting sky. With all of these elements present, you are sure to have a great portfolio image to add to your collection. This is a common site in Maine and one that attracts photographers from many places to try their hand at taking this one home. But what if the sun doesn't rise and the sky is full of clouds and thick fog? The opportunity is even more interesting in many respects, because you will be able to capture an image that few people ever see, and one that is every bit as intriguing.

The image lower down on this page is one that I took on a cold, windy foggy morning when the



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site was all but abandoned by photographers or other visitors. The key to the picture was to capture the moving light beam when it was on my side of the tower. The initial disappointment of arriving at a location that is often thousands of miles away and finding weather conditions that at first blush

seem to be anathema to making good pictures turned out to be the best conditions to capture the real meaning, or function of what lighthouses were created for – bad weather.

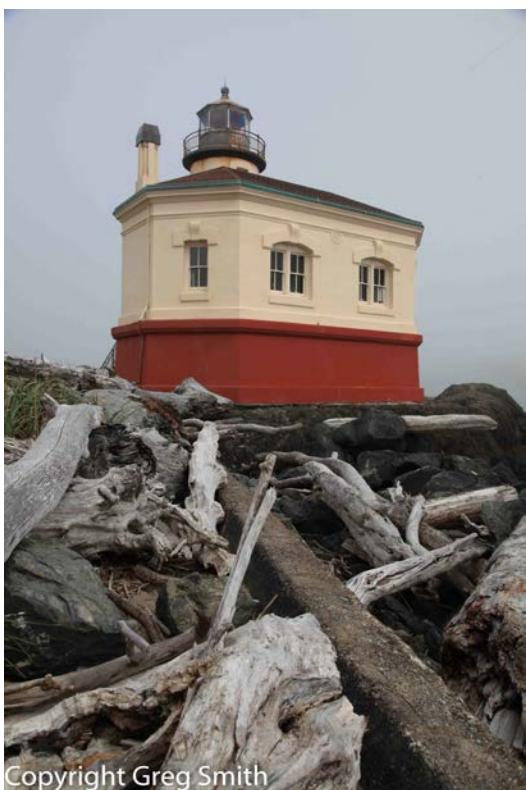
The picture is stark and doesn't seem to be that exceptional, but it shows quite a contrast to the other one on this page of Portland Head on a picture perfect day. Look for the details in any setting you pursue. Here it can be the parts of the lighthouse, the interior spaces if you are able to go inside. It could be the Fresnel light elements, the top railing, the grand view of sea and sky, remembering to anchor it with elements of the lighthouse, or even the spiral stairs like the one at Cabrillo National Monument near Sand Diego,



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California. Search for the gems in any situation.



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### Different Days

One of the best sites along the West Coast of the US for photographing lighthouses is Bandon, Oregon. There is a small decommissioned lighthouse there that is somewhat hidden but essentially easy to access that offers many different settings based on weather, time of day and your willingness to move around the site. It can even be accessed inside, though the light source has been removed and the glass windows are old and rather dingy. The real appeal is the changing viewpoints that can be achieved on any given day.

The phenomenon known as the marine layer over the Pacific Ocean that lies permanently off the entire West Coast is a perpetual fog bank that moves capriciously back and forth first out to sea and then on land and provides a great change in the weather and the atmosphere for photography, and it can change very

quickly. One minute it is a beautiful crystal clear day, and five minutes later you are immersed in a rather dense fog, and there is no telling how long either condition will last. With that in mind, the next three pictures on page four are that entire lighthouse taken on two different days. There are no Photo Shop gimmicks here, I do not use Photo Shop in any of my photographic work, but the results in these images are quite interesting.

In the top image, it is a sunny day and the lighthouse appears to be anchored on bedrock and is there forever. The middle image shows the lighthouse in a fog appearing to be lost in a sea of grass and diminished by the surroundings. The bottom image is one that gives the impression that the lighthouse has washed ashore and sits on a pile of driftwood. All three images work in their own way to illustrate how lighthouses can change in appearance and appeal in even as you stand there and consider how to approach them and capture them in their best light.

These paragons to safety on the sea are fading with time and many more are lost to the elements as they are abandoned and left to decay. But there are lighthouses on most every continent that are still going strong, often still functioning as working sites, while some are maintained as historic parks by private organizations or government agencies and are still available to us as photographers. If you have the chance you might seek out the following: In Maine - Portland Head Light; Bass Head Light; West Quoddy Light; Nubble Light. On the West Coast – Point Reyes, CA; Bandon Light, OR; Point Loma, CA. There are many more on each coast, along the coasts of Newfoundland and even farther afield in Africa, Europe and other continents. But do your homework and find out which ones are prime photographic specimens, or you will find yourself with some pretty discouraging subjects when you arrive.

Good hunting!

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