

TO GET BETTER PANORAMAS

MOST PHOTO software includes a tool for stitching your images together into panoramas, and some cameras can do it automatically, without your using a computer. But if you don't capture the photos correctly, your panorama won't dazzle. Here are three ways to take photos that are ready to merge.

1 Shoot it level. Ensure that your horizon (or any horizontal line in the frame) is straight across all your images so that you don't end up having to crop in after you stitch. To be safe, use a tripod with a built-in spirit level and, if you don't have a dedicated panoramic head, get another spirit level that fits into your camera's hot-shoe. Even with this double insurance, it's worth doing a few test shots to make sure everything is lined up properly. Position the images so that they overlap by between one-third and one-half of the previous frame.

2 Set your lens to a longer focal length to minimize distortion. Avoid capturing close objects in the foreground—they're more likely to show distortion and make it harder to combine frames. If you turn your camera to the vertical position, you can create a taller panorama, but you'll have to shoot more frames, which will make it take longer to process your final image.

3 Wait for even light. If the sun is continually going in and out of the clouds, it will be almost impossible to match your images. Set the exposure, white balance, and focus manually—you don't want your sky to change color or your point of focus to shift within the final frame. If you have to vary the exposure, don't change it by more than 1 stop, even if it means you have to take more photos.

—Kathleen Davis