

Travel Photography - Mistakes to Avoid

1. Having misconceptions about equipment

The two main misconceptions that we most often have about equipment when we're starting out in photography are:

- The latest, greatest gear results in better photos.
- The gear you have is not good enough because your images are not. In other words you blame the equipment.

A camera doesn't take the photo, nor does any piece of photographic equipment. Photos are made by you - the photographer. In some rare cases you might have a technical issue with a camera body or a lens, but for most part that's not the concern. We have a hobby at a very lucky time - most photographic equipment is excellent these days, and has been for a few years (with the development of affordable digital SLRs), one just has to know how to use it to its full potential.

The best advice here is - forget about chasing the latest, greatest stuff. Get out there with what you have, figure out how to get the most out of your equipment, learn when to use one lens over another, when to use a tripod and of course, learn about the basics of photography - setting the aperture, shutter speed and ISO. This might seem like the most obvious advice imaginable, but somehow so many aspiring photographers still think that it's all about the equipment you have, there's just nothing further from the truth.

2. Not Researching

This simply means gathering as much information as possible about the place you're travelling to. The best time/season to travel, the DOs and DON'Ts, the modes of transportation - these are the necessities, that we must find out about before every trip in order to have a smooth experience not only as far as photographing, but travelling in general.

Beyond the necessities, when photography is the main focus of your trip, it's worth finding out as much as possible about what's visually special in the place you're going to. Sometimes this isn't going to be obvious, you might have to dig a little, but when you do, a great number of photographic opportunities arise.

The 'research' is nothing complicated or difficult. Go online and just search for the relevant locations.... it's guaranteed that you'll find a few good shots - and plenty more that you could improve on. If travelling further afield, check with tourist offices and tell them that you're a photographer and that you're keen to see anything that's visually interesting and unique in their town/country.

3. Not looking beyond the main attraction

A lot of travel destinations have "must see" main attractions. Sometimes we get so obsessed with getting an image of these attractions that we fail to see the subjects around them which could be equally or even more photographically interesting.

Force yourself to look at what else there is to photograph besides the obvious. Sometimes this might even mean staying longer, or making sure that you catch a location at the right time of day. Photograph the main attraction and then discover the lesser known yet still photo-worthy subjects.

4. Not being aware of light

Not being aware of light means that you simply shoot whatever you see in any given lighting conditions without giving much thought to the whole matter. Your results might have impact on the viewer every now and then and they might sometimes reflect what you want to say and how you feel about what you see, but more often than not that won't be the case.

Being aware of light means that you know there are different kinds of light and that the way your image looks will greatly depend on the light you shoot it in. This of course also means that you can make a conscious effort to photograph in the kind of light which will reflect what you want to say and how you feel about the subject you're photographing.

5. Avoiding artificial light

As we get a little more familiar with light and begin to develop an understanding of how it affects our photographs, a lot of us tend to move away from using artificial light, especially flashes.

This is because we don't have enough knowledge about artificial light. It's true that the on-camera flash should indeed be avoided, but it's not the only available artificial lighting option and avoiding artificial light altogether means you'll never see what you can achieve with it.

The artificial lighting tools that are a great addition to any serious travel photography enthusiast's kit are an off camera flash in a softbox (or 'bounce') and a reflector. The reason these tools are great is that they allow you to control the light or to manipulate it. This opens one up to a whole range of creative opportunities or even opportunities to make photographs in situations where it would be impossible to do so otherwise.

6. Forgetting about communicating from within the frame - composition

When we travel, the new, exotic sights, sounds and smells can be overwhelming or they can get us so excited that we easily forget that with an image we're not only capturing memories, but can also communicate what we want to say or how we feel about the subject in front of the camera. In other words we forget about the way we frame the shot, about composition.

Pause and reflect a little, get your thoughts together and consider what you actually want to say and communicate from within the frame of a photograph and how to do it in the best possible way.

7. Thinking that photos which capture dramatic or interesting moments are lucky shots

Many images that we see in magazines and online might seem like the result of pure luck, it's easy to believe that the photographer was simply in the right place at the right time,

but that is vary rarely true. Luck can play a big part when it comes to making these sorts of images, but it is certainly not the only factor. The more experienced photographers will usually tell you that great “images of moments” are created when luck meets preparation.

So have a thought about what images you want from anywhere, then try to give it time for things to come together..... one of the drawbacks of being 'the photographer of the family' is that other people want your attention. I don't advocate taking all your holidays alone, but if you really want to come back with special images, you need to be single-minded about getting the pictures that you want, so see if you can arrange things so that you do the 'deal'... “OK, I'll meet you back here in an hour”.

8. Not taking enough photographs

What's “enough” is very subjective. “Not enough” is not doing any of the following; exploring different angles and viewpoints, photographing a person in action at different stages of that action, experimenting with the settings (exposure, ISO, shutter speed) and possibly even with different lenses.

One thing that most of the experienced travel photographers have learned is that it's always better to take more photographs than you need, for the simple fact that if you've got a photo-worthy situation, you're not necessarily going to be able to recreate it or come back to it ever again, so make the most of your chances.

9. Not interacting or connecting with people when making portraits

Photographing people can be a daunting task and the interaction is often what a lot of us shy away from. It's certainly possible to make powerful, candid portraits with a long lens without having any interaction with the subject whatsoever, but limiting ourselves to this technique means that we're not giving ourselves the slightest chance to create something really special.

Sometimes the interaction and the connection the photographer makes with the subject are obvious in the photograph. There's a certain trust and openness that often come out in the way the subject gazes through the lens. But the benefits of interacting and connecting also go beyond the obvious.

When the photographer establishes rapport with the subject, it means that he/she is no longer just a random passer-by, but someone who the subject sympathises with and this very fact can lead to the creation of photographs that would otherwise be impossible. If your intended subject is busy at some kind of work, pause and show (or at least feign) interest in that work, whether it be a sculptor chipping away at a masterpiece - or somebody who makes a living out of straightening out rusty old nails.

10. Not leaving the group

This applies more to people who go on group tours on group photo workshops. While such ways of travelling certainly have their benefits, there are also undoubtedly some disadvantages. Here are the significant ones:

- It is extremely hard if not impossible to get intimate with the subject. The fact that there's a whole group of people looking at or photographing the same person can feel

rather confrontational and overwhelming to any “normal” person.

- Usually you don't have the freedom to be spontaneous because you're not the only one making the decisions. While I'm all for planning and being organised, sometimes spontaneity can provide a great creative spark and leads to some unexpectedly special images.
- Your experiences are less personal, not necessarily only because you're following the group, but because being around other people inevitably influences the way one sees and experiences things.

Despite these disadvantages this doesn't infer that one should never travel in a group altogether, just that's good to set aside some time for yourself, to have your own, personal experiences, in order to make photos that resonate closely with you. How much time you set aside for yourself is up to you, but even a quick wander around the town in which you're staying can lead to fascinating experiences and worthwhile photographic results. It's the old “I'll meet you here in an hour” scenario, as mentioned above.