

PICTURE PERFECT

Ten tips to help you sharpen your photography skills.

PHOTOS BY GEORGE OSTERTAG

With new-generation digital and automatic single-lens-reflex (SLR) cameras now widely available, nearly anyone can capture technically correct images. But composing an eye-appealing image is entirely different. When you travel to once-in-a-lifetime places, it's important to get the great shots. One solution is to marry a professional photographer, which I did. If that is not in the cards, though, don't despair. This article will give you the tools to take your photography to the next level.

I am new to the art. In the past, I relied on my husband, George, for all of our photography needs, but as his professional demands grew, the job of documenting our trips fell on my shoulders. Thanks to my beloved automatic focus and a few other features, I've been able to fast-forward through some of the technical drills. Finessing those skills can come later.

But traipsing after a professional for 25 years hasn't been for naught.

Through osmosis and years of looking at good photography, I've gleaned some composition insight. And by mining the knowledge my professional filed to memory long ago, I've been able to shortcut some of the trial and error that lead to good pictures. As a result, I've assembled some very acceptable travel shots, all in a relatively short time.

So, whether you own a digital or an SLR camera, here are 10 tips to get you on your way to good photography. Most require no dollar investment.

1. KEEP IT STEADY. Digital cameras have many great capabilities, but they also encourage bad habits. Perhaps the worst is holding the camera at arm's length. Even a steady hand will shake, stealing from picture quality. Bend those elbows, bring the camera in toward the body, and, if your camera allows it, use the eyepiece. Better yet, mount the camera on a tripod.

While professionals could easily handhold many shots, they opt to

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Experiment with focus to find that best shot (opposite), and look beyond the action for interesting subjects (below). You can create memorable images without requiring people to face the camera (below right).



Tripods are essential for a steady aim, especially when dealing with static subjects such as flowers (right). Motorhomes look best when photographed in a natural setting (opposite, left). Morning and evening light give everything warmth and appeal (opposite, right).



use a tripod for a reason: You get a better final product. Besides delivering a crisp image, tripods allow you to review and edit your shot for any unwanted elements, as well as crooked horizons, glare, and the like, and once you line up that winning shot, tripods allow you to replicate it. If your subject isn't going to run away, a tripod is usually best.

2. SHOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT. After spending all the money to travel, do not penny-pinch on film or digital memory cards. Lost moments are gone forever. Perfect light, rainbows, a chance wildlife encounter, and favorite people are not everyday occurrences, so don't risk them to a single shot. Take plenty of pictures. When using a digital camera in which the card is reusable, there is no reason not to do so. Shoot now; delete later.

No matter how many images I shoot, George shoots more, even though he uses an SLR and I use a digital camera. Out of the many images come the few that make the journey worthwhile. Shoot plenty and edit scrupulously. George often cites a popular photography maxim: "The biggest difference between an amateur and a professional photographer is the professional has the bigger wastebasket."

Just be sure to carry extra batteries along with the extra film or memory

cards you need. Rechargeable batteries work well.

3. WAKE UP AND SEE THE LIGHT. At popular photo points in any national park, a predawn arrival will find an army of dedicated photographers lined up behind their tripods waiting for the first light to wash over their subject. And for good reason. The low-angle light of early morning (and similar light at late day) holds a magical quality that boosts your image tenfold. A well-conceived photograph of a trash barrel captured at first light can out-dazzle a pinnacle shot at midday. Why? Because the light quality is so good. Lighting is paramount, even to the subject. Think of the great pains studio photographers take with lighting. When you combine great light with a great subject, look out!

Although you might not choose to catch every sunrise, getting out early with the camera gives you a leg up on the better shot. So grab the camera, carry a snack, and plan on a nice brunch back at the motorhome after a morning shoot.

The warm, low angle of morning and evening light is also most flattering to people, so if you plan to take portraits or group photos, those are the times to do so.

4. MOVE! Most of us have a tendency to stand in place and shoot. But by moving about and checking different

angles of perspective, we can often craft a more interesting photograph. Photographers should be able to float like a butterfly and bend at the knee — or at least the waist. By all means, capture the classic head-on image, and then break loose. Change the height of the camera, move your location, rotate the camera to vertical, zoom in on a single feature, or broaden the view. Look for better light, the play of shadows, the presence of a silhouette, an outstanding feature, or a complementary or contrasting feature. When shooting people, move in and then move closer. You'll be happy with the results.

5. SIMPLIFY. Images containing too many subjects — no matter how spectacular — lack a focal point, and impact. Ask yourself what drew you to take the picture in the first place and edit out anything that steals from it. One solution may be to take several pictures: one of the summit's crowning clouds, one of the spotlighted snag, and one of the geese in the meadow.

A related problem is the tendency to crowd the edges of a photograph (my big problem). Give the eye and the subject some breathing room. Recast your image, even if something must go. Similarly, it is often best to take one picture of the scene and a second of your travel companion, to



do each justice. When you do include companions in the scene, consider showing them either as spectators or as active participants — fishing, hiking, reading, or relaxing — to achieve greater interest.

6. HASTE MAKES WASTE. Although you may have a point-and-shoot camera, don't rush to shoot. George takes his time setting up an image. He looks it over and over. Like other amateurs, I am often so fixed on the subject that I don't see the incidentals that can spoil the shot. Pausing forces the eye to see. Is the horizon straight? Does it decapitate the subject? Are branches sticking out of the subject's head? Is it a pleasant partition of the image? A 50-50 split usually isn't. Is this the best use of the entire frame? What's in focus? What needs to be in focus? What (or who) doesn't belong? A bystander? A candy wrapper? The sky? The sky is not a mandatory element. Eliminating harsh overcast skies often improves images.

"Point, pause, and then shoot" is the better practice.

7. AVOID FAVORITES. While learning a new technique or finding a shot at which we excel is exciting, it's best not to adopt favorites. An occasional starburst has impact; 300 starbursts do not. A leafy frame can add interest, but an entire photo collection taken through a bush is a yawn. By

all means, add these tricks to your arsenal, but pull them out only when they pack punch. Varying shots will add interest to your showings and help improve your skills and photographic eye as well.

8. PEOPLE, PLEASE! Don't let family and friends' photos become the all-too-familiar morgue of stiff. In the early days of photography, it was important for people to strike immovable poses and hold them for minutes at a stretch. But that was because of the technological constraints of the era. Modern photography allows life. Having people look into the camera is fine for portraits, but candid photos, silhouettes, and activity shots can be far more entertaining. Even in the mandatory group pictures, a bit of silliness or interaction makes the photo more memorable.

Remember, when photographing people, take plenty of each shot to be sure you get one where everyone looks his or her best. Blinks, tongue swipes, frozen smiles, or an ill-timed launch of conversation can spoil a shot. By keeping only the good shots, you'll improve your chances that friends and family will pose again.

9. COMPUTER VERSUS SHOOTER. For a growing number of modern photographers, the romance of the hobby is found at the computer station, where programs can heal minor

wrongs and add special effects to digitized photos. This is great, but no computer or program can produce a good image if none was available from the start. Getting a strong image with as much digital information as possible is always the first step.

Also, in general, it's very easy to go overboard with computer image enhancement. Wade cautiously.

10. KEEP LEARNING. A photographic flop can be a fine learning tool. Look at that bad photo before you toss it aside. Ask yourself why it failed. What aspects worked? What could you have done differently?

Whatever you do, don't quit. Continue to take chances. If you don't risk failure, growth stops.

Learn about your camera, too. Read the instruction manual, not only when you first buy the camera, but periodically. The options with modern cameras are overwhelming at first sight, but taking up one technique at a time is quite simple. If your camera has manual capabilities, learn how to use them. Automatic features tend to work based on averages or spot functions, which may not always be best. We buy a second instruction manual just to carry with us. It helps when problems arise or a situation requires an unfamiliar step.

Now get out there and shoot, shoot, shoot. **FMC**

