



BEFORE YOU TAKE THAT TRAVEL SHOT...

BY DOUG GIMESY

Putting aside the technical stuff, the gear and the locations, the secret to great images comes from asking a few key questions before you press the shutter.



OPINION: THE WHY OF GREAT PHOTOGRAPHY



Taken in a Madrid train station, the key to this photo was both exposure length and timing. Using the gap between the two passing carriages as a virtual shutter, plus a relatively slow exposure, made the subject more visible compared to the rest of the scene. Nikon D750, Sigma 35mm f/1.4 lens, 1/3s @ f/6.3, ISO 100.



So you've booked that big trip and want to make sure at the end of it you have a collection of photos you love. In excited anticipation, you've looked at a few websites to get an idea of what others have taken, and you may have purchased some new gear, or maybe you've done a course or two. You've practised using your equipment so all the controls are second nature and you don't have to take your eye away from the viewfinder during the action. You've got spare memory cards, maybe an extra battery or two, and a spare charger. You've got something to keep your equipment clean, and also something to back up your images on to. So you're feeling pretty prepared, and in many ways you are.

But is there anything else you could do when you're there, in the moment, which could really help make sure you get some images you'll love? The answer is yes, of course. I believe you need to stop and ask yourself 'Why am I about to take this photo?' Let me explain.

WHY IS THE 'WHY' SO IMPORTANT

Take a second and have a think about the last photo you took. Did you actually think about why you were taking it? If you did think about this, here's another question. Did it achieve what you wanted, and if so, why? Or, if not, why not?

I know asking these questions may seem just too simplistic to be helpful, but if you've spent some time think-



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OPPOSITE: Children attending a bush camp run by Cheetah Conservation Botswana in the Kalahari (30km outside Ghanzi) take a refreshing break from the more formal activities of the day. My goal was to capture both a sense of place and freeze the action, so I chose the wide focal length of a 16mm and a fast shutter speed. Nikon D750, 16-35mm f/4 lens. 1/1000s @ f/9, ISO 560.

BELOW: To capture a beautiful moment between a San person and her child, I wanted to make sure I didn't intrude on their time together or have any distracting background. I chose to use a zoom lens and shoot a shallow DOF. Nikon D750, Nikon 70-200 f/2.8 lens 1/800s @ f3.5, ISO 100.



ing about these before you pick up the camera, things actually start to change. You'll also find that you're better prepared to focus on what I think is the second most important factor in great photography. That's how to make a great image in the simplest and most effective way.

The number of people who give me a blank look when I ask them why they want to take a photo at a certain time, or place, or event, is amazing. Of course they want to capture something, but why?

Now a quick word of warning. Stopping and thinking about this 'why' question may make the 'how' part much harder, and possibly even more expensive, but it may also make it easier and cheaper too, or just different. But regardless of what it leads to, I'm pretty confident

that if you stop and ask 'why' first, you'll be happier with your outcome.

THINKING ABOUT YOUR GOALS

In my experience, I've found that there are probably nine main reasons why people take photos when travelling:

- as a visual diary/record for yourself (i.e. memory shots)
- to help tell an important story to others (i.e. photo-documentary)
- to show off (i.e. create that 'wow, I was there' photo)
- for the pure joy/fun
- as a technical or creative challenge
- to learn to really see
- to be in the moment (i.e. as a form of mindfulness)



“BEFORE YOU PICK UP YOUR CAMERA, OR EVEN DECIDE WHAT EQUIPMENT TO TAKE, JUST SLOW DOWN AND ASK YOURSELF ‘WHY AM I TAKING THESE PHOTOS?’



I always keep my camera set with a relatively fast shutter speed and on auto ISO – just in case I need to shoot quickly. This was a spontaneous shoot where I had to quickly capture a chance moment happening across the street. My key considerations as I pulled my camera out were shutter speed, framing, and not allowing the auto ISO to blow out the all important details of Le Bon's cakes. Nikon D750, Sigma 35mm f/1.8 lens. 1/600s @ f6.3, ISO 125. -1 2/3 EV.



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ABOVE: I like to shoot fireworks by placing them in a larger context. I find a four-to-seven second exposure gives a nice mix of firework trail without them becoming too overwhelming. Nikon D750, Nikon 105mm f/2.8 lens. 4s @ f10, ISO 110. Tripod.

OPPOSITE: Taken on a glacier in NZ, my objective was to ensure I exposed enough to be able to bring out the detail of the guide in post-production (who was in shadow), without blowing out the ice. To achieve this I over-exposed just one full stop above the meter reading. Nikon D750, 14-24mm f/2.8 lens. 1/400s @ f10, ISO 400. +1 EV.



- to generate sales (i.e. sell prints or generate stock images)
- they're on assignment (i.e. a specific job)

I am certain there are more, and of course all of these are not mutually exclusive, but I find if you start thinking about why and focusing on just one or two, it will start changing not only what you shoot, but also when you shoot, and maybe what equipment you use.

Here's an example. When I first started as a professional photographer, I went out with the approach that every photo I took had to be technically perfect, and every photo had to be of publication or print quality. I went out with every expensive piece of kit I could carry 'just in case'. Every photo I took had to be a 'wow' photo, and one that someone would want to buy or publish.

And whilst that sounds like a very sensible approach for any professional photographer, the thing is, I'm not always a professional photographer, and I was missing out on so many of the other benefits photography can provide by having this mindset all the time.

I rarely took a photo just for fun, or a series of quick memory snaps just to help me recall the moment. Looking back, it wasn't very often that I'd slow down and focus on where I was and enjoy being in the moment. If you've ever seen the film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, you may remember Sean Penn's character, who, when presented with the opportunity to take an image he'd been trying to capture for a lifetime, decided to just watch the scene unfold and not even capture it. Now I'm not suggesting you do this if this happens to you, but his approach is an important one to keep in mind: don't forget to step back and appreciate the moment.

LIVE THE MOMENT

If you're about to take a photo of a loved one, or a place you love just for the memory of it, does it really have to be technically perfect? I'd suggest it doesn't. Why waste your time with the technical or compositional details, when you could just take a quick snap and then spend the rest of the time actually enjoying the moment?



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LEFT: My only consideration when taking this was just to capture the smile on Heather's face. The fact I was at her eye level, there were two King penguins close by to help frame the image, and her red jacket draws the eye, was really pure luck. Olympus E-M5, 60mm f/2.8 lens. 1/320s @ f8, ISO 200. Tripod.

ABOVE: Using really wide angle lenses to capture expansive landscapes can have the danger of creating too much distortion and pushing everything into the distance. Here I chose to use a narrower focal distance and stitch two images together. Olympus E-M5, Lumix G Vario 12-35mm f/2.8 lens, 1/320s @ f11, ISO 200. Tripod.