

Booklet #18: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

PLANNING FOR TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at www.NVACC.org.

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on www.NVACC.com where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at JoeMiller@NVACC.org.

* Dave Carter, the creator of this booklet and a founding father of NVACC has passed but his photographic skill and artistic vision live on in the technique of all photographers who were fortunate enough to work with him.



Planning for Travel Photography

The purpose of this booklet is to offer some suggestions about planning for travel photography. We assume you want more than record shots.

"Making" travel photographs is different from "taking" travel photographs. To make good travel shots you must plan ahead. You must slow down, put careful thought into each photograph, and apply the principles of visual design. The mind must concentrate on what you are trying to do and the best way to do it. Otherwise, you are likely to be disappointed with the results, and it may be a long way back to the location to remake the image.

To be a good photographer it is important to take pictures constantly. Unfortunately, too many people only take pictures when on vacation. We see travel photography as a way to apply principles which we learn at home. As Freeman Patterson is fond of saying, "If you can't see what is around you at home, what will you see when you get to Tangiers?"

Equipment to Carry

Our advice is travel light! We tend to carry more equipment than we really need. This is less of a concern if we travel by car. When we travel by air we usually take only two lenses — a zoom in the range of 28-80mm and another zoom in the range of 80-200mm. If you have a good tele-extender take it as it is small and adds flexibility to your photography.

As much as we love macro photography, we often leave our true macro lenses at home when we vacation. There are other ways to take macro shots that do not require carrying heavy macro lenses. These include diopter lenses and extension tubes. Both are light in weight and small in size. See Booklet No. 5 in this series, "Selecting 35mm Camera Equipment" and Booklet No. 8, "Photographing Wildflowers and Other Small Subjects."

In preparing for your trip, it is a good idea to eliminate all but the most essential equipment. For example, perhaps the only filters you will need will be a polarizing filter and a warming filter.

If you are going far, and if it is a once in a lifetime trip, it is a good idea to have your camera checked before you leave. Also, you may wish to carry a second camera body if you have one. If space is very limited, you might want to take a point and shoot camera as a second camera.

Just because it is your vacation don't believe you can avoid taking and using a sturdy tripod. We recommend a tripod that has four sections to the legs because when the legs are not extended it is small enough to fit into a suitcase. An excellent tripod for traveling is the Gitzo Mountaineer, G-1228, made of carbon fiber, but it is very pricey. A satisfactory alternative to Gitzo is a Bogen tripod. We use the Bogen geared head No. 3275. We remove the head from the tripod and pack both in the suitcase.

By the way, while we recommend a tripod with legs having four sections for traveling, we prefer a tripod with three sections when we photograph at home because the fewer the sections the sturdier the tripod. We have found that a tripod having legs with four sections is a adequate compromise for travel photography.

Whether you use a tripod with three or four sections to the legs, we recommend a sturdy quick release system. Kirk Enterprises and Really Right Stuff make excellent quick release systems that support the camera well enough that you can carry the tripod over your shoulder with the camera still attached, and without the risk of the camera falling off, a real benefit when you are walking around in a city.

The choice of a camera bag is critical, particularly if you are flying. It must be large enough to carry the necessary gear, but small enough for you to take it on board the plane. The choice of a camera bag is certainly an individual decision. Bear in mind that there is no such thing as the perfect camera bag. When walking we have found that a photo vest can be a useful alternative to a camera bag.

When we travel by air, we like a small back pack with a shoulder strap. When choosing a camera bag, select one that can fit under the seat, or certainly one that can be carried on board and stored overhead. Under no conditions check your bag with expensive cameras and lenses. Also, do not check film as we understand that the latest x-ray machines used for checked luggage are very strong and may damage the film.

Film

We often travel with only one type of film. If for no other reason, we are less likely to set the film speed incorrectly. Travel with a film you are familiar with. We prefer a medium speed film, one having an ISO of around 100.

We suggest you purchase enough film in advance and take all the film you will need with you. Don't plan to purchase film during your trip unless it is absolutely necessary. Camera stores are often few and far between and their stock of some films, particularly the better transparency films, may be limited.

Remember, films should be kept in a cool place. We have on occasions purchased an

inexpensive cooler with a top tray to keep the film dry. If you are staying at one place for a few days, consider asking for a room with a refrigerator, or asking the management to store your film in a cool place.

When flying we insist upon hand inspection of all our film. We place our film in clear plastic bags and hand it to the security attendant. The bag can be examined visually and it does not have to be subjected to any x-ray equipment.

You may wish to use mailers for your exposed film. If you do, your images could be waiting for you at home when you return. We are hesitant to use an unknown local lab for film processing.

Means of Travel

Traveling by air allows you the maximum time in one place. However, it requires carefully planning in advance of the trip. What can and cannot be carried is an important consideration. Air travel also may require renting a car.

We have found it best to rent a car in advance of arrival at the airport in order to have available the best model for carrying photographers and equipment. Small station wagons, mini-vans, and lift backs allow tripods to be put away without collapsing the legs at every stop. We like those models that have a cover that can hide what is being carried.

Of course, many of us travel from home and back in our own cars. It has the advantage that you *can* carry more equipment, but it has the disadvantage that you *will* carry more equipment. The more you carry, the harder it is to find what you need. In addition, if you have traveling companions, the car will be packed with luggage making it hard to dig out your camera equipment when you need it. Even though you travel in your own vehicle, from a photographic standpoint it is good advice to travel light

Traveling Companions

It is hard to make photographs when you are traveling with non-photographers. If you can, arrange to travel with other photographers who have tastes similar to your own. If you must travel with non-photographers, make sure you have an agreement in advance concerning how much time you can devote to photography. Such an understanding may allow you to "work the subject" in greater detail. To a non-photographer, one picture of the Grand Canyon may be enough. To a serious photographer, a thousand pictures may not be enough.

It may be useful, and sometimes necessary, for the photographer to get up early while

the non-photographers are still in bed. The early morning light is desirable anyway.

When to Travel

We try to avoid taking photographic vacations during peak travel times — that is, when school is out and on holidays. Late April and May, and late September and October usually are good times to vacation. The weather is often good, it avoids the summer heat, and usually it is not too crowded. Many of the motels and hotels are open and the rates may be lower. However, fall rates may be higher in areas where fall foliage is an attraction.

Research in Advance

A successful vacation, whether solely for photographic purposes or not, requires careful planning and preparation. There is never enough time to do all one wants to do, so decisions need to be made in advance regarding what photogenic possibilities exist. If you are a member of the American Automobile Association, they will provide whatever maps you need as well as information on hotels, motels, and restaurants in the area you plan to visit. However, they no longer will plot a scenic route for you. Most all states have a tourist bureau which will help you plan your trip. Many of them also have web sites.

The larger book stores have a separate travel section where travel books provide information which may be useful in planning your trip. Also, in the photography section there may be books about a particular part of the country which will offer ideas about possible places to photograph. The captions often identify where the photograph was taken.

Security

Camera security must always be considered when vacationing. Your equipment should be insured against theft and other disasters. We frequently carry our equipment into the restaurant when we eat and keep it on our person. Equipment should not be left unattended in motel rooms and areas where other people have access.

Be extremely careful not to damage your equipment. An equipment disaster can ruin a vacation. Make sure your vacation is a memorable one, with only good memories.

A Final Word

We are tempted to see as much as possible when vacationing. From a photographic standpoint, however, it is better to spend more time in one place and "work the subject." This, of course, is difficult to do if you have non-photographer companions.

Some years ago one of the authors spent a day photographing in White Sands, New Mexico, and managed to go only two miles. Late in the afternoon a man drove up in a BMW, got out of his car, aimed his camera without tripod in one direction and took a shot, turned 90 degrees and took a second shot, turned another 90 degrees and took a third shot, then turned another 90 degrees and took a fourth shot. He announced: "I have done White Sands. Now I have to get to the Guadalupe Mountains before it gets dark." That is no way to do travel photography.

References

Carter, Dave. Photographing Wildflowers and Other Small Subjects. Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs, 1998.

Miller, Joseph and Carter, Dave. Selecting 35mm Camera Equipment. Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs, 1998.