

FOCUS ON

HAJE JAN KAMPS

Travel Photography



FOCUS ON
the fundamentals



Focus On Travel Photography

The *Focus On* Series

Photography is all about the end result—your photo. The *Focus On* series offers books with essential information so you can get the best photos without spending thousands of hours learning techniques or software skills. Each book focuses on a specific area of knowledge within photography, cutting through the often confusing waffle of photographic jargon to focus solely on showing you what you need to do to capture beautiful and dynamic shots every time you pick up your camera.

Titles in the *Focus On* series:



Focus On Travel Photography

Focus on the Fundamentals

Haje Jan Kamps

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Dedication

This book is for my sister Meke, who knows wanderlust when she sees it.



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About the Author

Haje likes to say he “lives in London,” which means that that’s where he keeps most of his stuff. Most of the time, however, he seems to prefer to use the city’s five (!) airports to get the hell out of there and go explore the

world. For the purpose of this awkwardly-written-in-third-person biography, he notes that he has only been at “home” about 15% of the time over the past two years. The rest of the time, he’s travelling, taking photos, and

building photography equipment from scratch. Haje has also invented the Triggertrap camera trigger – see triggertrap.com for more information.



Chapter 1: Introduction to Travel Photography



Travelling through Arizona more than a decade ago really opened my eyes to travel photography. Taken at 1/125 sec, f/8.0, and ISO 100 with a 28 mm lens.



There's an old truism that goes as follows: "On their deathbeds, no one ever states they wish they had spent more time at the office." No one ever asks the logical follow-up question: What do you wish you had been doing instead? For many of us, the answer is not hard to come up with: Travelling the world.

There are many ways to travel. Do me a favor, and imagine the following two scenarios: Imagine you are travelling in all-out luxury, flying only first class, with a footman to help you carry your dozen suitcases; staying in the swankiest hotels conceived by man. Now, imagine the other extreme, a reality where you

travel on foot, rickety buses, and downright dangerous trains, from youth hostel to youth hostel, carrying nothing but a notepad with your travel musings and two sets of clothes.

Do you have those two scenarios clear in your mind? Good. If you're anything like me, both alternatives have an almost magical draw to them, and in envisioning the lifestyles of journeying into the unknown, I can feel myself becoming thirsty with wanderlust. In reality, I will never be able to afford to travel in the former scenario, and I'm not brave enough to implement the latter. The point is this: No

matter how you travel, irrespective of where you go, you'll run into situations, see things, and make experiences that you couldn't have gotten in any other way.

As a photographer, this is a golden opportunity. The excitement of bringing home photographic trophies you can show to your friends and family is a particularly intense flavor of magic.

It doesn't matter if you're a seasoned photographer or a complete newbie—travel photography is great fun, and gives a huge amount of creative freedom and inspiration.



To me, travel photography is a fantastic opportunity to keep memories of my travels alive - and an excuse to spend some quality time with my camera, of course. Taken at 1/800 sec, f/2.8, and ISO 100 with a 17-35 mm lens zoomed to 17 mm.

Two ways of travelling



When we are talking about travel photography, it's worth making a distinction between the types of photographers we are talking about, because there is a fundamental difference between them: One group consists of photographers who travel, and the other group is travelers who take

photographs. The approach to travelling and photography will be quite different to each group.

This book is for both types of photographers, but some of the key advice will be different for each type.

Travel photography offers a lot of latitude for adding your own personality and your experiences to your photography. I love food, so I invariably come home with a lot of food-related photographs. Taken at 1/30 sec, f/2.8, and ISO 400 with a 50 mm lens.

The traveler who takes photos



Simple snapshots - such as this image taken in Thailand with a simple Canon compact camera - can be a lot more rewarding when they are taken half-way around the world. Taken at 1/1000 sec, f/4.0, and ISO 80 with a Canon S95 compact camera.

The difference is mostly a philosophical one: A traveler who takes photos will be focused primarily on travelling, experiencing the world around them, interacting with the new environments, and exploring the world. Photography—whether done for commercial purposes, to keep the people back at home up to date, or simply as a means to preserve memories from your travels—will be a secondary concern. Photography is, in a way, an overcomeable obstacle in the pursuit of travel.

If you fall into this category, you can afford to make a lot of photographic compromises to ensure that the pursuit of photography doesn't hugely inconvenience your travelling. By carefully selecting lightweight photography equipment that still delivers high quality results, and by utilizing techniques to make the most of a weight-limited photography bag, you can travel the world without having to check an additional bulletproof flight-case for your photography equipment.

The photographer who travels



My 100 mm f/2.8 macro lens is hardly the most convenient lens for travelling; but as long as it keeps getting me lovely photos, I can't bear leaving it at home when I head out into the world. Taken at 1/640 sec, f/6.3, and ISO 400 with a 100 mm lens.

A photographer who travels will have quite a different take on the same situations. If this is you, you will probably be travelling with a lot more photographic equipment. The goal of the trip will be to collect as many high-quality photographs as possible. For the travelling photographer, the travelling itself is the thing that is

an overcomeable obstacle in the pursuit of travel.

As a travelling photographer, you'll find that you have different demands than a photographing traveler. It is true that travelling with additional luggage for photography can be expensive, but if you are aiming to make

money on your photography, there's no space for compromising on quality. With your needs in mind, we'll be talking about ways of travelling with a significant amount of photography equipment that is less heavy, less financially risky, and as comfortable as possible.

How to become a luckier photographer



A lucky capture of a spectator in a crowd, or a result of careful observation and preparation? A bit of both, perhaps. Taken at 1/400 sec, f/2.8, and ISO 400 with a 100 mm lens.

We will be covering a lot of things in this book, but I wanted to kick off this first chapter with a brief discussion about the concept of "luck" in photography. You'll often hear one photographer comment on another's work by saying "Wow, that is an incredibly lucky shot" or "Wow, I wish I was lucky enough to come away with a shot like that."

I appreciate the sentiments in both sentences, and there can be no denying that all photography will have an element of luck in it. That is doubly true in travel photography; you're likely to be shooting at locations you aren't used to, possibly with less-than-ideal equipment given the circumstances, and you might be miles away from the nearest

photo store if something does go wrong with your equipment.

However, I believe that a lot of so-called luck, instead, comes down to preparation. Every photograph might very well prove to be a throw of the dice, but as photographers, there's a lot you can do to load the dice in your favor.

Planning ahead



A careful look at the day's program and doing my research meant that I knew I had better bring a polarizer filter with me for this particular day of shooting. Needless to say, it paid off. Taken at 1/320 sec, f/7.1, and ISO 100 with a 28-84 mm lens at 28 mm.

One tried-and-tested way to ensure your luck is simply to plan ahead. If you know you are going to travel in an area where you will be far away from the nearest photo store, for example, you might decide to ensure that you have backups for every piece of equipment. At the very least, this means bringing an extra set of batteries and memory cards, but you might also decide to bring extra equipment with you to work as a backup if your camera body fails or your lens goes crashing to the ground, or if you are a victim of a thief as you're travelling to the location of your shoot.

We'll talk about a redundant approach to photography equipment in more detail in the equipment chapter, but for now, I'd like for you to start thinking in "what-if" terms. It's no good to bring 24 different lenses with you if a failure of the imaging chip on your camera body leaves all your equipment useless, for example.

Let's take a closer look at "luck"

Planning ahead goes far beyond equipment. It also means that

you always have your camera on standby. If you're on a bus travelling from one place to another, and you spot a beautiful scene out of the window, it's no use if your camera is in the luggage compartment of the bus. A "lucky" photographer would be sitting with his camera in a bag between his legs, or even around his neck. He'd be able to produce a camera, turn it on, point it in the right direction, and fire off a couple of shots, before an "unlucky" photographer could start complaining about his camera being in the luggage hold.



On this visit to a safari park, I assumed correctly that I wouldn't be able to get too close to the animals. As such, bringing my 70-200 mm lens proved invaluable. Taken at 1/2000 sec, f/2.8, and ISO 100 with a 70-200 mm lens zoomed to 200 mm.

Another example could be if you're taking photos of an event at an air-show. The "unlucky" photographer might be shooting with a telephoto lens, and get a series of glorious up-close photos

of the planes in flight. However, one of the parts of the air-show is the spectacular look of a Harrier Jump Jet landing very close to the audience. One "lucky" photographer would have a compact

camera with a wide-angle lens on the ready. Another "lucky" photographer might have read the program in advance, and was aware of this part of the event, and would have switched to a

wide-angle lens before it happened. A third “lucky” photographer could have chosen to use an ultra-zoom lens for this event; the trade-off of slightly lower quality telefocus images is that she could quickly zoom all the way out and capture the action up-close.

A third example might be a safari. At sunset, out of nowhere,

an enormous, single male elephant shows up. It is moving at great speed through a small pass, and there’s very little time to capture it. The “unlucky” photographer grabs his camera and starts shooting, only to realize later that his camera was still on a very low ISO from shooting in the bright sunshine earlier in the day, and all the

photos come out blurry. The “lucky” photographer will have created a habit of always adjusting the ISO for the current settings, and always returning the camera to auto-focus and Program mode, in case the opportunity for a quick snapshot comes up.



“Training your luck” can be done in many different ways. When it comes to photographing kittens, for example, simply knowing how they react to a cat toy can greatly increase the number of successful shots you get. The same goes for wild animals, of course. Taken at 1/200 sec, f/5.0, and ISO 100 with a 50 mm lens and studio lighting.

As you can see, a lot of the scenarios we consider lucky have very little to do with luck. Some of it is experience, some of it is planning, and some of it is simply thinking “what if...” all the time.

Of course, sometimes your judgment will be off, or an animal shows up at an unexpected location, or things happen in a way that you couldn’t have predicted. Undoubtedly, there is

always a little bit of luck involved with taking a great photo, but most of the time, it’s down to skill, planning, and experience; never is that more true than when you’re travelling.

TRAINING YOUR LUCK

Travel naturally contains a lot of downtime—as you are making your way from place to place, for example, or as you are waiting for a performance to start, an opportunity to come to fruition, or an animal to walk into view. Don’t spend your time daydreaming—use it to come up with outlandish scenarios. What happens if your lens refuses to focus? What would you do if an animal suddenly shows up behind you? What if something happens very far away or really close to you? By always being prepared for the unlikely, you are much better prepared for when the impossible happens.

“This photo is good. How can I make it better?”

The most useful advice I was ever given about photography is that you can never take a perfect photograph. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve taken many, many

photos I am incredibly proud of, but that doesn’t mean that they are flawless.

The fact that you have purchased this book means that you’re probably eager to become a better photographer. For that, I applaud you: The first and most

important step toward improving as a photographer is to actively work on your photography. I promise I’ll teach you all the tips and tricks I know, but ultimately, photography is a skill, and as with any skill, there is only one way you can get better: by practicing.



I love this photo, but in retrospect, I wish I had waited until the pick-up truck that throws the shadow in the bottom-left of the photo had moved along; that would have made this strong photo, taken in Uruguay, even stronger. Taken at 1/400 sec, f/8.0, and ISO 80 with a Canon S95 compact camera.

Analyzing your own photos

Of course, taking a lot of photographs helps getting a lot of practice in, but blindly taking more photos isn't really going to help you improve in any meaningful way. It may seem like superfluous advice, but I've seen many photographers simply make the same mistakes again and again, and wondering why their photos aren't improving.

In order to improve your shots, you have to apply some self-critique on the photos you are taking. The challenge is one of being able to distance yourself from your own shots to such a degree that you can offer yourself helpful advice.



Personally, I am an enormous fan of putting my photos through the following set of questions:

- **What is the story?** All photography is ultimately about storytelling in one way or another. The first challenge is to identify what the story is that we're trying to tell.
- **Technical Quality:** Is the image in focus? Is the exposure perfect?
- **Composition:** Does the combination of the elements in this photo tell the story I am trying to convey?
- **What was good?** As it stands, what do I like about this photograph?
- **The right tools for the job:** Could this photo have been better if I had used different equipment? If so, what is the difference between the equipment I did use and the equipment I wish I had used?
- **Hindsight:** Now that I am looking at my photograph over a cup of tea, is there anything I wish I had done differently?
- **Did I tell the story?** Now that I've answered all the other questions, the line of questioning comes full circle. It's time to go back to the first question, and determine whether the story was successfully told. If the answer is no, chances are that one of the questions between the first question and this one holds the answer to why the image failed.

After I got home, I decided that the garish colors on this Cambodian girl's shirt didn't work well with the "feel" of the photo. At the same time, the image lacked impact when it was pure black and white, so I decided to keep one of the colors to help catch the viewer's eye. Taken at 1/1600 sec, f/1.4, and ISO 100 with a 50 mm lens.

Especially when you are just starting out, using a form asking the previous questions can be extremely useful in increasing the percentage of photos that come out great.

Don't worry if the process feels like it takes quite a long time at first; like anything you are learning, it will feel a little unusual and clunky at first, but once you grow accustomed to

running through this little checklist, it'll become second nature to evaluate your own photos. The secret to why this is so successful is that you're not just training yourself in evaluating your photos back in the comfort of your office chair—you'll also gain the ability to evaluate your photos as you are taking them!

Thinking about your safety and security

I'm sorry to put a downer on this book before we even get started properly, but I didn't think this book would be complete if we didn't talk a little bit about safety and security. Depending on where you travel, you may find that you end up in locations where you stand out compared to the local population. I've taken



Sometimes, it can take many years before you "get" why a photo isn't as high impact as it ought to be. This image was taken in 2004, and it was only recently, after I increased the saturation of the photos, that it really "popped." Taken in Paris at 1/250, f/9.5, and ISO 100, with a 28-105 mm lens, zoomed to 28 mm.

photos in locations where the cost of my camera body alone was more than my subject's whole extended family's combined annual wage.

Photography isn't a particularly dangerous hobby in general, but there are a few new challenges to keep in mind when you're travelling far afield with your photographic equipment.

Theft

Probably the biggest risk to you when you're travelling is your equipment being stolen. Whether you are in transit with your photographic equipment or whether it is stored in a hotel room, rented car, or on location, keep in mind that there are many elaborate scams out there.

I've had the bags that were stored in the luggage compartment of a bus opened and ransacked while travelling through Thailand, for example. The enterprising would-be thieves paid children to hide in the under-bus luggage compartment, and to go through the luggage while the bus was on the move. I've also had my hotel room searched several times, and on more than one occasion someone has tried to walk off with my bag. It's unpleasant, but it is part of being a travel photographer, unfortunately.

Top tips for not becoming a victim of burglary or theft:

- Always assume that somebody you can't trust has keys to your hotel room.



"Gritty" locations can undoubtedly give fantastic results, but if there's a risk you might be robbed in the process, it's probably not worth it. Taken in Liverpool at 1/30 sec, f/4.0, and ISO 200 with a 17-35 mm lens zoomed to 17 mm.



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- Always assume that somebody you can't trust has the pass-code or keys to the safe in your hotel room.
 - Never trust anybody you don't know to "watch your stuff," even if you are only popping to the bathroom on the train for a second.
 - Don't let anybody separate you from your valuable luggage, for example by loading you into one taxi, and your bags into another taxi or pick-up truck.
 - Keep your photographic equipment out of sight as much as possible.
 - Don't carry your photo equipment in a bag that has a recognizable photography brand emblazoned down the side. Thieves know what Canon and Nikon mean, and it's the equivalent of putting a "please steal me" sticker on your bags.
- In practice, this means that it's a good idea to carry all your valuable photography equipment with you. Yes, that's quite inconvenient, but this is also why carrying

Some situations and locations can be photogenic, but unless you know what you're getting yourself into, it may be best to stay clear.

a good, comfortable photography bag with you is doubly important.

Violent crime

Having things stolen from your hotel room or being pick-pocketed is extremely frustrating, but it's not the biggest worry you could have as a traveler. In much of the world, you'll find that theft is the worst you'll come across, but in some places, you'd be well advised to keep your wits about you: There is nothing pleasant about being robbed at machete- or gunpoint.



Staying streetwise is a good starting point for staying out of trouble. I doubt I would have taken this photo if I hadn't observed this man for a little while before taking his photo, for example. Taken in Vietnam at 1/200 sec, f/2.8, and ISO 100, with a 50 mm lens.

To stay safe, follow this advice:

- Don't take photos of people who look dangerous. This might sound like obvious advice, but there are plenty of people who have walked away without their wallet and camera when they tried to photograph some colorful characters in a shady end of town.
- Do your research about your destination. If you discover that violent crime is commonplace, that might affect how and where you travel.
- If you travel in dangerous areas, consider at least hiring a local guide, or possibly even a security detail.
- Be streetwise. If you are walking into a situation you don't like the look of, don't hesitate to get out of there. Quickly. Run if you have to, but be aware that that may draw attention to you.
- If somebody tries to rob you, give them what they want (usually just your wallet, mobile telephone, and your camera), then calmly walk away.
- Whatever you do, don't risk your health. Camera equipment, wallets, and passports can all be replaced a lot more easily than body parts with bullets in them.
- Use small memory cards, and take them out of your camera when they fill up. I keep memory cards loose in my trouser pocket rather than in my camera bag or similar. That way, if I do have to give up my camera bag, I still have my photographs for the day.