

Snap to It Want to Improve Your Vacation Shots? Heed Some Advice From the Experts

By Roy Furchgott August 20, 2006

In her 10 years as a professional, Rosanne Pennella has seen thousands of tourists with their feet cut off, some with telephone poles sticking out of their heads, and others with faces scorched featureless by the sun. She's no emergency room physician, though. She's a travel photographer and instructor who teaches aspiring shutterbugs not to crop off people's feet, to avoid telephone poles in the background, and not to overexpose in bright sunlight, among other things.

Although these photo errors may seem comically easy to avoid, look through your own travel albums and you're likely to see these and more recurring with disheartening regularity. The good news is that pro shooters say any holiday snapshot can be improved by following a few simple guidelines. Add some new skills and snapshots can graduate to photographs, and photographs into art.

The major problem for amateurs isn't that they fail to concentrate on the image in the viewfinder, it's that they concentrate too much, and on the wrong thing. "Your mind's eye is only seeing the subject of the picture, but the camera is seeing everything in the picture," says Bob Krist, a New Hope, Pa.-based freelancer who was named Travel Photographer of the Year in 2000 by the Society of American Travel Writers.

That's how families end up footless in photos: The shutterbug is so fixed on Junior's face that the photographer overlooks what is in the rest of the frame. Pennella, whose clients include Fodors, has a simple reminder that she calls "border patrol."

Before you press the shutter button, look at the borders of your frame, she says, and ask, "Are you including anything you don't mean to, or not including anything you do mean to?"

Pennella's cure for pole-in-the-head is a reminder she calls "background check." You've checked the borders, now look at the background -- is it too distracting? "The best way to improve that is to move yourself, and see if what is behind the person can be hidden or eliminated from the picture," says Pennella, who's based in Dallas.

While people often think to move left or right, they often forget that ducking down or standing on tiptoe may also hide an unwanted element. If all else fails, you can learn how to obscure the background by forcing it into soft focus.

Equally common is a problem Krist calls "psychological zooming" -- when you think you've filled the frame with your subject, but that great shot of the Eiffel Tower turns out to be "four-fifths sky and one-fifth tower," says Krist. "Your brain zoomed, but your camera didn't. You should move in closer and closer until you feel something is missing from the picture," he says. Then step back and shoot.

That goes for people pictures, too. "Whatever distance you are comfortable with, cut it in half," says Pennella.

But you also need to cut some emotional distance, says Catherine Karnow of Mill Valley, Calif., whose work has appeared in National Geographic Traveler. In too many shots of locals, "the people look uncomfortable, because you aren't comfortable," she says. Ask permission by smiling and gesture with the camera. If shooting digital, share the results with your subject. When they see the picture, she says, they will often relax and volunteer for more.

The most common composition in amateur photography is a horizontal shot with a person dead center. "It's the least interesting photograph you can take, and if you go through a photo album of a trip, it's what you see," says Pennella. "Use the rule of thirds," she says. "If you think of your photo as a tic-tac-toe board, it's usually best to place your subject in one of the intersections of the tic-tac-toe board. Not that you shouldn't ever center, just don't do it without thinking."

Also, vary your angles and don't always shoot from the same standing position, says Jim Richardson, a freelance travel photographer and gallery owner in Lindsborg, Kan., whose photos have been published in National Geographic. Say you're trying to photograph the action at a club or dance hall. "If you stand with the camera at eye level, the dancers in front cover up the ones in back. Stand on a chair -- it reveals more of the scene," he says.

Crouching or lying on the ground can make something as unimposing as a lawn ornament look heroic.

If you have pictures of your family with eyes rolled or strained expressions, it's because you take too long fiddling with the camera before shooting. A slew of photographic ills can be cured by learning to use a camera before you leave on vacation. "I've taken people to Africa on a safari and people buy a big ol' 500-millimeter lens, and they don't try it out -- not even once before going on a \$9,000 trip," says Adam Jones, a Louisville travel photographer whose outdoor images appear in Sierra Club calendars.

The minimum skills to know before you go include how to focus and shoot quickly, how to zoom in and out, force the flash on and off, set the camera for macro close-ups, change background focus and get images from your memory card to a computer. In the case of Jones's giant lens owner, "Why not go to the zoo first?" he says. "Just because you have a 500 [millimeter] lens doesn't mean you know how to use it." And always carry your manual with your camera, just in case.

Once you know your camera functions, you can use some fancier techniques. One that violates common sense is among the most useful: Use your flash in bright sunlight and turn it off at night.

"People go out on a bright sunny day, low humidity, white puffy clouds, and say, 'It's a nice wonderful day to get photos of the family.' No it's not. It's harsh contrasty light," says Krist. The eye can perceive details in a wider range of light and dark than a camera, which will either burn out the light areas or lose detail in shadows.

The solution, says Krist, is to use the flash in sunlight to reduce the contrast. "It will open up the shadows and make them more readable to the chip."

At certain times of day, even strong sunlight won't hamper a photographer. "When the shadow is longer than the subject is tall, that's what the photographers call 'sweet light,' " says Pennella. That's the time to break out the camera. And don't leave the camera at home because it's overcast -- that can be the best time to shoot.

Conversely, some of the best night shots are made at twilight without a flash. "It's the time the exterior light is the same as the interior light, so you can see both," says Krist. So your camera captures not only a cafe's facade but also the people inside.

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When it gets really dark, unless you are taking a close shot, the flash is useless. "Your flash is not going to illuminate the Eiffel Tower," says Krist. In fact, turning off the flash will automatically set many cameras for a timed exposure, the only way to capture a skyline at night. You may need a tripod, though: Long exposures will blur if the camera moves.

The final step to an improved photo album is to make sure you tell the story of your trip through variety. "Anyone can stand in front of the Grand Tetons at sunrise and take a good picture. But it doesn't tell me much about your experience," says Jones. "You need to show the grand scheme, the more intimate views and the close-ups." That means your camping trip should have shots of everything from a panorama of the mountains to a close-up of fingers on a ledge.

Karnow, after 20 years as a pro, still writes down reminders before each shoot. "I make a list that says, 'People, scenics, details, food, movement, action, night life,' " she says.

You could start yours with, "Note to self: feet."

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