

# PHOTOGRAPHING PEOPLE



## INTRODUCTION

One of the most satisfying aspects of traveling is meeting people from different cultures. Some of my fondest memories are of taking time to talk with citizens of countries I visit and learning their customs and beliefs. I've been invited to a family dinner by a taxi driver in Cairo and met a man who has become one of my dearest Canadian friends on the bow of a ship in the far North.

I have a feeling that if you asked 100 professional travel photographers what subject matter is most difficult to photograph, most would say people. How does one capture the essence of the cultures one visits, namely their people? Perhaps the most difficult aspect of people travel photography is the fact that these relation-



ships are always new, with little time to develop rapport with your subjects. Yes, this is a huge challenge, but it's not insurmountable.

Travel photography also involves taking pictures of loved ones. Often as part of a group tour we want to capture memories of our travel companions. Is there a way of capturing these images in a fresh and interesting manner?

As a pro travel photographer I'm pretty pleased with the images of people I've captured. So the inevitable questions I am asked are "How do you do it? Do you have any tips for the amateur photographer that you're willing to share?" Well, yes, I do have some tips on photographing people and here they are.

## TIPS

### GET PERMISSION

Pros have it drilled into their heads that they need written permission to use an image of a person for commercial purposes. But for the amateur the situation is different. Or is it? I firmly believe that it is a matter of civility, pure and simple, to ask someone you do not know for permission to photograph him or her. One of my pet peeves is the rude tourist who shoves a camera in the face of someone from a different culture. Of course, if the person is performing in an event that is a different story. But, in my opinion, people have a right to their privacy, and as a photographer I abide by that belief.



Permission does not have to be a signed release form for an amateur. It can be a gesture, such as holding up your camera, pointing to it and to the subject and shrugging your shoulders as if to ask the question. Or, if you speak the language or have an interpreter, just ask.

In some countries, I'm thinking of Muslim countries in particular, photographing women without permission can get you in serious trouble. At the very least you owe it to your subject to give her a chance to cover her face.

Sometimes I admit to having photographed a subject surreptitiously, to catch a special moment or expression. In that case I always go up to them afterwards, show them the images and ask if it is okay with them. Usually their smiling faces are their answer, but if they refuse, I apologize and delete the images right in front of them.

## TAKE A PICTURE, GIVE A PRINT

One thing I like to do is either send a print to the person once I get home or else bring one with me on my next visit to the country. In Ecuador, there is a market in Otavalo where I love to spend time photo-

Nepal: Photo by Norm Arnold





graphing. When I go back, I bring prints of my subjects from my last visit and now the people are excited when I return.

To that end, there are some wonderful new cameras that mimic the old Polaroid concept, but with the added advantage of newer technology and smaller size. The one I like best is the **Fuji Instax** product line that produce tiny prints perfect for handing out immediately and which fully develop in front of an amazed child's eyes in a minute or two. I will often take a picture of a reluctant subject and suddenly I not only have that person's cooperation, but the willingness of friends and neighbors.

If sending a print is not a viable option, then at the very least sit down with the person and show him or her the images you captured. If they request you delete an image, the right thing to do is to delete it immediately in front of them, then show them that the image is now missing from the sequence.

## BE PATIENT

Be patient when you photograph people. Often it is only after 10 minutes of shooting that the subject relaxes enough for that unguarded moment. This is a real challenge. By definition, you do not have a relationship with the people you will want to photograph. It's worth taking some time before giving up and moving on.

New Mexico, USA: 58mm; ISO  
200, 1/90 sec @ f11



## GET TO KNOW YOUR SUBJECT

Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of travel photography for me is getting to know my subjects, even if only for a short time. The people connection is what makes the travel experience shine. Before you hoist your camera, ask about the craft they might be exhibiting. Ask your subject about their family; it's the universal glue that binds us. If you take the time to do this you will be rewarded with warm and poignant images every time.

## SHOOT EARLY

A great time to photograph people is early in the morning, even in westernized countries. That is when merchants set up their market stalls, when farmers heave their produce from cart to table, when kids scurry to help their parents or scamper away from them. The rising sun casts a warm glow, dust is kicked up highlighting dust motes, and the grittiness of life is front-and-center for your photographic palette.

## TELL A STORY

When given a choice, shoot a scene tightly. Shooting tight conveys emotion and creates dramatic impact. You do not need the entire person's body in the image, at times not even the entire face. A child's face from chin to forehead, lips streaked in chocolate, can be a prize-winner.

**Robert Higgins Coming of Age,  
Sechelt, Canada: 200mm;  
ISO800, 1/15 sec @ f3.5**



However, you need to decide before you shoot what the story is that you want to tell. Is it the expressions of toil on a merchants face, or the warm embrace of a nurturing mother? That will determine how you will photograph the subjects.

## USE FILL FLASH

At certain times of the day light is harsh and creates deep shadows that distract from the subject. In many cultures people wear wide-brimmed hats that create problems during mid-day hours by casting their eyes into deep shadow. The solution in these cases is to use flash to gently fill in the shadows. Yes, pros have elaborate flash systems, but they are often superfluous. You can capture terrific shots using your on-camera, pop-up flash. The secret here is to diffuse the light so it doesn't appear harsh on the face. There are several after-market products out there that you place over your flash to smooth the light and create pleasing portraits. In a pinch I have used a tissue or a white plastic shopping bag wrapped around the flash.

## LAUGH... A LOT

Laughter truly is the best medicine and I've used it even in uncomfortable travel situations. Just think of how funny you look to a



Bedouin or a Sri Lankan fisherman, then lighten up and laugh at yourself. That frame of mind alone will loosen up your subjects and help them be more cooperative.

## MOVE

When shooting people, move around - talk to them as you do so – and shoot from many different angles. Digital is wonderful because there is no cost to taking extra images. Did the person blink? Just keep shooting. Was the background distracting? Move and keep shooting. Is the light too harsh from one direction? Shift to use the light to your advantage.

## SHOOT WIDE OPEN

I say this with a caveat, but if the person is the focus of your image, try opening up the aperture to its maximum (f2.0, 2.8, 3.5 or 4.0). That will significantly blur the background and cause your subject to pop out of the frame. That works especially well if the person's face or dress is able to carry the story. If the story you want to tell includes context – a dance, the village huts, animals or a spectacular backdrop, then close down the lens (f8 or f11). However, that works best when your subject is close to you, creating a strong foreground element.

*Marsaxlokk, Malta: 48mm; ISO 400, 1/400 sec @ f5.6*



## ZOOM IN

The higher the zoom factor the more you will be able to isolate your subject from distracting backgrounds, assuming that you still utilize a large aperture. In other words, photographing a person with a 70-200mm lens set at 135mm or higher isolates the face of the person from the background and makes it appear to pop out. Remember to focus on the nearest eye, shoot at perhaps f4.0 (or 3.5 or 2.8) and the image of your subject will jump off the page.

## SHOOT MOTION

Try shooting people dancing, parading, running, celebrating. Of course you will want to take shots that freeze the action. But consider handholding shots of people in motion using a slower shutter speed. Start at 1/25 or 1/15 second and follow the subjects as they move. Between the panning effect and your natural hand movement, you will get unpredictable but often lovely, artsy effects.

## IT'S NOT ONLY FOREIGNERS

If you have friends or family along with you when you travel, people photography will mostly be about them. Here you have folks you are familiar with and who hopefully will allow you to try some creative staging to get good shots. Instead of posing someone

*Eastern Desert, Egypt: Kodachrome; no data available*



like a toy soldier in front of the Eiffel Tower, try using a wide angle lens, posing them at an angle close to you, with the Tower in the background. When taking group pictures, layer the people (two up close, three several feet back and two in the distance) and arrange them in fun ways. Stagger them on steps or in trees or around surfboards. Look for something different!

## TIPPING

I make it a policy not to tip a person for allowing me to take their picture. Other photographers do tip. I prefer to give my subjects a print of images I take of them, using a Fuji Instax camera. There have been cases where I have tipped, but they are the exception. I also order batches of 100 or 250 novelty flashlights on a keyring that I hand out to children.

## PORTRAIT OR EDITORIAL?

There is a difference between a portrait and an editorial portrait. I will shoot a staged portrait of a family member or a person whose face I want to capture because of wrinkles, a laugh, or whatever.

An editorial portrait is different. In that case I am trying to capture a person in the moment, doing an activity or dressed traditionally that places them in the context of their culture.

New Mexico Pueblo, USA:  
70mm; ISO 200, 1/250 sec @  
f4.5



One last piece of advice... always remember that you are a good-will ambassador, whatever country you are from. Act accordingly.

New Caledonia: 70mm; ISO  
400, 1/500 sec @ f2.8



Puerto Rico: 12mm; ISO 200, 1/  
80 sec @ f11

*Sri Lanka: 48mm; ISO 1600,  
1/80 sec @ f8*





Sri Lanka: 28mm; ISO 200, 1/  
350 sec @ f4



*Sri Lanka: 70mm; ISO 100, 1/  
160 sec @ f 4*

*Sri Lanka: 70mm; ISO 400, 1/  
50 sec @ f 8*

