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Travel and Scenic Photography 101

By Seth Lutnick

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When you're driving through the mountains somewhere, and you notice a car parked half off the road and some guy leaning to the left to avoid a branch with his Rebel 2000 camera in the act of focusing, you've met me. I do this because, to me, a trip isn't fulfilling unless I've preserved that beauty for posterity. I'd like to share some of the techniques that make scenic photography such a wonderful artform – simple, yet elegant.

First off, equipment. As much as the cheapo disposable camera beckons, get real. These cameras have fisheye lenses which I call "spam" lenses. They cram everything in, with equal blurriness and boringness. Good photos are sharp, unless you use blur for artistic effect. Sharp comes from an adjustable lens. It can be a fixed lens or a zoom, but it must focus specially for each picture. Fixed lenses are limiting for scenic pictures, where to frame the shot you may need to move long distances. Imagine using a fixed lens on the Washington Monument, when you're half a block away! Zooms get my vote, even though they often don't have as wide an aperture, which limits their capabilities in low light situations.

Practically speaking, an SLR is the absolute best. They are lightweight, and can be used with top quality lenses. Film SLRs tend to be less expensive, but have the limitations of film, meaning you have to get it developed and so forth. Digital SLRs are VERY expensive, so for the budget conscious either go with a film SLR or a high quality basic digital camera. With digital, resolution is also a critical factor, so look at the specs before you buy.

OK, we've got the camera, emotions are running high, and that's great, but not too great! Sometimes I find a spot that is so wonderful, I start shooting like a madman, only to be disappointed by the pictures. What happened? Emotions. When you experience a place, there are sounds, aromas and breezes as well as the visuals of the spot. Needless to say, you can't photograph all of these elements, only the visual. When overwhelmed by the spectacle of a scenic hotspot, we are often overwhelmed by all of these elements.

So what to do? Look through your camera. The viewfinder does not lie (usually). Try to see what you are looking at as the finished picture. Most people perfunctorily take pictures, hoping that somehow the shot will come out great. If you wonder how the pictures came out when you are on the way to the drug store to get them, you're doing something wrong. At the moment you click the pic, you should know exactly what you will get. (Of course with digital, that's not a trick!).

Now, I was a tad dishonest in saying that you can't capture all of the elements of a scene. You can hint at them. For starters, motion. Yes, even in a still picture, there is motion. Something happened before, during and after your picture. In a mountain vista scene, you may find something that hints at motion, whether it be a branch of a tree that has been swaying in the breeze, or a river flowing through the valley below. These add a sense of motion.

Then there's the "rule of thirds." When you place the main object of the picture smack-dab in the

middle, it is static and boring. Place it one third of the way from either side, and you IMPLY motion. Put the horizon in a landscape photo a third of the way up or down, not across the middle.

Remember, when a person looks at a picture, their eyes move. You want to frame your photo to help that movement. If you can find some lines in the scene, such as a skyline, cloud formation, path through the forest, etcetera, use it interestingly, and with the rule of thirds to draw your viewer's eyes into the picture.

Avoid "summit syndrome." You get to the top of Mount Washington and shoot the majestic vista. Great. The pictures come out ... boring! How? No PERSPECTIVE. Big vistas will be flat unless you have an object in the foreground, such as a rock or a tree, to give them perspective. Then the eye really grasps how big this scene is. People enjoying the view is a real winner, because the viewer may identify with their emotions, giving the image real impact.

Cheese! Yes, you do have to take the family photos. It's obligatory. But when you do, make sure that they show the LOCATION of the photo. Otherwise, you might as well do it on your driveway. Frame the scene in context, with landmarks as part of the picture. Find a way to tell a story in the picture, such as little Sara climbing up the rocks by the waterfall.

Finally, any element in the picture that hints at more senses than just the visual will make it remarkable. Actor headshots for example, tell a story about the subject. You can almost hear them saying their next lines. If you photograph a garden, the viewer may experience the aroma of the flowers. A tourist street with an accordion player on the corner may have your amazed friends whistling "Dixie."

In summation, picture taking on travel is recording the experience in a satisfying way. Use motion, perspective, sensory, storytelling and so forth, to bring your photos to life. Oh, and needless to say, make your job easy and go to great places! See you at the overlook!

Seth Lutnick is a photographer, composer, and performer. He has taken thousands of scenic photos, recorded two albums of original music, and appeared on stage, TV and film. Visit his website –

<http://www.getitdone.biz> – for more detailed plans on photography, music, health and education, and extensive product links for the resources to fulfill your goals.

Travel Your Way To More Traffic

By Ken Mowery

I am not a professional photographer nor am I in the travel business. However, I stay very busy these days taking scenic photographs and featuring them on my web site because my "not so" professional travel photos are bringing serious traffic to my web pages.

I consider myself a serious hobbyist when it comes to photography. It's a hobby because so far no one is willing to pay for any of my pictures. I know it's a serious hobby because I am never totally honest with my wife when she wants to know just how much I spend on photography. Over the years I have been privileged to see and shoot a few of the spectacularly scenic locations that exist in the U.S.

When I started designing web pages I was constantly on the search for fresh images. One afternoon my search for a waterfall took me into the basement of my home where my wife had stored dozens of shoeboxes filled with hundreds of ordinary vacation snapshots. I found the perfect scene for my project among the many photographs I had taken of Niagara Falls.

I scanned several of the Niagara pictures into my computer and tweaked them slightly with an image editor. I was very pleased with the results and decided to post the images on my personal website. I made a mistake when I typed the words and the file ended up as "NiagraFalls". I didn't think that much about it because I only planned to publicize the Niagara Falls pages to a few friends and relatives so they could enjoy the pictures also.

A few weeks later I was checking the stats for my website and noticed that a number of guests had surfed in through search engines. To my surprise 30% of my visitors had come through a search for "niagrafalls". I went to one of the major search engines and keyed in that phrase and was amazed to see that my site was in the top ten returns.

I decided to see if other scenic hotspots might become "virtual" destinations of choice. I went through the same process with photos I had taken at Garden of the Gods State Park in Colorado Springs Colorado as well as a few other Colorado locations. I was pleased that "gardenofthegods" became another key search phrase that brings people to my site.

In the past I used my personal web pages to promote my web design and hosting business. Unfortunately, web design and hosting is not that relevant to my guests who come because of scenic interests. After some measure of trial and error I discovered that "entertainment" products market very well to the scenic seekers that visit my site.

I began a banner rotation on my photographic pages that link out to various entertainment sites which I affiliate with. So far the results have been very encouraging. In a future article I hope to explain what I discovered about keyword searches in the entertainment sector.

Let me summarize with these simple instructions. Get those vacation photographs out and upload them to your website. Build a separate page for each exotic location that you have been to. Be sure to

enter the name of the place in your page title and in the keywords and description meta-tags. Set up a relevant banner rotation program and enjoy the traffic of virtual travel.

Ken Mowery's articles have been published in a number of magazines. He also writes a monthly column for the Greeley Tribune. He has been involved in web design and promotion for 8 years.

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