

Angling for the best shot

As the summer holidays approach, photographer Mark Davidson offers advice on essential camera equipment and how to capture the best images

I started to take photography seriously just under three years ago when I purchased a digital SLR (single lens reflex) camera.

I'd always taken a compact 35mm camera with me on my many travels. But, although I faithfully recorded my impressions in a journal, I never captured the sights through a lens because I never thought I'd be able to do it well enough.

During this period, my eye was caught by the digital SLRs coming onto the market. The only reason I didn't buy one was because I thought the cerebral palsy affecting the right-hand side of my body might make operating it a problem.

'Faced with iconic buildings you have to think of new shots'

On previous journeys, whenever I used my compact camera, I just turned it upside down to shoot the image because it made it easier for me to use my left hand.

And it's true that a shutter-release cable can be a good compromise for those who, like me, have difficulties holding a camera steady. I can press the shutter with my left hand while maintaining a steady grip.

Another useful accessory is a photography bean bag. You can use it to rest the camera on a fence, for example, without it getting damaged, and it provides a firm base for steady shots.

If you need to use bigger lenses, then a monopod, which screws into the lens and rests on a single spike on the ground, or a tripod, is a necessity.

A monopod is ideal if you need to travel lightly, but require a degree of support, and it can be packed away compactly. But a tripod provides the best support and allows the greatest variety in picture-taking. Because it allows you to keep the shutter open for a longer period, it can create more unusual images.

Apart from the camera, the most important piece of kit is a suitable bag. A number of manufacturers now make a large variety of padded backpacks and shoulder bags.

When on my travels, I snap the same monuments and landscapes as every tourist, but I try to find slightly different angles. Faced with iconic

buildings like the Taj Mahal or the Egyptian pyramids you have to think of new ways to capture them. You might get up before dawn to see a beautiful sunrise behind a temple, or wait for the sun to disappear over the horizon, so the warm, rich, red evening glow adds colour to buildings in the foreground.

Ensure your camera is always ready. You never know when you will see something that catches your eye, and that spontaneous shot may be the best one. Ensure you have enough battery life and plenty of memory cards handy.

Engage with the locals. A few sweets or pens can bring a smile to a child's face. Strike up a conversation. If you gain a person's trust you are more likely to get a close-range shot, capturing all their interesting wrinkles and age marks. You never know – they may even pose in their national dress.

One common mistake is to wait until an area is clear of both local people and tourists. Yet someone near a building can give it a sense of scale. If there are religious sensitivities make sure it's OK to snap away in places of public worship.

So, should you use a compact camera or an SLR? Compact cameras are easy to carry and ideal for point-and-shoot situations. But if you require more variety, then you need an SLR. It has interchangeable lenses which give more control over composition, lighting and shutter speed. On the downside, the equipment is heavier and overall costs are higher.

An issue arising with digital cameras concerns the number of megapixels needed. A six-megapixel camera will print up to A3 size without any loss of quality; for standard 7x5 prints, three megapixels are adequate.

If you have a natural flair, picture libraries or magazines may buy your images. You could even set up your own website.

Equipment cost

1. Compact digital camera: from £60
2. Digital SLR: from £380
3. Monopods: from £15
4. Tripods: from £25
5. Shutter release cables: from £10
6. Bean bags: from £10
7. Camera bags: from £20
8. Memory cards: from £10



Shooting party: Some of Mark's favourite images, clockwise from top, on top of the Brandenburg gate in Berlin; an Indian boatman on the Ganges; the British Museum reading room; Nepalese silk dyes; St Petersburg's frozen Neva river