Travel Photography
How to Capture the Essence of Faraway Places

Lesson 1
Course Notes

With
Nigel Hicks

4 Week Online Photography Course
Introduction

Hi, I’m Nigel Hicks, and welcome to our travel photography course, ‘Capturing the Essence of Faraway Places’. In this course I’ll aim to teach you how to go about making the most of photographic opportunities when shooting on holiday at home or abroad.

In this first lesson I’ll give an overview of what I believe travel photography is in terms of the types of subject matter and locations, and will go on to introduce ways to go about capturing unusual images of sometimes already well known places. I’ll conclude with ideas about how to prepare for a trip and how to consider what equipment to take with you.

In the remaining three lessons I’ll look at how to go about photographing in some of travel’s specialisms, particularly people, architecture, landscapes and wildlife.

Nigel Hicks
Course Curriculum

Week 1: What Is Travel Photography?

This lesson introduces travel photography as a multi-discipline skill that cuts across several of photography’s genres, notably people, landscapes, wildlife, architecture and interiors, with each of these introduced in turn. This is coupled with the notion that travel photography doesn’t have to entail travelling thousands of miles – great travel photography opportunities may well be right on your own doorstep, even if you don’t live in a tourist area. This moves on to consider the possible aims and priorities of any planned travel photo shoot, which may range from simply photographing the family on holiday, to shooting a range of globally iconic views, to lesser known sites, to aiming to get under the skin of a place and find out a little about what a place is really like. The lesson rounds off with tips on how to plan the trip, in terms of being sure you pick the right kind of destination at the right time of year for the type of photography you want to do, combined with selecting what equipment to take and how to consider the problems of image storage.

Week 2: The Human World: People and Events

Lesson 2 is all about the photography of people, whether posed in portraits or caught in action while at work, out on the street, involved in sport, or taking part in a festival. Nigel takes you through a series of scenarios that help you work out how to cope with a range of lighting situations, both indoors and outside, making use of natural light and flash. This is coupled with the all-important compositional skills, not only in creating a strong main subject, but also in making best use of the ‘negative space’ – everything in the image frame that is not the main subject. Included here is the balance struck between getting people to pose versus catching people candidly while in action. The material covered in this lesson will help you to improve your people photography in a host of settings, from shots of the family on holiday, through street life, to fast-moving spots and festival images.

Week 3: Street Scenes, Architecture and Interiors

This lesson is all about the photography of what we humans have built as part of our civilisation, namely our buildings, from towering skyscrapers to tiny cottages, from ancient ruins to the most modern constructions. The techniques described cover not just the buildings’ external architecture, but also their interior designs, and the many street scenes that surround them. Composition and lighting are once again paramount, along with techniques to cope with issues specific to architectural and interiors photography, including frequent legal restrictions. While the section on external architecture looks at techniques for a wide range of building types, when it comes to interiors much of the emphasis is on restaurants, hotels, museums and large public spaces. The street scenes section looks at a range of scenarios from the cluttered city street to market views, to evening nightlights (both neon advertising lights and moving traffic), to the picturesque harbour - a much loved holiday photography scene.

Week 4: The Fantastic Natural World: Landscapes and Wildlife

The course rounds off with a look at the natural world, describing how to photograph landscapes and both plant and animal wildlife. The lesson starts off by describing how to move away from the ‘point-and-snap’ approach to landscape photography towards something a lot more considered. Techniques that put natural light, composition and focussing at the heart of any landscape image are described for a range of settings, including Mountains, forests, coasts, lakes, rivers and waterfalls. Particular emphasis is given to photography during the ‘golden hours’, early and late in the day when the sun is low, along with photography while the sun is below the horizon. Techniques commonly associated with landscape photography are introduced, including use of graduated filters and shooting for the panoramic format.
Travel Photography: What Is Travel Photography?

When thinking about travel photography, people often consider that it applies only to distant, exotic locations, far from wherever they live. But what to one person is distant and exotic is home to another, so you should never dismiss photographic subject matter close to home just because it is familiar to you - to someone else your home area might be the ultimate travel destination!

Of course, travel photography is filled with images of some of the world’s most iconic views, whether they be the Great Wall, Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramids or the Grand Canyon, views that one might think have been photographed to death, and with which we are all totally familiar and are able to recognise.

However, never overlook your own backyard. Of course, this is obvious if you live in a recognised tourism hotspot, and if you’re lucky enough to live in such a place then you’ll be spoiled for choice when it comes to shooting images that are easily defined as travel photography - even if you didn’t have to travel more than a mile or two from your own home!

But even if you live in a less visited place, such as an industrial city, this doesn’t mean that your area is devoid of travel-type photography, and once you start to think about things you might well be quite surprised with the subject matter you can generate. If it helps, think of travel photography in such a non-tourist location as being either a pioneering exploration of its tourism potential or documentary photography with a positive spin!
Quite apart from the types of locations, we also need to consider what types of photography actually constitute travel photography.

In fact, it has to be said that there really is no specific ‘travel photography’ skill or genre. Instead, it requires multiple talents that cross several of photography’s well established genres, and it is hard to say which of these is more or less important than any of the others.
We’ll start with one of the most popular, however, and that is landscapes. From tropical rainforests to polar icecaps, landscape photography forms a major backbone of almost all travel photography, whether they be remote ice-filled lagoons, such as this image taken at Jokulsarlon in Iceland, or urban garden and parkland scenes.

Linked closely to landscape photography is nature, photography of both the plant and animal world living within our natural environment, and a central feature of many forms of modern tourism, whether an African safari - such as this cheetah photographed in Kenya’s Maasai Mara - or a Southeast Asian scuba diving adventure.

Inevitably, people are crucial to travel photography, and indeed form the major attraction for a good many photographers. People photography comes in many forms of course, starting with the composed portrait, in which your subject has cooperated with you and arranged themselves for your shot.

Less formal and more spontaneous are the candid portraits, in which you have simply grabbed images of people either going about their daily lives, if they are residents of your tourism location, or engaged in some tourism activity, if they are fellow visitors.
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ess specifically about people and often more about their environment (whether natural or manmade), are the multitude of possible street scenes, ranging from crowded urban markets to vignettes of village and farm life.

Architecture is also of major importance to travel photography, so critical in many a holiday for the recording of everything from prehistoric tombs to the glass, steel and concrete skyline of a modern city. This image of Washington DC's Capitol is typical of much of this photography, capturing both the building's architectural style and its status as a national icon.
Interiors are perhaps of less importance to general travel photography due to the permissions that may be needed to get such shots. However, the subject is included here as it is a crucial component of any professional travel photography, central to almost any travel brochure and guide book, highlighting the delights of hotels, restaurants, bars and museums to name just the most obvious. That said, there are many opportunities for the general photographer to shoot great interiors views, and this image of the inside of Berlin’s Reichstag Dome is a classic example.

Even before you head off on a holiday armed with your camera it is worth pausing to think what it is that you’re hoping to achieve photographically. Are you out to just get snaps of the family enjoying themselves? Are you aiming to come back with a library of images that capture the most famous views (some of which might be world icons) of the area to be visited? Or are you hoping to get beneath the surface of that place, go beyond those icons and get a set of images that capture the essence of the place? Not surprisingly, those three different aims will require very different approaches, preparations and indeed mental mindset.

Photographing the family while on holiday is probably the most common form of travel photography, though I suspect some would argue that this does not really qualify to come under this title: it is just family snaps!

Nevertheless, there is no reason why this kind of photography can’t be carried out as thoughtfully and artistically as any form of good quality travel photography should, generating a set of images that are graphically just as pleasing as any images of the local scenes.
If the aim is to capture the famous views, preferably in the best light and from the best angles, then this of course clearly fits right into what most photographers would think of as classic travel photography. Naturally, what constitute the most well known views of the area to be visited may be open to some conjecture. However, any globally iconic views will inevitably be right at the top of the list.

We can probably all make our own list of what these places are, and photographically speaking they’re likely to spread across all the travel photography genres. For landscapes, the list is likely to include, for example, Japan’s Mt Fuji, the Swiss Alps, Arizona’s Grand Canyon, and - the image shown here - southwest China’s karst limestone pinnacles.

When it comes to architecture and city skylines a classic example could be the image shown here, the Taj Mahal, though others inevitably on the list would include Egypt’s Pyramids, the Hong Kong skyline, the Sydney Opera House, the Washington Capitol, or Britain’s Stonehenge.

Even nature, or wildlife, photography has its global icons, with few more widely known than China’s Giant Panda, though of course Africa’s lions, elephants and cheetahs would also be right up at the top of the list.

Interior views are less likely to have global icon status, if only because it is often so much harder to photograph them, a result of a combination of poor light and legal restrictions. Nevertheless, one such view that has the status of global icon has to be that of China’s incredible Terracotta Warriors.

You should also never forget views that may be iconic in one part of the world, but which are barely known elsewhere. Finding out about these will require some research in advance of your trip, but they should always be covered during your trip. There are many such places around the world, but one great example is O-Torii, the Great Gateway, at Hiroshima, Japan, whose image graces many a travel poster across Asia, but which is hardly known in Europe.
Then there are scenes that, though locally famous, are generally not well known further afield. Again, you will almost certainly want to cover these places, and you should try to identify as many of those in the area to be visited as possible in advance of your trip. This landscape view across the countryside of southwest England fits this category perfectly.

When you start photographing less obvious scenes, trying to get under the skin of a place, then you’re aiming to capture its real essence, perhaps coming close to finding out how it ‘ticks’ and what it’s like to live there.

This is something that simply photographing the most famous, touristed views rarely manages to achieve. That said, some of the shots you might want to take to achieve this can still be quite ‘touristy’, such as relatively straightforward shots of seaside amusements.

Frequently, shots that capture the essence of a place include views of typical street life, commonly market or other shopping scenes, showing local people going about their daily business.

They can include simply shots of transport in use, such as this shot of a tram in downtown Istanbul. Or indeed people at work, whether engaged in something linked to tourism, or in a rather less obvious activity, such as these farm workers shearing sheep in southwest England.

Photographing this kind of thing illustrates that almost anything can come under the banner of travel photography, particularly if you’re trying to get under the skin of a place to document what it’s really like.
Whatever subject matter you’re aiming to photograph, you will always need to confront another choice: whether to stick to shooting the most obvious angles or go for something new and unique. This is a particularly important question with the global icons. With many, we’re used to seeing them shot from particular angles.

The Taj Mahal from straight in front, for example - and sometimes there is good reason for this, such as there being just the one angle possible. There are many occasions, however, where tourism promoters - and indeed their photographers - have become lazy and afraid to try out something different.

When you visit, by all means shoot the obvious angles, but to produce great photography you should also go the extra mile to explore different angles and viewpoints. As this image of the much-photographed Washington Memorial, in Washington DC, illustrates it is surprising what you can come up with!

Shooting your subjects in different types of light is important too. Because promoters of tourism want to convince potential visitors that it’s always sunny at their destinations, the photography used to promote those places is often done in bright sunlight.
As a result, we have become used to seeing images of many of the most well known sites photographed in the middle of the day. But do many of the views you might want to shoot - including the iconic ones - actually really need to be shot in bright sunlight? Can they be photographed at other times of day? They may even be better photographed under completely different lighting conditions, such as at dusk - as with this shot of Istanbul’s Blue Mosque.
Some particularly wild, rugged landscapes may even do well when photographed in quite stormy light, provided that there is some angled sunlight shining into at least a part of the image, such as with this view taken in Chile’s Torres del Paine National Park.
Photographing your favourite travel spot in heavy rain can be something of a challenge, but even here you might be surprised by what's possible. It is often feasible to get some great vignettes, as well as some nighttime street scenes and very lush, verdant forest shots. This image of nightlights reflected in a rain-soaked street in Taipei is a great example of how things can be turned around even in rotten weather.

So one of the golden rules for good travel photography is: don’t just follow the photography you’ve seen in brochures or websites that are promoting the place you’re heading for. Seek out something a little different, both in terms of angle and light, even (or perhaps especially) when photographing a truly iconic view.
Getting all this right means that you really should do plenty of planning before you head off on any trips. It may sound obvious to say, but be sure you fit your intended destination to the kind of photography you’re hoping to do: don’t go to a temperate region if you’re hoping to get shots of tropical, palm-lined beaches, for example!

Similarly, once you’ve decided where you want to go and what you want to shoot, make sure you head there at the right time of year. If you’re intent on photographing Rio’s Carnival, don’t go there in July, for example. Similarly, I can speak from experience when I say that it is really no fun at all hiking and attempting to photograph inside a Southeast Asian tropical rainforest during the wet season!
It is really worthwhile researching subject matter, locations and viewpoints well before you head off on your travels. The internet, as well as guide books, can provide a wealth of information not only on what to photograph, but also on some of the best angles, as well as time of day and lighting conditions. A careful look through internet images can give you a lot of advance guidance, saving precious time during the limited opportunities you’re likely to get during your trip.

Then there’s choice of equipment, always a headache, particularly if you’re having to fly. Carrying lots of equipment gives you maximum versatility for all kinds of photography, but it’s heavy, cumbersome, and may be problematic, not to say expensive, when taken on any aircraft.

Going light overcomes the weight issues, but then is likely to restrict your versatility and the types of photography possible. Which option you take is likely to depend on the type of trip you’re taking viz a viz the balance between serious photography and family holiday.

To take or not to take a tripod is always a thorny issue, as they are a nuisance to carry around. Personally, I would say that, unless your trip is primarily a family holiday, always take a tripod. They are essential when shooting dawn, dusk or nighttime scenes, or views inside a forest. If flying, minimise hassle by making sure you have a tripod that will fit inside your check-in luggage.
Last but not least, image storage. Clearly, relying simply on an adequate supply of memory cards is the most straightforward, space- and weight-saving means of carrying your images during a trip. If shooting your images in Jpeg format you will probably be able to fit quite a large number of images onto one card, and so need only a handful of cards for a trip lasting a couple of weeks.

However, if shooting in Raw, you will almost certainly need a lot more memory. You could still rely on memory cards, but you’re going to need an awful lot more of them. A notebook computer, perhaps coupled with an external hard drive, or a tablet may then be the best way to go, though of course this adds more weight and bulk to your luggage. On the plus side, it will also enable you to review and start processing your images during the trip, allowing you to keep a regular check on both the style and quality of your photography.