

WIDE AND WONDERFUL

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

In the cool air of Sri Lanka's tea country there is a train that slowly winds its way up the mountains. It was built over half a century ago, to connect the remote hills to the city of Kandy. On an 8-hour journey to Bandarawela I played games with Tamil children, taking photos of them each time they pop their heads out the window. This is what I enjoy most about travel photography.

Taking better photos of your travels is not just a matter of technical skill and equipment, it's just as much about inspiration and perspective. Enjoying the playful antics of kids on a train is far more important than which camera you buy.

Next time you reach for the shutter button try to ask yourself, "What is really special about this scene, this moment and these people?" Photographs are never an absolute copy of life, they merely reveal your interpretation of it. The more you know the more you show.

Tip #1 – Get Closer

The easiest way to improve your travel photos is to get closer to the subject. The generous smile from a farmer in Kenya can get lost when you stand back to far and shoot the whole village. If the smile is your inspiration then make it the focus of your photograph, first and foremost.

A wide-angle lens is helpful here, because they let you stand very close to your subject yet still capture a little of the broader setting. A standard lens is 50mm, and most compact cameras only give you 38mm of wide-angle. It's worth spending a little extra and getting a 28mm wide-angle or better.

Your landscape photos will also improve with a more generous wide-angle lens. On clear morning at Tasmania's Cradle Mountain the blue sky is reflected across the still water of Dove Lake, a beautiful scene from any angle but one made even more photogenic as you walk closer to the water's edge. Using a wide angle lens you can include elements of flora and old sheds to add a sense of perspective, without losing the winding shoreline and distant peaks.

Tip #2 – Know Your Subject

Your main objective with the camera is to reveal the charms of your subject. Don't be one of those tourists who jump of the bus and start snapping at anything that doesn't move. Let the beauty of the scene capture you before you capture it. The insight you gain into the people and history of a place will become your primary focus in the photos.

A little light reading from your guide book before you arrive can be helpful, but there is no substitute for just being patient.

I found myself on a street corner in Hanoi just as the sun was going down, and watched the street turn into a market before my eyes. I spent an hour amidst the buzz of bicycles and buyers, and discovered that selling flowers makes people smile a lot more than selling chicken-giblets.

Tip #3 – People Are Special

Photos of people you meet on your travels will make your memories more vivid, because it is the people that make places different. Don't limit yourself to the brightly dressed women of ethnic minorities either, your fellow travellers are worthy of the camera too.

Some of my favourite images of China are of tourists besieged by women selling their jewellery. I love the way the least bit of interest from a passing traveller results in a flurry of hands and bangles, but the story wouldn't be complete without revealing the excitement of the buyer going home with a bargain.

You do need to be careful when snapping local people, as respect for their privacy and beliefs is paramount. Never take someone's photo without asking them first. You don't have to speak their language to get permission; just hold up the camera, smile and then wait for them to smile back.

Tip #4 – Little Things Matter

Any photo collection can be enhanced by snapping a few detailed images that help to make a destination unique. Close-ups of petals, produce and pottery look great in your photo album along side panoramas and people portraits.

Visitors to the Doi Su Thep temple in northern Thailand are always dazzled by the layers of gold that enclose the courtyard. Get closer to the Chedi and you realise that the full length of its fence is adorned by small gold bells, each with a heart-shaped wish that echoes a prayer of kindness.

Photographing small objects close-up requires a 'macro' function on your camera, and even the simplest of models these days will have one. Look for a button with a flower on it, and spend ten minutes experimenting with it before you travel. Get used to turning the macro mode on and off and note the difference in your camera's ability to focus on the little things.

Tip #5 – Tell The Story

There is a difference between a photo of something interesting, and an interesting photo. A snap shot of Brahman cows in India can be interesting but catching them walking through alleys, as if shopping for a T-shirt, is even better.

A wide-angle lens is helpful once again, because you can fill part of the shot with your main subject but also include a sense of what is happening around them.

On my train ride through the hill-country of Sri Lanka I was lucky to have such willing and wonderful subjects to photograph. The bright eyes and bursting smiles of young passengers are nothing short of a gift. Adding the train itself into the background, and the blurred outlines of other people leaning out their windows, echoed the journey itself as the train climbed through tea-plantations and forests.

This is why we take photos when we travel, to share our stories when we return.

Guide to Gear

It's nearly impossible to buy a bad digital camera these days, but you can do some research online before you shop – go to www.dpreview.com.

More MegaPixels (MP)

The bigger the number of pixels, the bigger the print size. 5MP is more than enough for most of us, but if you plan to make enlargements of your best photos then 7MP is better. 10MP cameras will print the size of a poster, but remember that more resolution also means you need a bigger memory card.

Wider the Better

Many new compact digitals feature a wide-angle of 28mm, which is much better for landscape photos than the regular 38mm. A few even go to 23mm. To get better than this you have to invest in a nice Digital SLR camera and a quality lens.

Power To Go

The most common problem people have with digital cameras when they travel is running out of batteries. If the camera you want to buy doesn't use standard AA size batteries then factor in the cost of a spare one when you purchase.

Real Prints Please

Just because you have a digital camera doesn't mean you can't have real photos. Any camera store or photo shop can cheaply make prints from the pictures on your memory card. Home-use photo printers also make great presents for anyone who prefers the real thing – just ask my mother-in-law.

