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## Expedition Photography

These notes have been put together following several queries from people going on expeditions. I have tried to break them down into coherent sections, but there is still some overlap.

The first thing to do, long before you head off to the wilds, is to try and decide what it is that you wish to use your photographs of the expedition for. Most of us will want them for memories of a lifetime experience and, as such, almost any quality of image will recall the event. Having said that, a good image will always look better than a bad one.....

If you wish to give presentations to your school, university, sponsors or club then an out of focus shot of people hanging off a cliff may not be really suitable! If you intend to write an article on your trip for a magazine or local newspaper, then "out of focus" shots are also unlikely to be of much use.

To get better photographs does take a little application of thought and a minimum of technique. This has been written with the thought that there will be limited access to electricity during the expedition – any opportunity to recharge batteries should be considered as a bonus! If solar power is available, remember that satellite phones may well have priority and you will be in a queue with other users for the available power. Don't forget you will need your battery charger and probably an adaptor for the country you are visiting.

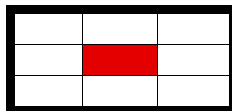
You should also ensure that you know how to work your camera before you go out on an expedition – don't buy one in the departure lounge! If you are buying a new camera and intend to go on further expeditions, then it might be worth considering one that takes non-rechargeable batteries.

### Viewpoint & image composition

When taking pictures, it is very tempting just to raise the camera to your eye and "snap" straight away. Some times this is the only way to get a picture – especially if you are taking "candid" photographs.

Usually, better pictures will be taken when you actually think before you press the button. Take some time to look through the viewfinder and see if there is anything in the picture you do not want – is there an elbow or head blocking your view? Or do you have a nice pile of colourful rubbish between you and the person you are photographing? It is also important to ensure that you have what you want in the picture! Do you get a better image if move to one side? What happens if you lie down to take the picture – can you get some interesting foreground included?

When composing a photograph, it can be handy to mentally divide your viewfinder in 9 segments as below (rule of thirds).



Do this with two lines across the viewfinder and two lines down giving you the nine segments. All you need to remember now is to try and get the main subject or part of an image on one of the four places where these lines intersect (or the corners of the shaded middle rectangle). End of maths course! As an example, the eye of the bird is on the top left of the middle rectangle.





Another easy way to get a good photograph is to have something to lead the eye into the picture – like following a track or river into the distance.

Many compact cameras have a wide-angle lens – quite often this can make people in the picture seem very small – sometimes unrecognisable if they are in the distance. This can be a very nice effect – provided it is what you wanted. If you need to recognise the people or catch a particular expression on their face, then get closer or zoom in. Despite what they say, most people like to be recognisable in pictures!

When photographing on an expedition, consider taking images of typical behaviour or life during the time. For example, map reading will be a common aspect so perhaps an image of 2 or 3 people poring over a map waving their compasses around or pointing in different directions while deciding where they are! Other typical events are river crossings, hiking when strung out along the trail, lying on the rucksack during a break are a few other examples.



When photographing activities, it is worth getting in close to catch the expression on people's faces or show what they are doing. You can also get good images by standing back and catching the rest of the group moving across the terrain. Don't be afraid to take several images to show the progress of an activity – even if you have to move quickly to catch them up afterwards.....

If taking pictures of the scenery, try to include a person or object as a marker or indication of size / perspective.

Food becomes important and who at home would believe that you actually ate some of the "things" that end up in your mess tin? Get in close and photograph someone cooking, what the food looks like in the pot, how the custard sticks to your spoon etc.

While abroad, you often need to be careful taking pictures of local people – in some areas it is considered intrusive and in bad taste. Check with the local people / village and report back at base camp. In some areas you are expected to pay people if you take their photograph.



## Camera

One question that is often asked these days is whether to use a film or digital camera and, unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Both have their uses, good and bad points. I will try and list out a few of the pros and cons of each type.

Digital cameras have the ability to display the image you have taken immediately. This can be very good if you are not sure what you have taken(?) and need to ensure you have a particular image before moving on. One school of thought says that you should know your camera well enough to know what you are doing and therefore don't need to check!

Displaying an image – both before and after taking – on the small screen uses a lot of battery power and can result in fewer images being captured before the battery goes flat. Most, but not all, digital cameras use rechargeable batteries. Some have a battery type that has a non-rechargeable equivalent and it may be worth taking one or more of these as spares.

Film cameras usually take non-rechargeable batteries – again it is worth taking at least one spare, especially if you use the flash a lot. While talking about batteries, it is important to realise that batteries do not work well in the cold – they lose their charge quicker, flashes take

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longer to recycle and work again. If it gets below freezing at night, consider sleeping with your battery and keeping it warm.

Note that this is the “battery” and not “camera”; if you take a cold camera into a tent there is a danger of condensation and potential damage so it is worthwhile leaving the camera in the tent porch safely wrapped in a plastic bag or other protective cover. And preferably not where somebody can stand on it....

If you have a digital camera it is important to realise that the setting you use to capture the pictures can make a big difference to the final quality and what you can do with the images later. Most digital cameras will capture the image in “jpg” or “jpeg” format. This is a very good way of getting more images on your memory card but there is a cost in terms of image quality. If you want to do A4 size or smaller prints, then the highest quality settings on most cameras should be okay. This assumes that your camera has a resolution of 4 or more mega pixels. As a general rule (there are always exceptions) the more mega pixels your camera has, the higher quality image you can produce. Note that the more mega-pixels, the harder it can be to get a really sharp image!

If you reduce the quality setting so that more images will fit on your memory card, then getting good prints from these will be harder. One way to get around this is to take a large and / or spare memory cards. (It might be worth the group considering communal use of a storage device.)

Camera types vary between compact and single lens reflex (SLR). The latter are usually anything but compact! They do have the advantage that you can change lenses to get different effects – if you carry the extra lenses with you.

## **Film type**

Those of you using digital cameras can skip this section!

Types of film can provoke very heated debate with many arguments for and against each type and make of film. The first decision is do you want to use slide or print (negative) film – very much a matter of personal choice and what you want to use the images for.

If you want to show the images to an audience then slides are probably the best way of doing this (leaving aside digital images for the moment). Prints from negatives are easier to pass around the family and friends. As I said at the start, what do you want to do with your pictures?

Film speed is also a good point to debate. For most outdoor shots, ISO 200 is suitable. For evenings and dull weather, ISO 400 is probably better. The lower the ISO number, the slower your shutter speed and the more risk you have of blurred pictures. As the ISO number goes up, film will tend to show more grain – even digital images at high ISO show more “noise”.

When you get either slide or print film developed, it is worth asking for scanned images at the same time – these can then be easily emailed to people and also used for reports!

When a film is used, make sure that you rewind all of the film back into the cassette and replace the cassette in the plastic tub it came in. The first action prevents you using the film again and losing both the images you have taken and the pictures you want to take. The second prevents the film being damaged by dropping, dirt or moisture.

When flying, all film – exposed and unexposed – should be carried as part of hand luggage. This helps prevent fogging of the film by the high dose X-ray equipment used to screen hold baggage.

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## Filters

These can be used on the end of lens to modify the image you are recording. While there are a large number of different filter types, I will only discuss UV and polarising filters here. UV filters are similar to sunglasses in that they block the UV rays (prevalent at altitude) and can give “sharper” image. This effect is more pronounced on film rather than digital cameras.

Polarising filters also act like sunglasses in that they make the sky bluer, cut out reflections and allow you to see through water. Be careful of the uneven effect you can get when using these filters on a wide-angle lens.

Both can be useful, but neither is essential. The small diameter lenses on compact cameras are often difficult to get filters for. If you have them, bring them along, if you don't then do not worry about it.

## Flash

Many cameras have built in flashguns and these are a great help in taking pictures in darker surroundings – nightlife at camp, interiors etc. A couple of points to remember. If you use direct flash to photograph a person it is easy to end up with the person having a “red eye”. Many cameras have a setting that allows a “pre flash” effectively contracting the pupil before the main flash and avoids, or at least reduces, the red eye situation. Worth reading the manual to find out how to switch this on and off!

Many flashguns do not illuminate very far in front of the camera so when taking a night scene the whole area may not be as bright as expected. Also, if you are trying to capture a sunset or dark landscape, it may be worthwhile switching your flash off – unless you want a small area in front of you illuminated.

There can be very little light when you are in a forest during the day and you may well need to use your flash to capture the image you want. Another issue with forest photography is that you can often get very bright rays of light coming through the canopy giving the effect of deep shadow in non-lit areas – flash may be useful here.



## Heat, Humidity and Water

Cameras are sensitive pieces of electronic equipment and they do not like water. When travelling to humid climates or experiencing large changes of temperature (day to night), you need to protect your camera. For this reason, it is worth keeping your camera in a sealed plastic bag when these changes apply.

For example, when flying to a humid destination from a low humidity region, the plane will be at the lower humidity and cooler. When you get out of the plane, the cold camera will allow condensation to form on the lens and inside the body of the camera – near the electronics.

With your camera in a plastic bag, you can allow your camera to warm up to the humid atmosphere before taking it out to take photographs. You can also include a sachet of desiccant (silica gel or calcium chloride) in the bag – but do get one that says what it is on the outside (just in case people think you have bags of white powder....). Once the camera has acclimatised to the heat and humidity there is no need to keep your camera in a plastic bag.

Keep a dry bag (such as that sold in outdoor shops) to use to protect your camera if you get caught in a rain storm as they are stronger than a “plastic bag” – and considerably cheaper than replacing your camera. It may be possible to keep your camera under a poncho or rain jacket – depends on the size of camera and how close fitting the clothes are!

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It is worth remembering that every time you switch your camera on and the lens cover moves to allow the lens to go in and out, air is being pushed in and out of the camera body allowing dust and moisture in.

### **Camera Shake**

This is something that can spoil many an otherwise good photograph. What happens is that you are shaking the camera as the picture is taken and the resultant image is “fuzzy”. This is not always easy to prevent – especially if you have been working hard and are out of breath when you get to where you want to take the photograph. The ideal is to use a tripod but these can be problematic when on expedition.

Taking a deep breath and holding it while you press the button along with wedging your elbows into your side to form a rigid structure can overcome this effect. Another option is to rest your camera on a rucksack, a rock or other solid support (not a fellow team member as they tend to move) and press the button very slowly. If the camera cannot slip, consider using the self-timer – this helps to reduce the vibration.

### **Camera care**

Cameras are delicate items – they do not like being dunked in water, dropped in the sand, cooked in the heat, trodden on and thrown down hills or at people! Lenses are either made of glass or plastic – both of these materials can be scratched quite easily. This coupled with dirt on the lens, can easily ruin a photograph. The bottom line is if you look after your camera, it will give you pictures and (happy) memories to look back on.

Use a small, soft-bristle brush to gently brush any sand away from the camera, switches, buttons and lenses. If you use a blower (some have the brushes attached) ensure you do not blow dirt into the camera body.

Be careful if you use any insect repellent as some brands, especially those with DEET, can attack plastics – the camera body or the lens.

Make sure you have some form of padded bag to carry your camera in. This can either be a purpose made bag or take care to wrap your camera up in something soft and pack carefully into your sack. One of these options will allow you to have a camera to use when it is needed. Remember that you will need to be able to get to your camera quickly (it is a bit unreasonable to ask someone to hold on by their fingertips for 10 minutes while you unpack your rucksack...) and you may wish to fasten your camera bag to the front straps or waistband of your rucksack. Make sure you are comfortable with the solution you choose.

***In conclusion, email me at [david@calicoimages.co.uk](mailto:david@calicoimages.co.uk) if you have any queries or questions on the above and finally, happy snapping!***

*Dave Williams*