

## Creating Culture-Rich Photos

Photo-taking strategies to capture real elements of culture on camera

*Your photos tell a story—about your travels, about the places and people you visit, and ultimately about you. Make your story interesting and rich with cultural insight with these tips on creating culture-rich photos of your travels.*

### 1 Start with Scouting trips...

To get your bearings when you first arrive, take a little scouting trip – a walk (or sometimes a drive) around the area you're in to get a feel for where you want to invest the rest of your time and energy. Leave your camera behind. *Look around you.* Find the points of interest, the scenes, that you want to later come back to, to experience, and capture on film. Without your camera at hand, your mind will work harder to remember details of your environment, and you'll already be enriching the memory of your travels.

### 2 Choose Culture Rich Subjects

*"You can find pictures anywhere. It's simply a matter of noticing things and organizing them. You just have to care about what's around you and have a concern with humanity and the human comedy."*

- Elliott Erwitt

Cultural photographers use their cameras to get beyond the surface culture or the cultural face that most tourists see. There are many ways to do this and many subjects to choose from. Look for subjects that tell you about the daily life, the voices of the people, recent changes and struggles in the culture. A few examples include:

- *Graffiti and street art...* to tell you about local undercurrents in the culture
- *Daily markets...* to show you daily life, customs and food
- *Festival life...* to capture the human spirit in celebration. Expect some traits of festivals to

be almost universal, others to be very unique to that culture.

- *Houses...* to appreciate other lifestyles. Few people live like Americans do, both in terms of size, luxury, and ease of living.
- *Local products...* to learn about the resources, behaviors, and values of a culture, capture the by-products of the culture. The French bread in Luang Prabang speaks to the French colonial history of the nation. The colorful and intricately designed Moroccan rugs use a similar color palette and geometric design found in their architecture. The Spanish Jamón Serrano that hangs from store windows speaks to the speed of life in Spain.
- *New angles ...* climb high to get your bearings on a new location. Zoom in to focus on details. Take macro shots of single items to focus on elements like color, texture, and light.
- *Expressions ...* to connect at a human level. There is nothing that joins people more easily than shared emotions. When you capture a revealing expression on film, whether sadness, joy, frustration or elation, it is something people can relate to. Unfortunately, many people look at individuals from other cultures as foreign and different. Expressions help us see people as exactly who they are: people and human beings with more similarities and shared interests than we might first think.



### 3 Document Your Photos...

Keep a small memo pad with your camera and write down details of the pictures you take. Include:



- Name and description of the subject
- Place and time
- Your thoughts, feelings, reactions to the subject

Incorporate this information into photo titles and captions of your photos. A few good words create great descriptions. A caption can fill in missing details, give the photo a setting and significance, and create a story. These details also help you keep vivid memories alive and well and make for more interesting stories when you share your photos.

### 4 Use technology to build connections and give thanks...

The camera is a tool to capture cultures, but also a good way to show appreciation for the fact that people are sharing their lives and cultures with you. If you have a camera with a LCD viewer in the back (common with most digital cameras these days), you can share your images with those around you. Do they think it represents their culture? What do they think you should be taking pictures of? Use your camera as a conversation starter.

If someone lends their face or takes the time to get to know you, you can show your appreciation by sharing your pictures with them in return. If they have a mailing address, write it down and send them a photo afterwards. You may not even need to wait that long—a quick turnaround is easy with both digital and film photography these days. In Japan, you can find kiosks where you can immediately print any of your photos using your memory card. One hour and overnight developing is almost standard in many places you can travel today. You can easily have a few or all of your photos printed so you can share your pictures almost immediately.

### 5 Know when to leave the camera behind...

*"True possession of a scene is a matter of making a conscious effort to notice elements and understand their construction. We can see beauty well enough just by opening our eyes, but how long this beauty will survive in memory depends on how intentionally we have apprehended it. The camera blurs the distinction between looking and noticing, between seeing and possessing; it may give us the option of true knowledge, but it may also unwittingly make the effort of acquiring that knowledge seem superfluous."*

- Alain de Botton, in *The Art of Travel*

Photos document experiences so you can continue to enjoy the experience afterwards, but they don't substitute for the real thing. To really see and experience what is before your eyes as you travel, you sometimes need to leave the camera out of the picture. When you're not focused on capturing an experience visually, you'll find your other senses kicking in and wonderful smells and sounds complimenting your visual picture.

Then, next time you bring out your camera, you'll be awakened to a richer, more complex environment of sights, smells, and sounds, that you can now better capture on film.

### 6 Take the reigns on the story you create.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are essentially crafting a story of our travels through the photos we take. Well-crafted stories portray both the good and the bad and the exotic and the everyday. When you think of your photography as a story, then, you must ask yourself questions like:

- What do I want these pictures to show? *Therefore, what should I be taking pictures of?*
- Who is the main character? *Is it me or the culture I am in?*

**C.Tip!**Ways to Tell a Visual Story of  
your Travels...

- Make a scrapbook of your travels
- Create a Photo Card for the Holidays using a favorite shot and writing a caption for it on the back or inside
- Create Postcards with your pictures and send them after you return with a list of your top memories.
- Create a screensaver to keep you virtually in your travels
- Set one of your pictures as a background on your computer
- Email pictures of your travels to family and friends as you travel to keep them in the loop
- Frame pictures and present them as gifts to family, friends, and travel companions

- How do I want to tell my story? *In other words, how will I present this cultural story (album, online photo gallery, a stack of pictures)? Will the story be chronological or a presentation of little vignettes? Besides the pictures, what information do I need to fill in the missing information and amplify the meaning of the photos?*
- How do I accurately portray that character? *How can I develop a well-rounded character that is realistic, accurate, and interesting?*

**7 Overshoot.**

In my recent year living in Japan I took over 1500 photos—everything for close up pictures of flowers, kimono fabric, rice crackers, and geta to still shots of storefronts, street scenes, landmarks and portraits of friends, students, and strangers. What I ended up with is a rich composite of cultural gems that told the story both of Japanese culture and of my year in Japan. I created three different albums from the experience. I made a short album on the seasons in Japan with nature shots, a Japanese culture album featuring a wide collection of cultural products in Japan, as well as a themed album of my year in Japan with sections on work, friends, hiking, skiing, and traveling through the country. Each stands alone but in combination they tell a rich and robust tale of Japanese life and my interaction with it.

Digital photography especially removes any limits to taking photos. Invest in extra memory and shoot away. Take pictures often and of many different things. Even if you don't ultimately feature these photos in your album or online, you still have them both for your memory and your cultural knowledge bank. ✧

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*Kate Berardo, founder of the cultural awareness portal [www.culturocity.com](http://www.culturocity.com), is a Northwestern educated intercultural specialist who helps people from different cultures, backgrounds, and schools of thought understand each other and work effectively together. She is the co-author of **Putting Diversity to Work** with colleagues George Simons and Simma Lieberman and the Executive Planet Guide to Doing Business with the US.*

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For more tips on photo-taking across cultures, download the entire *Pop Culturocity Guide to Photography*, available at [www.culturocity.com](http://www.culturocity.com).