

One of the most exciting things about traveling is seeing new places and people, and for me and my husband, Mark, learning photography has enhanced our travels immensely. Basic camera gear is not expensive; everyone seems to have a smartphone these days, and the essential skills are not hard to learn. Best of all, photography is a lifelong hobby that can put a smile on your face as long as you can press the shutter button.

Essential skills to enhance your RV TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

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The sky is the limit for buying camera gear, but it need not be.



Camera Gear

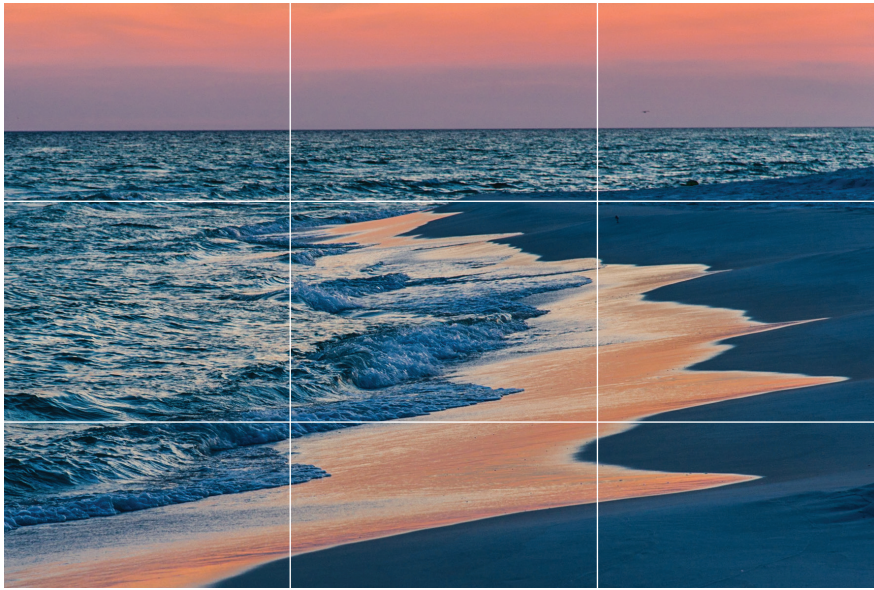
Before we started our full-time RV travels, we each bought a Nikon D40 camera for about \$500. These trusty cameras served us well for our first five years on the road, and we published many photos taken with them. Nikon D40 cameras can now be found on Craigslist and eBay for \$150, and unless they're damaged, they work as well as when they were new. The modern equivalent (and much improved) model is the Nikon D3300. We have upgraded our cameras twice since we started, but beginners can get a lot of mileage out of a small investment.

It's easy to recognize a gorgeous photo when we see one, but what is it that makes a photograph engaging?

Composition

In a nutshell, it is the layout of the elements in the image and how they relate to each other, the way in which some parts are razor sharp while others are not, the colors and the overall emotional response these things evoke in the viewer. This is a lot to think about each time you raise your camera to take a photo, but with practice it can become second nature.

The layout of the objects in an image is referred to as "composition." Whether you have a smartphone or professional gear worth as much as your RV, the composition of your photos is what will have the biggest impact on the "wow" factor when you show your pics to your friends.



You can give a sense of scale and show the vast size of a canyon if you can get your hubby to climb up on a precipice so his tiny silhouette stands out against the massive vista. Of course, getting your husband to cooperate as a super model is not always so easy. Sometimes I have to bribe and cajole mine.

Using the rule of thirds, you can magnify the effect of a dramatic sky by placing the horizon just 1/3 of the way up from the bottom so the sky takes up 2/3 of the photo. Or you can emphasize the crashing waves on the ocean by placing the horizon 1/3 of the way down from the top, giving the wave action 2/3 of the image.

Any kind of diagonal lines coming into the photo from the lower left or lower right hand corners are referred to by photographers as “leading lines,” and they bring a certain magic to a photo. These diagonals can be things like the line of a wharf at a harbor, or the white stripe painted along the edge of a curvy road or the foundation line of a building that’s shot on an angle.

Ansel Adams once said, “A good photograph is knowing where to stand.” Before you take your photo, walk around to view the scene from different angles, to see if it looks better lined up one way or another.

Camera Angles, Scale, Diagonals and Spatial Relationships

When you look at a scene and think, “I want a picture of that!” ask yourself why. What is it about the thing you are looking at that makes you want to capture it forever?

The relative sizes and positioning of the things in the photograph express what you think is most important. The next time you take a picture of your husband at a scenic overlook, think about what you want to tell the world about him and the place you visited. Is this a photo of your handsome hubby with a pretty backdrop, or is it a photo of gorgeous scenery that your husband is a small part of? Walk back and forth and zoom in and out to balance the relative sizes of your hubby as compared to the scenery. Notice how the impact of the image changes as you change his position and size relative to the background behind him.

Photographers rely on the “rule of thirds,” placing objects 1/3 of the way in from the top, bottom and/or sides of the photo rather than dead center. Try placing your hubby 1/3 of the way in from the right or left of the photo. Take multiple shots so you can decide later which worked best.

As humans, our eyes naturally focus on faces, so you can emphasize the beauty of a scenic landscape by having your husband turn his back or side to the camera to look out at the view himself. Anyone looking at the photo will naturally follow his gaze towards the landscape. If he points or gestures toward the scenery, the effect is even more dramatic.

Taking Photos While Driving

In our household, Mark does all the driving while I sit back and get chauffeured around the country. One thing that keeps me happy in the passenger seat is taking photos out the window. This has helped me learn to have fast reflexes and to compose images in a split second.

As you travel, notice how things close to the RV get lined up with things in the distance. The pretty barns and rolling hillsides change their spatial relationships with each other as you pass them. Try to catch them when they look their best. You can do this with or without your camera, and it’s wonderful training for your artistic eye.

The challenge with passenger-seat photography is that, depending on where the sun is, the dashboard can reflect up on the windshield, ruining every image. Putting a polarizing filter on the camera lens and turning it until the dashboard reflection vanishes will eliminate that problem.

Also, shooting around big, side mirrors can be tricky.

I’ve been known to sit in the window sill of the truck door as we drove. That’s crazy, I know, but the scenery in Glen Canyon on Utah’s Bicentennial Highway was that stunning.

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The best lighting for photography is at dawn and dusk, right before and after sunrise and sunset.

Lighting

At those hours the sunlight has a lot of yellow, pink and orange in it, making everything in the scene glow. Unfortunately, those are tough times for travelers who like to sightsee midday. We struggle with this, and our motto is often a frustrated, “We shoot at noon!”

Where the sun is riding in the sky is important too. Shooting towards the sun causes backlighting, making the objects in the foreground (like faces) become black silhouettes. Translucent things like leaves and flowers look wonderful when they are backlit, however, and lying down to shoot up at the underside of a flower backlit by sunlight can make a lovely image.

If the sun is behind you and beaming directly on your subjects, they will be well lit so you can see their features. This is great for seeing the details a dark bison’s face. However, landscape scenes look flat in direct sunlight because there are no shadows to show three dimensions. Also, people facing you will squint when the sun is in their eyes. Direct sunlight also creates hotspots on flowers and washes out their color.

Overcast skies are great for photographing flowers and portraits of people. When it’s sunny, having the sun a little to one side or the other of you often gives the nicest general purpose lighting.

If you are mechanically minded, mastering the technical aspects of photography before worrying about composition may be the easiest way to begin learning photography

The Technical Side

That is how Mark started. If you aren’t technical, just memorize a few things.

One of the most important technical elements is learning to control sharpness and blur. The three primary tools in a photographer’s arsenal are aperture (“F stop”), shutter speed and ISO (see the glossary). These three things work together to ensure proper exposure. As the aperture number goes up, the shutter speed must slow down, and vice versa. In low light, which requires longer shutter speeds, the ISO number rises to allow for faster shutter speeds, so you don’t have to use a tripod to hold the camera still.

PHOTOGRAPHERS PRIMARY TOOLS

Glossary

- **Aperture:** Refers to the size of the opening in the lens to let bright light in from the scene you’re photographing onto the camera sensor. Given as an “F-stop” value, a large number corresponds to a small opening that lets in just a little light, and a small number corresponds to a large opening that lets in a lot of light.
- **Shutter Speed:** The amount of time that light is allowed in through the aperture onto the sensor. A fast shutter speed is 1/1000 of a second. A slow shutter speed is several seconds.
- **ISO:** An adjustment to your camera’s sensitivity to light (higher is more sensitive with lower being less sensitive), the initials of ISO are an abbreviation for International Standards Organization.



Using Aperture to Control Sharpness and Blur

A large aperture number will cause most things in the photo to be in focus (known as a big “depth of field”). A small aperture number will cause only the thing you are focusing on to be sharp while the rest is blurred out (known as a “shallow depth of field” or “bokeh”). An aperture of F/8 is a good baseline for most photos and is the aperture at which most lenses are sharpest.

If you want an entire landscape from the nearby flowers to the distant mountains to be in focus, a large aperture number like F/22 is needed. If you want a person’s face to be in focus while the background behind them is blurry, a small aperture value like F/4 is needed.

Using Shutter Speed to Control Sharpness and Blur

Blurring portions of a photograph with slow shutter speeds can show motion. At a waterfall, a shutter speed of 1/3 of a second or longer will blur the water and make it appear to be flowing, although you will need a tripod to hold the camera still. If you pan a motorcycle as it goes by with a shutter speed of 1/60 of a second, the motorcycle will be in focus but the trees behind will be blurry. Or, if you keep the camera stationary and click the shutter when the motorcycle passes, the bike will be a blur but the background will be in focus. Both of these techniques will show that the motorcycle was moving.

Ansel Adams spent days in the darkroom enhancing his photos. Today photographers do the same on computers.

Post-processing

The most basic adjustments are cropping, adjusting the colors, raising the shadows and lowering the highlights. The free online tool Picasa is great for beginners. For Macintosh users, built-in iPhoto (or the new Photos) is a good place to start. Adobe Lightroom and Adobe Photoshop are the software packages the pros use. For those who want to give their photos psychedelic colors or bizarre effects with the click of a button, the Topaz suite of software is fun.

One of the best ways to improve your composition skills is to spend time cropping your photos. Crop them to crazy shapes, wide and short, tall and skinny, to see the effect of removing certain items and zeroing in on others.

These are only a few tips to get you going. The most important thing is to grab your camera, jump in your RV and go have some fun. 🐾

Emily and Mark Fagan have been traveling full-time in an RV and sailboat for the past eight years. They share tips about their lifestyle and chronicle their adventures at: www.roadslsstraveled.us.



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