

“Surviving and Even Thriving on a Photo Tour”

I. What is a photo tour?

On a photo tour the tour leader is paid to organize and conduct the tour; the tour leader should be a photographer who, through personal experience and training, knows what serious photographers want to shoot and the circumstances that will contribute to successful shooting.

Photo tours don't usually include formal instruction but the photographer should be available for advice when you want it. The promotional material on the tour should make it clear how much formal instruction versus advice you may receive on the tour.

II. What are the advantages of a photo tour?

A photo tour should provide increased safety and security in comparison to traveling on your own; the professional organization of a tour should also result in the efficient use of time for photography. Photo tours provide opportunities to meet new friends and to learn from them as well as from the tour leader.

The tour leaders do the work of organizing accommodations, food, lodging, in-country travel, and local guides. They identify what is of photographic interest (e.g., places and the best time of day to be there) and trouble-shoot issues locally (cultural norms, any hazardous conditions or situations to be avoided, geographical challenges in walking such as altitude, sand dunes, hilly paths, etc). All potential problems should be identified in promotional material.

III. How can you find potential tours?

There are many ways to search for photo tours. Hundreds can be found online; they also appear in ads in the PSA journal and other photography magazines. Professional photographers who do tours often make presentations at CAPA and PSA conferences; meeting them and seeing their presentations and images provide information on whether they might be good tour leaders and people you would enjoy being around for a week or two. Ask photography friends and acquaintances for recommendations.

IV. What is the right photo tour for you?

A. Identify what it is you want from a tour.

Is it Photography for yourself, for competitions, or both.

The experience of a culture and people or a particular natural setting with its landscape, wildlife, birds, etc.

The opportunity to travel with friends.

Be clear about your goals. You may want to do all three of these things (plus others), but prioritize and understand that you may need to sacrifice something in the final selection of a tour.

B. Study the itinerary of tours you are considering.

What is the focus of the tour and how does it match your goals? How will time be used and what locations are to be visited; are they iconic but over-crowded sites; small towns/villages or cities?

Use a map to try to figure out how much traveling is done each day; when is the traveling done during the day? Is there explicit mention of shooting in the best light? How many different places do you stop each day; is there time for photography?

How much traveling is done during the trip as a whole and how; will you be based in a couple of places or move around to many different locations? If the group is moving around on a near nightly basis, you will lose time in packing-unpacking and in traveling. How much time do you actually have for photography or for experiencing the place and its people?

Are you traveling in-country by train, bus, van, airplane? Depending on the mode of transportation, time for photography will be affected. Flying over landscape and traveling by train through landscape are not necessarily to be avoided but they do result in your having a different experience of a place and the type of photography you can do. Large buses are more comfortable than small vans but they lack flexibility, for

example, in parking easily when an interesting photographic opportunity is seen or in getting off busy highways onto back roads.

C. Learn as much as you can about the tour leader.

How many times has the tour leader gone to the area in question and how recently?

Have you seen pictures by the tour leader of that area? Do you like the tour leader's photography? Read about the leader's philosophy in traveling and doing photography and their relationship with clients, if possible.

Talk to others who have gone with the tour leader and to the area in question. Ask questions: what is the best and worst thing about traveling with this tour leader? Is the tour leader interested in providing opportunities for the best possible pictures to be taken by the clients? What is the best and worst thing about the tour and the area?

Do any of the tour leaders (there are often more than one) have first aid training?

Will you be dealing with a tour operator or company that guarantees the full refund of your money if the tour doesn't take place? Do you get the sense that the tour operator is more interested in profit from one trip or in providing the best possible photographic experience to ensure return customers?

D. Read up on the location you are interested in.

Check travel advisories online for information on political problems, social disruption, etc. in the area. Remember that warnings about particular areas in a country do not mean that the country as a whole is to be avoided. Think about how you will act if you are in the midst of political disruptions (strikes, marches, protests). What physical challenges (e.g., conditions of roads, weather, altitude) and cultural norms may affect your chances for photography? For example, in some areas of the world it may be almost impossible to take pictures of people. Don't go with an expectation of being able to do something that you cannot do.

E. Look carefully at the number of people who will be in the group.

A big group (c. 20 -25) is not necessarily to be avoided, as it may be (though is not necessarily) cheaper than a small group tour. Ask how the number of photographers will be handled. Is there much opportunity for feedback from the photo tour leader, given the number of photographers going? Is the terrain such that the group can split up and go in different directions and not be a photographic nuisance to each other?

One problem associated with having a larger group of people is that the tour schedule is less flexible. Arrangements to feed a large group must be made ahead of time. That might also mean that periods when there is the best light for photography may be the time for meals.

V. Once you have selected a tour, prepare yourself for the tour.

Know what you want from the trip; think about how you are going to achieve that.

Read up on the area, its people, culture, and natural landscape.

You may want to look at good photos that others have taken in that area to give you some ideas about what to look for.

Prepare yourself physically for the trip. Get in shape; visit your doctor; prepare a first aid kit, including antibiotics if you are traveling outside of North America and Europe.

Know your physical limitations and act accordingly.

Plan and prepare your gear, clothing, and snacks.

Give yourself plenty of time for this, even if you do have a “travel box” that you keep on hand.

However, also take as little as possible. Assume you are going to be responsible for moving your suitcase and camera gear around.

Make sure you have cash with you and can access money in-country.

Have travel insurance. Have the information on travel insurance and emergency contacts somewhere easily accessible if you run into problems.

Have a phrase book for the majority language in the country where you are traveling, if possible. You may not use it, but it is good to have nonetheless.

If you can, you might want to get a single room. You might sleep better and it will give you more room to spread your camera gear around and to do the downloading and recharging of batteries.

If you can, you might want to go early, before the tour begins, and stay later than the tour dates to protect against missing flights and missing part of the tour; to acclimatize and get over jet lag; to give yourself time to do things that you might want to do beyond what was on the official tour.

Be responsible for yourself and your equipment. Don't take chances. Listen to what the guides say regarding your activities, especially when you are on your own.

Stay healthy. Get as much sleep as possible, especially if it is a physically demanding trip. Eat and drink carefully.

Keep notes or a diary; download often and check your photos to make sure the camera is operating correctly.

Finally, don't sacrifice respect for other photographers on the trip or the subjects of your photography for the sake of a photo.

I recommend all of the above but I certainly don't manage to do them all. As you travel, you will make your own "to do" list and learn your own ways to survive and thrive on photo tours and, most importantly, to have fun while doing so.

Presented by Nanciellen Davis, at the PGNS meeting October 21, 2013