



Alistair Scott

The Greatest Photography Tips in the World

A 'The Greatest in the World' book

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A few words from Alistair...

Almost everyone owns a camera, whether it's a little snapper tucked away inside a phone, a professional job with a lens like a howitzer, or an old film one. And taking photographs seems so easy. You only have to push the button and a modern camera will do everything for you... except make a cup of tea.

So, if it's all so easy, why do you need a book like this?

Because, just as all the bells and whistles of your word processor won't turn you into Shakespeare, so all the automation on your camera will not make you a better photographer. There is still nothing to equal the human brain for judging exposure, or the human eye for seeing composition and light.

In other words, it is the person behind the camera who matters. As the great landscape photographer Ansel Adams said, "You don't take a photograph. You make it."

'Making' good photographs is not difficult. But to get the best results you do need to go a little bit further than a snap-shooter does, searching out the best viewpoints, waiting for (or creating) the right light and selecting the correct settings. You need to learn to 'see' rather than just 'look'.

The aim of this book is help you do all these things. I will cover everything from buying the right equipment, through composition and lighting, to making your photography pay. There are tips on portraiture and sports photography, hints

on taking landscapes and even help with capturing a flash of lightning.

But there's one tip that is most important of all. Have fun! Get out and about with your camera, be creative, and come back with some stunning images that you can display in an album, or frame for your wall, or even sell for a pleasant profit.

Enjoy your photography!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alistair". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'A' being particularly large and stylized.

chapter 1

Kit & caboodle

Go into any camera shop you'll be spoiled for choice... digital or film? Matchbox or brick-sized? Three megapixels or ten? How do you choose? And what is a megapixel, anyway?

Don't despair. There are certain key features to look out for, and others that are not worth having. I will cover the worthwhile and not so worthwhile in this chapter. And I'll also mention some additional items that will help you get the best out of your camera.

But, whatever you buy, remember that it is not the gear that is important. It is the person behind the lens. Consider the early photographers. They had the most primitive and unwieldy equipment—wet plates, magnesium flash powder, huge heavy cameras—and yet they produced stunning images.

It's simple. Your eyes and brain are the most important pieces of equipment you have.

Anyone for chips?

The first decision you have to make is whether to stick with film, or buy a digital camera with an electronic chip inside.

This may seem like a no-brainer, but be careful. Film cameras are certainly not to be written off as something out of the Ark. They are still used by professionals because they are more robust and can deliver images of the highest quality.

In addition, film cameras can be left switched on for longer without draining the battery, which is ideal for sports or wildlife photography. Some film cameras don't even need a battery.

However, digital cameras do have advantages. They can be made a lot smaller and you see the results instantly so you can experiment... or retake the family portrait when you accidentally caught little Freda picking her nose. Then you can print or e-mail your photos, or post them on web sites.

This book is principally aimed at digital photographers, though the majority of the tips will apply to film cameras too.

Good resolutions

The 'resolution' of a digital camera is a measure of the detail in the images it takes, and is measured in megapixels. A pixel (short for 'picture element') is one tiny coloured dot on a digital photograph, and a megapixel is a million of these.

Inside a digital camera is a rectangular sensor, called a Charge Coupled Device (CCD), made of tiny light-sensitive receivers. Each of these collects the light for one pixel.

The megapixel rating of a camera is calculated by multiplying the number of these receivers along the long edge of the sensor by the number along the short side. It's exactly like working out area at school (remember that?) except the answer is divided by a million to get a workable figure.

chapter 2

How to be a sharpshooter

Clear, crisp, well-focussed pictures are the aim of most photographers... most of the time. Nothing ruins a photograph more than unintentional fuzziness. So look closely at your photos and be critical with yourself. Are you getting shark-tooth-sharp ones? Maybe they look great on your monitor, but that will probably be displaying them at a resolution of only 72 pixels per inch (ppi), which is very forgiving. When you enlarge them you could be in for a disappointment.

Here are some tips to help you get sharp pictures or, sometimes, a touch of blur.

Hold on

Cameras are now so small and lightweight that you may be tempted to shoot one-handed. This is sometimes encouraged by camera adverts, where a 'cool' photographer leans out of a sports car, dances at a party, or dangles from a cliff face, shooting one-handed.

That's a laugh. No serious photographer does that.

You should only use one hand in the most extreme circumstances – if you are trapped in a crowd, for example, and the only way to get a shot is to hold the camera high over your head. At all other times, use both hands, one supporting the camera body, the other around the lens. And tuck your elbows in to your sides.

No matter how calm and relaxed you are, your hands are going to shake a little. By using both at the same time, you help cancel out these slight tremors.

Try this: Hold out one hand and try to keep it as still as possible. Now hold out both hands with your palms lightly pressed together. Which is the more stable configuration?

Ah, but I don't need to worry about the shakes...

...I've got image stabilisation on my camera.

Congratulations. A vibration reduction mechanism will certainly help improve the sharpness of your images and allow you to use a slower shutter speed than before. But don't rely on it. Even with image stabilisation you still cannot defy the laws of physics. In photography it is best to get the fundamental techniques well established. Then everything else is a bonus.

But don't hold your breath

In some photographic guides you might read the advice to hold your breath when pushing the shutter button in order to minimise vibrations still further.

Don't bother. Holding your breath is not a natural action, and you are likely to be shaking even more... or suffocating.

Continue to breathe in and out slowly and naturally and, if you're not shooting fast action, try to press the shutter release at the moment when you've fully exhaled.

chapter 3

Compose yourself

Whenever you look through the viewfinder of your camera you're composing a picture. You're deciding, "I want a picture of *this*".

The danger is, we often concentrate on *this*, someone's face for example, and fail to see other elements such as the background, the foreground or the corners. The camera doesn't. It sees everything, in exactly the same way as a tape recording of conversation also picks up all the surrounding creaks, thuds and traffic noises.

Although your camera only captures a small rectangle of a scene, it's amazing how much junk can creep into that space. This is where the good photographer takes control, deciding what to include and what to leave out, choosing an angle, view, and settings that emphasise the subject whilst minimising any elements that distract from it.

There are certain rules that can help you. I will cover them in this chapter... and also suggest that you can break them, too.

Kiss

Every good photograph has a subject... the reason why you pointed your camera in that direction in the first place. One of the cardinal rules of composition is 'KISS' – 'Keep It Super Simple'. The more irrelevant things you have in a picture the more 'lost' your subject will be.

At the extreme, notice how many commercial photographs are nothing but the subject, with a plain background, usually white.



A pure white background will really make your subject stand out.

Try it sideways

It's amazing how many photographers don't ever think to turn their camera sideways, to get a vertical shot. This is the simplest composition technique there is, and it is ideally suited for certain subjects, e.g. a full-length portrait of someone.

On top of that, if you are hoping to sell your photographs (see Chapter 11) the vertical format is much more suitable for magazine/brochure covers.

chapter 4

The light fantastic

Photography is all about light. Its quality and the amount of it, are the two most important factors. They can make the difference between your picture being a glowing masterpiece, a flat grey bore, or a jet-black rectangle.

But if the sun isn't shining what can you do? Don't worry. You have more control than you imagine. And if you are working indoors, you have total control. This means that, with a little work, foresight, and creativity, you can achieve remarkable things with light. This chapter will show you how.

Expose yourself?

In photography 'exposure' means the amount of light that you allow into the camera to create the picture. This is controlled by two settings, the aperture of the lens and the shutter speed.

The aperture is the opening of the lens, like the iris of your eye, and is expressed as an 'f' number (f5.6, f8, f11, and so on). Don't ask me why, but the larger the number the smaller the opening, so less light gets through.

The shutter speed is the length of time the shutter is open, and is expressed in fractions of seconds (1/125th, 1/250th, 1/500th and so on). Obviously, the shorter the shutter speed, the less light gets into the camera.

The two settings are related, so if you increase the shutter speed by one 'click' (called a 'stop' in photographic terms) you must open the aperture by one stop to let the same amount of light into your camera.

Although most cameras can set these for you automatically, it is much better if you know how to control them yourself. This will allow you to extend the range of conditions in which you can take photos, and will also allow you to become more creative.

Over and under

Over-exposure is when too much light enters the camera and the picture looks pale. You are either using a shutter speed that is too slow, or have the lens aperture open too wide.

And, guess what? When too little light is allowed into the camera the picture looks dark and gloomy. That's under-exposure. You are either using a shutter speed that is too high, or an aperture that is too small.

In general, over-exposure is worse than under-exposure. Using image editing software, a passable picture can often be retrieved from an under-exposed image. But if the brighter parts of a picture are 'burned out' they're gone for good.

In brackets

To be sure of capturing that never-to-be-repeated shot perfectly, try 'bracketing'. This means taking three pictures in quick succession, one at the indicated exposure, one over-exposed by opening the aperture one stop and another under-exposed by the same amount. Then you'll be sure to get one right.

chapter 5

Shooting people

People love looking at portraits... of other people. But face the camera for one? That usually ranks with a visit to the dentist on a list of pleasurable activities.

So, as a portrait photographer your first challenge is to put your subject at ease. The best way to do this is to keep things relaxed and informal. And use the simplest of set-ups. You can achieve beautiful effects with nothing more than the light coming in through a window. In fact...

Your own studio... is the bathroom

The bathroom is ideal because it is usually painted white and has lots of reflective surfaces. Also, bathroom windows are made of frosted glass giving a beautiful soft light. Try this...

- Drape a suitable backdrop over the shower bar... you don't want the bathroom fittings in your portrait.
- Pose your subject in front of it. A comfy chair may help.
- Turn off the bathroom lights and...
- Shoot away.
- If you want to add some light then aim your flash at the white wall/ceiling to give a diffused result.

Agreed, it may be a little cramped. But the results will speak for themselves. And the hire charges are very reasonable.

Beyond the bathroom

Another approach is to choose a setting that says something about your subject. You might, for example, consider taking a portrait of a farmer leaning over a gate, a writer against a background of books, or a cook buying produce at the market.

Quick tip

The bathroom is also an ideal place for cleaning your digital camera's sensor. No, not under the cold tap! (See Chapter 10 – *Taking care.*)

And, if you are taking portraits outdoors, choose an overcast day. The light is softer and more flattering.

The living daylights

So, you can't afford those fabulous professional strobe units with umbrella reflectors and softboxes for your portraits? Don't worry. Use daylight.

Despite all their equipment, many professionals prefer daylight because of its qualities. And one of the best sources of daylight is a large window, out of direct sunlight.

Sit your subject down next to it. Control the light by moving her closer or further away from the window. Sitting her closer will result in greater contrast between the two sides of her face. Sitting her further away will give more even lighting.

chapter 6

The call of the wild

A magnificent mountain range spreads out in all its glory before you. Your shutter finger works overtime until the memory card is full. But when you call the photos up on your computer screen, back at home, your heart sinks. Where's all the glory gone?

Unfortunately, there's no getting away from a hard fact – although landscape photography is hugely popular, getting worthwhile results is difficult. The single most important factor is the quality of the light. It doesn't have to be light from a golden sun, peeping over the horizon. Dramatic landscapes are achievable when the sun is hidden. You don't even have to be in amazing scenery. Under the right lighting conditions even an old gas works can look good.

So, success is all about being in the right spot at the right time. And that rarely happens by accident. You have to work at it and wait... and wait... and wait... until the light is right.

But, if you don't have the time to wait, there are still a number of techniques you can apply which will improve your landscapes dramatically.



The light makes all the difference.

Red sky at night, photographers' delight

If you want the best light, get into the habit of watching the weather forecast. If the forecaster is predicting a clear night followed by a sunny day, get up early!

But this isn't necessarily enough. To get the light just right you need to know where and when the sun is going to rise. Tables are available which tell you this, obtainable both online and for sale in shops. There are also free computer programs that will give you the information for any place in the world. One of the most comprehensive is GraphDark, which will not only tell you sunrise/sunset, but will also give you moon phases, which planets can be seen at night, and much, much more.

Details of these websites, free programs and more are given on my website: www.alscotts.com.

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