

Photography: The Supporting Cast

By Michael Goldstein



Photo 1.
This typical tourist photographic "stance" is guaranteed to result in blurry pictures, and tilted horizons.

We've all seen tourists gripping their cameras, standing with their legs apart and their elbows flapping as they face their subjects (Photo #1). A more recent phenomenon is the digital photographer, holding his camera at arm's length--perhaps with one hand--while he views his subject on the LCD screen. Is it any wonder these folks come home with blurry pictures in which horizons are askew, and distractions are creeping in from the edges of the image?

Whenever you see an image with nothing in sharp focus, the fault isn't depth-of-field. It's camera shake. The majority of camera shake is vertical, and it's caused by the use of an unstable gun platform. At the very least, camera shake can be greatly reduced by holding the camera steady. (Photo #2 illustrates the technique. Photo #3 shows this position combined with the support of a nearby tree.) A shooting stance that is more stable yet is the "prone position" (Photo #4). Practicing these techniques will vastly improve the sharpness of your pictures.

USING A CAMERA SUPPORT

Photo #5 shows the use of the ultimate in camera-shake reduction, a sturdy tripod combined with a shutter release cable. The tripod provides a very stable camera support that eliminates camera shake in a vertical plane. Using a

shutter release cable ensures the camera will not be touched (and shaken!) at the moment of exposure. However, there are additional reasons why you see serious photographers lugging tripods around the landscape:

1. Use of a tripod allows you complete freedom over shutter speed, even when you're using slow film in low light. Dial up the smallest aperture setting you require, and the tripod ensures your shot will be sharp, despite the required slow shutter speed. As your lens becomes longer and heavier, a tripod becomes more important.

2. The tripod makes successful low-light photography possible. Sharp time exposures at night, using available light (perhaps with some fill flash), are possible only if a tripod is used.

3. Using a tripod forces you to work more slowly and carefully. You'll notice--and correct--a crooked horizon and re-compose to eliminate the garbage can that may be sneaking into your image from the edge of the viewfinder. You'll probably notice the tree that appears to be growing out of Aunt Molly's head. You'll certainly come home with more artistic photographs.

TRIPOD ALTERNATIVES

I often find, on hiking trips, a tripod is simply more than I want to carry, but neither do I want to "hand hold" my shots. My favorite alternative camera support is a monopod one-third the weight of a tripod and easily carried.

The monopod allows the same shake-free exposures in daylight shooting, although it's necessary to avoid tilting horizons. Under low lighting, you can shoot much later in the day on a monopod than without. Even using a long lens, the monopod lets you employ surprisingly slow shutter speeds and still come home with sharp images.

At the very least, carry a mini-tripod in your pocket or pack. You can brace it against a rock, wall, or tree and achieve shake-free shooting. If you're shooting from a car or truck, there are window mounts available for your camera. Some photographers shoot prone from the roof of a van, using a "beanbag" as a support.

TRIPOD HEADS

On top of the tripod (and monopod) itself, you must install a tripod "head." This allows you to move (and lock) the camera in any three-dimensional position. Large lens include a tripod collar, and it's customary to mount the lens, and not the camera body, on the tripod. Some heads allow positioning by means of three independent controls. These are fine if you're not in a hurry, and they allow very precise adjustment.



Photo 2.
The proper stance for holding a camera, while standing. The camera is supported from below with one hand, and that elbow is pulled into the front of the body. That foot, and only that foot, has the toes facing the subject, and the photographer leans his weight on that foot.

The other hand holds the camera at the side, using a grip if one exists, and controls the shutter. That elbow is tucked tightly against the side of the body.



Photo 3.

Combine the technique shown in Photo #2, while leaning hard against a tree or utility pole, and you have stabilized your camera even more.

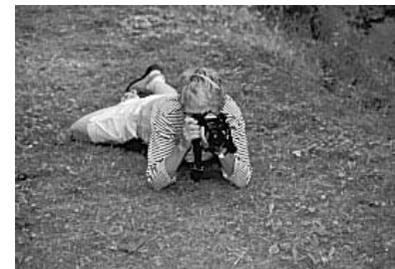


Photo 4.

Any "shooter" will tell you that the prone position is the most stable of all. One knee is bent to prevent the body from rolling, while the elbows are tucked in to line up with the shoulders. Using a plastic garbage bag as a ground cover will protect your clothing.



Photo 5.

Using a solid tripod, and a shutter cable release, makes camera shake virtually impossible. If the sun is behind you, block the sunlight from the viewfinder window, to avoid possible exposure errors.

For those in a rush, the ball head allows one-adjustment, three-dimensional positioning of the camera. Note that some tripod heads are smaller and weigh less than others. This is significant. Whichever head you choose, it must adjust smoothly, lock securely in position, and not limit one's options as far as weight and height are concerned.

QUICK RELEASES

Nothing will discourage you more quickly from using a camera support than the need to screw the support to the camera each time you use it, and to unscrew it afterward. I once followed a fellow photographer on hiking trails all over the Yorkshire Dales (Herriot country in England) for two weeks, while he faithfully carried his monopod in a special vest pocket ... and never used it. He didn't know about the quick-release.

The quick-release consists of a female socket that screws to the tripod (monopod) head, and a male plug that screws on the bottom of the camera. The two mate in a non-slip configuration, locked together with a spring-loaded lever. Flip the lever, and off comes the camera. A quick-release must be fast to release with one hand and contribute no instability whatsoever to the camera support system.

MISCELLANEOUS THOUGHTS

It's easy for photographers to develop a collection of tripods, tripod heads, and quick releases. A heavy tripod with a trigger-type ball head is fine for working out of a vehicle, but not ideal for distance hiking or fitting into a suitcase. One of the lighter carbon-fiber tripods is better suited for these purposes, and you'll want a smaller, lighter head to keep weight to a minimum. The new lighter head might have a built-in quick release, so you will have acquired a whole new system.

For close-to-the-ground macro photography, you'll want to avoid tripods with long center posts and heads that raise the camera high above the tripod itself. A tripod with a shorter center post (or none at all) and a smaller head will bring you closer to small flowers. Of course, you'll want to avoid tripods that don't allow the legs to spread into a flat position.

To sum up, look for a support system that's tall enough to avoid giving you back problems, heavy enough to support your heaviest camera and lens, light enough that you'll be willing to carry it, and adjusts low enough that you can fill the frame with a ram's head orchid. (When you find such a system, call me!)