



BEHIND PHOTO

A GUIDE TO TAKING BETTER TRAVEL PHOTOS

My name is Kien and I am a visual storyteller. I love to travel, explore and capture what I see in both stills and films. When I started teaching myself photography, I learned quite a bit by looking at photos that I really liked and then trying to backwards engineer how it was created. It helped a lot when I was able to get EXIF data like shutter speed, aperture, ISO and focal length. It gave me a better understanding of the technical side of an image, but alone, it couldn't make me a better photographer. From there, I had to gain a better understanding of all the moving parts involved in creating a beautiful photograph. Technique, timing, and experience were just as important, but not readily evident in the final image. In this book, I hope to share some of the insights and tips I've picked up shooting all across the globe for over 12 years. I've handpicked 25 of my favorite photographs and talk about the why's and how's. I also share the settings for the photographs and any additional equipment I used to teach you how to take better travel photographs.

KIEN LAM

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TRAVEL

What do you shoot with? This is a question I get a lot. Some photographers hate fielding this question, but I love it. I use it every opportunity I can to tell people that the equipment you use is only as important as how you use it. More than that, I love to show and tell people that it is possible to create beautiful photographs without having to lug an expensive DSLR with \$8000 worth of glass. When I do professional assignments, I shoot with a top of the line Nikon system and I'm very happy with it. When I'm backpacking the world, the last thing I want to do is lug around all that equipment and worry about it being damaged, lost or stolen. It's just not worth it. Fortunately, advances in digital photography now allow us to travel with much smaller systems that produce stunning results. I've created some of my best photographs using these mirrorless systems, entry level DSLRs and the kit lens that come with them. There's even a shot in the forthcoming pages that was shot with a DSLR-like Olympus camera back in 2004 that had a fixed lens and topped out at a whopping 4 megapixels. More important than just the equipment itself is learning how to embrace each system's limitations and pushing right up to that edge. In 2010-2011, I traveled around the world and shot a timelapse video across 17 countries that picked up around 4 million views. I did that on a Panasonic GF-1 mirrorless camera and \$14 tripod I picked up from Wal-Mart. I brought it with me because it fit inside my small shoulder bag and I hoped the light load would encourage me to have it on hand when I needed it. I was right. I would not have shot half the scenes I did if I had to carry a giant tripod with me the whole time.

Travel Gear Used For Photographs In This Book

1. Olympus E10
2. Nikon D70 + D80 + 18-70mm f/3.5-5.6
3. Panasonic GF-1 + Panasonic GX-1 + 20mm f/1.7 + 14-45mm f/3.5-5.6
4. Sony NEX 6 + 16-50mm f/3.5-5.6 + 35mm f/1.7 CCTV + Voigtlander 50mm f/1.5 + 75mm f/2.0

Hitech Graduated ND Filter 0.6 Hard Edge

Dolica 62" Proline Tripod (Collapses to 21.5")

No Brand Telescoping 42" Tripod (Collapses to 10")

Sirui T-005 Aluminum 51" Tripod (Collapses to 11.8")

*** For all images, I note the 35mm equivalent of the focal length to account for the difference in the crop factor of the cameras.**



The hard part about the photographing on the Annapurna Circuit is that for 2-3 weeks, you are bombarded with some of the best hiking scenery in the world. When everything is just stunning, my strategy is to enjoy the moment and only take out my camera for something truly breathtaking. In the town of Manang, I zoomed in slightly to isolate a part of the Annapurna III as the clouds were moving over the glaciers. In post-processing, I made the image black and white and increased the contrast to bring out the dramatic texture of the mountain. I took care to avoid blowing out any highlights in the cloud, which would have drawn the attention away from the mountain itself.

ANNAPURNA RANGE, NEPAL

Sony NEX 6, 66mm, 1/200s, f/5.6, ISO 200



02

Slot canyons are beautiful to photograph, but some, like Antelope Canyon, get very little light, which makes for difficult handheld photography. To do this right, I made sure to have a tripod to allow me to keep the ISO clean at 100 and exposing for 15-30 seconds. In this shot, I increased the aperture to f/18 so that all the layers are in focus despite their different distances away from the camera. A long, clean exposure will also bring out the colors of the canyon. In post-processing, I slightly increased the contrast and shadow details to brighten up the scene and emphasize the structure.

ANTELOPE CANYON, ARIZONA
Nikon D80, 46mm, 15s, f/18, ISO 100, Tripod





I reached camp in the White Desert after sunset so I was treated to a pleasant surprise when I woke the next morning. I kept the ISO low, and shot at 1/500s to avoid any handshake blur since I took the photograph without a tripod. In post, I lowered the saturation and increased the white and shadows in Lightroom to amplify the whiteness of the desert. I felt the monochromatic look really helped the scene.

WHITE DESERT, EGYPT

Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 1/500s, f/6.3, ISO 100



04

When I first moved to San Francisco, I stayed in a high rise condo overlooking the Bay Bridge. To say I had a nice view would be an understatement. I woke up one morning to the atmospheric fog rolling in over the bridge. I didn't have to do much for this shot. The lighting, the monochromatic tones, and the minimal elements were all there. I simply used the principal of leading lines to have the dock and bridge converge towards itself and the center of the frame.

SAN FRANCISCO, USA
Nikon D70, 27mm, 1/400s, f/7.1, ISO 400





I loved the stop at this ramshackle barn just outside of Millerton in New York as the sun was setting. I got right into the field of wildflowers and aimed from a lower angle to get an animal's eye view of the barn. To allow myself to shoot handheld with a clean ISO of 200, I opened up the aperture on the kit 18-70mm lens and braced my arm against my body to avoid any unnecessary shake at 1/50s. In post, I increased the temperature of the white balance to warm up the scene and bring out the yellows in the flowers. I also increased the granular contrast in the scene to show the texture of the weather worn wood.

MILLERTON, USA

Nikon D80, 27mm, 1/50s, f/3.5, ISO 200



06

I love dawn. To get these shots, it usually means waking up when it's still dark out. To get these shots on the top of a mountain, you're going to have to get up a whole lot earlier than that. Hard as that is, I find it worth it everytime. The light is just stunning as it develops. The key is to keep shooting. There is a sweet spot just before the sun comes up over the horizon where the colors are soft but vibrant enough. Once the sun peaks, I usually stop shooting and just enjoy it.

MOUNT SINAI, EYGPT

Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 1/40s, f/6.3, ISO 400, Tripod



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RUE DE
BRASSERIE

Café

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The most inescapable monument in Paris is the Eiffel Tower. In a city devoid of a skyline, you can see L'Tour Eiffel from so many locations. Instead of getting your standard straight on-view of the tower, I framed it the background of a cafe to highlight this aspect of its ubiquity. In post-processing, I did very little other than to adjust the contrast and to curtail the highlights and whites to keep the area to the right of the tower from blowing out.

PARIS, FRANCE

Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 1/640s, f/5.0, ISO 400



08

Before DSLRs became relatively affordable, I took to Australia with a DSLR-like camera. It was a beast of a camera with a fixed lens, and even more so when I screwed on the wide-angle adapter. It certainly had its limitations, but I loved the thing. It taught me to wring out everything that my camera was capable of and to not worry about need this lens or the latest body. There are point and shoot cameras now with bigger sensors than the E-10, but with the right timing, the correct exposure, and one of the most spectacular sunset over the Great Barrier Reef, I don't think any viewer will care what camera was used.

HERON ISLAND, AUSTRALIA

Olympus E-10, 27mm, 1/8s, f/11, ISO 80, Tripod



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Dusk and dawn are perfect times to shoot landscapes because the light is both soft and even thus allowing the camera sensor or film to capture a narrower dynamic range of light between the sky and the foreground. This allows you to see the details in both. At this island resort on Nusa Lembongan, I waited for the light to fade a bit in order to capture a shot of the tranquil infinity pool against the crashing waves in the distance. With the dark clouds and stormy waters, I wanted to show a bit of irony in “paradise.”

NUSA LEMBONGAN, INDONESIA

Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 1/100s, f/3.5, ISO 100



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This was taken as part of a timelapse video. I used a slow 1/10s shutter speed to convey motion in the steam rising from the geysers and the people moving. From scene to scene, the slight motion blur creates a ghostly effect with the people flowing across the frame. I slightly underexposed the scene to keep some colors in the sky and increased the exposure and shadow details in post-processing while reducing the highlights.

EL TATIO, CHILE

Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 1/10s, f/8, ISO 200, Tripod



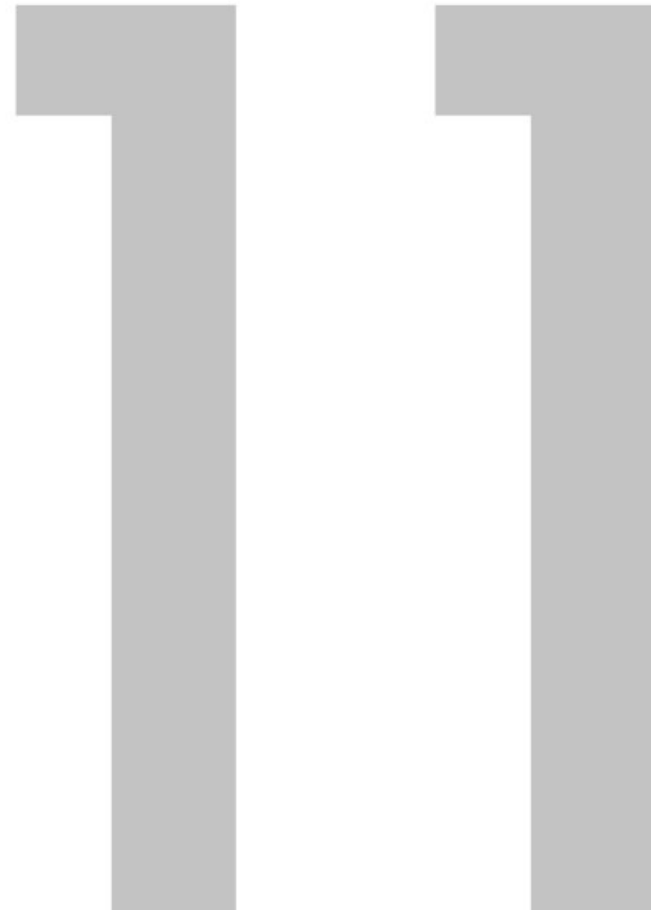


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A big part thing of visiting Stonehenge in person is being able to appreciate the scale of the structure. The classic approach to photographing things is to get in closer. Why else would you be paying the entrance fee? In this case, I did the opposite and stepped back from the scene. From there, I could capture a sense of how big the stones are relative to a person standing right next to it. I was also able to get the sky and clouds floating above to add a bit of negative space to the composition.

STONEHENGE, ENGLAND

Panasonic GF-1, 35mm, 1/400s, f/6.3, ISO 100



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I shot this from the top of a jeep hoping to keep the horizon straight while trying to not fall off at the same time. I came here during the wet season to get a shot of the sky mirrored in the thin layer of water over the salt flats. Unfortunately, it started to rain and the wind created a ripple in the waters that broke up the illusion. Instead, I focused on capturing the scale of the place by framing the jeep in the scene. In post-processing, I reduced the saturation in most of the colors to isolate just the white and blues.

SALAR DE UYUNI, BOLIVIA
Panasonic GF-1, 42mm, 1/640s, f/10, ISO 200



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You really have to rough it at times to get the shot. Yellowstone National Park is well known for its volatile microclimates. In June, I found myself driving through a snowstorm racing to get to one of the lodges before more of the roads in the park were closed. When the snow stopped, I stopped the car and walked waist deep into fresh snow to get this shot of the trees reflecting in the lake. To get the even lighting, I used a graduated ND filter for the top 1/3 of the image to reduce the exposure by 2 stops. Without this, the top area would have been much brighter and I wouldn't have been able to capture the soft glow behind the clouds.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, USA

Nikon D80, 27mm, 1/3s, f/18, ISO 160, Tripod





I am a big fan of negative space and minimal composition. In this shot, I wanted to focus on the many lines in the scene. I played around with different angles and then zoomed in until I found a pleasant balance. I also wanted to show the contrast between the whiteness of the building and the yellow and black of the escalators.

BARCELONA, SPAIN

Nikon D80, 52mm, 1/50s, f/5.6, ISO 400





I took this shot of Half Dome's cable ascent just a couple of hours before sunset. The special bit is that this cable route is usually packed with people queueing to get up and down. Since my friend and I were some of the last hikers making this ascent, it was relatively empty. I used the focus shift of the Lensbaby 3.0 lens to isolate the hikers. By compressing the scene, it also creates the illusion that the hikers are making a near vertical ascent when in fact they are *only* at a 45 degree angle to the granite face. The price for this shot was having to hike the 7+ miles back down in the dark.

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, USA
Nikon D80, 75mm, 1/400s, f/2.8, ISO 200



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I used the rule of thirds in this composition, leaving the top portion mostly empty to draw the eye mostly to the ground with the exception of the moon. In post-processing, I slightly increased the white balance temperature to compensate for coldness of the evening light.

CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY
Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 1s, f/7.1, ISO 100



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The trick to photographing heavily visited places like Petra is to shoot very early or late in the day when the number of visitors die down. I wanted to get a shot of the Treasury from the Siq, but it was filled with visitors when I entered in the morning. With a bit of luck, I only had to wait a couple of minutes on my way out to get the passageway mostly empty. I left the lone figure at the end of the opening to highlight the scale of the place. In post-processing, I increased the shadow detail to lessen the contrast between the brighter Treasury and the darker stone wall of the Siq and added a vignette to draw the focus towards the middle of the scene.

PETRA, JORDAN

Panasonic GF-1, 28mm, 2s, f/4.5, ISO 100, Tripod



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This is still one of my favorite shots from my travels. I stood on a bridge and observed the flow of traffic below. Leaning over, I pointed the camera straight down and released the shutter just as a woman walked right into the middle of my frame. The bird's eye view is a great angle, often changing the way we see things that we are used to seeing from a level angle.

DALAT, VIETNAM

Nikon D70, 105mm, 1/80s, f/4.5, ISO 800





To capture the Holi festival in Pushkar, I went to the restaurant on the top of a building overlooking the town square and shot from a “safe” distance above the revelers below. It was a sea of colored bodies, which made for an amazing picture in and of itself, but I wanted to capture the act of someone throwing the colored powders in the air. Beyond waiting, it was a matter of constantly adjusting the manual focus so that I was “ready” when the shot came along. In post-processing, I created the contrast and the clarity while reducing the highlights in order to cut through the haze of powder in the air.

PUSHKAR, INDIA

Sony NEX 6, 112mm, 1/1600s, f/2.0, ISO 100



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I was fascinated by this scene of a lone woman washing clothes along the steps down to the river in Udaipur. The soft late afternoon light allowed me to shoot the water without overexposing it relative to the dock and steps. I like that the diagonal lines of the dock forms a right angle that eventually draws the viewer's eye to the woman.

UDAIPUR, INDIA

Sony NEX 6, 52mm, 1/400s, f/5.6, ISO 200





My stop in Manang on the Annapurna Circuit coincided with an annual festival celebrated by the locals that involved archery and lots of eating. I chose a medium telephoto to capture the event without getting in their way. Shooting wide open at a large aperture of f/2.8 allowed me to isolate the subject. In post-processing, I reduced the highlights, increased the shadows and the clarity to emulate the look of a photograph shot on 35mm film. I slightly decreased the saturation since the colors were vibrant enough and I did not want them to be oversaturated as I increased the contrast.

MANANG VILLAGE, NEPAL

Sony NEX 6, 112mm, 1/500s, f/2.0, ISO 400





A favorite technique of mine is to shoot with the sun to the back of my subject. They tell you not to do this because usually, a “correct” exposure” would render the subject very dark. The exception to this rule when shooting without a flash or reflector is that is perfectly acceptable just after sunrise or before sunset when the light is softer and lower. I exposure for my subject during this time, which creates a warm and soft glow behind her that isn’t completely blown out. Without the sun in her face, the lighting is more even and flattering and the subject doesn’t have to squint.

COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

Sony NEX 6, 75mm, 1/400s, f/1.5, ISO 800



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The most important advice I can give about photographing strangers is to not be a stranger. When you interact with a subject, you can work towards getting them comfortable with you AND the camera. I captured this shot after playing with the children for a bit while riding around Nusa Lembongan. I showed them my camera and showed them pictures of themselves I just snapped randomly. When they understood what I was doing, I was about to get a more natural shot. By having the child look upwards, I was able to get the catchlight in the eyes and take advantage of the distance between the ground and her head to blur the background.

NUSA LEMBONGAN, INDONESIA

Panasonic GF-1, 40mm, 1/500s, f/1.7, ISO 100



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The ability to quickly adjust your manual settings is paramount to be able to capture fleeting moments that don't want around for you to set your exposure. Sometimes, you don't get it right in time. In this instance, I only noticed just as I was about to release the shutter that my shutter speed was 1/30s handheld. The resulting photos would be subject to be handshake and motion blur from the subject in most circumstances. To compensate, I quickly exhaled to stabilize my body, braced both arms against my torso and shot a rapid succession of photos to ensure that I could get one in that

MANU, PERU

Panasonic GF-1, 40mm, 1/30s, f/1.7, ISO 200





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Understanding how to use natural lighting will go a long way towards taking better travel portraits. In this image, the woman is sitting outside her house. The light is diffused by the clouds above and coming in from her left side. This creates a more dramatic look similar to using one softbox and shooting with a flash from one side. You can see that the other side of her face is dark as well as the background behind her. I shot wide open at f/1.5 to create a soft background blur. In post-processing, I converted to black and white and increased the contrast and clarity to emphasize the characters of the lines on her face and the pattern of her clothes.

BHULBHULE VILLAGE, NEPAL

Sony NEX 6, 75mm, 1/200s, f/1.5, ISO 800



Kien Lam is an international photographer and filmmaker based in San Francisco. He quit his finance job in 2010 to spend less time at a desk and more time capturing stories and experiences around the world. In 2014, he launched WHEREANDWANDER.COM to share his journey and adventures as he attempts to complete all the items on his long Bucket List. After backpacking across over 40 countries, he has turned his focus towards finding unique experiences off the beaten path and wants to inspire others to do and see more with his style of visual storytelling. His work has been featured on CNN, The Huffington Post, Gadling and many other media outlets around the world.

