

Challenges of Photography 2: Hazards

Whether we are dangling from cliff faces, arguing with strangers for photos rights, or negotiating tricky photography terrain with inadequate equipment, photographers can face challenges beyond simple exposures and compositions. While the wild world can certainly threaten a photographer's safety, it can also ruin precious photographs, claim valuable equipment, raise legal issues, and present unending challenges for a photographer on a budget.

Despite all this, with good sense, some tact, and a little creative problem-solving, you and your camera can come safely home at the end of a photo day. If you're really clever, you might even have some great photos too!

Photography in Exposed Places

Remember one thing when you're shooting frame after frame, perched precipitously on the edge of that enormous drop: if you fall off and are never seen or heard from again, no one's ever going to see the photos you made. Wouldn't that be a shame? With that in mind, here's how to NOT fall to your death while still getting that airy photo position you want so badly.

If you're working on the cliff itself, make sure you properly use the appropriate safety equipment. Many outdoor clubs and climbing gyms run rappelling courses. If the ground is loose at the lip of the cliff, be sure to wear an approved helmet and have others do the same. If you're just working close to the edge, rappelling might not be necessary. However, you should still anchor yourself with a rope and harness to a solid object, like a large tree.

Now that you're safe, what about your camera? Don't trust your expensive camera equipment to a two-dollar buckle. Be sure that your camera bag is tightly closed and attached to your body with at least two anchor points. When you take your camera out, attach the neck strap similarly: around your neck and anchored to your body. There's no easy way of anchoring lenses, so be sure they're firmly attached to the camera body or stowed in a zippered compartment. Remember that anything you drop will effectively be gone forever and could pose a hazard to someone below. If you do drop something, yell "rock!" at the top of your lungs to warn people below you.

A tripod can still be a useful tool for photography on high, but you'll have to use it a little differently than you do on flat ground. Attach a length of rope to the neck of the tripod. Collapse the tripod legs completely and firmly attach the rope to the cliff. (Use a climbing anchor or something natural, like a strong branch.) Turn the tripod sideways,

with the legs facing the cliff, and adjust the legs until the tripod is tensioned firmly against the cliff surface. Using the tripod this way can be awkward, but it gets easier with practice. Remember to always keep your camera anchored to you, even when it's mounted on the tripod.

The vertical environment offers a host of perspectives never seen in the flat world, and hanging cliffside is a great way to get away from the crowds. Being up in the sky amidst the light and silence can make any day a good one. Above all, keep your own safety and the safety of others in mind. Have fun up there!

Photography and Private Property

In our forays as photographers, we might be tempted to photograph subjects on private property. Photographers are also commonly approached by concerned citizens mistaking us for terrorists, government agents, or the like who emphatically claim that we are beyond our rights in photographing them or the spaces around them! A brief understanding of the laws relating to privacy and photography is therefore important for any photographer.

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| <p>NOTE: The below points form a loose description of privacy laws in Canada only. They are simplified and incomplete and are not intended as legal advice.</p> |
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Private Land: You can make photographs of private land from public land. This distinction gets a little murky when long telephoto lenses are involved, especially when people are being photographed without their knowledge. Use common sense - no one likes paparazzi.

Trespassing: You cannot trespass to make photographs. If you want to make photographs from someone's land, ask permission. If you appear friendly and professional, permission will most likely be granted. If you are caught trespassing, you can be handed a hefty fine. Worse, the land-owner will be less likely to allow photography on their land in the future.

Security: Restrictions on photography by security personnel are common and are almost always entirely unwarranted. Very few situations require a guard to restrict photography for safety reasons. You can mention this. Try to be polite, but realize you probably won't get very far. You should never have to show ID to a security guard.

Police and Emergency Personal: Don't get in the way of any emergency personal at the site of an emergency. Stay away from the scene, respect the victims of the emergency, and follow instructions from emergency personal. No photograph is worth hindering aid or embarrassing victims of a crisis. If you can help the

situation in any way, put your camera away and help! If a police officer ever asks for your ID, you are obliged to show it.

People: Photography of people is not restricted in public places. Printing and selling a photograph of a stranger is allowed as art. If a photograph is to be used as advertising, it must accompany a signed model release.

Film and Memory Cards: Unless ordered by a court of law, you are not under any obligation to surrender memory cards or film to anyone. However, certain privileges taking place on private property can be withheld if you don't, like getting on an airplane or entering a museum.

When considering photography and the law, the responsibility lies with the photographer to act in a lawful, courteous, and respectful manner at all times. When you are in public with your camera, you represent any photographer. Acting responsibly will not only land you in significantly less hot water, it will help keep public spaces open for generations of photographers to come.

Camera Theft

I clearly remember a clear, crisp day on Granville Street in Vancouver, BC in 2002. I was making a call from a pay phone, my camera pack on the ground beside me. A man picked up the phone beside me and began yelling so loudly I could hardly hear. I turned away to shut out the noise. Seconds later, I turned back. The man, and my camera pack, had vanished into the crowd.

Panicked hours running the streets, phoning police, and searching pawn shops turned up nothing. I had lost two camera bodies, five lenses, and numerous pricey odds and ends. By pure luck, I had just dropped off 10 rolls of film for processing.

Insurance covered some of the replacement cameras and lenses, but the company was reluctant and there were awful moments when I thought I would be without a camera for years. The ordeal was expensive. More than three months later, I was behind a lens once more. This time, it was with a sober understanding of how much I, as a photographer, rely on my equipment to create the art that I love. I have never left a camera bag even briefly unattended since.

If you're in an area where you might expect to be robbed, don't make it obvious that you've got a camera. Store it in a regular bag or backpack - the more beat up, the better - and hang on to it. If you have to leave your equipment in a vehicle, cover it up or put it in the trunk. When you make a photograph, don't make a show of it - just get the photo and move on. If anyone asks about your camera, be very friendly, but greatly downplay your camera's value. Thieves steal more often from people they don't like, and words like "digital", "zoom", and other advertising catch phrases will only tempt potential thieves

further.

If you can't afford to replace your photography equipment, consider insuring it. Ask lots of questions of your insurer, and be sure that the insurance covers theft from a vehicle, accidental damage and mysterious disappearance. Keep in mind that insurance companies can squirm out of paying even the most legitimate claims. You will probably have to aggressively pursue any claims that you make. When my photography equipment was stolen, I was told on three separate occasions that my policy didn't cover street theft. The company eventually changed its mind, but not without a struggle!

Keep your photography equipment reasonably safe, but don't spend your time in the world worrying about it. The art of photography sometimes puts photographer's equipment at risk. Minimize that risk, but not so much that you're driven to distraction or missing out on great photos!

X-Ray Machines and Photographic Film

The ubiquitous digital sensor has solved the problem of airport x-rays for the most part, but this section is still useful for us Luddites still working with film. X-ray machines do cause cumulative damage to photographic film and should still be avoided whenever possible. A little forethought and understanding will keep your hard-won photos out of the garbage and on the wall where they belong!

X-rays will record on most undeveloped photographic film as white, lightening any past or future exposures on the film. The severity of the effect will vary with film speed - ISO1600 will show a large difference with just one trip through the machine, while ISO100 will show evidence of x-rays only after a few exposures to an average airport machine. The number of exposures required to turn black to grey will depend on the strength of the x-ray. Of course, developed film won't be affected, so develop any exposed film before going through an area with x-rays.

When getting on a plane, always carry your film with you instead of putting it into your checked luggage. Don't pack it in "x-ray safe" bags - airport security guards can increase the strength of the x-rays to see the contents of the bag, destroying your film. Instead, store your film unpackaged in a clear plastic bag. Put everything but your film through the machine, and politely request that the film be hand-checked. If you have made the job easy by removing all the packaging, most security guards will gladly comply.

If you do have to put your low ISO film (ISO100) through an x-ray, be sure to not repeat the performance more than twice. If you're forced to x-ray unexposed high ISO film, like ISO1600, throw it away. Depending on the strength of the x-ray machine, the film could be damaged and shouldn't be trusted to produce your potentially great future art.

If you find that a great photograph has been ruined by an x-ray machine, don't panic.

Take it to a lab and have it scanned or scan it yourself with a high-quality film scanner. If it's not severe, the overexposure and decreased contrast in the photograph can easily be removed digitally.

X-ray machines can be a thorn in the side of any traditional film photographer. However, by planning ahead, being polite, and trying your best to limit your film's exposure to x-rays, you can be confident that your photographs will arrive home safe and sound.

Photography With Low-Quality Equipment

We all know that cheap cameras take bad pictures. But let's face it - few can justify the cost of professional quality photography equipment, and still fewer want to lug 40 pounds of camera bodies, lenses, and tripods along just to take pictures! Though their abilities can be somewhat limited, consumer level SLR cameras and lenses can create great photographs too. Knowing that, here are some pointers to help you get the best photographs you can with the equipment you've got.

Lenses: Due to their lower-quality lens coatings, cheap lenses tend to flare (spill over light from a bright region of the photo) very easily. Try to avoid including an object in a photograph that is a great deal brighter than your subject. For the same reason, colour reproduction tends to be inaccurate or slightly less vivid, so inspect your finished photos to get an idea of the colour "personality" of your lens. Keep this personality in the back of your mind when making photographs in the future.

Consumer lenses, especially zooms, can be significantly less sharp than professional lenses. To create sharper photographs, try to avoid using the extreme end of the lens's zoom spectrum. For example, a 28-80mm lens will tend to be sharpest between about 35-50mm. The aperture you choose is important too. Consumer lenses tend to be sharpest around f8-f11, so try to use these apertures whenever they are practical and suit your subject. The centre of a photograph will usually be the sharpest, and the corners will usually be the blurriest. Keep this in mind when composing a photograph - don't put anything that needs to be critically sharp too near the edges of the frame.

Companies often produce economical prime (non-zoom) lenses for a price similar to their consumer level zoom lenses. Though you will miss photos with a fixed focal length, you will notice better sharpness, colour reproduction, and contrast in your final prints. As an added bonus, a wider maximum aperture will give you more flexibility in low light. I often carry only three fixed length lenses in my camera bag. The limitation of not working with zooms often works to my advantage, forcing me to move around my subject and be creative with a composition. Though many of my lenses are among the best available, one of my sharpest and most reliable lenses cost less than some haircuts!

Film and Sensors: Poor quality films and digital sensors are capable of capturing less detail than their more expensive cousins. This usually means that you will be limited to producing smaller prints than photographers using higher resolution films or digital sensors. Colour reproduction also suffers, especially in the case of poor film, and grain or noise is more obvious in both film and sensors.

For film photographers, it is possible to use higher quality film occasionally, when the shots really count, reverting back to cheap film the rest of the time. Look for film shops that sell "processing included" film - buying film this way can be a huge money-saver. For large prints, slide film of the same price is often better quality than negative film, but making many small prints is much more costly.

Digital camera owners with good software know-how should learn to "stitch" many low resolution photographs together at the edges to form a single, very high-resolution image. It takes a lot of work, but the results can be stunning and will surpass the resolution of the even the best digital cameras! As a bonus, this technique can mimic the effect of expensive wide-angle lenses, creating a very wide angle view or long, detailed panoramics.

Whether you're photographing with film or digital, use the lowest ISO possible for your intended application. Regardless of quality, using a slow film or setting will produce more colourful, detailed, and tonally rich photographs.

Expensive, high quality cameras and lenses don't have to be a precursor to great photography! With knowledge of key problems associated with bad gear, you can creatively sidestep your equipment's failings and create stunning photography on a shoestring budget. Be creative, and don't confuse great gear with great photographs!

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