



# Rick Steves' Lost Photography Tips

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A Novel Holiday Travel Guidebook

# Rick Steves' Lost Travel Photography Tips

The text in this PDF was obtained on January 18th, 2012, from the webpage below:

[http://www.ricksteves.com/plan/tips/photography\\_etbd.htm](http://www.ricksteves.com/plan/tips/photography_etbd.htm)

Unfortunately, that link is dead, and Steves no longer offers travel photography tips on his website.

Because we think that the majority of Rick's old tips are wonderful, in April of 2016, we created and posted this PDF.

- If a link within Steves' old article has a strike through it, it is no longer a good link.
- Links *without* a strike-through were still active in October of 2019.

## Travel Photography

*By Rick Steves*

Every year I ask myself whether it's worth the worry and expense of mixing photography with my travels. After I return home and I relive my trip through those pictures, the answer is always "Yes!" Here are some tips and lessons that I've learned from the photographic school of hard knocks.

Good shots are made by the photographer, not the camera. For most people, a very expensive camera is a bad idea. Your camera is more likely to be lost, broken, or stolen than anything else you'll travel with. An expensive model may not be worth the risks and headaches that accompany it.

When buying a camera, get one that will do what you want and a little bit more. You are buying one not only for the trip, but also for use later.

Don't buy a camera a day or two before you fly. Not every camera works perfectly right out of the box. Practice shooting indoors and outdoors before you leave and study the results. Check your pictures for good exposure and sharp focus. If they're not right, take it back. Do the same checks with the replacement camera. Do your learning on hometown Main Street — before you're standing at the base of the Eiffel Tower, wondering how to zoom out.

### Digital Cameras

As technology has improved and prices have plummeted, digital cameras have become the standard. I haven't taken a film camera to Europe in years. Most of the photos in this book were taken with a digital camera.

The advantages of "going digital" are many. You can view and delete photos immediately, allowing you to take several shots of a subject, then keep only the best one. You're free to experiment with artsy angles, tricky lighting, and nighttime shots without wasting film. Digital photos are also easier to share: Post your favorites on a Website, e-mail them directly to your family and friends, or print them to create an old-fashioned scrapbook. Printing digital images is getting more common and cheaper (most photo labs charge about 10–20 cents per print) — and, since you can choose only the very best pictures to print, you know they'll all be keepers.

Most digital cameras come with conventional-camera features such as a zoom lens, flash, and auto and manual focus. They also feature a handy liquid crystal display (LCD) screen, which functions as a viewfinder and allows you to review photos you've already taken. Most cameras also come with a traditional squint-through viewfinder. (The LCD screen drains batteries more quickly, but shows you a more accurate version of what the final photo will look like.) Models with a pivoting viewfinder let you sneak candid shots while looking the other way (periscope-style).

## Buying a Digital Camera

There's a wide range of digital cameras available. How to choose? Narrow down your options based on the below criteria. Ask your friends what they recommend and why. Flip through sales fliers to see which models are hot right now. (Today's bestseller will be obsolete in 6 months, so you might as well get the most up-to-date model.) Then read reviews and compare specs on your likely choices. You'll find extremely detailed technical information, in-depth professional reviews, and informal consumer reviews at [www.steves-digicams.com](http://www.steves-digicams.com), [www.dpreview.com](http://www.dpreview.com), and [www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com) (more informal reviews are at [www.epinions.com](http://www.epinions.com)).

Once you've gotten an overview, head to a store to test-drive the likely candidates. Most stores that sell digital cameras have floor models that you can try out. While camera specialty shops can be more knowledgeable than the big electronics stores, they're also more likely to work on commission (which might color their advice).

These factors will help you zoom in on your ideal camera:

**Resolution:** Digital cameras are classified by resolution — that is, by how many megapixels make up each image. (A pixel is a tiny building-block of an image, and one megapixel equals one million pixels.) Any camera that's three megapixels or more will produce crisp images and suitable 4" x 6" prints. The more megapixels, the sharper the image — and the better it'll look when printed (especially for larger prints). As camera prices drop, and high-quality four- and five-megapixel cameras become affordable, it's hard to justify buying a three-megapixel model just to save a few bucks — and buying anything smaller than three megapixels just doesn't make sense.

**Brand-name:** Digital cameras are available from most traditional camera makers (such as Nikon, Olympus, Canon, and Minolta), as well as from electronics or computer companies (such as Sony and Hewlett-Packard). Many avid photographers already have a favorite brand, but anyone who wants decent images should pay a little extra for a big name-brand, rather than the no-name cheapos you'll see advertised.

**Size:** If you travel a lot, you might prefer a camera that's as lightweight as possible. Several models — often called "compact" or "ultracompact" — are almost as small as a deck of cards but can still take high-resolution pictures. I used to have a bigger camera, but found that I was inclined to use it less — it was just too bulky to hassle with. Now that I have a pocket-size camera, I take it with me just about everywhere, and can pop it out anytime something catches my eye. There are trade-offs — smaller cameras have, by definition, smaller lenses, and the image quality can suffer slightly. Serious

photographers who prefer SLR film cameras can consider more elaborate SLR-type digital cameras (with interchangeable lenses and a satisfying, old-fashioned shutter click). These cameras — which are available only in high-resolution versions — are expensive and bulky, but produce beautiful, professional-looking images.

**Ease of use:** Some cameras are made for first-time users, with only a few bells and whistles to negotiate. Other types appeal to semi-pro photographers, requiring you to sit down with a manual to figure out how to use the flash. If you're buying a new camera, ask lots of questions in the store and get a good demo on everything you'll need to do (zoom in, delete bad photos, transfer pictures to a computer's hard drive, turn the viewfinder on and off to save battery power, etc.).

When talking to friends and reading reviews, keep in mind these other important features: the ability to take pictures indoors and in low light (make sure it has a good light-metering system), a simple control that turns off the flash (since flash photos are prohibited in most museums), a good wide-angle lens (and/or a panoramic option), and the ability to switch "compression settings" (how many pixels make up your image — and how much room those images take up on your memory card). Also, see how long the camera takes to "warm up" once you turn it on and between photos. Some high-megapixel cameras take a while to go from shot to shot — and can cost you spontaneity as you try to capture a fleeting moment.

## Digital Camera Accessories

Though you can forego the film, there are several other accessories and add-ons to consider for your digital camera.

**Memory:** Digital cameras store photos on a memory card. You can choose how high-resolution you want your images to be; the higher the resolution, the more memory each image takes up. There are different types of memory cards (including CompactFlash, Secure Digital, and Sony's Memory Stick, depending on your camera), and different sizes of memory cards (ranging from 16 megabytes to 1 gigabyte). Most cameras come with a chart explaining how many images will fit on different sizes of memory card, depending on the resolution that you choose. For example, I travel with a five-megapixel camera and a 512-megabyte Memory Stick (which cost me about \$90). Taking photos at high resolution, I can fit about 200 photos onto my memory card. For more tips on storing your images — especially on a long trip — see below.

**Batteries:** Some digital cameras come with a battery that can be recharged; others take AA batteries (which the camera will burn through amazingly quickly). Rechargeable AA batteries last much longer than disposable alkalines, and are significantly cheaper in the long run — you can buy a good set of rechargeable nickel-metal hydride (NiMH) batteries and a charger for about \$20. Before you buy, make sure the charger will work in Europe (look for the numbers "110V" and "220V" — see "Electronics," page TK), and take an adapter to plug it in.

**TV adapter cable:** Many cameras come with a cable that allows you to plug directly into a TV set. If you're staying at a hotel in Europe with a modern TV, you can enjoy a big-screen digital slideshow while you're still on the road.

For other accessories that work with both digital and non-digital cameras, see "A Galaxy of Gadgets," below.

## Storing Digital Images

The biggest disadvantage of a digital camera is the dilemma of how to store all of your photos when you're on a lengthy trip. The easiest solution is to edit your images ruthlessly and often, keeping only the very best shots. (The people who wind up watching your slideshow will thank you for it.) But even the most selective shutterbug will start to run out of room after a week or so on the road.

**Upload to a laptop.** Since I usually travel with a laptop, I can simply upload my photos to my computer every so often. But it's not practical for most travelers to carry a laptop, so you'll have to consider other options.

[A Novel Holiday authors and contributors promote traveling with a small travel laptop. Not only is it easier to Email & Blog each night with a little laptop (creating a diary of your daily activities and experiences), you can upload photos to it each evening and clear your camera's memory card. Filed in Folders that begin with the month(space)day(space)year (04 03 2016, 04 04 2016, etc...), your photos will be stored in the order they were taken.]

**Don't skimp on memory.** Buy the biggest memory card you can afford. While it may seem excessive to spend as much as a third of the price of the camera on memory [2016 Note: They aren't that expensive anymore!], having a massive memory card gives you flexibility when it comes to how many shots you can keep. Consider investing in a second memory card to increase your capacity (these are available in Europe, but they're more expensive). [2016 Note: If you won't be traveling with a laptop, purchase and pack several massive memory cards.]

**Consider lower resolution.** [2016 Note: This segment is no longer valid, and was removed.]

**Empty your memory card as you go.** Many European photo stores and Internet cafés can now burn your images to a CD, allowing you to free up space on your camera's memory card. This costs only about \$5-10 per CD, and it's well worth the expense to allow you to keep snapping away. A backup CD can also provide peace of mind; if anything happens to your camera, your images are safe on a CD in your suitcase.

## Non-Digital Cameras

If you prefer film, here are the options.

**Disposables:** The simple choice for an amateur photographer is a disposable or "single-use" camera. Disposables cost as little as \$7 for 24 exposures of 400-speed film. A cheap panorama camera, with a very wide-angle lens for 180-degree shots, can be a fun supplement (\$15).

**Point-and-shoot:** Compact little “focus-free” cameras (\$25–50) allow minimal creative control but take decent pictures. They’re inexpensive, fragile, and, when broken, usually just tossed out.

The more expensive point-and-shoot cameras (\$50–350) have autofocus and a wide-angle 38 mm lens. Models over \$100 come with a few helpful bells and whistles and a small adjustable zoom lens of 38–70 mm. The pricier cameras have lenses that zoom from 28 to 105 mm.

If you spend less than \$100, you’ll get a cheap camera that might not last much longer than the trip.

**Single-lens reflex (SLR):** Those shooting slides should stick with a good SLR (\$200–1,000).

Regardless of advertising claims, there’s no real difference between the mind of Minolta and the mind of Pentax, Nikon, or Canon. The trend in SLRs is toward autofocus lenses, but most of these units have a manual focus–override switch. For traveling, the quick and accurate autofocus is handy, but creative photographers will also want the manual capabilities.

**Lenses:** Your best all-around lens is an f/3.5 28–70 mm or 80 mm “midrange” zoom lens, which ranges between \$120 and \$300. No, it’s not as fast as an f/1.7, but with the fine-grain ASA-400 films on the market today, it’s almost like having an f/1.7 lens.

**Filters:** Make sure all your lenses have a haze or UV filter (\$15). It’s better to bang and smudge up your filter than your lens. The only other filter you might use is a polarizer, which eliminates reflections and enhances color separation, but you can lose up to two stops in speed with it. Never use more than one filter at a time.

**Batteries:** Remember to leave home with fresh batteries in your camera (and it doesn’t hurt to bring a spare). [These days, most camera batteries are rechargeable. Bring at least one EXTRA battery, and don’t forget to pack the charger!]

**Gadget bag:** The most functional and economical is simply a small nylon stuff bag made for hikers. When I’m taking a lot of pictures, I like to wear a nylon belt pouch (designed to carry a canteen). This is a handy way to have your different lenses and filters readily accessible, allowing you to make necessary changes quickly and easily. **A formal camera bag is unnecessary and attracts thieves.**

**Film:** When choosing film, go with 400-speed film in 36-exposure rolls. Print films are all about the same. You’ll see more difference between the print processors than between the films. With slide film, stick with the films that are known as E-6 developing (Ektachrome, Fujichrome, and so on). They can be developed overnight in most large cities, and usually cost less, too. Kodak film is cheapest in the United States. In Europe, buy film in department stores or camera shops rather than for rip-off prices at the sights. Fuji and Konica are reasonable in Europe.

If you’re concerned about your film being damaged by airport X-ray scanners, you have several choices: 1) ask the security personnel to hand-check your film (no guarantee that they’ll consent); 2)

buy slow film (under ASA 400), which is less likely to get fogged by X-rays; 3) buy and develop your film abroad (more expensive than at home); or 4) switch to digital.

## A Galaxy of Gadgets



The Vatican Museum staircase: have fun with composition and find creative new angles.

Photo: Dominic Arizona Bonuccelli

Like many hobbies, photography allows you to spend endless amounts of money on accessories. The following are particularly useful to the traveling photographer:

**Mini-tripod:** About five inches high, this great little gadget screws into most cameras, sprouts three legs, and holds the camera perfectly still for slow shutter speeds, timed exposures, and automatic shutter-release shots. (It looks like a small lunar-landing module.) Because the flash on my digital camera gives a harsh image, I prefer to use existing light — which often requires a tripod. A conventional tripod is too large to lug around Europe. Those without a mini-tripod use a tiny beanbag (or sock filled with rice) or get good at balancing their camera on anything solid and adjusting the tilt with the lens cap or strap.

**Tissue, cleaner, and lens cap:** A lens-cleaning tissue and a small bottle of cleaning solution are wise additions to any gadget bag. You can leave your protective camera case at home and protect your lens with a cap that dangles on its string when you're shooting.

## Tricks for a Good Shot

The principles of good photography apply to both digital and film cameras. Most people are limited by their skills, not by their camera. Understand your camera. Devour the manual. Shoot experimental shots, take notes, and see what happens. If you don't understand f-stops or depth of field, find a photography class or book and learn (for tips on taking pictures, visit [www.photosecrets.com](http://www.photosecrets.com) <http://photosecrets.com/travel-photography-tips> and [www.betterphoto.com](http://www.betterphoto.com)). Camera stores sell good books on photography in general and travel photography in particular. I shutter to think how many people are underexposed and lacking depth in this field.

**A sharp eye connected to a wild imagination will be your most valuable piece of equipment.**

Develop a knack for what will look good and be interesting after the trip. The skilled photographer's eye sees striking light, shade, form, lines, patterns, texture, and colors. With a digital camera, you have unlimited freedom to experiment, without worrying about paying for film and developing.

**Look for a new slant to an old sight.** Postcard-type shots are boring. Everyone knows what the Eiffel Tower looks like. Find a unique or different approach to sights that everyone has seen. Shoot the bell tower through the horse's legs or lay your camera on the floor to shoot the Gothic ceiling.

**Capture the personal and intimate details of your trip.** Show how you lived, who you met, and what made each day an adventure (a close-up of a picnic, your leech bite, laundry day, or a local schoolboy playing games with his nose).



Fill the lens with your subject.

**Vary your perspective.** You can shoot close, far, low, high, during the day, and at night. Don't fall into the rut of always centering a shot. Use foregrounds to add color, depth, and interest to landscapes.

**Get close.** Notice details. Get closer, real close. Eliminate distractions. Get so close that you show only one thing. Don't try to show it all in one shot. For any potentially great shot, I invest several exposures.

**Be bold and break rules.** For instance, we are told never to shoot into the sun. But some into-the-sun shots bring surprising results. Try to use bad weather to your advantage. Experiment with strange or difficult light situations. Buy a handbook on shooting photos in existing light

**Maximize good lighting.** Real photographers get single-minded at the magic hours — early morning and late afternoon — when the sun is very low and the colors glow. Plan for these times. Grab bright colors. Develop an eye for great lighting; any time of day you may luck into a perfectly lit scene.



The best people shots are up close and well lit, with a soft background.

**People are the most interesting subjects.**

It takes nerve to walk up to people and take their picture. It can be difficult, but if you want some great shots, be nervy.

**Ask for permission.** (In any language, point at your camera and ask, "Photo?") Your subject will probably be delighted.

Try to show action. A candid is better than a posed shot. Even a "posed candid" shot is better than a posed one. Give your subject something to do. Challenge the kid in the market to juggle oranges.

Many photographers take a second shot immediately after the first portrait to capture a looser, warmer subject.

If the portrait isn't good, you probably weren't close enough. My best portraits are so close that the entire head can't fit into the frame.

**Buildings, in general, are not interesting.** It does not matter if Karl Marx or Beethoven was born there — a house is as dead as its former resident. As travel photographers gain experience, they take more people shots and fewer buildings or general landscapes.



**Expose for your subject.** Even if your camera is automatic, your subject can turn out a silhouette. Meter without the sky. Get those faces in the sun or lit from the side.

**Don't be afraid to handhold a slow shot.** At most major museums, you're not allowed to use a flash (which ages paintings) or a tripod. Tripods enable you to take professional (profitable) shots that could compete with the museum gift shop's. (Nearly every important museum has a good selection of top-quality slides, cards, and prints at reasonable prices.)

Despite these restrictions, you can take good shots by holding your camera as still as possible. If you can lean against a wall, for instance, you become a tripod instead of a bipod. **Use a self-timer, which clicks the shutter more smoothly than your finger can.** With these tricks, I get good pictures inside a museum at 1/30 of a second.

**Bracket shots when the lighting is tricky.** The best way to get good shots in difficult lighting situations is to bracket your shots by trying several different exposures of the same scene. With a digital camera, you can simply delete the unsuccessful attempts, but this approach is even worthwhile with a film camera. You'll have to throw out a few slides, but one good shot is worth several in the garbage can. Automatic cameras usually meter properly up to 8 or 10 seconds, which makes night shots easy, though bracketing may still be necessary.

**You could make a scrapbook on the flight home.** Some scrapbookers buy a book and get their prints developed at their last stop in Europe. Then they happily pass the hours on the long flight home putting together their vacation scrapbook.

**Limit your slideshow.** Nothing is worse than suffering through an endless parade of lackluster and look-alike shots. If putting together a slideshow (digital or otherwise), set a limit and prune your show down until it bleeds. Keep it tight. Keep it moving. Leave the audience crying for more ... or at least awake.

### Traveling with a Video Camera

With video cameras getting better, smaller, and more affordable, more and more Americans are compromising a potentially footloose and fancy-free vacation to get a memory on videotape. To me, a still camera is trouble enough. But thousands of amateur videographers happily seeing Europe through their viewfinders can't all be wrong.

[If you can upload your memory card to a laptop each night, you can shoot all the MINI-videos you want with your regular digital camera without compromising memory space for more valuable still photos. If not traveling with a laptop, consider bringing a GoPro video camera with you.]

**Stow that camera.** When not using your camera or camcorder, stow it in your day bag. Many go through their entire trip with a camera bouncing on their belly. That's a tourist's badge that puts a psychological wall between you and Europe. To locals, it just screams, "Yodel."