

Ten Tips for the Part-Time Photo Enthusiast

by Randy C. Finch

If you are like me, then you have a full-time job doing something other than photography. But you thoroughly enjoy taking pictures, enhancing them on your computer, printing them out, and sharing them with friends and family. Heck, you may even submit photos to an occasional contest. In addition, you may find yourself becoming frustrated that you just don't have the time to do everything you want to do with your photography. You may be thinking, "If I can just make it to retirement, I'll have more time for my photographic endeavors." Well, you might not use the word "endeavors," but you get my drift. If all this sounds like you, then you are indeed like me. So, needing some guidelines, I decided to put together some tips that would help me keep things in perspective while awaiting that elusive retirement phase of my life. Perhaps they will help you also.

Tip #1. Plan Ahead

Since your time is limited, it's a good idea to plan a place, date, and time for shooting photographs. Make an appointment with yourself by putting it on your calendar. Most of us find this a natural thing to do when preparing for a vacation. We will plan where we are going, where we are staying, and what sites we want to see and photograph while there. However, it seems less natural to plan this way for shooting photos of local areas. This is probably due to these local areas becoming old hat and thus not seeming as interesting as remote places that we seldom see. Don't fall into this trap. Try to think like a visitor. Ask yourself, "What would I find interesting to photograph if I lived elsewhere and was only here for a few days?" Make a list of these sites and plan times to photograph them before or after work or on a weekend. Even if you have photographed some of these areas before, keep in mind that different seasons and different weather conditions can make for a fresh view of a familiar spot.



This waterfall is within 10 miles of home and was photographed during a planned family outing.

Tip #2. Be Creative

Okay, so you've planned ahead, you arrive at your destination (whether local or remote), and you are presented with an unexciting view. Perhaps the season is wrong, or the weather is wrong. Whatever it is, the scenery just seems dull. What do you do? Pack up and go home? No! Stay and shoot. It's times like these that can get your creative juices flowing. Make a conscious effort to find something interesting to photograph, even under the current conditions. If the overall scenic view is poor, try looking for smaller objects like plants and animals. Perhaps a different perspective or cropping will help. If you look carefully enough, you should be able to find something that will translate into at least a few interesting pictures.

While on a trip to Monticello (Thomas Jefferson's home) with my son's sixth grade class, the weather was dreary. It was cool and overcast with a mist in the air. I heard others talking about their disappointment over not being able to get good pictures under those conditions. I, on the other hand, decided to look for possible photos that would be enhanced by the weather conditions rather than hindered by them. While some of my pictures did indeed come out drab, I was successful at others. So, don't give up. Learn to turn your lemons into lemonade.



Monticello on a misty morning. The colorful flowers in the foreground made for a much more interesting photograph, and the gray mist provided a backdrop that made the flowers “pop.”

Tip #3. Be Prepared

Although planning ahead is good, there are times when a photo op presents itself at an unexpected time. Be prepared for these occasions. The primary way to prepare is to always have a camera with you. In the past, before the digital camera era, this was sometimes difficult. Most cameras capable of taking decent pictures were bulky. However, nowadays this is no longer true. Very good, very small digital cameras are now ubiquitous. Even if your primary camera is a bulky high-end point-and-shoot or SLR, get a small lightweight digital camera that you can take with you all the time. Sure, it may not have the long zoom or the ability to shoot at high ISOs with low noise, but it will work just fine in most situations. I personally own a small Pentax Optio 550 with a 5-MP sensor and a 5x retractable zoom lens. It fits in a small camera bag that I can attach to my belt. Since it uses SD cards that are fairly small, I can also stash two additional cards, an extra battery, and a wireless remote in the bag with the camera. I have owned this camera for over two years and it has worked great for me. Now, smaller cameras with bigger, brighter LCD displays at lower prices are available. So there are no excuses.



On my way to work, I was able to stop and capture this photograph of The Nina sitting in a foggy harbor because I had my camera with me. I learned later that The Nina left the harbor just a few hours after I captured this photo. (The Nina is a replica of one of Columbus' boats.)

Tip #4. Don't Fret, Enjoy

How many times have you been driving down the road on your way to work or an important meeting and suddenly happen on a perfect picture-taking opportunity? You are prepared, camera at the ready. Your first inclination is to pull over and start snapping, but suddenly you realize that there just isn't enough time to stop. You would be late to work or your appointment. Your frustration level begins to rise, and you think to yourself, "I may never have another opportunity like this one." My advice: Get Over It! Life is more than photographs. Work is important. Family is important. Many other things are important. Just keep in mind that even though another photo op like the one you missed may never come your way, *other* photo ops *will* come your way. You must simply quit fretting about the ones that got away and begin concentrating on the joy you feel over the ones you got.

Tip #5. Balance Your Time

I have already mentioned the need to balance work, family and friends, and photography. Another aspect of balance is how much time you spend taking photos versus how much time you spend doing something with your photos such as making computer enhancements, printing, creating slideshows, posting on the Web, submitting to competitions etc. This can sometimes be a tough fence to straddle. If you spend all your time snapping pictures and none doing anything with them, your time is wasted since nobody ever gets to enjoy your creative efforts. On the other hand, if you only take a few photos and spend tons of time in the digital darkroom, you will begin to lose your creative picture taking skills. Be aware of this balance and try planning time for both activities.



By spending some time in the digital darkroom rather than out shooting more photographs, I was able to put together this interesting composite entitled “Keeping Watch.”

Tip #6. Go With the Flow

Since you are not a professional photographer, you do not have the luxury of going to a location, scouting out the good viewpoints for making images, and then spending several days moving between those locations at different times of the day. Normally, when you are on a photographic trip or vacation, you are committed to a certain time schedule. Therefore, you will usually not have time to scout out a location and plan the perfect shot at the perfect time. You must work with what you have at the time you arrive and then move on to the next location. When you find that the photos you are taking in one location are not what you were hoping for, don’t sweat it; just go with the flow. Anticipate that the next location you visit will make up for the current one.

This happened to me several times on a recent vacation out west. My family and I would be at a location where I was hoping to get some excellent photos. But rain would set in and mess up my photo shoot. I simply kept a good attitude and trusted that we would arrive at our next destination at a better time than we would have had we been able to stay longer at our current location. And indeed this happened several times. So don't get frustrated, just go with the flow.



I was able to capture this beautiful scene only because the weather compelled us to leave other sites prematurely.

Tip #7. Look for Interesting Composites

Professional photographers wrestle with finding just the right locations and just the right times of day to get the photos they are after. Even so, many times they still do not get exactly what they want. Oftentimes they have to use filters or various exposures to assist with the colors they are after. Even so, they still may spend a fair amount of time performing computer manipulations to get the image they had originally visualized. As non-professional photographers, we have an even more difficult time getting the images we want. For instance, we may have only been able to photograph a location during the day, when we really wanted to photograph at sunset. This being so, don't be afraid to play around with compositing multiple photographs to get an image you want. Many times this is as simple as replacing the sky in one photo with that of another and possibly tweaking the hue of one to match the other. Sometimes it can be more complex, but still worth the effort. Just make sure that, when asked, you are honest about the fact that it is a composite.



Although I was able to get a good sunset shot of Monument Valley on a recent vacation, the sky was uninteresting. By combining the Monument Valley photo with a sunset photo taken from my front yard, I was able to get the image I really wanted.

Tip #8. Spread Out the Work

Sometimes you will want to tackle a more complex project with your photos, but you will want to complete it in a week. Don't put yourself in this type of stressful situation with unrealistic goals. Spread the work out over a period of time and let other people know that it's going to take a while to finish the project. Earlier I mentioned a trip I took with my son's sixth grade class a few years back. The trip was in May, near the end of the school year. I decided that I wanted to create a Powerpoint presentation for each of the eight days of the trip and add comical thought and speech bubbles to some of the people pictures. This was a labor of love, for if I had not loved doing it, the labor would not have been forthcoming. I knew that the project was going to take a long time since I had other things to do besides create the slideshows. So, I worked on the project in small pieces. Ultimately, it was three to four months later that I completed the project. I copied the presentations to CDs and gave a copy to each family that went on the trip. I received very

positive feedback, which was nice. The point is that had I tried putting the project together in short order, it would not have been any good, and no one would have been interested in looking at it. So, spread out the work; pace yourself.

Tip #9. Don't Get Bugged Down in Detail

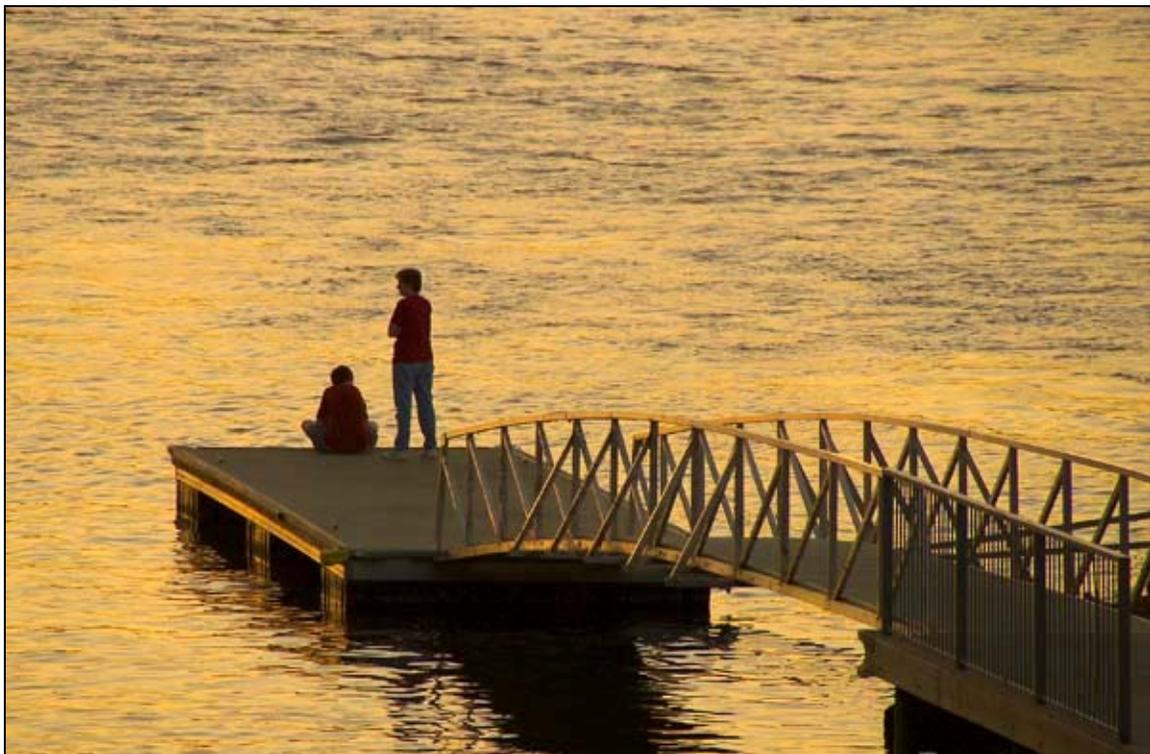
Many times when I load a photo into Photoshop or Paint Shop Pro (the two editors I use most), I start looking at all the options available and begin thinking that I should do more to the photo than is really necessary. I also read about all the detailed manipulations the professionals are writing about in books and magazines and think I need to apply these techniques to all of my photos. Then reality hits and I say, "IMPOSSIBLE!" I just don't have the time to spend getting every little detail perfect before printing and showing my photographs. You probably don't have the time for this either. The truth is that for most photographs, all you will ever need to do to them is apply some of the following: Levels, Curves, Saturation, and Cropping. Also, sharpening is good once you have set the appropriate print size. Sometimes you don't even need most of these. Of course, if you are preparing a print for framing or submission to a competition, you will want to do everything possible, including burning and dodging, etc., to make a perfect print. But for day-to-day prints, Emails, and Web uploads, very little adjustment is needed to complete your images. So, don't waste your time doing them, save that for the really important photos.



This is a photo straight out of my digital camera. No enhancements were made.

Tip #10. Involve Your Family

Between my work, my wife's work, and my son's school, it is hard finding the time to do pleasant things together as a family except for eating dinner (and I do love to eat). That is why I enjoy planning a photo expedition around a family outing. One thing my family enjoys doing together is to visit a scenic area and hike. This is a good time to take along my camera and take a few pictures. Perhaps your family likes to go on picnics together, go boating, or spend time driving through the countryside. Whatever it may be, try to tie it in with taking photos. One of the problems you may run into, as do I, is balancing the photo-taking with the family activities. You need to work out a compromise with your family members. For instance, it is understood that when my family and I are hiking, I will sometimes fall behind them as I stop and snap a few pictures. They will slow down some and I will walk faster after taking the pictures to get caught up. So, it's important that I learn to spot good photo opportunities as I am walking. You will need to develop some appropriate techniques based on the activities in which your family engages. Just be careful scouting out those skyward shots while walking along a foot-wide path with a 50-foot drop-off and no railing!



This photograph was taken on recent hiking trip with my family. That's my wife and son at the end of the pier.

Conclusion

It is challenging being an enthusiastic photographer that has limited time to pursue his or her passion. But, with diligence, a proper balance of photography and other important

aspects of life can be achieved. I sincerely hope the ten tips I have presented will help you reach this goal. Ciao.