

Gearing Up—Notes on Travel and Photographic Gear

Our Photo Safaris provide a very wide variety of subjects for the traveling photographer, including landscape, wildlife and cultural themes. Within every trip we find that each participant has his or her own photographic interests and their own preferences about gear. As camera manufacturers vary widely in equipment, there is no one-size-fits-all formula for photo gear and its transportation. We offer these guidelines as a reference and realize that the information supplied is subject to your level of interest, equipment owned, and how frequently you photograph in the field during the year.

All of the photo tours we offer are geared for 35mm digital photography, with Four Thirds and mirrorless digital camera systems also common on our trips. However, you should always feel free to bring whatever format you want to work with. Please make sure the gear you choose fits the trip as outlined on our website or in the itinerary. For example, a 4x5 view camera is not suitable for shooting wildlife action!

For trips where wildlife photography is the prime objective, we suggest a zoom telephoto lens in the 100-400mm range and/or a "prime" lens ranging in size from 300mm to 500mm, plus a 1.4x teleconverter for 35mm cameras. (If you are serious about shooting wildlife, sooner or later a 500mm lens will become your lens of choice!) For tours during wildflower season, a macro-capable lens and extension tube set is useful for close-up work. As always, lenses are a matter of personal preference, but it's a good idea to include wide-angle, "normal," and medium telephoto lenses to allow you to take advantage of a wide variety of subjects. Most of your lens needs can be fulfilled by the excellent quality zoom lenses produced by the brand name camera manufacturers (e.g., Nikon or Canon) or by some independent producers like Tamron or Sigma (check with your camera dealer for their recommendations regarding these lenses). A typical camera bag might contain a 16-35mm zoom, 35-70mm zoom, 80-200mm zoom, 100-400mm zoom (or a straight 300mm telephoto), plus a 500mm telephoto. If you are shopping for a versatile telephoto lens, an image-stabilized 100-400mm zoom lens (for Canon) or a vibration-reduction 80-400mm zoom (for Nikon) is a great place to start.

Many locations we visit are far from a convenient camera or hardware store, so when packing, remember to bring spare batteries, a set of jeweler's screwdrivers, and a set of hex keys (Allen wrenches) to tighten tripod legs and lens base plates. "Krazy" glue and a small roll of duct tape are useful additions to your kit. A polarizing filter and battery chargers are often forgotten accessories. Include an extra camera body in case your primary body malfunctions. To obtain really sharp images we strongly recommend a tripod for crisp landscape images and to support telephoto lenses. A bean bag is a must if you are going to Africa (bean bags are often provided by our in-country suppliers or directions for making the ideal safari bean bag will be provided in

the practical information handout for your Africa tour). For travel where baggage weight is an important consideration, bring the lightest sturdy tripod possible; consider a carbon fiber model.

The major camera manufacturers produce flash units that have through-the-lens (TTL) metering capabilities for fill flash that virtually anyone can operate with a minimum of instruction. Some photographers use them constantly—particularly for wildlife and human portraiture—while others always prefer to use natural light. Most photographers use them “occasionally.” TTL flash units can easily be ruined if used in rain or falling snow.

Below is a general list of 35mm equipment you should consider, keeping in mind the type of trip you are joining—and possible weight limitations due to small charter aircraft, if used on your tour. With some exceptions, **it is not a requirement that you run out and purchase all of this gear, but you will find it useful to bring the recommended gear if you have it**. You will probably discover a few more "toys" you will "need" after you see other participants' equipment. "Equipment lust" is a communicable disease! The individual tour's practical information handout (supplied at final billing) may have a few alternative camera gear recommendations that pertain to the specific trip in which you are enrolled—**but it is a rare trip that will vary from the list below!** Except for the flash and the 500mm and macro lenses, the following inventory is what most of our leaders will bring on virtually **every trip** they lead. Many of us simply leave our gear packed in our camera bag all the time. We are always ready to photograph—even at home!

- 2 camera bodies—the same manufacturer that will fit all your lenses
- Long fixed telephoto lens—500mm (or larger in some cases for **wildlife**-focused tours)
- Medium telephoto—180 to 200mm fixed lens or, for maximum versatility, an 80-200mm zoom plus a highly recommended 100-400mm zoom or equivalent
- "Normal" lens (50mm), possibly with macro feature, or a 35-70mm zoom
- Wide-angle lens—20 to 35mm or the equivalent zoom
- Macro-capable lens (105mm or 200mm) for tours featuring flowers, human portraits etc.
- 1.4x teleconverter for the "biggest" telephoto—same brand as lens
- Extension tubes
- Tripod and ballhead or pan head (we almost all prefer ballheads and recommend those from [Really Right Stuff](#))
- Flash with automatic TTL fill flash capabilities
- Photo backpack or rolling camera bag (depending on destination)
- Lens tissue and cleaning fluid
- Blower ball for dust
- Microfiber cloth
- Circular polarizing filter(s)
- Split neutral density filters (not as important as the polarizer)

- Camera battery charger and cords
- Extra rechargeable camera battery and disposable batteries (lots of them) for other gear—visit <http://www.tsa.gov> for current information on lithium battery restrictions on aircraft
- Jeweler's screwdrivers—always packed in checked luggage
- Hex keys (Allen wrenches)
- Swiss Army knife—always packed in checked luggage
- Leatherman multitool with pliers—always packed in checked luggage
- Plastic trash bags as rain cover (trash compactor bags are better as they are more durable)
- Cable or electronic shutter release
- Laptop computer
- Mouse (remember cordless units cannot be used on an airplane!)
- AC adapter and cords for computer
- **Photoshop** and/or **Lightroom** for your laptop
- CompactFlash cards (**at least** four 16GB cards or equivalent)
- CompactFlash card reader and a backup
- External hard drives for backup (we recommend a minimum of two 500GB USB "bus powered" drives that are powered by the laptop's USB port)
- Sensor cleaning supplies
- Multiple electrical plug adapter (or a power strip) to gain more electric outlets in your hotel room for simultaneous downloading and recharging
- Smart phone—to make a short video, email a snapshot to a friend, **use as an alarm clock**

Although this is a long list, **for ease of transportation we recommend you pack the minimum amount of equipment necessary to photograph the kinds of subjects that interest you**, as you will occasionally shuttle photo gear in and out of vans and buses, from ship to shore or, in some cases, from plane to plane. If possible, avoid placing delicate equipment in your checked airline baggage. If this must be done, be sure to use a well-padded hard camera case like a Pelican (brand) or pack some of your gear, well-wrapped with clothing, in a hard-sided suitcase. As carry-on baggage limits (both domestic and international) shrink, more and more photographers are compelled to check their gear as baggage in a hard-sided case. Traveling on a business class ticket may allow a greater carry-on allowance (can be particularly useful on stricter non-US airlines). Consider getting and using an airline credit card to accumulate miles to upgrade your future tickets.

Virtually all airlines with scheduled jet service post restrictions on checked baggage allowance and weight. Most countries' airlines around the world have more restrictive checked and carry-

on baggage limits than US-based carriers. Staying within these limits is usually not a problem for most people on most airlines. But for those international (and some US domestic) airlines with more stringent baggage allowance and weight restrictions, **participants can usually resolve this problem by paying their own excess baggage charges.** There is no easy answer as to how to avoid putting some camera gear, such as tripods, battery chargers and, occasionally, big lenses, into your checked luggage. For carry-on bags in this situation, a couple of quality zoom lenses (particularly the newest image stabilization and vibration reduction varieties) can demonstrate their great range, versatility and (generally) reduced size.

There is no standard panacea for the carry-on dilemma due, in part, to broad variations in internationally-owned and US airlines and TSA rules. On US domestic airlines you are usually allowed one carry-on bag plus a small "personal item." Within the US there is normally no problem taking a camera backpack and computer briefcase onto a full-sized jet (this may differ on regional commuter flights due to cabin/overhead space). Today trip participants usually pack a laptop computer, several external hard drives, (possibly) a camera body, other small digital accessories, and their prescription drugs in a briefcase as their personal item. A camera backpack is a good way to transport the daily gear you will need on the trip, thereby avoiding the discomfort of lugging an over-the-shoulder bag. Avoid jumbo "pro-sized" camera packs that may be rejected as carry-on luggage. Some of our trips are operated in areas where wheeled ("rolling") camera bags may be used in lieu of a backpack. Remember, whatever photo gear you bring, **you** should be able to comfortably carry it!

Some of our tours have specific weight restrictions for camera gear combined with personal luggage due to the use of small chartered aircraft that simply cannot carry the same weight and bulk as a Boeing 747. These restrictions are necessary for your safety and are to be taken seriously. On these flights we can occasionally get a bit more gear transported than the stated maximum, but it is best to pare down your non-essential equipment on these trips.
Joseph Van Os Photo Safaris, Inc. cannot be held responsible for excess or overweight baggage being denied timely transportation.

US federal regulations prohibit the locking of checked baggage with anything but specific TSA-approved locks. These are generally flimsy and relatively easy to remove, so they provide only minimal security. A sturdy strap around your baggage to prevent accidental opening is a practical alternative.

For international flights, you may want to have a list of your equipment and the serial numbers with you and take this to the US Customs office before your flight. You can transfer this data to CBP form #4457 and have the signed form with you for your return to the US. This will avoid arguments with agents and possible payment of duty on gear you already owned. **In practice, most photographers generally ignore this procedure and are rarely made to**

account for their photo gear at US Customs. **But**, if you are questioned about your photo gear, the agents won't care whether you are arriving from a camera-exporting country like Japan or a camera-importing country like Canada—you must prove where the items were purchased! This form can be used again and again, but needs to be amended at the customs office if your camera equipment (and laptop computers, binoculars, etc.) or serial numbers are different than those on the list. You must bring all your gear with you to the customs office to prove ownership at the time of registration.

Two final notes: As you go out into nature to photograph its incredible beauty, it is helpful if you have done a bit of advance homework so that you have a cursory working knowledge about the environment you are about to immerse yourself in. Most areas are now covered by a wealth of field guides and natural history books and videos. Your advance preparation will greatly enhance your enjoyment of the area and your advance knowledge of the behaviors of the animals you may encounter will actually improve your photography as well.

And, **always download your camera's instruction manual** onto your laptop or tablet so you constantly have it with you when you travel. There is nothing more useful than having the manual handy when there is a need to troubleshoot a camera problem.