Photographic Hints and Tips

It might sound obvious, but the most important thing when taking that photo of a life time is to have a camera with you! Whatever the camera, everything else is secondary. All modern cameras, even in mobile phones, are capable of taking good images and how well the picture turns out is down to you.

- If possible, take time to compose the image.
- Avoid putting the subject directly in the centre or having the horizon running through the middle. The end result will usually be better if these are offset. Half press the shutter to focus, then recompose while holding the shutter down so that the camera does not refocus.
- Have a main subject that is clearly visible, but don't crop too tight and allow some space around it.
- Diagonal element(s) often strengthen a composition.
- Watch out for features such as a fence in the middle of the picture that could divide it in two.
- If you are taking a picture of a person or other animate subject, allow space for the subject to look into, unless you are shooting directly head on.
- If the subject is a landscape, foreground interest such as rock will give depth to the image.
- If there is a feature such as a path, try to use it to guide the viewer into the image.
- Check the viewfinder or screen for unwanted elements around the edges as these can be distracting.
- Beware of backgrounds that divert attention from the main subject, e.g. a lamppost growing out of someone's head!
- With a digital camera, examine the screen afterwards to see if there any obvious problems. Remember that you can zoom in to make sure the picture is sharp.
- Try not to delete images at the time. A picture can look very different when you see it later on a computer monitor.

So you are now ready to take that competition winning picture. Allow the camera to focus and then gently squeeze the shutter. If the light is dull, support the camera on a wall or railing to help prevent a blurred picture.

The shot's taken, now what? Try experimenting to see if you can get more from the scene. What happens if you move to a different position or change the angle? Can you zoom in to pick out a detail or zoom out for a wider view?

You might later find that an alternative or unusual viewpoint yields a picture you prefer. It costs nothing to experiment when using digital and even film costs are insignificant compared to how much you might have spent travelling to the location.

Out of the box, your camera will normally give good results, but can be fooled in certain conditions. To get from good to great, you can help it along if you have read the manual and know how to alter the settings when circumstances are not optimal. Some useful controls for digital models are:

ISO. This controls the sensitivity of the camera's sensor. The lower settings, such as 100 or 200, give the best quality, but it can be increased to compensate for dull or dark conditions.

Histogram. It may sound scary, but if your camera has this facility it is a useful way of checking exposure when you've got your shot. If the bulk of the histogram is over to the left, this indicates under exposure, while on the right indicates over exposure. The best results are obtained when most of the histogram is in the middle. Over exposure is particularly bad as detail is irretrievably lost, but under exposed areas can often be adjusted later on a computer using image manipulation software.

Correct Exposure

Under Exposure

Over Exposure
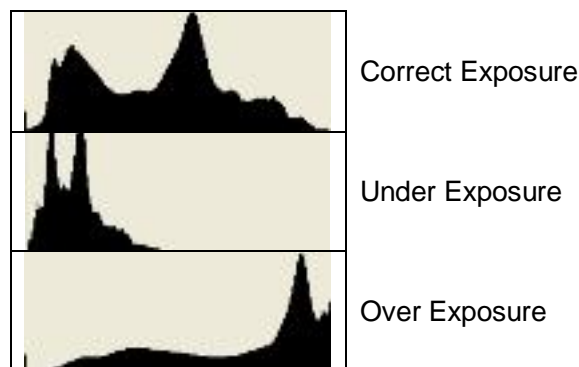
Exposure Compensation. Use this in conjunction with the histogram or simply looking at the screen after taking the picture. Increase the exposure if the image is too dark and decrease it when it is too light. Bear in mind that the screen might not give an accurate indication of exposure.

Composition and technique is very subjective and the tips given above are guidelines, rather than rules. It is possible to break every single one of them and end up with that prize winner. But whatever the outcome, the most important thing is that you like the results. So get out there and enjoy your photography!

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