

Gearing Up—Notes on Travel and Photographic Gear

Our Photo Safaris provide a wide variety of subjects for the traveling photographer. On every trip we find that each participant has his or her own photographic interests and own preferences about gear and, as camera manufacturers vary in equipment, there is no one-size-fits-all formula for 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. Digital photography has become the industry standard in 35mm nature photography.

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 in a hard-sided suitcase and wrap it well with clothing. More and more photographers are forced to check their gear as baggage in these hard cases as carry-on baggage limits (both domestic and international) have been reduced. Traveling on a business class ticket may allow a greater carry-on allowance, particularly on foreign-based airlines (consider getting and using an airline credit card to accumulate miles to upgrade your future tickets).

US federal regulations prohibit the locking of checked baggage. A sturdy strap around your baggage to prevent its accidental opening is very practical. On domestic airlines you are normally allowed one carry-on bag plus a small “personal item.” There is no easy answer as to how to avoid placing some camera gear like tripods, battery chargers and big lenses into your checked luggage. Today our participants usually bring a laptop computer, several CompactFlash cards and other digital accessories in a briefcase as their “personal item.” But there is no panacea for the carry-on dilemma due, in part, to ever-changing TSA rules.

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 huge “pro-sized” camera bags and camera packs that may be rejected as carry-on luggage. And remember, whatever photo gear you bring, **you** should be able to comfortably carry it! Many of our trips are operated in areas where wheeled (“rolling”) camera bags may be used in lieu of a backpack.

Some of our tours have specific weight restrictions for camera gear combined with personal luggage due to the use of small 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. We can occasionally get a bit more gear transported than the stated maximum, but it is best on these trips to pare down your non-essential equipment. Most other countries around the world have more restrictive “free” checked and carry-on baggage limits than US-based airlines. For carry-on bags in this situation, a couple of quality zoom lenses (particularly the

newest image-stabilized and vibration-reduction varieties) can demonstrate their great range, versatility and (generally) reduced size. Most carriers with scheduled jet service post restrictions on checked baggage weights. Staying within these limits is usually not a problem for most people on most airlines. But for those internal flights in foreign countries with more stringent baggage allowance and weight restrictions, participants can usually resolve this problem by paying their own excess baggage charges. **Joseph Van Os Photo Safaris, Inc. cannot be held responsible for excess or overweight baggage being denied timely transportation.**

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 their form and have this 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 binoculars, laptop computers, etc.) or serial numbers are different than those on the list. You must bring your gear with you to the customs office to prove ownership at the time of registration.

Most of the photo trips we offer are geared for 35mm photography—for photographers using digital equipment. Over 95% of our trip participants are using digital cameras 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 in our website catalog or itinerary. For example, a 4 x 5 view camera is not suitable for shooting wildlife action!

For trips where wildlife photography is the prime objective, we suggest a telephoto lens ranging in size from 300 to 500mm, plus a 1.4x teleconverter for 35mm cameras. (If you are serious about shooting wildlife and “wildlife models,” sooner or later a 500mm lens will become your lens of choice!) For tours during wildflower season, a macro 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 (for example, Nikon or Canon) or by some independent producers (check with your camera dealer for their recommendations regarding “off-brand” equipment). A typical camera bag might contain a 17–35mm 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 telephoto lens, consider an image-stabilized 100–400mm zoom lens (for Canon) or a vibration-reduction 200–400mm zoom (for Nikon).

Many locations we visit are far from a convenient camera store, so when packing, remember to bring spare batteries, polarizing and split neutral density filters, a set of jeweler's screwdrivers and your flash unit (strobe). Don't forget to bring an extra camera body in case your primary body malfunctions. It is extremely important to bring a tripod (and a bean bag if you are going to

Africa—see practical information sheet with your Africa tour handouts for making the ideal safari bean bag). For international flights where weight is an important consideration, bring the lightest sturdy tripod possible. Consider a carbon fiber model.

The major camera manufacturers produce strobe units that have through-the-lens (TTL) metering capabilities for fill flash that virtually anyone can operate with a minimum of instruction. Once you own one of these sophisticated units, you will marvel that you ever left home without it. You can always find some use for one of these in the field. They don't last long, however, if used in rain or falling snow.

Below is a general list of 35mm equipment that you should consider, keeping in mind the type of trip you are joining (and possible weight limitations due to small 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 it is best to bring the recommended gear if you have it.** You will probably see a few more "toys" you will "need" after you see other participants' equipment. The individual tour's practical information sheet (supplied at final billing) may have other camera 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 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 travel!

- 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 or, better yet, an 80–200mm zoom plus a 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 lens (105mm or 200mm)
- 1.4x teleconverter for the telephoto—same brand as lens
- Extension tubes
- Tripod and ball head or pan head (we almost all prefer ballheads and recommend those from Really Right Stuff)
- Flash—strobe 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
- Camera battery charger and cords
- Extra batteries (lots of them)—visit <http://www.tsa.gov> for current information on lithium battery restrictions on aircraft
- Jeweler's screwdrivers—always packed in checked luggage
- 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 CS5** and/or **Lightroom** for your laptop (trial downloads available at <http://www.adobe.com/downloads/>)
- CompactFlash Cards (**at least** four 4GB cards or equivalent)
- External hard drives for backup (we recommend a minimum of two 120gb USB “bus powered” drives that are powered from the laptop’s USB port)
- Sensor cleaning supplies
- CompactFlash card reader and a backup of different manufacturer
- Multiple electric plug adapter (power strip) to gain more electric outlets in your room for simultaneous downloading and recharging

One final note: As you go out into nature to photograph its incredible beauty, it is helpful if you have done a bit of homework in advance so that you have a cursory working knowledge as to 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.