

TPS Tech Sheet 20

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Press Trip Photography by Bill Bruzy

Introduction

I was in Massachusetts, on a press trip, writing a story about eco-tourism in Plymouth County. Naturally, I wanted a photograph of Plymouth Rock. Three days in, after whale-watching, hiking, eating an authentic Pilgrim lunch, and more, still no rock. It was only three blocks from my hotel.

Bombarded with information, events booked wall-to-wall there is precious little time on press trips to get away and do what photographers do best, like sink into the environment, wait for light, hunt for shots.

As one photographer said to me about press trip photography, "You might as

well hurt yourself ahead of time. That or leave your camera at home. You get three seconds to take a shot." Often it's taken



Shooting from a window

hanging out of the window of a van. You might think of it as the anti-Ansel Adams approach to photography. It's a case of travel light, be ready and shoot fast.

Even though what I've learned comes from more commercial ventures, you can apply these lessons to getting photographs in the midst of your ordinary business, personal travel or even family vacations. Rarely do we get the luxury of time we would enjoy to shoot photographs. Still, we can shoot anyway. Being ready to see beauty and grab a piece of it is a way of seeing the world. It enriches our lives and that we can do in three seconds.

Equipment

Press trips are a job for 35mm. Don't consider larger formats. Carry compact gear you can cram in a crowded van under your feet, and haul around all day in a cloud of ever-changing events. Always have a camera, not in the back of a jeep, but within reach. Always.

I carry a film camera and a small digital on most trips. My bag is an unpadded Domke journalist's bag, about the size of a medium purse, with an easy open flap, no zippers. The film camera is a Contax G-2 rangefinder with interchangeable lenses. I'm a little old fashioned about lenses and it's a bit slower, fiddling with a 28, 45 and a 90 than a zoom, but the glass is about as good as it gets. The G-2 is very compact, very fast, and rugged. It fits unobtrusively under a jacket, which is comforting under some dicey situations like wandering the back streets of some port town when I occasionally do get away from the group. The other camera I carry is a small Canon G-3 digital. I usually shoot both, often in quick succession.

The travel writer/photographer's nemesis is, besides a tightly packed schedule, the ubiquitous van. You're in one a lot. A third of my shots on most trips come

from inside Ford Expeditions and mini-vans. It is a drive-by shooting style of photography. Use the ride time to study the light and the landscape. To help better your odds of getting photographs, clean the windows, keep a camera handy and have it preset.

I keep the film camera set to aperture priority (the only option besides manual with the G-2 anyway). I set mine at $f/2$ unless there's a lot of light. If I'm shooting in a microsecond, I mind the focus point very carefully knowing I have no depth of field, but I will have the most shutter-speed for handheld work. If I have more light I can adjust my aperture quickly. Often, in choice areas, I set for automatic



Press photographers in Yosemite

bracketing. I get three successive shots on a flyby and the range of exposure difference for print film, if I bracket a half-stop, is negligible but might help.

In the digital camera I preset three custom modes. Usually I set 'program' mode to ISO 100, large JPEG files, no flash, ultra color since I can desaturate in Photoshop later if I need to. Then I program a 'custom' mode with the same ISO and file format but with flash for fill, more neutral color. The final custom mode I program in ISO 50, RAW file format, ultra color and no flash. That way I have a few quick



Yosemite in Winter

options and don't have to take the time to scroll through menus.

It turns out one of the biggest keys to successful press trip photography is to practice shooting handheld at slow shutter speeds. You will almost never get a chance to take your time and use a tripod; just carrying one can be difficult.

Shoot like a marksman. Grab the lens in the circle of your index finger and thumb. Put the camera in the palm of your hand. Hold your elbows close to your body and breathe in. Then breathe out a little since holding your breath makes you shake. Gently press the shutter. I've seen handheld photos taken down to a 15th of a second. Another handheld trick is to set the timer for two sec-



onds so you can concentrate on holding the camera still. Any kind of prop to steady the camera is fair game but be careful of idling autos, they vibrate a lot. It also helps to learn to appreciate blur. I've come to love it.

There really aren't many things to carry besides the cameras. Film of course. Bring a variety. I have everything from 800 (usually Portra) to slow (100) slide films since you can't predict what you'll be shooting. The truth is the slow film doesn't get used much. 200, 400 and 800 are good stocks. Black-and-white-film is generally not a good idea. It limits sales potential and when I want to get black and white I scan the negatives and use Photoshop (usually getting a good black and white by deleting a couple of color channels rather than using the grayscale option).



Skip filters other than UV and maybe polarizing although I never use one because I want as much light as I can get and they don't work well on rangefinders anyway. Lots of batteries are good, as are digital memory cards. For other accessories I take a shower cap to cover the camera from rain, boat spray and other hazards. It's a good idea to also keep a couple of zip-lock plastic baggies for serious gear protection. A small compass and tiny flashlight can come in very handy. You can get oriented to the direction



the light will take throughout the day. The flashlight helps with gear setup, lens and film changing in dark spaces. I've used both a lot.

From l to r: Docks in Casablanca Skiers, Jackson Hole, Wyoming Top: Grand Rapids, Michigan

Advantages

As challenging as they can be, there are a lot of advantages in press trips. For one thing you can use them as scouting trips. See if it's a place you want to come back and photograph. You also have built in marketing. You get to know the writers well and many need photographs.

I had a trip on The Riverbarge Explorer, which was a much more relaxed situation, and sold the story with photos to a magazine, then licensed the photos to *American Heritage* whose senior editor was also on the trip, and

then licensed shots to the barge company for their calendar, newsletters and ads.

Although free trips, great food and great locations sound wonderful, press trips are hard work. I swear, every time I get home, that I'm not doing another one. But ... I just heard that the Governor of South Dakota does some kind of invitational Buffalo run. I'm a little curious. I wonder how you shoot a thundering herd of buffalo from a horse you can barely stay on? Sounds interesting. And oh, Plymouth Rock? My three seconds

to shoot it came up at dusk, while it was raining hard.



Morocco

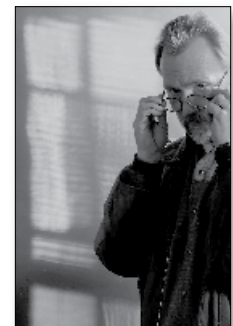
About the Author: Bill Bruzy

I do a lot of photography without a camera. Even driving through traffic I look at the world as a place that offers beauty and my job is to be vigilant and see it. I've looked at the world that way long before I consciously took up photography as part of my work.

I inadvertently learned the principles of photography in two places. In college, married to an artist, I learned the basics shooting slides of paintings, jewelry, prints, sculpture and the artists themselves. Later, I got a job running a television studio camera for a home shopping channel.

I've been a feature writer for *New Texas Magazine* in Austin for ten years along with freelance work in other publications. Editors were always asking for pictures. Then one day a good friend bought me a camera. I felt very at home with it, and I got a little obsessed. I have published photographs in *American Heritage* magazine, *The Baltimore Sunday Sun* and sold prints of travel work in various shows in Austin. My writing includes philosophical work, general interest, travel and fifty or so personal interviews with individuals like Paul Stooky

of "Peter Paul and Mary," Richard Gere and photographer Keith Carter. I can be reached at Bruzy@earthlink.net or (512) 477-9595.



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The Texas Photographic Society is a non-profit organization of amateur and professional photographers with over 1,200 members from 46 states and 7 countries.

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