

TPS Tech Sheet 21

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Selecting a Photography Workshop by Craig Varjabedian

Introduction

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

Mark Twain

When I think about photography workshops, I remember the first workshop I attended in the 1970's. The twelve of us students rose when the sun did. We met, cameras loaded, and set out to explore. We saw the kind of morning light that bathes

and dazzles the world - a kind that many photographers miss. We photographed and photographed. We didn't stop living photography until well after the sun went down. Our teacher was a photographer of great acclaim who shared with us the nuts and bolts of what he had learned from a half century of photographing. We discussed all sorts of things: what developer to use to achieve a particular result; which lens provided which effect. He demonstrated to us the kind of love and commitment good photography requires. He challenged us to capture that magical moment in a

photograph that takes the viewer beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary.



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What's in a Workshop

The ideal photography workshop is hands-on, where you are learning and doing. You can read and learn only so much from a book; a workshop gives you the experience and practice to become familiar with the technical tools. A teacher is there as a guide, a coach. Yes, there should be lectures, discussions, and theories, but more importantly, photography should be experiential. You should photograph and photograph and photograph wherever you are, be it in a studio or in the field. A photography workshop should be about you and how photography fits into

your life. I was startled by some of the things I was told about other photogra-



Students during a workshop

phy workshops. Teachers who spent two hours of the day with participants and then vanished. Teachers who took their own cameras out in the field and photographed, ignoring their students. Workshops held in classrooms with no activity, no practice time, and worse, no time to process the lessons learned and to share from each other. I have little patience for workshops such as these. Watching an instructor do his or her thing is of limited value, as is teaching people to photograph like the instructor.

What and Where

The main things I'd have people consider are where they want to be and what they want to learn. Do you want to be indoors or outdoors or both? Are you interested in a particular region, such as the West or



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East? Desert or city? If you're interested in studio lighting or portraiture, you'll probably be working in a studio and frankly, you can do that almost anywhere. But if you want to be in a specific geographical location and photograph particular subjects (the ocean, cactus, redwood trees, cowboys, etc.), you need to find a workshop in that area. And the instructor must be familiar with that area. The instructor should know the best light, the best locations, how to get to places (and get out of places!) and should teach you what photographing in that area really means.

Be clear on what you, as a participant, will learn or do in a workshop versus what you want to learn or do. A work-

shop advertising nature photography may be too general. Animal photography is a specialty, as is portraiture. When you read about a workshop, you should be given enough specifics to know where you'll be, the subject matter available, and the times you'll be photographing (some people do only evening work). Our workshops have themes more than subjects, because that allows for a specific mood while allowing for more general subject matter. For example, our Georgia O'Keeffe workshop finds those sites and subjects that O'Keeffe painted - shadowed cliffs and twisted juniper branches - but we also look at places she lived and visited; we meet people who met her and hear stories about her. Our



photographs are enriched by what we've learned, seen, heard ourselves. So, study the information available, be it a brochure or webpage (and remember both contain main

Be Prepared

Remember to be open. Let go of some of your expectations in order to be open to new questions. Be very clear what equipment you must bring and what is expected of you: hiking? driving? listening to lectures? learning how to share your work? learning from the work of others? What will be the ratio of students to the instructor? What will the various skill levels be? If you think you only want to be with other beginners, you might want to focus on that type of workshop. And if you've been photographing for years, you may want to be with similar folks.

Be clear about your comfort level, not only with other participants but with the workshop location and housing. Some questions to ask yourself: do you want to find your

The Instructor

An important factor in a workshop is the instructor. A lot of workshops have only one instructor who you work with the entire time. Other workshops have guest instructors who may be there for only a brief time. Make sure you understand how much time is available with the instructor. Some



© Dinah McNew a private workshop participant

About the Author: Craig Varjabedian

Craig Varjabedian is a fine-art photographer of the lands and peoples of the American West and Southwest. He is also the director of the prestigious New Mexico Photography Field School and is an Advisory Council Member of TPS. His photographic work is included in the collections of the William Benton Museum of Art, the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and Southern Methodist University. He is the recipient of grants and

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.

points more than details). Read the FAQ's and students' comments. Telephone or email in with questions. I'm surprised by how few people call and ask questions. That's when

own housing and meals; do you want the workshop to provide these; do you want to stay by yourself or with the group? Will you be traveling during the workshop; will you need a car; what weather changes might you expect? If you want a vacation and photography workshop together, you need to be clear what that might entail. Take into consideration what workshops are open to children, if you are looking for a family event. We do get couples or friends, and other combinations who all participate together. Some workshops are open to non-participating companions or spouses, but some are not. Be sure to see if the workshop has a specific policy. I find participants do better when they stay together and commit as a group to the

instructors may have a large portfolio of work, and teach rarely. Others may commit more of their time and energy to teaching, and as a result, have a smaller portfolio. You can't really tell good teachers by their own work (though I'd avoid any photography teacher who takes poor photographs). Some brilliant photographers may not be very good teachers; and on the other hand, some wonderful and insightful teachers may rarely have time for making their own photographs. A teacher should be actively involved in his or her own field, in making photographs, writing about photography, doing something to stay current in the profession. And a teacher should be immersed in the teaching process and experience when the workshop is in session, focusing on the participants and their needs. Good

awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and many others. Books of photographs include *En Divina Luz: The Penitente Moradas of New Mexico* and *By the Grace of Light: Images of Faith from Catholic New Mexico*. A new book *Ghost Ranch: A Treasure of the Spirit* will be published by University of New Mexico Press in 2006.

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you make the first personal contact and test the waters.

workshop. They help and support each other, encourage and challenge each other. Staying together focuses the group on why they are there to become better photographers.



Taos Teepees by Katrina Dickerson workshop participant

teachers are passing on information from their own photography life experiences, not only teaching technique and equipment. They must be committed to photography, the workshop, to the individual, and to teaching.

I remember an important learning experience I had was when I was in physical therapy after a leg injury. I had a coach, who worked with me every day. He explained simply and clearly what the process would be like. He buoyed me up when fatigue set in and he helped me measure my progress. My coach encouraged me to reach just beyond my ability to keep me challenged (yet safe). This is an ideal teacher to me, and these qualities are what I would expect in a workshop leader.



Photo by Cindy Lane

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