

## Artful Vacation Photos

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Making unique, artistic photographs of your vacation is a snap! Whether you're off to the deserts of Africa or a tropical paradise in the Caribbean, understanding a few composition principles can help you bring home vacation memories with style, beauty and a vision that is all your own.

**Clarity of Subject:** When we are not available to explain our photographs, they need to tell their own stories so our friends and family don't have to guess at what they are seeing. I can't count the times I've critiqued photographs when I had no idea what the subject was! For interest, our subjects should be as clear as possible, and the reason for taking the photo should be unmistakable. Evaluate the scene and focus on that which makes the image special to you and eliminate everything that doesn't add to the image.

- Make your subject strong and undeniable and it will carry more interest and impact for the viewer.

**Angle and Perspective:** While visiting a famous or frequently photographed location, get the photographs that you want most, then go a step further and shoot the scene in different ways. In Brian Kennedy's photograph of the Eiffel Tower (Photo 1), he photographed the tower at night from its base to make a unique and very dramatic image of one of the world's most photographed landmarks. Unusual photographs of famous places are almost always more interesting than those we have seen hundreds of times.

- Walk around your subject if possible to see if a different angle, distance or height would help make the image special and unique.

**Subject Placement:** If you have a composition with a single subject that is less than half the size of your viewfinder, it's often visually appealing to place the subject off-center to avoid a common, centered bulls-eye composition (Photo 2).

- Try placing your subject off-center and including something of interest in the other side of the image for balance. This kind of composition can add a good deal of drama and interest to a photo.

**Weight, Balance and Negative Space:** Photographers will often place their subject off-center and leave the rest of the photograph empty. What this does is balance the weight of the subject with the weight of the empty space, while creating a visually interesting composition. The empty space, simply by being empty, carries as much weight as the subject itself.

- Many photographs of a single subject look great when the subject is placed off-center, balanced nicely against colorful or textured negative space.

**Simplicity:** Jim Erhardt's photo of the single Euonymus stalk against a plain brick wall (Photo 3) is a beautiful illustration of the concept "less is more." Although it is a simple image of common subjects, it is a magnificent study in lines and contrasts. The many horizontal lines against the single strong vertical make the plant appear to jump out of the image. The fresh and lively round leaves stand out nicely against the dark rectangles of solid brick. And finally, the contrasting red and green colors are harmonious and give the image a warm, cozy feel.

- Don't overlook small, common objects! Often they look great in foregrounds, as counter balances for off-centered subjects, and they can often look great as a main subject against a plain background of pure color.

**Color:** Color is important in creating mood in our images. A photograph of Disney World with its colorful lights and structures will produce a festive image that could lift a viewer's spirits whereas a dark, foggy beach scene might conjure feelings of loneliness or despair. Colors can also create an emotional response in a viewer. For example, big blocks of reds and oranges can give a feeling of warmth and power. Blues and greens are known to cause a peaceful, relaxed feeling in a person, and pinks and pastels invoke feelings of purity and innocence.



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4

- Use the power of color to help enhance your subject or determine the overall mood of your photograph.

**Clutter:** It's hard to appreciate an image that is filled with unnecessary clutter. Examine the viewfinder carefully before you take the picture. Look at the edges to see if anything is protruding into the scene. Look at the foreground and background as well, to see if there are any distracting objects that can be eliminated by moving your position.

**Light:** Light is of the utmost importance to photography. In the old days photographers would spend years learning how to make good exposures using ambient and artificial light. Today's automatic cameras do most of the work for us but there are a few facts about light of which we still need to be aware.

- **Light and Time of Day:** On a cloudless day, light from the sun is at its brightest when directly overhead. At this time light colors appear very bright and shadows appear very dark. Modern cameras are designed to record this range of light, but when there is too much difference between the bright and dark areas, such as when the sun very bright, the camera will fail to record the details in the extreme bright and dark areas. The contrast is too much for your camera to handle and you will get patches of light and dark that have no detail in them.
  - For many subjects it is often best to wait until the light is lower in the sky and not so bright and harsh.
- **Direction of Light:** When the sun is directly overhead, your subject will cast short, vertical shadows onto itself. This is often undesirable in photography, especially in portraits of people with prominent facial features. Many subjects such as large structures, people and scenes with big areas of color are best photographed in front lighting (when the sun is behind you). In some situations sidelight can be preferable to front light. Sidelight creates shadows and textures are enhanced when lit from the side.
  - Examine your scene from different angles and notice how the light is falling on your subject. Move around until you find the most complimentary angle!
- **Cloudy Days:** One very untrue myth about photography is that the shooting is only good when the sun is out. Nothing could be further from the truth! Clouds act as big light diffusers which can help eliminate dark shadows. Soft light also helps minimize distracting reflections from objects such as faces, leaves and other shiny surfaces.
  - Colors often appear more vivid and saturated when photographed on overcast days.
  - When the clouds are too heavy and it's too dark out, remember that it may be necessary to use your camera's flash to adequately light the scene.

**Using Flash:** Most modern cameras have built-in flash units that enable us to photograph at night or in very low light. If your camera has one of these, it is most likely programmed to automatically adjust the amount of flash output that is necessary to light the scene.

If you have a separate flash unit and a more sophisticated camera, be sure to read the instruction manual so that you fully understand how and when to use the flash before you make the trip. Too much flash on a scene can render it unnatural or unrealistic and nobody wants this to happen to their once-in-a-lifetime vacation memories.

- Even though a subject is outside on a sunny day, if it is in dark shade the use of flash may be required.

**Photographing People:** When photographing people, it is often pleasing to have their faces in the light with no heavy shadows falling on them. Unless there are creative reasons to use side or back lighting, people generally look best in front light or light that has been softened by clouds or photographic light diffusers (Photo 4).

- When photographing people, look for objects behind them that may appear to be protruding from their heads or bodies.
- Try not to amputate body parts. This looks clumsy and awkward. If you must truncate body parts, try not to cut them off at a joint as this can also look awkward.
- Decide if the entire person should be in the picture or only a part of them.
- Try to situate your subject in a way that is complimentary to them and whatever else may be in your viewfinder.
- When photographing people indoors or in the shade, remember that it may be necessary to use flash to help light the scene.

While discussing vacation arrangements with my travel agent a couple of years ago, she looked at me seriously and said "don't depend on the Vacation Gods to keep you safe on your journey." She explained that often people get so caught up in having fun on their vacations that they forget to pay attention to the rules of an unfamiliar place and get themselves in trouble.

Fortunately, most destinations have Vacation Gods in the form of emergency personnel, attraction attendants and global signage. Unfortunately, there are no Vacation Gods assigned to watch over your photographs and make sure they come out as wonderful as the vacation itself. It's all up to you. Think about each image before pushing the shutter and you are likely to bring home beautiful and artistic memories that you can frame and cherish for a lifetime.

*About the photos* - The images to the right are thumbnail links to larger images with descriptions, which are presented in a slide show format.

**About the Author**

Gloria Hopkins is an award winning nature photographer who is driven by passion and the search for natural beauty. Her photo credits include Nature's Best, the American Museum of Natural History and various natural history books and periodicals. You can view more of Gloria's work on her website at [www.naturesglory.net](http://www.naturesglory.net).

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