

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a tan jacket over a blue shirt, stands on a city street. He is holding a black camera in his right hand. In the background, another man with long hair and a beanie is walking. The scene is set in front of a building with a dark door and windows.

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

100 INSPIRING WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

by Jens Lennartsson

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Whether you're traveling around the world or just around the block, Jens Lennartsson's minimalist approach to photography will help you create better images. Connect with your surroundings, reconsider composition and improve your intuition with 100 tips that don't rely on technology.

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1

GET DIRTY!

If you're dressed in your most expensive jeans, stiletto heels and a suede jacket that will dissolve in damp weather, you'll spend most of your time worrying about staying clean. Being a photographer gives you permission to get sandy, soaked, slimy and sweaty. The grime will wash off, but the pictures will last forever. Wear durable clothes while shooting - not to mention comfortable shoes.

Rooftop Films is an organization that runs pop-up movie theaters on 20 different rooftops around New York City for about six months a year. I wanted to catch the faces of the people watching a documentary about the world's strongest man, but the low light made it impossible to do it hand-held and I didn't have a tripod. Lying down in a huge puddle of water, with my hip and both elbows on the ground, I waited for a bright part of the movie. It took me almost a hundred shots to get the lighting and expressions right.



2

MORNING HAS BROKEN

During my teenage years, I developed a very sophisticated routine that allowed me to get out of bed, get dressed, give the breakfast that my mother prepared for me to the dog, brush my teeth and run to the bus in less than 7 minutes. Your bed can feel amazingly comfortable and you want nothing more than to stay in it. But if you do, you are missing out on some of the best light of the day! Witnessing a city waking up will certainly make up for those hours of lost sleep. Get up before the sun to give yourself hours of great image-making opportunities.

I silently untied one of the yellow, plastic kayaks from the wobbly bamboo paths that connected about 20 bungalows to make a small floating village. It was one of many similar villages located in the bays of Khao Sok National Park in southern Thailand. Without a sound, I sliced through the dark green water as if sliding on a gigantic glass tile. I was the only human being awake. I sat in solitude for a long time, waiting for the sun to rise. A couple of cicadas started to sing.



3

PRACTICE YOUR SCALES

As you stand looking up at that gigantic redwood tree, it will feel like the most majestic thing in the world. But why does it look like a two-year-old pine tree when you're showing the picture to friends at home? Your brain needs a point of reference – something that's a size you're already familiar with. That gigantic mountain could just as well be a molehill, if you don't have anything to compare it with. However, if you place a person, car or something else in the frame that has an immediately recognizable size, you'll provide a completely different sense of perspective.

A gaunt man led his two cows between palm trees as tall as five-story buildings. The sun, just rising over the Gulf of Thailand, made it look like the whole beach was exploding in a cloud of sand. It was morning in the small and at the moment very tired town of Ban Nai Plao. On the streets men were walking towards the forest with their monkeys to pick coconuts before the sun got too hot to stand.



4

GET UP THERE!

One of the goals of a travel photographer is to show viewers a place from an angle they haven't seen before. While everyone else is busy walking through a city's streets and alleys, take a moment to look up. Where can you go to get an overview of the city? How far up can you go? When taking pictures from above, you're elevating viewers to a place they probably wouldn't find themselves. Find the highest point in the area and go there.

Half an hour earlier, I had taken the stairs up to the roof of the cathedral in the middle of Piazza del Duomo. Now I was just waiting for the right light. Tourists on manic shopping sprees were walking from store to store under the large cupola covering the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. The saints were balancing on their stone pillars surrounding the cathedral. I watched the dome's white light spread into the approaching night, showing Milan at its most beautiful.



5

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

You're bound to be noticed as soon as you arrive in a new place. But the longer you stay in the same location, the less attention you'll attract. You become a part of the scene; part of the environment. Everyone will be less aware of you and the fact that you are taking pictures.

Don't rush away from a good photo spot. Hang around for a while until you become a fly on the wall and it will be easier to capture the scenes in front of you. You and the people around you will feel increasingly comfortable with each other.

A month-long trip around Sri Lanka was coming to an end. I stayed at the gigantic colonial Galle Face Hotel in Colombo. A very narrow strip of beach, no more than ten feet wide, stretched for miles alongside the stone wall. During the day it was empty, but when the sun was about to set, thousands of Sri Lankans gathered to play in the waves. I was amazed by the light and the scene and came back evening after evening. I walked around among the families, couples and laughing children until the sun was nowhere to be seen.



6

IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

Renowned photographer Robert Capa once said, "If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough." Even though you should take this with a grain of salt, keep the old master's voice in the back of your mind. A photographer isn't supposed to capture everything in one frame, just the interesting parts. Don't forget to look really closely, because you might find a completely new world. Get as close as possible and capture the smallest details.

I'd been walking back and forth on a sandy road, looking for the path that was supposed to lead into the jungle. An old couple had been watching me and when I passed for the fifth time they waved for me to come over. They were sitting on a wooden porch in front of their small house. They didn't speak a word of English and I certainly didn't have any skills in Thai. Nevertheless, we spent a couple of hours together sharing lunch, bananas and a weird orange fruit that I actually thought might kill me for a couple of white-knuckled minutes. I survived though.



7

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

Children are the most amazing models there are. They don't worry about what they look like or if they are beautiful enough to be in a picture. They don't care about behaving. They won't judge you; they won't laugh at your silly attempts to speak their language. They are inspiring to be around and everyone could, and should, learn from their curiosity. Spending time with kids is a sure way to bring home honest and intimate portraits.

I was walking through miles of green tea plants when tiny raindrops started to soak into the sandy road zigzagging towards the top of the hill. A group of kids had been following me from a distance for almost an hour, hiding in the leafy ocean of Sri Lanka's greatest export. Suddenly they dared to come closer and a few moments later it was nearly impossible to take a picture without at least one laughing boy. The second I raised my camera, my viewfinder was filled with white-toothed smiles.



8

BACKGROUND CHECK

There are generally three main layers in every photograph: the foreground, the subject and the background. The latter could make your picture pop or flop. Before you press the shutter, take a moment to think about what the background look like. The camera transforms three-dimensional reality into a two-dimensional picture and if the background is not thought through, it can ruin a great shot. Pay attention to what's behind your subject.

I saw it from far away. The old, two-colored American car and the wall behind with the exact same colors, only inverted. It was so perfect I almost thought the driver had been aware of it and parked his car right there, just waiting for an attentive photographer to walk by. Sometimes the world's colors come together in amazing ways. Pay attention to color schemes and you'll be able to get great pictures.



9

A PICTURE SAYS MORE WITH A COUPLE WORDS

I'm sure you've heard the old saying about a picture and a thousand words, right? But why don't we mix pictures and words? Employing words and sentences to enhance the story can be a very powerful technique. Look for street signs, restaurant menus and walls filled with graffiti to help you get your message out!

I'm not sure if the man was actually rewriting the restaurant's menu, but it sure looks like it, doesn't it? It was a chilly day in Dharamsala in northern India and I was walking down the main street, trying to find a place to eat and warm up enough to get the blood flowing in my hands again. At first I walked past him, as I was just too hungry to pay attention. But something made me stop and go back.



10

GO WITH THE FLOW

Don't think too much. Just let things happen. Turn off the part of your brain that is constantly trying to figure out what's going to happen next. Let everything that happens lead to something else. Don't try to stop it. If you love to plan your trips, please do. But leave some time for the natural flow of things to show its beautiful face.

About an hour earlier I was woken from my slumber in the back seat of a white van that was driving to northern India. I felt a force pull my entire body towards the front seat as the driver brutally hit the brakes. A split second earlier I had heard his terrified gasp when he realized that he wouldn't be able to steer away from the oncoming red motorcycle. Now I was sitting in between eight Tibetan monks heading for Dharamsala in an exact replica of the van that had just crashed. They'd stopped to pick me up. I hung out with them for the rest of the day and accompanied them on one of their many pilgrimages. We didn't share a language, but we shared food and company.



EXERCISE 1: JUST DO IT

If you look through some articles shot by your favorite travel photographers, it's likely they'll have one thing in common: great portraits. Travel photographers must have the ability to get close to people and make them relax. Intimate portraits build an instant connection between the location, the story and the viewer. It's often one of the last skills you'll master, if only because it's frightening to approach total strangers on the street.

This exercise will teach you to:

- Talk to strangers on the street
- Stay calm during the shot
- Improve your street portraits



STEP 1

Find a photography buddy and take a walk in a fairly crowded area, preferably where people don't just rush by. A location where people naturally take a break is ideal, like a park, market or train station. As you get more experience, you'll be able to take portraits even if the person is in a hurry, but let's make it a little bit easier to start.

STEP 2

Keep your camera easily accessible, around your neck or over your shoulder. Take turns with your buddy picking out interesting faces. Your buddy should find a suitable model for you and point him or her out. When he does, you have to approach that person immediately, without thinking. If you hesitate, your buddy should encourage you to do it, first by reminding you and then by literally pushing you in the right direction if necessary.

STEP 3

Approach your model without acting like you have anything to hide. It's important that you actually believe you aren't doing anything out of the ordinary. Make eye contact and approach your target with confidence. You may want to discuss your opening line with your buddy in advance. You could simply say, "Hi, my name is Jens. We're practicing taking pictures of strangers. Do you mind if I take your picture?" The truth is good enough. You're a photographer, not a secret agent.

STEP 4

If your potential model says yes, feel free to ask him or her to move slightly. You might want to decide on a suitable background before you approach so you'll have one less thing to think about. Remember, you now have permission to take a few minutes of their time. Don't rush it and try not to feel stressed. Ask yourself, "What is the worst that can happen?" Someone might say, "Sorry, but I really have to go now." Keep going until you are satisfied, and then thank your model for their time.

STEP 5

Afterwards, discuss with your buddy what went well and what went wrong. Also, review your pictures and see if there is anything you could do better next time.

Approaching people you don't know is enormously challenging if you are not used to it. Working with a buddy makes everything less frightening. It's a difficult threshold to cross, but it pays great rewards once you've mastered the skill.

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