



**THOUGHTS ON  
PHOTOGRAPHY and STORYTELLING  
MEDIA RESOURCES**

**Todd A. Gipstein  
National Geographic Photography Expert  
National Geographic Expeditions**

**AROUND THE WORLD BY PRIVATE JET**

**January, 2026**

**[www.Gipstein.com](http://www.Gipstein.com)**

**Email: [Todd@gipstein.com](mailto:Todd@gipstein.com)**

## **PHOTOGRAPHY & STORYTELLING**

*Some thoughts and resources from*

**Todd Gipstein, National Geographic Photographer & Filmmaker**

### **On Photography**

I can't teach you how to take pictures. That is for you to discover with a camera in hand. All I can offer is some thoughts, insights, questions to ponder and suggestions. I can share some of what I have learned in more than 60 years of shooting all types of photographs all over the world, and working alongside and interviewing some of the world's best photographers. I've made hundreds of media shows about people, cultures, history, wildlife, travel, and so on. I've built a career on simple, elegant, storytelling shows. So I'll include some ideas about media here as well.

A lot of what I talk about here is applicable to travelers who don't take photographs. For me, photography is not so much something I do as something I am. It's a way of being in the world, of looking at the world, of experiencing the world. The camera just records my reactions. Photography is a gift you give yourself that you can share with others. When you travel or when you take photos, you should do it with your mind, your eye and your heart. Immerse yourself in life.

### **Why are you taking pictures? Who is your audience? How will you use them?**

Think about and answer these questions before you go. Maybe even before you buy any gear. Are you shooting just for yourself, to have some memories to look at? To share with friends and family? Do you plan to have prints made for your home or an exhibit? Do you want to publish a book, put the images on FaceBook, Instagram or a web gallery? Are you going to give a travelogue talk or make a film? Do you have professional or semiprofessional goals? Different uses require different equipment, quality specs, mindset, and methodology.

\* \* \*

### **It is not enough to look at the world. You have to SEE it.**

Taking good pictures requires that you really pay attention to the world about you and what is happening in it. We are often blinded by familiarity, distracted by the obvious, distracted by others we are with, in a rush, or simply overwhelmed by what we are encountering.

A good photographer is a hunter, searching with nervous eyes, looking at details, anticipating what is about to happen, planning where to be. You have to learn how to be immersed in the experience so as to be connected to it, yet at the same time be objective so you can document and interpret it with a camera.

You must learn to be a part OF the moment and, at the same time, apart FROM the moment. You are a person, a traveler experiencing something, but also a photographer composing a photo. With experience, these two roles coexist easily. Some say photography is a distraction. But I would argue that it actually encourages more immersion in experiences. Even if you don't get great photographs, the quest to do so might enrich your travels.

### **Situational Awareness (Mindfulness)**

For the photographer, situational awareness involves a constant calibration of what is happening and might happen: the light, the action, the mood, the flow of people through the physical space. Through observation, the photographer can anticipate where to be to maximize the chances of a good shot. What will happen in 3 seconds? In 30? In 3 minutes or an hour? The photographer can ready himself and his equipment so when the opportunity for a good picture presents itself, he is ready.

For me, situational awareness is a kind of hyper alertness, a restless searching with my eyes. Where is the light hitting? Where are there shadows? What is the trajectory of motion of people or things? Should I move ahead or get a higher vantage point? Should I set up a composition and wait for the final elements to fall into place? Or should I be ready to shoot quickly as events unfold in front of me? How is the emotion of the situation shifting? Is something about to happen? Where? It takes focus and awareness.

### **Shooting on the Run**

Often when we travel, and on Expeditions, we are constantly on the move. There are lots of things to shoot. The tricks is to be **Observant** (see what's going on), **Opportunistic** (evaluate the options now and as the situation evolves. Take what the scene gives you), **Decisive** (pick your shots, commit to getting them right), and **Proficient** (know your camera and photographic techniques so you can execute the shot and get what you want).

\* \* \*

### **Remember that your pictures will be seen out of context.**

When you travel, you immerse yourself in new sights, sounds, smells, tastes, experiences. While you take pictures, you are still immersed in the experience. But the photos will be seen days, weeks, maybe years later, and they will no longer be in context. You are ripping an instant, an impression, out of a rich vibrant tapestry. Remember this when you shoot. Try to imagine the picture you are about to take in an austere gallery, framed and hanging on a white wall. Will it stand alone as something that is worth seeing? Or does it require "being there" for its meaning? If you have to be there for the photo to work, it won't work as a photo. Pictures have little context. You see, you shoot, you move on. The experience, the context, is lost. The smells, the feel of the wind, the heat of the sun, the sounds of the village, the events leading up to the instant you snapped

the photo do not convey with the photo. If you have a camera with a viewfinder, use it!!! Seen as a rectangle surrounded by black, the viewfinder will help isolate the image and remove its context. You cannot do this looking at the LCD on the back of the camera held at arm's length! It is part of the scene. The viewfinder is your best tool for composition. Using a phone doesn't offer a viewfinder, so you have to learn to look at the phone as a window and try to ignore everything else around it. It's not easy, but you can learn to do it.

### **YOU are responsible for what is on the frame.**

The camera is dumb. It knows nothing about photography. And it will never get smarter. A camera is merely an instrument to record what YOU tell it to record. The content of the photograph is under your control and it is your responsibility: what is included, excluded, focus, exposure, viewpoint, if it is straight, color balance, etc. Look carefully before you shoot. Is there something in the corners that is distracting? Crop it out by zooming the lens or changing your position. Is there a tour group ruining your scenic? Maybe you can hide them by moving a bit and positioning something in the frame that blocks them. Parallax is your friend! Is the horizon straight? It should be. Etc. Etc. Learn to scan the whole frame quickly for little things. The more you shoot, the quicker you will be able to do this. Eventually, it will become instinctual. Look at the composition and ask if it is as good as it can be? Get it right in the viewfinder. Most digital cameras allow you to set what is displayed in the viewfinder. Keep the information in it simple and essential to avoid distractions. And use the framing guidelines to help you find the "rule of thirds" intersection points and to keep the horizon level. Forget about PhotoShop ... don't plan on fixing your mistakes later. That just makes you lazy and sloppy. Back when I shot film, I **had** to get it right in the camera. There was no way to fix it. This is a good mindset to have.

\* \* \*

### **Shoot often and shoot a lot when you do... but try to make every shot count.**

There is a contradiction here, certainly. On the one hand, in this day of digital photography, once you own a camera and a chip to record on, you have thousands of frames you can shoot. There is really no cost to shooting a lot. Do you really want to go half way around the world and see something extraordinary and just take one photo? You should try different things when you shoot: different compositions, exposures. **Work the scene.** Let events unfold in front of you and your camera. Stay with them and keep shooting. Slow down and observe. And shoot. I have never met a photographer who really meant it when he said "Just one more shot."

**On the other hand**, mindlessly shooting away, even using a motor drive/burst sequence for something that isn't moving, and hoping you will stumble on a good photo, is not a sensible way to shoot no matter how many frames you have. This is called "spray and pray." I have seen many photographers shoot bursts of a

dozen or two photos of a building or a mountain. WHY? It's not moving. No action. Back in the days of film, we had 36 pictures on a roll. We made each one count. So should you, even if you have 36,000 pictures to shoot. If you can get in to the mindset that each and every time you press the shutter you are trying to make an image that you would be proud to have printed large and hang over your mantle, you will shoot better pictures. Don't be lazy. Don't be sloppy. And by the way, when you get home and have to edit your pictures, you will much happier to have, say, 6 or 10 of a scene rather than 600. Just ask my wife who is my editor!

\* \* \*

**Make pictures even when you don't have a camera.**

Of course I am a pro, but I believe that photography is not something you do, it is something you are. It is a way of looking at the world. Even when you don't have a camera with you, study light. Watch people's expressions and gestures and interactions. Look at compositions. Watch how they change as you move about. Polish your looking and you will start seeing better. Seeing better will help you shoot better, because a photograph is only a record of how YOU are reacting to something you are seeing / experiencing.

Some people say that photography is a distraction. That it distances you from experiencing things. It can be. But I believe the opposite. In a quest for a good picture, photography encourages you to immerse yourself in life. It encourages you to go down that side street, to engage that stranger, to look closely at the patterns in a rock — in short, to go places and see things and interact with people that, without a camera, you would have missed. Immersion in experiences is not a distraction. It is, rather, a way to fully engage and align your mind, your eye and your heart in the world. A way to live vividly and vibrantly. A good way to travel even if you don't take pictures. If you are fussing a lot with your gear, if you shoot incessantly and mindlessly without really engaging in the situation, then photography is a distraction. The experience should come first and the photo to remember it by second.... not the other way around.

\* \* \*

**Tell a story with a sequence of pictures. Include far shots, medium shots, close-ups.**

Watch a movie and you will see that the compositions vary from close up to wide angle. ANY viewpoint can become boring if used too much. It's good to shoot a variety of viewpoints. Also, think of shooting over time: if you are at a outdoor barbecue, for example, you might shoot the food being prepared, cooked, presented and consumed. Shoot processes. If you go on a tour of glass blowing in Murano, Italy, shoot the showroom of finished products and then the artisans making them. And, as you do, shoot the whole foundry, a portrait or two of men at work, then close-ups of their hands or the molten glass. Scraps on the floor. A workman's lunch box or some worn gloves hanging on a hook. Look for

interesting signs or posters on the walls. Shoot the **texture** and the **tapestry** of experience.

\* \* \*

**There is no such thing as bad light. Learn to work with the light you have.**

They say early morning and late in the day are the best times for photography, and certainly these times of day do have magical, beautiful light. But good pictures can be created on cloudy days, rainy days, snowy days, in the bright light of midday or the depths of night. Understand the strengths of each type of light and shoot to those strengths. Flowers, for example, look much better in cloudy or shady light than in bright sunlight. This is generally true of portraits of people, too. They won't be squinting. Midday can create intense shadows that can sculpt statues and architecture, which can look flat on cloudy days.

The fact is, too, that as you travel, you won't have any control over the weather or the light. So learn to go with it. If you can't get the light you want, work with the light you get.

\* \* \*

**Don't get too hung up on gear and gadgets. Keep it simple, keep it light.**

Cameras are just boxes. Everyone can buy the same box. They don't create, they facilitate and record. That's all. Your personal vision, your viewpoint is the only unique, creative thing you can offer. Great pictures have been taken with modest cameras, and lousy pictures with very good cameras. It is not the machine but the human using it that makes the photo. As the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson wrote: "To take photographs ... is putting one's head, one's eye and one's heart on the same axis."

A camera is like a musical instrument. You get the most out of it with practice and when you know it so well it becomes an extension of you. It becomes invisible. You don't have to think about using it, you just "play" it.

Don't get bogged down with a lot of gear. It will slow you down with its weight and the need to decide on lenses and gadgets. Get a camera that is good and that you like to use, and a good zoom lens or a few prime lenses that give you options for the type of subjects you will shoot. If you like scenics, a wide angle lens (or wide angle zoom range of maybe 12-24). If you like nature or animals, a telephoto of maybe 200-300 (or telephoto zoom range of 70-200 or 100-300). Portraits are best in the 75-135 range. A single lens like an 18-200 will probably cover 85% of what you will ever want to shoot. A 35 to 105 or so is also a good range. A small fast lens like a 35mm 1.4 will let you shoot in low light.

If you plan to shoot pictures of a lot of people as you travel, think of how you will appear to them. A single, small, discreet camera — or our ever-present phones

— will work well and not intimidate. Don't use too wide angle a lens as that will distort them close-up. Go for a 75mm or more if possible.

Go to YouTube and look for my “Israel: A Living Palimpsest” film (search my name/channel or find it on the FILMS page of my website). I shot it all with one 18-135 lens — with a few iPhone photos thrown in.

My “X100” and my “Day in New York” films (to see them on YouTube, search for “Gipstein X100” “Gipstein A Day in New York”) were shot entirely with a fixed 23mm lens (35mm equivalent). I zoomed with my feet and didn't worry about the telephoto or extreme wide angle shots I couldn't get. Limitations can be liberating.

**iPhone:** Since 2022, I have been shooting on Expeditions **with only my iPhone.** I have gotten great shots of subjects as diverse as wildlife, sceneries, the Northern lights, and people. I can't get extreme telephoto shots of birds or animals, so there are some limitations. But **ALL** gear and situations have limitations. I work with them and don't fret about what I can't shoot. I try to make sure what I shoot is the best it can be. Smartphones are very powerful cameras. They fit in your pocket. They are versatile. They shoot great videos, I may never use a larger camera again. My website has many photos taken with the iPhone.

\* \* \*

### **KNOW what your camera can do.**

These days, cameras are technological wonders. They are computers capable of remarkable things. You should know what your camera can do. They have lots of bells and whistles, most of which you probably won't ever need. But a situation just might arise when you DO want to do something a little different or specialized, and the camera can help you do it. But only if you know that the camera can help you do it. Since some of these features and functions might be obscure, you will probably have to review them from time to time. It's a little like having an exotic spice in your pantry. You might not use it often, but when you want just the right taste, it's indispensable.

I suggest downloading the user's manual onto your phone. Once you have the manual loaded on your smart phone or tablet, take some time on a long flight or a day at sea or an hour at the hotel waiting to go to dinner to review the manual — with the camera in hand. There are also whole books written to help you get the most out of almost any given camera. And YouTube coaching videos. They, too, might be worth watching or having along.

### **A good picture should be simple, uncluttered, pleasing to the eye and evocative.**

Some photographers like clutter and confusion. Layers of action and meaning. Sometimes I like this, but generally, for me, a good picture is as stated above. Just personal taste. The compositions and lighting of the great painters have

proven themselves for centuries. I like to make pictures that could be called painterly.

Try to capture the ESSENCE of a person, a place, an event, an idea, a moment. Think: "If I had only one picture to shoot, what should it be?" Shoot the IDEA of something.

Moreover, if you create a media show, simple pictures work better. Media is time-based. It flows. Pictures are on the screen for a matter of seconds — viewers can't study them at a leisurely pace like they can in a magazine. Simple, graphically powerful, iconic photographs are easy to see and understand. Think of each shot as a word in a poem. Or a jewel on a necklace. Or maybe a book cover that evokes the story.

\* \* \*

**You will miss a lot of good pictures. Don't worry about it. Make the ones you do get count.** You are always missing great shots. There are always great shots someplace else. Get over it. Declare to yourself that where you are is where there are good shots. Find and make them. Life is full of paths not taken, and photography is no exception. Pick a path and enjoy what it has to offer. You will drive yourself crazy and run yourself ragged if you try to go everywhere and see everything. Make the shots you do take good ones. Nobody will ever know the shots you missed — not even you.

\* \* \*

**Don't be afraid to try strange things or low percentage shots.**

I try all sorts of strange pictures. Some work, some don't. I once panned my camera for about ten seconds from a moving boat hoping I could get the moon and its reflection on the water to come out. They did. A low percentage shot but it worked. You can try long exposures. Zooms while the shutter is open. Weird reflections. Shoot through a glass of beer or a great scene reflected in a friend's dark glasses. They won't all work but you might come up with something that is quite striking. Worth a try. If it doesn't work, use the Delete button.

\* \* \*

**Learn from your bad shots. Study them and do it better next time.**

I study my bad shots and wonder what I could have done better. You shoot as long as I have and you take a lot of bad shots (too many to count) and yet you eventually learn from them and get it right (or at least better) next time. Even though you may travel someplace new and encounter a completely new situation, the light and the action and the mood are probably similar to something you have encountered in some way before. If you didn't get a good shot before, here is a chance to try again. Try to recall what you didn't like and do better. Was it how you exposed the picture? Where you stood? The lens you used? Shutter speed? Your memory is a database, a textbook that can teach you in the field.

FYI: most digital cameras have meta data that stays with the photo. You can look at this data and see exactly how your lens was zoomed, f-stop, shutter speed, ISO, etc. It will give you all the technical parameters of a given image.

**Even the world's best photographers shoot a LOT of BAD pictures!  
No one sees them.**

What makes a great photograph is seldom technical perfection. There are plenty of soulless but technically perfect photos. Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the great photographers of everyday life of the 20th century, shot with a simple camera with a simple lens. Some of his photos weren't razor sharp. But they are icons, masterpieces of photo journalism and the art of photography. Sharpness is more important in razor blades than in every photograph.

In the realm of digital photography, there are "pixel peepers," folks who obsess endlessly about sharpness and noise in images. They go on forums with endless chatter about test results, resolution, chromatic aberrations, and all sorts of technical matters. Well, people who look at your pictures probably do not care about resolution or noise or pixel count. They care if the photo "works" for them. Connects with them. Shows them something. Makes them feel. If they are worried about technical aspects then, sad to say, the photo is probably failing on an artistic level. This is not to say poorly focused, composed and exposed pictures are okay. Technical proficiency should be a goal of every photo. But it is not the only goal nor the only factor that makes a picture great. Some baseball pitchers get a win by pitching a no-hitter. Others by giving up lots of walks and hits yet still come out on top. A win is a win.

\* \* \*

**Turn around once-in-a-while.**

It is easy to get seduced by the obvious and overlook something great. Sometimes, it is not the action that makes a great shot but the **reactions** to it. Watch spectators. Turn around.

\* \* \*

**Do a status check from time-to time.**

I have certain custom/default settings I tend to use for my shooting. The old photojournalist mantra was "F8 and show up." There is some truth to it. My settings get me certain results I like and make the camera handle the way I am comfortable shooting. Most top-end cameras give you the option of setting up some presets or custom settings and quickly choosing among them.

But sometimes, you set a camera a certain way for a particular shot or sequence and then get caught up in shooting or moving on and forget it is set a certain way. This can cause problems. Every so often, stop and check all your settings. Are they the way you want? Have you left it on spot or matrix metering when you want center-weighted? Did you fiddle with the color balance and forget to reset it? Did you adjust the dynamic range or film simulation or ISO or any of a

hundred other settings and not turn them back to your default? On iPhones, it's easy to get it set to LIVE. Which is not always useful. You can disable this. Check and catch any settings that are not what you want. And create a "default" that is a basic shooting mode that you leave the camera on so that if a quick shot comes your way, you can turn the camera on, put it to your eye and shoot without fiddling with settings. There is nothing wrong with a "point and shoot" mentality. Better to worry about when and where you are pointing than trying to adjust a bunch of camera settings. And missing the shot.

\* \* \*

### **Interact with the people you photograph.**

Some portraits are made without much interaction. You are just observing. The subject may see you and know what you are doing, but if they are otherwise engaged or you just haven't had a chance to build any rapport, you can still shoot. You can show a lot about a person by showing them in the context of their life. But to me, the most compelling portraits are when my subjects are looking at me — at my camera.

Some cultures think a photograph steals someone's soul. Whether or not it does, it is something to keep in mind when you photograph people. You are TAKING their image. Be sensitive to that. Body language and facial expressions count. If the situation allows for it and you want a portrait where they are looking at you, come right out and do it — don't stalk. People have radar that picks up suspicious behavior.

The best approach is to try to engage them, even if for just a few moments. Smile, tell them you are interested in what they do, who they are, where they live. Lead with your warmth and humanity, not with a giant lens and fancy camera. This is where smartphones shine. They are ubiquitous. And people are used to seeing people looking at their phones. So if you are shooting with a phone it is almost "invisible." And it doesn't scream "professional photographer" even though many professional photographers now use them.

If you can't speak the language, gesture and smile. Think of how YOU would feel if someone walked into your neighborhood while you were mowing your lawn or walking your dog and starting snapping away. Or if you were at work going about your business and some stranger walked up and stuck a camera in your face. The golden rule applies here. Respect peoples' privacy. Don't force it. If they don't want their portrait taken — and believe me, you will know — don't take it. In a public place, you have the legal right to take pictures of people. But be careful: in America, if you take pictures of children, you may well be attacked by a parent or find a policeman pulling up. Sadly, in America, photographer = stalker / pervert. So, I don't take pictures of children in America anymore. In other countries it doesn't seem to be as much a problem. You have been warned.

**Learn a simple magic trick.**

I have done magic all my life, and more than once it has been a great ice-breaker when traveling. It can be a simple trick like turning one of your coins into one of theirs or making a pebble vanish in your hand. Kids and adults will smile, gather around, and watch. Magic (like photography) is a universal language. Once you have broken the ice, you can take out your camera and start to take portraits. Now they feel comfortable with you and will respond.

**Avoid forced smiles.**

If someone smiles naturally, or is genuinely amused, I will shoot that. But when you ask people to smile, they are putting on a mask of sorts. They are, in some sense, acting. A good smile will last about three seconds before it becomes forced. Just try it yourself. Personally, I think people will reveal their true selves, maybe even their souls, if they do not smile. I may even shake my head if they smile too hard and wipe my hand across my mouth to show them not to smile. I never ask my candid subjects to smile.

\* \* \*

**Moments**

To me, life and history are like a beach made of billions of grains of sand. While there may be the occasional rock on a beach, like there may be an occasional war or assassination or other major event in life, mostly the tapestry of life and history is made of billions of everyday people doing everyday things. These are worth looking at and photographing. In them, we see a common, shared humanity. Henri Cartier-Bresson and many other photographers have shown us the power of the “quiet dramas” of everyday life. The nobility of “everyday heroes.” So observe the world around you, watch people as they go about their lives, and find in them subjects for your photographs. The power of photography is that it can capture the moment and preserve it. It mirrors how we remember our experiences — as moments, not days. As snapshots, not continuous videos.

\* \* \*

**Start collecting themes and subjects: it will make you notice more.**

I love torn and layered posters on walls around the world. I have been shooting these for about 40 years. I have enough for a book or two and have made a film of them “Palimpsest” on my website). Having something thematic you shoot everywhere, if possible, will help your seeing. It could be torn posters or it could be markets, windows, weathervanes, window shoppers, cats, circle shapes, clouds, shadows, reflections, #9, steeples, puddles, the color blue, — whatever. I have a friend who shoots the wild patterns on rugs in ballrooms around the world! When you collect, you are on the lookout and you see more. So collect. Even on a limited expedition, you can collect themes. I shot lots of close ups of the patterns of ice in Greenland I saw on hikes then made a short film of them.

\* \* \*

### **Shoot labels & signs**

It's good to know the details of places: buildings, statues, artwork, avenues, etc. Consider shooting a reference photo of signs, maps and explanatory panels so you will know what you have shot later, back home. You can also then look up more information about it. Smartphones are handy for this and usually include GPS location information.

## **STORYTELLING**

### **The Tapestry of Experience**

As you travel, think how to capture facets of your experiences to later weave together into a story, a show. Mix establishing shots (wide angle videos), with medium shots and close-ups. Look for telling details. Mix people and places, architecture and wildlife. Look for themes and patterns in what you experience and capture them. Keep notes of your impressions to use in a script. Use the video feature on your camera to record dramatic motion or just to get live sound / music / a guide explaining something, etc.

Also, look for little chapters to document. Every long film I have created (you saw a few in my lecture), is actually made up of a number of small shows strong together. My Antarctic Dream show had chapters about penguins and icebergs, whaling, Shackleton, etc. Look at any of my shows on YouTube and you will see they are a series of chapters.

These chapters offer opportunities to vary the pace and mood of a longer show, making it flow better. So when you travel, think of creating some short, 1-3 minute chapters of things you experience. And shoot them accordingly. Then, when you are home and trying to make a presentation, you will have plenty to choose from. In my lecture, when I spoke about "working the scene," this is what I was really doing. At the tavern in Italy or the Vietnam Memorial in D.C. or aboard a zodiac in among the icebergs, I was shooting in a way that would later let me put together a sequence, a chapter, a piece of a presentation.

**OPPORTUNITY** is key. You must shoot what you want while you are there. You can't shoot it later. Unlike many other art forms, photography relies on proximity to the subject and a reality to record. Writing, painting, music, etc. do not. You can write a book in a prison cell. Photography would be limited.

### **Edit!**

You may be in love with each and every shot you take, but nobody else is. No matter how much you suffered to get a shot, no matter how long you waited or what extremes you went to, if the pictures does not help tell the story, don't use it! *Nobody cares about the photographs they don't see. They only care about the ones you show them.* Do a tight edit. Get away from it a while. Then go back and

see if you can pare it down even more. This is true of photographs and words and a whole presentation. Less is more.

### Media

Keep your presentations simple. A lot of visual effects or images dancing across multiple screens or other AV fireworks may show off what your software can do, but they usually distract from the experience of a show. Same when you make a PowerPoint/Keynote presentation, My goal has always been to transport people into a **dream**. I open a doorway and invite my viewers to step into the world of my show. I try to keep the media invisible. The attention and emotional engagement of an audience is a fragile thread. It can be snapped easily when the story is overwhelmed by the medium. Remember that you can use sound, visuals, and scripting simultaneously. So don't describe your pictures. Use **words** to convey impressions and ideas and interpretations. Use **music** for emotion and pacing. And use the **visuals** to provide reality or the fabric of a dream. Every show should have a "script". By this I mean a flow of ideas and emotion, not necessarily spoken words. What do you want to say? To show? How do you want people to feel? Think about it, outline it, and then produce it.

## IMPROVING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

**The best way to improve your photography is to go out and shoot.** The more you shoot, the more experience you get. And there is no substitute for experience. Cameras are just dumb boxes, for all their computerized bells and whistles. After 100,000 photos, they won't be any smarter, but YOU will be!

**Take pictures even when you don't have a camera....** that is, don't just look at your world; learn to see it. Feel it. The play of light and shadows. Details. Textures. Moments of life unfolding around you. Good images come from good seeing. You can train yourself to see a lot more by just observing more closely. Then, when you are taking pictures, your seeing skills will be better.

Go to a bookstore (if you can find one), and spend some time in the photography section browsing books. Study pictures in magazines and books and at websites like Nat Geo's. Before you go somewhere, go to NatGeo or Getty Images or Google Images and see how others have shot the place. Look at the composition, the choice of subject, the lighting, the moment. I still get photo books and study them.

Here is a short list of a few books I find inspirational:

*Henri Cartier-Bresson: Here & Now / Any other books of his work*  
*The Mind's Eye: Writing on Photography and Photographers by Henri Cartier-Bresson*  
*Andre Kertesz - Jeu de Paume*

*Sebastiao Salgado* - Genesis / Other books of his photography. Watch the documentary about him “The Salt of the Earth.” It is intense and sometimes grim, but he is a true photographic genius.

*Jim Stanfield: Eye of the Beholder* - National Geographic. There is a documentary I made about him “I Witness” on the Nat Geo page at my website.

*The Photographers* - National Geographic

*South Southeast* - Steve McCurry

*The Creation* - Ernst Haas

*Century* - Phaidon

*Family of Man* - MOMA

*Looking at Photographs* - MOMA

*The Photographer's Eye* - MOMA

*The Tao of Photography: Seeing Beyond Seeing* - by Gross & Shapiro

*Magnum Contact Sheets* - Magnum Photography

Photographer books created by “Mignon”, a group of excellent Italian photographers

Create self-assignments. My X100 “1 Year, 1 Mile, 1 Lens” show (on my Gipstein website FILMS page) came out of an assignment I gave myself, and it was one of the most enjoyable and instructive shoots I have ever done. Same with my “A Day in New York” show. I challenged myself to shoot for just 24 hours and in the square format and in B&W. It was fun. Create something for yourself that you can do easily: a day on the sailboat. The fall harvest of apples. The carnival comes to town. Your daughter’s championship soccer game. A hike in the woods. Your backyard or neighborhood. Reflections in the water. People at work. The architecture of downtown. An intersection. A market. The color blue. Spring. “Friendship.” Etc.

Agree to give a talk about your trip. Nothing like pressure to get you to polish your photography, editing and presentation skills. There are many venues: Rotary clubs, churches, local libraries, senior centers, museums, photo clubs. I have spoken at all of them.

The internet is full of forums: forums for your specific camera, for sharing photos, for just street photography, just flash photography, pixel-peeping, classic, historical photography, magazines, reviews, etc. I have found some forums very helpful in solving problems with my cameras, computer programs or for learning some tricks. And for seeing great photography that inspires, and not-so-great photography that reminds me that not everybody can take a good photo — that’s why they sell postcards.

So search the internet and find some forums that may be handy for you. If you are thinking of buying gear, simply search for “[Equipment Name] Review” and you will find sites, like DP Review, Luminous Landscapes, Ken Rockwell, Pop

Photo, Techrader, Nat Geo, B&H, and many others that will talk about gear and shooting. There are also many reviews on YouTube. Read/watch several reviews and user comments, though, before you buy: some reviewers get paid by manufacturers. And gear and photography is very subjective. Different strokes for different folks. The same holds true for programs to make shows, create books, share photos and so on. And like all forums, beware: folks can get a bit nasty and personal at times.

## WHAT I USE

### What camera gear do I use?

I sometimes shoot with my Fuji mirrorless cameras: XT3 and X100V (fixed 35mm lens). My lenses for travel are the 10-24mm, the 35-135mm, and the 55-200mm (when I know I will be shooting wildlife). I also have the 18-55 which is a good, small all-purpose lens. And a single prime lens, the 35mm. Since the Fujis are not full frame, all these lenses are 1.5 times more powerful due to the crop factor of APCS. So the 10-24 is effectively a 15-36 in the full-frame 35mm world. I have adopted the mirrorless system and would never go back to DSLRs. As I mentioned here before, I shot for 2 weeks in Israel to make a film using only an 18-135mm lens. I got everything I needed. I traveled light. See the film on YouTube "Israel: A Living Palimpsest." Search by my name / find it on my YouTube channel or through my website. I always shoot in JPEG and simultaneously in RAW. The Fujis do an amazing job of in-camera processing and I use the JPEGS for my films about 98% of the time. Phones usually offer a RAW format as well. RAW offers much more editing possibilities, but often doesn't look very good UNTIL you do some editing and processing. JPEGS usually look good and aware usable right out of the camera.

With mirrorless cameras, if I shoot in B&W, I see the image in B&W in the viewfinder which helps me think and compose in B&W. But, also having the RAW files gives me the option of a color version as well. RAW also is more versatile for post-processing images to tweak them very precisely. If you want to shoot in B&W with a phone you can often set them for monochrome or get apps that are dedicated to B&W shooting.

**Smartphones:** The best camera is the one you have with you, and we all almost always have our phones with us. They can take remarkably good photos. They have limitations, like all equipment (and situations). There are online courses, like **iPhone Academy**, where you can learn about shooting with the phone, editing, etc. And also many YouTube videos where pros who use phones share their thoughts and techniques. I upgrade every other year to get the latest in iPhone technology & cameras. On many Nat Geo Expeditions, I have shot **ONLY** with my iPhone. It's the only camera I have taken along. And I have photographed many diverse subjects and gotten very good images to use in presentations and other forums. More and more, I just bring and use my iPhone.

**Editing, Processing & Presentation Software:**

*Reviewing & Processing Photos:* Adobe Lightroom / Adobe Bridge

*Processing & Tweaking images:* Adobe Photoshop / Lightroom

*To make books/cards:* Shutterfly / Artisan State, Apple, Blurb. There are many out there!

*To create films:* Adobe Premiere Pro (what I use) / Apple Final Cut / iMovie / Photo Magico / Pinnacle Studio (tablet) / DaVinci / many others.

*To create lectures:* Apple Keynote.

Camera Grip for iPhone: KiwiFotos (on Amazon). Gives a nice handgrip. Shutter button that can be used with gloves. It also comes off and is a remote. Tripod socket. Cold shoe. Notch to attach camera strap. Very useful and secure. In recent years, many grips have come out. Many will attach magnetically to an iPhone and some have a battery in the grip that can recharge the phone. The battery adds weight but may save the day if your battery runs low from a full day of shooting.

**iPhone Shooting:** Many apps now that give more control than the built in Camera app on the phone. Look at their specs & reviews.

“Panorama” for 360° images and videos.

There are too many apps for editing and enhancing to even list. The native editing app on the phone can do a lot. There are specialized apps for certain looks (like old-style photos). Just browse the app store or online forums to learn about them.

**Music Libraries** (*online — you sign up as a client, subscribe, and can then download music to use in your shows. While some are free, often you have to legally license & pay for the music. Here are the libraries I use.*

**Storyblocks.com** - Royalty-Free videos, sound effects, images, music. I use it a lot. I pay a yearly fee and can download, try out, and use assets for almost everything.

**KusiakMusic.com:** John Kusiak is a talented and versatile composer of music. I worked with him on original scores for some of National Geographic projects. He has done a lot of music for films, for “The American Experience,” and other high-profile media presentations. He really understands *how to set moods and evoke eras and dramatic situations and emotions.*

**APM (Associated Production Music):** A fantastic library with everything you could ever, ever want. All styles, countries and moods. Quite expensive to license. They charge in tiers, so you will pay one price for the basic show, more to put in on the internet, yet more to sell on DVDs, etc. So, a single cut of music

can cost hundreds of dollars. It adds up when you have more than one piece in a show. The “blanket” licensing option might work out better. You pay a flat fee for the music, and can use many pieces under it. But it still has tiers depending on your uses. They will help you find music.

**Cinephonix:** Very good. Doesn’t have the depth of APM or Kusiak, especially for more evocative, emotional music, period music, ethnic, or well-known pieces (like classical standards). **But:** quite cheap to license. For example, for about \$10-40, you can use a piece of music in a show that is also on your website, YouTube or that you sell. You might have to search longer to find what you want, but it’s hard to beat their pricing. They will also help you find music. If you plan to do many films and use a lot of music. Cinephonix will offer you a blanket license. For a yearly fee of about \$800, you can use all the music you want. Much of my work now on YouTube was made using Cinephonix music.

Be aware that should you want to broadcast on TV or stream your film on something like Netflix, you will pay a premium fee to all libraries to do so.

Other Audio, Visual, Video and Narrator Resources I use:

**Voiceovers.com** - Audition and hire professional narrators and get them to narrate for you — all online.

**11 Labs 9 — A subscription service.** AI Voices. Write it. Enter it in the website. Try different voices. Download what you like.

#### **FOR AI MUSIC:**

**Suno.** Type in your lyrics if you have some. Pick a music style. Suno will generate variations to use. It’s quite amazing.

You **should** pay for the music, images, video and sound effects you use in a presentation. Like photographers, composers and musicians make a living by licensing their work and getting royalties when it’s used. These libraries will provide you with great **LEGAL** music, video and voices to use in your presentations. Check their terms and restrictions and consult with them when in doubt.

\* \* \*

#### **Parting Thoughts:**

Photography should motivate you to explore, to interact, to react, to record. Taking pictures will reward you with lasting memories of your travels & experiences. Memories that you can share. In the end, photography is a gift to yourself that you can also share with others. Your travels are only half the experience. Telling the story of them is the second half. Creating a powerful media presentation is a great way to both preserve the memories and share the

stories of your travels. Planning ahead to create a show while you are traveling will encourage you to seek out more experiences. It will make you shoot better, observe more, and think more about what you are seeing and doing. I have spent a life traveling to create media shows, and I've been rewarded with some remarkable experiences because of it.

So ... safe travels, good light, and moments worth having, capturing, and sharing in photographs and media presentations. Or just stories.

### **TO SEE MY WORK:**

*Visit my website: [www.Gipstein.com](http://www.Gipstein.com) and Facebook: Gipstein Books (I also write novels. Mostly historical fiction. You can find them on Amazon.)*

*On my website, there is a FILMS page and a National Geographic page. They both have some of the projects I have created, most using still photographs, some shot entirely on National Geographic Expeditions. Here are some specific recommendations:*

*To see B&W photography: X100, Antarctic Impressions, Station, A Day in New York, Monochrome*

*To see gathering of assets while on the move to tell a story of a trip: Israel: A Living Palimpsest, Galapagos, Nowhere, Antarctic Dream*

*To see storytelling without words: Kingdom, Cultures, Station*

*To see short subject documentaries: Touchstone, Reflections on the Wall, Memorial, Intersection*

*Some of the films I showed in my presentations, like **Moments**, **Face to Face** are also on my website if you want to watch them again.*

*To see experimental AI films — on the FILMS page: **The Museum** and **The Diner***

*Also, visit my **YouTube Channel: Todd Gipstein** The above films are there (some of which I screen in my presentations), and more will be added in the future. So subscribe to my channel to be alerted when I add new work. And check in on my website, too, as I am always updating it and adding new material.*

*If you are interested in the story of Shackleton's expedition and the Antarctic region, and want to read a fast-paced adventure, thriller, love-story, consider my historical fiction novel "**Elephant Island**." There's a trailer on my website. The book is available on Amazon.*

*Keep in touch: let me know if you have thoughts or questions. If you read my novels, I'd love to hear from you what you think about them (and always appreciate reviews on Amazon). Reach me at: [Todd@Gipstein.com](mailto:Todd@Gipstein.com)*

**Contents Copyright 2026 Todd A. Gipstein**

V12/23/25

***This PDF is being made available only to guests on Nat Geo Expeditions. No part may be reproduced in any medium, copied, shared online, posted to social media, or distributed without the written permission of Todd A. Gipstein***

**Good light and good shooting.**

((O))