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an efficient workflow
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Travel and Street Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Learn the best ways
to compose your
pictures!

John Batdorff

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Street Photography:
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Snapshots to
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To you, the reader

I want to sincerely thank you for giving me the chance to share my insights with you. I hope you enjoy the book, and as always, feel free to contact me at www.johnbatdorff.com if you have any questions.

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Introduction

I've been taking photographs for as long as I can remember. My passion began when my mother handed me my first Kodak Instamatic in 1977. What started out as a way to keep a young boy out of mischief blossomed into a lifelong pursuit of personal expression. I've always been fascinated by people and by their relationships with others and their environment. It's this natural curiosity that has fueled my addiction to travel and to observing through the lens.

The Goal of This Book

The number-one goal of this book is to help you take your street and travel photography to the next level, and help you get the images you envision. Photography can be confusing at times, but the technical aspects of exposure and composition should never hold you back from getting the photograph you want. I made many mistakes early on with my photography, but through them I have learned a lot, and I'm happy to say I discover something new every day.

This book isn't intended to be the gospel of travel and street photography. Rather it's a guide that jump-starts your creative photographic endeavors while helping you avoid a few bumps and bruises along the way.

What You Will Accomplish

We'll start off by discussing potential camera kits, tips for planning a journey, getting a good exposure, and creating better compositions. It's important to note that I can attest only to what I use and how I do things. I'm not a fan of speculation or recommending techniques that I don't use every day. If you ask a group of 20 photographers how they would approach a photograph, you'll get 20 different answers. Photography should challenge you, and it should also be something we can all enjoy regardless of skill level. It's my hope that I have distilled my experiences into an easy-to-understand methodology that you can duplicate—and improve upon.

Once you've completed Chapters 1 through 4, you should have a stronger foundation in photography and be prepared to begin your journey.

Starting with Chapter 5, we'll discuss the pros and cons of observing and engaging your subject. Next we'll travel to the urban environment, where I'll share insights into getting the shots you want and using best practices, and give you some creative tips. Then we're off to the countryside, where we'll shift our focus to capturing sweeping vistas, rural communities, and road trips. I'll provide detailed information on how to get a great landscape shot as well as interact with people in more rural settings. Finally, we'll wrap up by discussing the legalities of street and travel photography and how to organize your post-processing workflow.

Make sure to download bonus Chapter 10, "Sharing Your Work." First login or join Peachpit.com (it's free!), then enter the book isbn (032198823X) on this page: peachpit.com/store/register.asp. After you register the book, a link to access bonus content will appear on your Account page in the Registered Products tab. NOTE: if you purchased an ebook, you're covered—the chapter is already included.

This book is a journey we will make together, and I will be there along the way, giving guidance and tips. At any point if you get lost or stuck, you email and I'll answer. Feel free to contact me at www.johnbatdorff.com.

How Much Experience Do You Need?

I wrote this book with the beginner-to-intermediate photographer in mind. Regardless of your level, my hope is you'll find the book to be a resource loaded with useful information, personal experiences, valuable assignments, and helpful tips.

Whether your passion is for travel photography, street photography, or both, your top goal should be to enjoy yourself. It's a gift to be able to follow a passion and create art at the same time!

As you work through the book, I strongly encourage you to share your images with me at www.flickr.com/groups/street_fromsnapshotstogreatshots.

If you don't enjoy the process, you won't be happy with the outcome—so relax, have fun, and create some art!

Grand Place,
Brussels, Belgium



ISO 125 • Ilford FP4 film •
50mm lens

5

Observation vs. Engagement

How to approach street and travel photography

Up until this point we've focused on building a strong foundation for your photography: equipment, planning, exposure, and composition. Now comes a bit of the classroom discussion before we head into the field. In this chapter, we'll focus on the merits of observing versus engaging with your subjects, and we'll review some of my real-life field experiences. The goal is to set the scene for future chapters, where we'll dig into the specifics of getting the shot in both cities and rural destinations, and cover the legalities of street and travel photography.

Poring Over the Picture

The use of gold color throughout created a rich image that tied together many of the elements, including the statue's lettering, the man's beverage, and the woman's hair.

GESNEUVELD
RLAND
O - 1945

PA
SUP
L

ISO 500 • 1/250 sec. •
f/13 • 21mm lens



I observed this couple from a distance and found myself drawn to the symmetry of the bench, the couple's body language, and the colors in the scene.

To add interest to the image, I waited for a moment that showed action. When the young man took a drink, I captured a few frames before moving on.

Using a wide-angle lens, I was able to capture this image without needing to engage or distract the couple from enjoying their afternoon.

Brussels, Belgium

Are You a Street Photographer or a Travel Photographer?

The focus of this book is travel and street photography because when traveling we're often shooting images that would be considered street photography. I don't get too caught up in titles or labeling oneself as a street photographer or travel photographer, but understanding how these types of photography are defined helps us understand the role we play in each category. The important thing to remember moving forward is these roles are not reserved for "professionals"—they apply to everyone, regardless of skill level.

Travel Photographer Defined

A *travel photographer* spends time documenting the world by capturing different cultures and foreign landscapes. Her goal is to learn more about other cultures while sharing this newfound knowledge with others. When you think of a travel photographer, you may think of Steve McCurry or other *National Geographic* photographers, but you don't think of your Aunt Margie who has traveled the world posting a daily blog of her latest trip to Myanmar. Professionals may balk at this comparison, but fame, income, and intention may be the only things separating Aunt Margie from a professional travel photographer.

Street Photographer Defined

The label *street photographer* tends to leave people scratching their heads, and there are many misconceptions about this type of photography, so let's spend a little time reviewing what has become a very popular and widely debated genre of photography.

By its purest definition, street photography is the photography of people in candid situations in public settings. In the most rigid form of the definition, the emphasis is placed on the word "candid," meaning without the subject's knowledge. This is important because purists will argue that once the subject is aware of your presence, a photo can no longer be truly candid—thus it is not street photography. So what is it when a subject is well aware of your presence, if not street photography? Many would argue that it's a form of documentary photography.

A documentary photographer's emphasis is on recording history and telling a story, while a street photographer strives to capture candid moments with no agenda other than getting the shot. I recognize that this seems like mere semantics, but a photographer's intention truly defines this distinction. It might be safe to say that a street photographer is the ultimate creative narcissist: obsessed with getting the shot, void of historical reverence, fixated on capturing a fleeting moment anchored in a well-composed frame. Meanwhile

the documentary photographer's purpose is centered on the story and recording a specific time and place, and his ultimate goal is to communicate this story via images. Many times a documentary photographer will dedicate extended periods of time to one subject matter to create a cohesive statement and record of history. These types of photographers are similar to photojournalists, who are driven to cover current events.

Another misconception is that all street photography is taken in the streets, which is not the case. Street photography needs to be taken in a public area or space, which is what the word "street" implies, but there's no need to limit yourself strictly to images from the streets. As I said earlier, don't worry too much about labels, but understanding the narrative serves as a helpful foundation for clarifying your role as a photographer.

To Observe or to Engage?

Regardless of what type of photographer you identify with, the one question you should always ask yourself is whether the photo would be more interesting from the perspective of an observer or a journalist who engages. Many times I'll try to capture both perspectives by taking a candid shot, then later approaching and engaging the subject to get a portrait and the story (**Figure 5.1**).

Of course, the number-one question I receive from budding travel/street photographers is, "Can I take a person's photo without asking permission?" Chapter 8, "The Legalities," is dedicated to the legalities and ethics of photographing people in public. But for our purposes in this chapter, let's assume you're within your rights so we can tackle the issue of when and how to approach people.



Figure 5.1 I saw this gentleman from a distance and took a few candid shots. But I knew that in order to get the shot I wanted, I'd need to approach and engage. He was very open to letting me take his photo, as long as he didn't miss his cab.

ISO 400 • 1/250 sec. • f/3.5 • 35mm lens • New York City

The idea of taking a photograph without someone's knowledge might make you uncomfortable, perhaps because it feels sneaky, awkward, or even unethical. I have had to overcome these same concerns as my style has developed over the years. By reviewing best practices, in time you will develop your own comfort zone and ethical boundaries. Now let's discuss a few of these best practices so you may begin formulating a strategy of your own.

Observing

Observing and photographing a subject from a distance allows you to capture a truly candid moment. People have a tendency to change their behavior when they know they're being observed. In many ways it's a bit of a social experiment to watch people interact with others and their surroundings. My number-one goal when I'm photographing people in their environment is to minimize my influence on the subject and to create a frame that is truthful above all else (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2
If these girls knew they were being photographed, they likely would have posed, and the irony of the shot would have been lost.

ISO 200 • 1/60 sec. •
f/5 • 35mm lens •
London, England



Here are some benefits of an observational approach:

- You get to capture an authentic, candid moment.
- You can document a story without influencing it.

But there are also some things to be aware of with this style of photography:

- You need to feel confident that what you're doing is within your rights.
- Speed is the name of the game. Taking too long to take a photo leaves you exposed, and you could blow your cover. If you want to observe, don't run the risk of being seen (more on this later).
- Always being alert can be exhausting, and it is a very easy way to lose track of what's going on around you.
- You'll need to seek out shots alone to avoid drawing too much attention to yourself. Street photography is not a team sport.

Staying Under the Radar

The trick to capturing candid moments is being able to photograph others without being detected; you can't photograph a parade if you're leading it. In the long run, keeping a low profile and learning to blend in will create more photographic opportunities. Your clothing and equipment are one part of the equation, and your ability to observe from a back-row seat is the other. Improving the speed in which you take a photo will also minimize your chances of being detected. It's the photographers who fumble and outstay their welcome who run the risk of being detected by their subjects.

Here are some tips for staying under the radar:

- Keep your equipment to a minimum. Toting more than one camera body and a host of lenses will make you stand out.
- Check your camera settings in advance. That way, when the moment strikes, you don't lose time fumbling with exposure.
- Pre-focus whenever possible.
- Take note of your surroundings. Sometimes you can act like you're taking a photo of a building or something else when you're actually composing with your subject in the frame.
- Avoid the "creep factor" by carrying yourself with confidence. If you're uncertain about what you're doing, people will read that in your body language and it will make them feel uneasy.

Getting Caught in the Act

At some point, most of us will get caught in the act of photographing a subject. Knowing how to react can save you major headaches, and preparing for these situations will ensure you handle them with dignity. Keep in mind, we're talking about images being taken in public settings, where you are within your legal right to be taking them (see Chapter 8). In the years I've been shooting street photography, I have yet to have a bad experience. I find that a quick and disarming smile and a compliment tend to settle most concerns. If approached by a person, always remain calm and polite. And again, knowing your rights as a street photographer will help you build confidence in these matters.

During a workshop in Belgium, we were photographing a small market of used booksellers in Ghent. I saw an interesting-looking gentleman wearing a captain's hat, so I quickly snapped his photo (**Figure 5.3**). Just as I did, he looked up and caught me. Knowing I was busted, I instantly smiled, and he responded with a wink. I winked back—no harm, no foul, and I ended up with a good image.



Figure 5.3 I was caught red-handed when this man looked up right as I was taking his photo. Thanks to a smile and a wink, I didn't have any trouble.

ISO 320 • 1/250 sec. • f/8 • 21mm lens • Ghent, Belgium

The Long-Lens Approach

A long lens, such as a 70–200mm, allows you to capture candid images while keeping enough distance to go unnoticed. Locate a comfortable place to sit, such as an outdoor café, where you have a clear view of a busy intersection or square. Avoid drawing too much attention to yourself so when a desired subject enters your field of vision, you're able to get the shot without the person being aware.

The long-lens approach isn't for everyone, and at times can come off feeling a bit sneaky, but it's an excellent technique for learning street photography. I recommend it for people who have difficulty walking or standing for long periods, or who require more time to get a shot.

Engaging

Photography can be a very intimate process, and the camera is a tool that's easy to hide behind. Throughout the years, I've found that putting down the camera is every bit as important as knowing when to raise it. Interacting with people and working on your social skills will create more opportunities for you to get memorable shots.

The role of a travel photographer is to learn more about a culture, and communication is an important part of this equation. Street photographers come in all flavors, but my approach has always been that if I need to get within a few feet of a subject to get the shot, I'll ask for permission. I also ask when there is any doubt about my intention. Remember, people don't want to look like fools or be teased, so when in doubt I explain why I am taking their photo and reassure them that I'm not teasing or being mean (**Figure 5.4**).



Figure 5.4
During a World Cup soccer match I noticed this man's huge mustache—I had to get a photo. I approached him and complimented his amazing mustache, and then asked for a photo. He obliged without any trouble.

ISO 250 • 1/180 sec. •
f/4 • 35mm lens •
Brussels, Belgium

If I think someone is doing something funny, I'll smile or give a thumbs up to let her know I'm taking the photo in the spirit of fun. In regard to travel photography, you need to remember that you're not just representing yourself but your home country and photographers as a whole, so be a good ambassador.

Here are some pros of an engaging approach:

- It's the only way to get an authentic close-up portrait.
- You are less likely to insult your subject.
- It's a wonderful opportunity to represent photographers and your home country with pride.

But here are some cons:

- It can be a bit awkward until you learn how to have a successful interaction.
- It requires a thick skin because you may get turned down.

Don't Be Paparazzi

There's a growing trend that I find alarming, and I feel it will eventually put street photographers at odds with society: the indiscreet and invasive practice of forcing a fast, up-close portrait onto an unwilling subject. In my opinion, these images are inappropriate, and often the subject's reaction reflects his or her disdain for the practice.

In an age when privacy and safety concerns are at an all-time high, it goes against the grain to participate in these quick-and-easy images. I say easy because it's much easier to force yourself into people's personal space than to ask permission and allow a person to assess your integrity. Those who give typically get in return, and those who take tend to look for the easy way.

Don't be like the paparazzi. Always respect people's space, especially if the person is disabled or otherwise might feel physically vulnerable. Use your judgment when taking photos of these folks; you may just want to skip images of them altogether. Ask yourself, am I taking this photo because this person is an easy target? Or do I truly have a greater purpose here? Be honest with yourself, and make sure the answer to the second question is yes.

The Street and Travel Photographer's Code of Ethics

- Be confident and mindful of your body language; self-deprecating humor goes a long way.
- Show an honest and sincere interest in the world around you.
- Be prepared to field questions, and always be respectful with your reply.
- Respect personal space.
- No means no.

Effective Communication

A quick case in point before moving on: I do a night photography workshop in Chicago. A very small group and I were photographing at the El stairs as people came and went. I noticed a police officer staring at me from across the street, but we continued to shoot. Next thing I knew, there was another officer. Obviously something was on their radar, so I calmly walked over and, with open body language and polite tone, asked if there was an issue. The officer said that the building behind the El was the Federal Reserve Bank, which I didn't realize at the time. I explained our purpose, thanked them for doing their job, and gave them a time frame for when we would complete our work. The officer thanked me for addressing the issue and told me I was free to carry on, but to finish within my stated time frame.

Was I acting outside the law? No. But regardless, clear, calm, and honest communication went a long way. I have no desire to lose time on the street by ticking off a cop!

Case Studies: Portraits

By definition, a portrait is a photograph of a person or a group of people. As a street photographer, your goal should be to expand beyond the basics of what defines a portrait by capturing what defines the *individual*. Therein lies the difficulty: A quick snapshot doesn't tell a person's story like taking your time with an intentional portrait does. When you authentically engage, you get a better portrait. In the following chapters, I'll address techniques and considerations for approaching strangers in the field, whether you're walking the streets of New York City or visiting rural Montana. Right now, I want to share some of my real-life experiences, starting with my goals and process for getting the images.

Group Portraits

Don't think of a group portrait in the same terms as a family portrait in a studio. When taking a group portrait in the field, your goal is much different from that of a studio photographer. In the studio, sharpness, creative posing, and perfect white balance are the goals. In the field, we aim for compelling content and visual transportation of the viewer to the scene.

In 2013, the family and I traveled to Stonehenge to watch the summer solstice. Twice a year at solstice, the park allows people into the center of the site to celebrate the ancient Druid holiday. On these special days, when the sun sets, it shines through a narrow opening in the stones, perhaps acting as a type of calendar to the ancient people who architected the structure. There was a low cloud ceiling the day we were there, and the sun didn't shine through the stones. I was left to photograph all of the interesting people, which was just as fun.

I approached a group of Druids and asked politely to take a photograph. At first they were hesitant, but when I explained I was a photographer visiting Stonehenge for the first time, they seemed to relax. One of them said it was up to the guy in white, and I made a joke about him being the boss. They laughed and someone asked me for a "fiver," which I took to mean money. I joked that photographers don't have any money. They laughed again, and I got the nod to take the image (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5

It took a little bit of work, but I eventually got this group to let me take a portrait during a solstice festival at Stonehenge.

ISO 400 • 1/200 sec. • f/1.6 • 35mm lens • Stonehenge, England



This was a tough group, and the immediate vibe was trepidation, but by making a few jokes and keeping it light, I won them over. As I said earlier, you need to be prepared to hear no, but by sticking with it, you'll be surprised how people will change their minds.

Individual Portraits

Getting a close-up portrait of a stranger can be nerve-wracking for some photographers. It's completely natural to feel nervous, because it means you care about how others feel and don't want to offend anyone. I still get nervous when I approach someone for a portrait, but not as much as I used to. With practice, you'll find asking gets a lot easier.

The best approach to take with any stranger is honesty. The number-one question I get is, "Why do you want my photo?" I'm drawn to people because they either look interesting or they have a unique presence about them. People are very self-conscious about their looks and often are worried that the photograph will show them in a bad light. Having empathy for your subject will build rapport. Reassure your subject that you find her unique or interesting, and be complimentary so she doesn't feel like you're just using or making fun of her.

I was visiting Belgium and enjoying the atmosphere of the Grand Place when I saw this gentleman with his dog. He was smoking a cigarette and people watching—much like I was watching him. I took my time, meandered over, and sat down near him. Initially, I took a few candid shots of him interacting with a couple of children who were interested in his dog (Figure 5.6).



Figure 5.6
I took a candid shot of this gentleman interacting with some children who were interested in his dog.

ISO 125 •
Ilford FP4 film •
50mm lens •
Brussels, Belgium

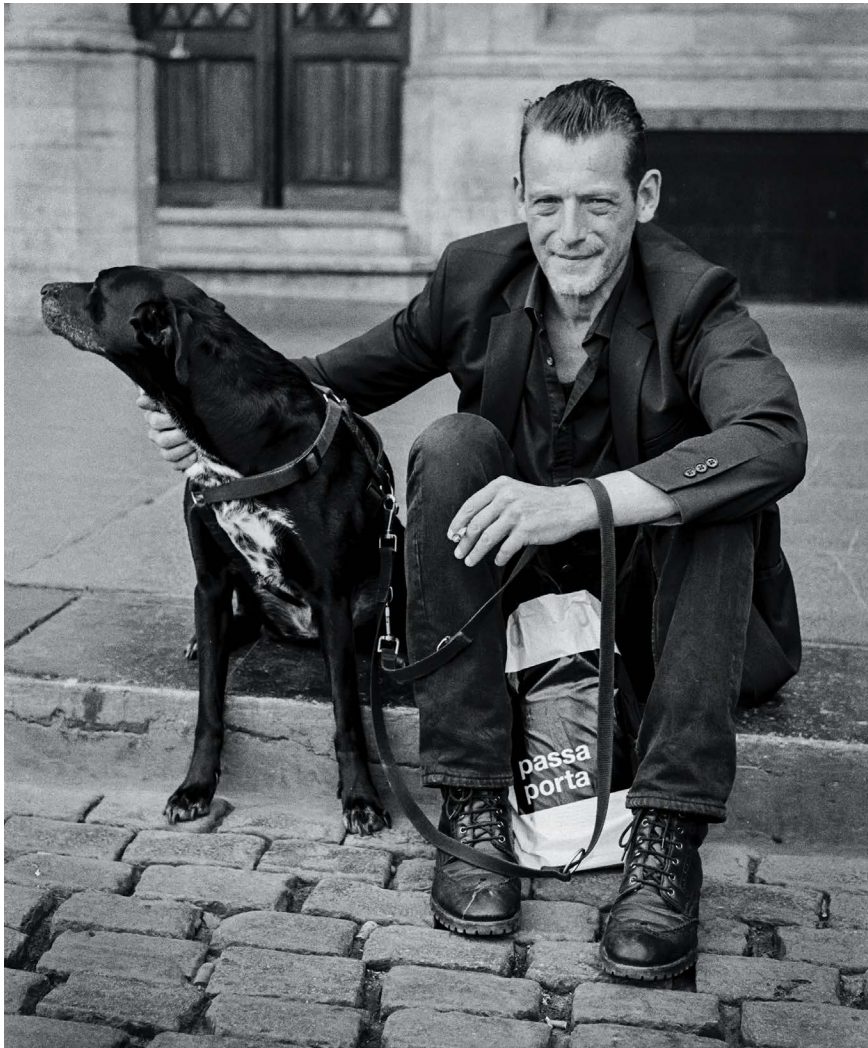
After a while I made my way to petting his dog and chatting with him about her. Finding a common ground can help quell uncertainty, and the fact that I love dogs probably helped my cause. I asked if I could take a photo of him and his dog. He said yes, so I took a few photos and then returned to petting his dog (**Figure 5.7**). I went back to my place on the curb, joined him in people watching for a few minutes, and eventually said goodbye and moved on. The takeaway: Taking your time, not seeming in a hurry, and being sincere will create photo opportunities.

Field Notes

A long lens such as a 70–200mm is an excellent lens and recommended when you want to photograph from a distance. But up close, a big zoom like that can be downright intimidating to your subject. Instead, I recommend a focal length between 35mm and 85mm for portraits. My favorite lens for travel and street photography is a 35mm, with my 50mm coming in second. Each of these lenses is very compact and performs well in low light.

Figure 5.7
After finding common ground by chatting with him about his dog, I asked for a photo, and he obliged.

ISO 125 •
Ilford FP4 film •
50mm lens •
Brussels, Belgium



Chapter 5 Assignments

It's time to go out and practice taking photographs of people with and without their knowledge. Then have someone take your photo!

Observe, then engage

Observe a likely portrait candidate from a distance and capture a few candid frames. Once you've captured a few good shots, approach the subject and ask politely if you can take a photograph. Assuming the subject gives permission, take the photo.

Back at your computer, pull up the images side by side and note how the subject interacted. Was she smiling when it was a candid? What was her general demeanor? Does the close-up portrait tell a different story? Decide which image you feel tells the better story.

Put yourself in your subject's place

It doesn't feel natural to look into a lens while trusting someone to photograph you. When someone is photographing me, I feel every twitch in my face, I don't know where to put my hands, I'm sure my fly is down and my hair is sticking up, and the list goes on. Empathizing with your subject will help you connect and overcome objections.

So here's the assignment: Have someone you don't know well—maybe even a complete stranger on the street—take your photograph. Take note of how you're feeling and what sort of communication you want in order to feel more comfortable. Then next time you're taking a portrait, employ the same methods and communication style to help put your subject at ease.

Share your results with the book's Flickr group!

Join the group here: www.flickr.com/groups/street_fromsnapshotstogreatshots

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