

Apogee Photo Magazine

## Just Ask: 3 Questions That Make Better Travel Pictures

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Join pro **Jim Austin** in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, as he shows you how to create photo opportunities by asking for them.



Lunenburg Harbor © by Jim Austin

On the southwest shore of Nova Scotia, Canada, there is a town of wooden ships and iron men. Lunenburg is a thriving world heritage site. Its tall ships and eye-catching scenery can keep any photographer enthralled. Once the “busiest shipbuilding town in the world,” locals now call it “the prettiest town in Canada.” Although Lunenburg is the setting, our real destination for travel photography lies inside the photographer. When you create successful travel images, you must make a mental shift. Just ask three questions.

### Question 1: “How can I change my approach...?”

When you photograph, ask yourself: “How can I change my approach or beliefs to make this photo even stronger?” This question is a thoughtful tool to expand your seeing when you travel. If you’re in a rut—seeing “the same old pictures” even in new places—Question 1 will get you moving.



Picture this first question as a triangle within a circle. All your past habits for making images are represented by the triangle. Surrounding the three points of the triangle, the circle has more area. This expanded area holds those fresh, risky images that you could take. We’re not talking about lenses, close-ups, or specific skills here. We’re talking about the inner photographer creating novel, self-expanding imagery. Asking Question 1 lets you slow down and think about each subject on its own. You stop, question, then photograph. Let’s see out how Question 1 changed my work in Lunenburg.

Tall ships have been the focus of many a camera. Most photographers shoot from

a distance and attempt to get the entire vessel in the frame. Because I asked Question 1, the thought came to try a different approach and take a portrait of the crew. The barque Picton Castle (a tall ship built in Selby, England, in 1928) arrived in the port of Lunenburg that day. Asking Question 1 prompted me to walk over to the dock where crew members were lashing the ship's anchor in place with manila rope.

As I talked with a crew member, I considered how to find a strong story-telling image. The ship's port anchor was close by; its arrow-like shape in the foreground was an eye-grabber. When I wondered how I could shift my approach, the decisions I had to make forced me to slow down. As a result, I noticed more crew standing on the bowsprit foot ropes. The actions aboard — securing anchor and drying the sails — became the story for the picture.

Question 1 led to another change. I tend to approach a photo situation and start right in making images. Here, I talked with the sailor aboard the barque and learned he was an assistant engineer. By waiting, I became part of the scene. Waiting also gave me time to notice the leading lines of the ship around my subject. These lines, in retrospect, keep the eye moving from foreground to background in the frame. Shooting from below was also a change, as I tend not to do this for portraiture. The goal for the photograph, *Returning Home to Lunenburg*, was to suggest the spirit of a ship, rather than identify a specific place.



**Picton Castle Finn Asst. Engineer  
Lashing Anchor © by Jim Austin**

One key to improving your travel imagery lies with your attitude at the time you're shooting. When you ask questions before you shoot, you can break the habits that constrain your work. Your images will have more variety and spontaneity.

### **Question 2: "What If...?"**

Each photograph in this article came from breaking an habitual way of seeing. The idea behind the questions was to move deeper into the photographing process. A light-hearted question helped, especially when I was tired or had a head full of images. Asking, "What would happen if I did . . . ?" often led to my having more fun while I was photographing.



**Lunenburg Red © by Jim Austin**

Question 2 doesn't have to be complicated. It can be as straightforward as "What would happen if I looked around the next street corner before I stop for the day?" For instance, in Lunenburg, the town has a rich variety of colors. In particular, it boasts more red buildings due to a belief that they stand out in the fog. Several times I walked past the Fisheries Museum, a perfect example. Its red-colored exterior was attractive, but I was ready to

quit for the day.

Asking Question 2, I filled in the blank part of the phrase in my mind, wondering, "What would happen if I went back to the Fisheries Museum just one more time . . .?" A parked red car next to a red motorcycle caught my eye as I was strolling past the museum on a fourth visit. There was red everywhere. The next question woke me up, and I imagined an image I had never seen before. I asked, "What would happen if I waited to shoot until a red car drove by?" Waiting paid off. Lunenburg Reds was the outcome.

### **Question 3: "How Can I Simplify...?"**

One last question creates better travel imagery. I call it the "Thoreau Question," because it lets you simplify your process, easing the demands of photographing on the road. This question is "How can I simplify my approach, equipment, or picture?" When we routinely carry too much, complicate our schedules, or over-think our shots, we can return to this question. For instance, Lunenburg commissioned local artists to paint figureheads for public display. I photographed Trudi, one of the artists, as she painted a weather sealant on the face of her mermaid sculpture. Although I took many shots, a direct composition at eye level with a clean red background proved to be the most effective image.



**Trudy Figurehead © by Jim Austin**

In short, when you ask questions you create photographic opportunities. Your

questions will help you seek out and create images that surpass what you've done before. Best of all, asking three questions will challenge the assumptions you make as you photograph. Your curiosity will even lead to fresh ideas for your work. Finally, to improve your travel photography, ask and you shall receive.

**Did You Know ?** Apogee Photo Magazine is a comprehensive web magazine for travel photography. Noella Ballenger, Michael Goldstein, Richard I'Anson, Andy Long and many others have superb travel photography articles on Apogee in the archives. Check out these articles before you travel to strengthen your photography on the road:

1. The Travelogue: Creating a Compelling Travel Story, by Brenda Tharp.
2. Grab The Eye: Composition Techniques For Travel Images, Michael & Allison Goldstein
3. Travel Photography: Composition, by Richard I'Anson.

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