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Successful Travel: Overcoming Photographic Challenges

by Noella Ballenger

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Train station - point the camera higher if you don't want people in the shot.

This past September, I first traveled to Germany with my sister to visit our cousins and then we flew to Helsinki, Finland where we were joined by some of our friends for a 3 day pre-tour extension, before heading off to Russia. (I'll tell you more about Russia in future articles). This was going to be a terrific trip and we were all looking forward to the photographic adventures that were about to unfold!

Since our friends are also serious photographers (carrying as much photo equipment as I do), they are a joy with whom to travel and understand that it would be logical for me to have also set some work goals for myself. And the added bonus for me—they, along with my sister, also have wonderful “eyes” and can “see” and point out so much that I might miss.

None of us had ever been to Finland or Russia, so being a little hesitant about some of the language barriers, we decided to travel by organized tours.

I always have mixed feelings about guided tours, because on the one hand, I really want to see and do everything I can and having a tour can get you to the high points very quickly. They are a great way to introduce you to a location. But, on the other hand, I want to have time to linger and shoot at my own pace. It is a compromise. But for this trip and the circumstances we made a wonderful decision.

Helsinki is a friendly, very lovely and modern town with good restaurants and lots to see and do. However, our first guided tour was a city tour and with about 40 others we managed to get on the bus and I even got a window seat. There were a couple of short stops on the tour, but most of the time it was, “And, on your right you see --- and on your left, there is the ---“, and in the meantime we went zipping by.

This was major trouble for me, because if I had too much of this, I would be forced to go find a nice tree to hug! So, how did I turn this traveling "lemon into lemonade"? Well, I think I broke every rule in the book... I shot through windows as we sped by and I became the most “opportunistic” photographer I could be. I bumped my shutter speed up and, when needed, the ISO up so that I could hand hold without too much movement. Tripods were simply out of the question.



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**Get up close if you can.
Yum - looks so good!**



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Sibelius Monument

And I shot plenty. In the almost 4 weeks that we were gone, I think I did about 5,000 images! One of the questions that I was asked a lot was, “What are you ever going to do with that many photographs?” The answer ... well, I plan to throw most of them away.

Another question that I was asked was whether I could enjoy the trip when all I did was take photographs.” I guess my answer to that one should have been to point out that a photographer takes photographs, but I nodded sweetly and smiled at those folks and they soon went away.

So here are some pointers if you find yourself in a similar situation.

1. Take lots of images ... and then take a few more just to be sure. Don't be intimidated by folks looking at you like you have lost your mind. You will come home with the great shots and they won't.

2. Carry your camera in your hand and have it preset to the conditions that you expect to encounter. In this way, only minor adjustments need to be made to the exposure, shutter speed, etc. You will be prepared for whatever you encounter and be able to take the shot quickly.

3. Carry extra compact disks or whatever recording media your camera uses and take some kind of storage device so you can download the compact disks. I take a really small computer and several portable hard drives.

4. Carry extra batteries and the cords and devices that allow you to recharge them. Always have extra batteries and camera media on your person because there is nothing more frustrating than having to carry a camera and not being able to use it because of lack of battery power or no room on a chip.

5. Study your camera and know how to use it. Know when and how to change from aperture priority, to shutter priority to auto or manual. Keep things easy for yourself. Know what to do when you encounter new problems. A trip isn't the best time to have to figure out how to do something special with the camera.

6. Take only the camera gear that you can easily carry and use. I use two zoom lenses (17-50 and 28-300) and a 1.5 tele-converter. I know how to change lenses quickly and I have all of my lenses easily accessible at all times in either a camera vest or purse. Save your energy for seeing and shooting. My motto was "Do your best to make it work and when in doubt, set it on automatic or program and let that expensive camera work for you."

7. Download your compact disks each and every evening no matter how tired you are and clean your camera if it needs it. Be ready for the next day's shooting the



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**Uspensky Orthodox Cathedral
- try different angles for a new perspective.**

night before.

8. Get plenty of rest and get in shape because these tours aren't for the weak and puny. I try to train for a big trip just as you might train for a marathon. On our trip, we walked miles and climbed thousands of stairs.



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Cranberries at the Market Place

9. Ditch the extra luggage and clothes ... carry as few things as you can. It will only get in your way and the fatigue factor of lugging and keeping track of stuff will wear you down.
10. Don't sweat the minor stuff on a trip ... just learn to take what comes with a smile. It always amazes me that some folks get into the biggest fights over the smallest things on a trip. Just relax and enjoy the experience and bringing home those great images.



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Rock church

So how did I do on this trip? Well, I'm happy with the outcome. Yes, I have tossed lots of images because of the quality ... blurs, exposure problems, heads cut off, telephone poles coming in front of the camera, out of focus, reflections off the glass of the bus, and other technical problems. And then I have tossed a bunch for not having much artistic merit ... in other words, they were just sort of "blah."

And, no I didn't get to take some of the things that I really wanted in the way I wanted to do it, but I did my best and had a wonderful time. Several times I was really frustrated with the logistics of the trip and just had to do what I could do and not what I wanted to do. But, I also think that what I did bring home was very representative of the beauty and uniqueness that we saw.

In future articles I'm going to share some travel highlights of this trip to Finland and Russia with you. It is a unique and wonderful location and traveling certainly broadens your awareness of people and places.

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Noella Ballenger leads photographic workshop/tours to special locations in the West. Visit her site in Apogee Photo Magazine at [www.noellaballenger.com](http://www.noellaballenger.com) or send her an e-mail at [Noella1B@aol.com](mailto:Noella1B@aol.com) Write to her at P.O. Box 457, La Canada, CA 91012, call: (818) 954-0933 or fax: (818) 954-0910 for more information on her workshop/tours.

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