



GUIDES

# TIPS TO BEING A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER

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There is a little wanderlust in all of us. Everyone, at some point in their lives, wants to travel the world and experience all its beauty for themselves. Travel opens the mind to many different possibilities, and makes us more tolerant and conscious as humans. What might be simple, normal, and mundane to some, might be unique, challenging and exciting to another. In the words of Gustave Flaubert, "Travel makes one modest. You see what a tiny space you occupy in the world."

As photographers, travel and photography are very much intertwined. Photography is a way to capture and communicate the sense of place and people. Our images help immortalize our experiences in travel. This is particularly important when we travel to places outside of our cultural comfort zones. Every moment & experience is new, and the need to document and preserve them sometimes takes over simple basic common sense. I admit that there have been times when all I've done is experienced a place or an event through the back of my viewfinder. My camera has been strapped to my person like my life depended on it, and I have always come back feeling less than happy. The fact that I missed all the little nuances outside the vision of my viewfinder, weighs quite heavily on my mind.

Here are some basic guidelines on how to be a culturally sensitive photographer when traveling

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## 01 Knowledge is key

Invest time before traveling to research the customs, and photography norms of the place you will visit. Believe me, not every place you visit is the same!

Customs vary not only by country, but by region and religion as well. Understand and appreciate the diverse cultural context, and be respectful of these differences. A little research prior to your journey, goes a long way in avoiding disappointment and despair when you find out that certain photography restrictions exist in the places where you are traveling. I want to take this a step further and say that if you know something is a no-no in a certain part of the world, don't break the rules or this it does not apply to you!

*Seen here : I stumbled upon a religious ceremony on a recent trip and soon found myself to be the official photographer of the ceremony – the cultural enrichment was unlike anything found in any guidebook!*



## *02 Be personable and communicate your needs*

Self confidence, an open attitude, and a genuine smile, are important wherever you travel. People will generally respond to you with the same attitude that you show them. Be open and honest about your need to photograph something or someone, and more often than not, people will respond positively to you. I have found that most people love to have their picture taken. If you are uncomfortable or nervous **about** something or someone, it's best to just leave the camera in your bag.

*Seen here: I was grabbing a quick meal before going to the airport in Jaipur, India and this lady was very curious about me and my gear. I promised her a photograph in exchange for a smile and I absolutely adore this image!*

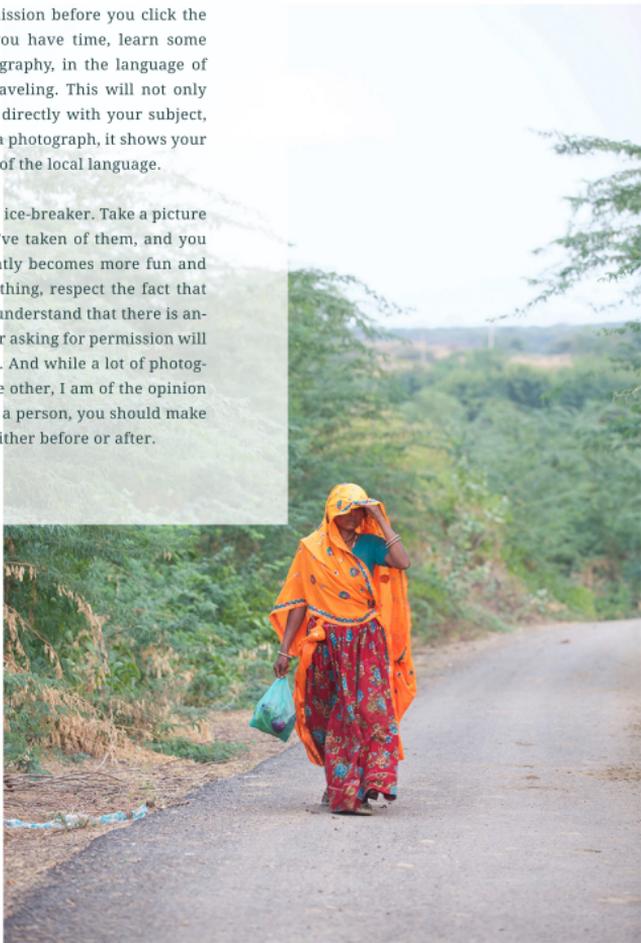


### 03 *Get permission*

Almost everyone around the world knows what a camera is, and what it can do. Even if you don't know the language, simple hand gestures and pointing to the camera, can take you far in terms of communicating what you are seeking.

Not understanding the language should never be an excuse to photograph an unwilling person. As a photographer, the responsibility of asking for permission before you click the shutter rests solely on you. If you have time, learn some simple phrases, related to photography, in the language of the country in which you are traveling. This will not only allow you to communicate more directly with your subject, **explaining** why you want to take a photograph, it shows your interest in learning at least some of the local language.

Sometimes use your camera as an ice-breaker. Take a picture and show people the photos you've taken of them, and you will find that photography instantly becomes more fun and less intimidating. More than anything, respect the fact that "No" really does mean NO. Yes, I understand that there is another school of thought of whether asking for permission will ruin the composition of an image. And while a lot of photographers will argue one way or the other, I am of the opinion that if you are taking a picture of a person, you should make every effort to ask permission – either before or after.



## 04 Know your gear

This one is one of the basics of photography, no matter what your genre.

You should know the workings of your camera inside and out. If you are buying new gear specifically for a trip, take the time before hand to read the manual, figure out the settings and/or understand how that piece of equipment really works.

When you are traveling and have strangers pose for you, that is not the time to start trying out different settings and fidgeting with your gear. People begin to lose patience and often get leery of you and your abilities. They are more likely to simply walk away, rather than waste their time with a stranger who does not know how to operate his/her camera.

*Seen here: These men were intently discussing the price of wholesale fruits and vegetables at the Chennai Flower market and I had exactly two seconds to take this image – this image is literally SOOC (Straight out of the camera).*



## *05 Travel without taking pictures*

More often than not, we travel to take a break from life, escape our routines and live a little. I encourage you to take the to really travel without obsessing over capturing every minute of every day with your camera. Spend time exploring your surroundings, and your body and mind will thank you for it.

Even if you are on assignment, build in some down time to your schedule. Not only does it help you relax, but also re-charges those creative juices so you are more productive when you do get back to work! Is it likley that you may 'miss a shot' - yes, that might happen. But isn't that better than working on vacation everytime you travel - is that vacation then really a vacation?

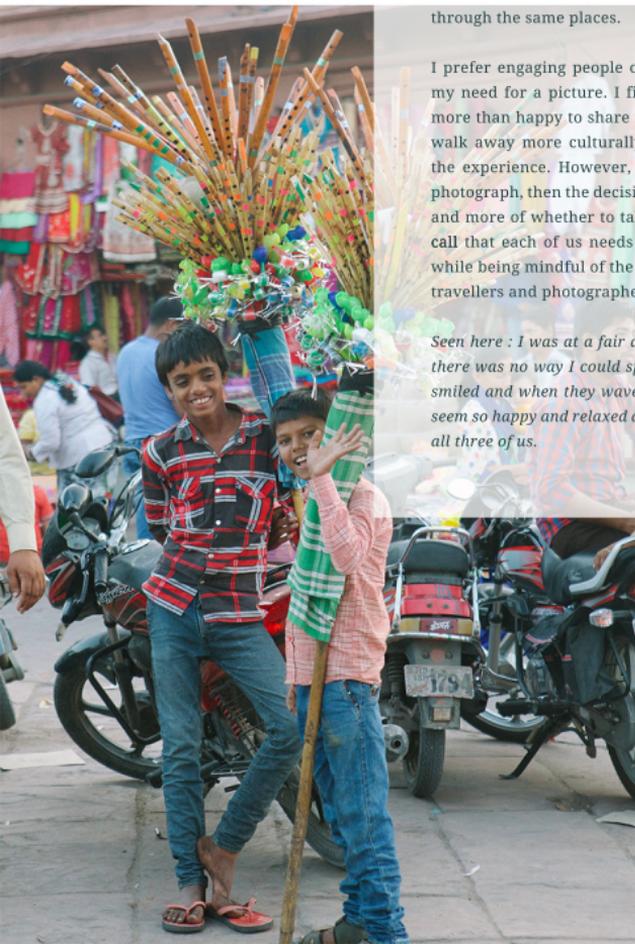


## 06 To pay or not to pay

Perhaps, one of the most controversial situations while traveling abroad, is the question of giving money to people you photograph. There is always that one uneducated, desperate tourist who gives money to get what they think is an award-winning prized photograph, and soon it becomes a lucrative business in the local community. This can get quite uncomfortable and unsafe for other photographers traveling through the same places.

I prefer engaging people openly, and sharing my story and my need for a picture. I find that in most cases people are more than happy to share their story, and to be heard. I too, walk away more culturally and emotionally enriched with the experience. However, if someone expects money for a photograph, then the decision becomes less of whether to pay and more of whether to take the photo. That is a judgement call that each of us needs to make on a case-by-case basis, while being mindful of the example we are setting for future travellers and photographers.

*Seen here : I was at a fair distance away from these boys and there was no way I could speak to them. Instead I waved and smiled and when they waved back, I took this shot. They just seem so happy and relaxed and it was a pleasant experience for all three of us.*

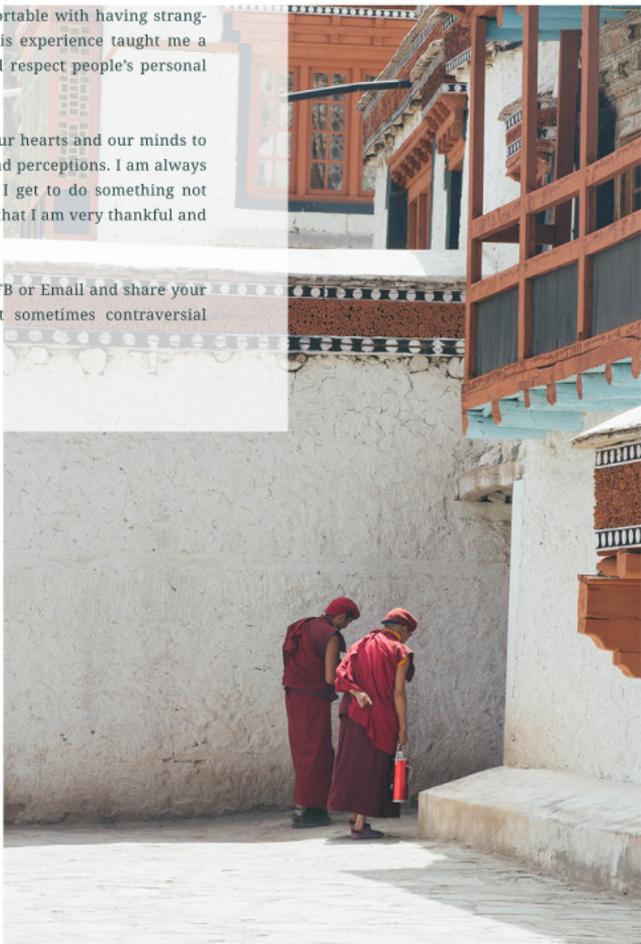


## *Conclusion and Thoughts*

I remember one instance last year when I was traveling in India with my kids. We were visiting a temple in Southern India, and for some reason a lot of teenagers started taking pictures of my five year old son. They would come and ask me if they could take a selfie with my son. Initially it seemed innocent enough, and my son posed with them. Soon it was getting to the point of being creepy, and I had to refuse. As a **parent**, I was extremely uncomfortable with having strangers take pictures of my kids. This experience taught me a very valuable lesson – value and respect people's personal space and personal preferences.

Travel, if done correctly, opens our hearts and our minds to different cultures, experiences and perceptions. I am always humbled when I travel because I get to do something not many people experience and for that I am very thankful and respectful.

Feel free to connect with me on FB or Email and share your thoughts on this interesting yet sometimes controversial topic!





## *Thank you!*

Travel is an incredible learning experience for many different reasons. Yes, for some travel is also a way to earn a living. But as photographers we need to understand and acknowledge that responsible photography is very much like responsible travel. By arming ourselves with a thorough knowledge of the place, an interest in cultural enrichment, an open mind, a pleasant attitude, some common sense and a smile, photography abroad—just like travel itself—can be a very fulfilling experience.

*Note:* The materials in this PDF are for travel and photography enthusiasts for the purposes of open dialogue and knowledge. Please do not forward, copy or distribute without my permission.

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