

Photographic Hints

By Howard Whelan

The Polar Regions offer some of the world's most challenging conditions for photography, but also some of its greatest rewards. We will explore shining icebergs, cobalt blue ice tongues, the edges of great mountains and of course the plenty of wildlife - which also means bright light and high contrast in an overwhelmingly snowy environment.

Fortunately modern cameras, both digital and film, are well up to the task as long as preparation and common sense are applied. The type of camera you use will really depend on what you already own or what you want to use the photographs for.

If you're a professional photographer, then you will know the different camera and film types. Otherwise, you may be hoping to capture images to share with friends, jog your memory, inspire others or perhaps even publish something on your web page or newsletter.

Digital Cameras

Digital cameras have come a long way in recent years. You can buy a good digital camera for about the same price as a quality point-and-shoot film camera and get similar results. Digital cameras are great in low light conditions, and the ability to view shots immediately after they've been taken is very seductive indeed.

On the expedition, you'll need to store the images, either on your laptop computer, or a digital 'wallet', which can carry the images until you get back to your computer. There are no facilities on board to download and store images. Most digital cameras come with a battery charger and rechargeable battery, but it's worth purchasing spares.

Be sure to bring all the electrical leads necessary to recharge your battery, transfer data from camera to storage facility or simply to operate on ship's power while you're viewing your shots.

If you were considering switching to digital cameras before our trip, do so early enough to familiarise yourself not only with taking pictures, but with transferring them to storage as well.

Film Cameras

Whether you use a fully automatic camera, or a single lens reflex (SLR) camera with interchangeable lenses, the end result will ultimately depend on the quality of lens in the camera and your ability to hold the camera still and compose the shot.

There's a wide range of lightweight automatic cameras with very good built-in lenses, such as the Nikon 800. Some photographers carry a SLR with interchangeable lenses for their "serious" work and an instamatic for "fun" shots.

As with digital cameras, become familiar with your gear well before you depart. Read the instruction manuals and bring them with you. If you haven't used your camera for some time, take it to a competent technician for a service, and then test it with a couple of rolls of film before you leave.

Many photographers carry two cameras, in case one fails. You can also put film of differing speeds (or print/slide film) in each; thus increasing your range of possible shots.

We find the most useful lenses are a 20-35 mm zoom, 80-200 mm zoom and a 2x teleconverter. You may also like to bring a 55 mm macro lens for the beautiful mosses and intriguing lichens.

Lenses with the largest possible aperture, for instance a 2.8 rather than 3.5, 4 or 5.6, means that you can shoot at a faster speed in lower light. Nowadays most lenses are auto-focus and there's even a new generation of lenses that have built-in stabilisers, meaning you can shoot without a tripod even at low shutter speeds.

Some professional wildlife photographers will carry a 300 mm or 400 mm lens. These are heavy, ungainly and require a tripod to create sharp images, but the results can be stunning.

Video Cameras

Expeditioners carrying video cameras should bring a generous supply of tapes and several battery packs. Please note that some battery packs require heavier duty converters than the normal travel type. You might also like to bring a lead to attach to a television monitor to view your shots on the ship.

Film & Equipment

What kind of film should I bring?

Your first choice is either print film or colour transparency (slide) film. Unless you're planning to show slides or sell your photos, you'll probably find print film more useful. Prints are easily stored in photo albums, which can be shown around.

Once you've decided on film type, you'll need to choose film speed.

Recommendations include:

Colour transparencies: Fuji Velvia 50 and Fuji Sensia 100 cover most bright daylight situations. Fuji Provia 100 and 400 are suitable for cloudy days and lower light conditions. You can 'push' both Provias by at least twice their ISO rating without visible deterioration in quality.

Print film: Kodak Kodacolor 100 for good colour saturation at a reasonable price; Fuji Reala 100 for rich (but slightly exaggerated) colours. It's excellent for close-up photography, sunlight and dull but bright, reflected light; Fuji, Kodak & Agfa 200 & 400 are all good films. If you have a particular favourite and have had good results in the past then use it. Fuji Super G 800 is a fast film used extensively by professionals.

How much film?

Bring a generous amount of film, at least twice as much as you'd take on an average holiday. To cope with the high light levels, bring a greater amount of low-speed film than you normally might. A useful rule of thumb would be to bring about 60 per cent 200 ISO and higher and 40 per cent of film 100 ISO or lower. Remember to reset the ISO speed dial on your camera each time you change film type.

Do I need a tripod?

Unless you are using high-speed film, you will need a tripod to get good results. Regardless of where you are, if you're using telephoto lenses, a tripod will hold the camera still, allowing you to use slower speed films and still get sharp images. When shooting landscapes, the tripod permits you to concentrate more on your depth of field, using higher f-stops to create images with both foreground and background in focus.

Filters and Flash

Polarising filters are useful for removing the glare from water or bringing definition to cloudy skies. All SLR lenses should have a UV (skylight) filter to protect them from being scratched. But be careful with polarising filters because they can give unexpectedly dark results if you are not familiar with how they work. Electronic flash is the most practical way to get high resolution from slow films, but most flash units don't have enough power to be effective over long distances.

Protecting your cameras

The polar regions are hostile environments for cameras. To keep cameras dry in the Zodiacs, you can use float bags (available at good camera stores). These durable, waterproof bags come in all sizes and can be inflated to ensure your camera will float if it falls in the water. Alternatively you could put your camera in a plastic bag or use a waterproof case that floats; there are many brands and sizes available. These cases seal and have foam lining for extra protection. A supply of zip-lock plastic bags is recommended as extra protection for camera and personal effects.

When going from the air-conditioned ship into humid, warm air, condensation can develop on your camera and lens. To prevent this, place your camera and lens inside a plastic bag, expel the air and seal it. Be sure to keep your lens cap on so that the condensation will occur only on the camera body. In about 10-15 minutes, your camera should be acclimatised.

Photography Etiquette

When photographing wildlife, never surround a single animal or group of animals. Try to form a semi-circle to leave an unspoiled background. Never harass wildlife for the sake of photography. Remember that photography isn't over when your shutter clicks; retreat from your subject in the same way you approached.

Respect the rights of other photographers. Allow others to get a clear shot before walking into their view. Also, be aware that those with video cameras are recording sights and sounds.

Handy Hint Checklist

- Read manuals
- Bring lens paper and cleaning fluid
- Pack spare batteries, film/tape/memory sticks
- Pack electronic flash/tripod
- Soft cloth for cleaning lens
- Waterproof bag
- Identify subject (look for interesting behaviour as well as beauty)

- Frame shot carefully.
- Open aperture 1 stop in bright light and glare.
- Close aperture 1 stop when subject is dark.
- Increase shutter speed when shooting from moving ship or Zodiac
- Focus carefully and hold camera still.
- Respect the rights of people, wildlife and fellow photographers