



Travel photography

Recommendations on how to take photographs respectfully on a journey

We have never produced more pictures than we do today. Every two minutes, we take approximately as many photographs as the whole of humanity did during the 19th century. Taking photographs has become a matter of course: we do so all the time and everywhere, we capture holidays, parties, people, animals, sceneries and objects. In times of wide-spread use of smart phones, our cameras are almost always close at hand. There is basically nothing that has never had a photograph taken of it – and ethical and moral boundaries have often been crossed in doing so. Especially when travelling, people often take pictures thoughtlessly and thus frequently break taboos. Travellers and photographers bear a huge responsibility, even more so when visiting cultures that differ greatly from their own. Photographing consciously and taking fewer pictures can be rewarding: less is more!

Why do we take photographs?

We take photographs in order to remember better, to show our experiences to other people, to capture impressive and emotional events, to eternalise and to take with us. A picture is the evidence of our experiences that we want to share with our family, friends or colleagues. Oddly, we are often too busy capturing special situations and moments in the right light and from the right perspective to be able to enjoy the actual experience.

About half of all pictures are taken whilst travelling; preferred photo subjects are extraordinary, spectacular views, not everyday objects. Many travellers try to convey an idea of distant realities or the local population in their photographs that serve both as travel documentation and evidence of the journey. But all too often, it is especially tourists taking photographs who attract negative attention by behaving thoughtlessly and who cross moral, ethical, cultural and religious lines. They take photographs of people obtrusively and without asking, thus degrading them to mere photo objects, or do not respect prohibitions of images (e. g. at religious sites).



In disconcerting situations, the camera also takes the role of a protective shield and enables the person behind it to approach people or things in a way which would otherwise be considered inappropriate or awkward. Looking through the lens gives the photographer a more distanced view and a certain feeling of security and control. It might take a lot of effort to leave this safe position, but it will be rewarding to participate in the events on the other side of the camera.

How to take photographs respectfully on a journey

Sustainable, fair tourism is characterised by its respect towards the environment and the local population. It creates economic opportunities for the latter, takes into consideration cultural identities and helps protect the environment. Travelling responsibly, especially towards the locals, also includes respectful photographing. Taking pictures thoughtfully will enable travellers to discover the country and meet its people at an equal footing.

There are frequent culture-based misunderstandings due to ignorance, insensitivity or missing interest of tourists to inform about local customs and do's and don'ts in the country. The photographer snaps away to capture and eternalise this special moment as a memory. Quite frequently, people take several hundred photos on a journey. But who can really tell a personal anecdote about encounters with the local population while showing so many pictures?

10 recommendations for taking photographs on a journey

1. Information before the journey

Find out about the culture, traditions, the do's and don'ts of the country and the living conditions of the people you are visiting. Do take into account the country and region-specific laws, regulations and prohibitions that you need to adhere to.

2. Interest and esteem

It doesn't hurt to smile! Smiling connects people and soothes the soul – at home and abroad. Show interest, be curious and friendly. Usually you can ask for people's

permission without words, simply by smiling, making eye contact or nodding before you take a picture. Be careful to take your pictures unobtrusively and never against somebody's will.

3. Communication at an equal footing

A special photograph needs time and communication. After a friendly conversation, many people are happy to have their photograph taken as a memory. A few words are often sufficient to win someone's sympathy, or if necessary you can also try to communicate with gestures. Most importantly, take your time – without taking pictures – to get to know people.

4. Respect of culture and religion

Pay attention to local customs and do's and don'ts, as pictures are often unwanted due to cultural or religious reasons. Show restraint during religious ceremonies, rituals or in sacred places. Many historic sites and public institutions have their own rules that photographers need to respect.

5. Be especially tactful around women, children and teenagers

In some places, culture or religion don't permit taking photographs of women and children. You should always get the parents' consent before you take a picture of a child. Do not take photographs of naked children.

6. Cross-check in front of the lens

Take pictures consciously and, before taking one, consider whether you would like to be portrayed in such a way or whether you would approve if your children were. Personal photographs are taken on an equal footing and with appropriate distance, and not from ambush with a telephoto lens. Give something back in return: share the pictures you took, showing them on the display of your camera. Use the device as a means of engaging locals in a conversation.

7. Photographs and money

In many touristic regions, adults have their photograph taken for money and thus get an additional source of income. If they ask for money for "right to one's own image" beforehand, you can either pay or not take the pic-



ture. Local tour guides can assess well whether a tip for a photo is appropriate or if giving money rather aggravates socio-cultural problems.

Do not take photographs of children that charge money for it – even if it is difficult. Successful beggar children often cannot complete their education and donating money retains a vicious circle.

8. Taking photographs of nature

While taking photographs, be considerate of animals and plants. Stay on marked trails and stick to the rules in conservation areas. Keep in mind that animals are unpredictable and normally shy and that your presence might cause them stress. You need to be especially considerate in sensitive areas or during the breeding season of birds.

9. Sensitive zones and sensation

Do not take photographs in military zones and conflict regions, as this could expose you and other involved persons to risks.

10. After your journey

If you promised to send someone a photograph, please do. If you wish to publish your photographs – e.g. in exhibitions or presentations – you need the consent of all the people depicted. This is also the case for quick and simple publication over social media. The depictions should be fair, respectful and honest.

Which messages are conveyed?

Pictures move people and they can create reality. Photographs and the messages they convey, used deliberately e.g. in the tourism sector, can create distorted views of reality and help spread clichés and stereotypes. Tourism uses ideal images of perfect, clean beaches and smiling people. There are almost no pictures of the flipside, which does exist both socially and ecologically. Travellers and photographers also mostly show the bright sides of their dream holiday in faraway places.

These holiday photographs do not appropriately depict the local reality, but produce new, ideal realities that people looking at these photographs take on and interpret. The

Understanding picture prohibitions and soul theft

Nowadays, most travel photographers are aware of the fact that there are reservations as concerns the depiction of people and animals in countries or regions with a Muslim population. The Qur'an does not contain a direct picture prohibition in writing, but there is evidence against illustration and a picture prohibition in the Hadith tradition which is the reference for traditional Muslims. The picture prohibition is actually a polytheism prohibition: if an artist tried to imitate the act of creation, this would equal a doubt of God's uniqueness. This basic approach toward pictures has especially prevailed in religious places, where there are no depictions of people or animals. Up until now, picture prohibition within Islam is a controversial issue about the legitimacy of depiction of living creatures both at the religious and at the secular level. Many scholars also take the view that the picture prohibition is outdated. Depending on how traditional the religious values are that are upheld, taking photographs can be allowed or forbidden.

The phenomenon of soul theft or loss of shadow through photographing was observed especially in indigenous population groups from the start of the 19th century. They considered the camera a violent object which destroyed or stole the souls of the people depicted in the photograph – for them, the reflection of the people and their decrease in size in the view-finder of the camera was the proof that their souls were stolen when the picture was taken. In some places, people believed that soul theft inevitably led to illness and death if the soul could not be brought back. Others talked of evil magic harming the depicted people.

If tourists thoughtlessly take photographs in such situations, they show disregard for the moral, ethical and religious feelings of the population and thus intrude on their privacy. Photographing is seen as a threat by those depicted, a fact of which the tourists are often not aware because their belief is different from the population's.

(cf. www.bilderverbot-islam.com / Behrend, Heike: Seelenklau)



perception of the “foreign” is characterised by one’s own situation and socio-cultural background and reflected in the photographs. Poor working conditions of the hotel staff, bad living conditions of the population and environmental pollution at the beach and in the countryside are rarely depicted.

The tourism sector, the media and the travellers themselves have the responsibility to convey authentic messages and images that do not eclipse real life. A photograph is not to be considered a mirror, but has to be understood as part of a complex entity. A truthful depiction of life just by one single picture and without further information on the context is impossible. As a matter of principle, all images and messages ought to be avoided which use clichés and stereotypes of places, people or living conditions or promote discrimination.

A guide on how to use images and messages

It is a fact that images are used less critically than the written word. In 2006, European NGOs introduced a code of conduct on images and messages. Photographs are to be used only with knowledge and permission of the people depicted and in the appropriate context, and should not use clichés or be discriminating. The organisation „Global Responsibility“ has published a guide with useful information on how to implement the Concord Code of Conduct on images and messages.
www.globaleverantwortung.at | www.concordeurope.org

ipsum – intercultural dialogue in images

The association ipsum has been working in development and intercultural education, taking photography as their vehicle, since 2003. They focus on access to different forms of lives and day-to-day routines, the possibility to express personal experiences and perspectives and fair use of photographs. This establishes a dialogue between the reality of the photographers and the reality in which the pictures are viewed. Thus, they incite people to question stereotypes, give insights into different lives and trigger reflexion at different levels. ipsum implemented several projects within and outside Europe.
www.ipsum.at

How are the pictures used?

Our photo archives and hard disks are filled with thousands and thousands of photos of our lives. A majority of the photographs depict our adventures, experiences and travels. Photos that we took passionately, which have a personal meaning to us and which, at the same time, we forget in our data storages or only look at very occasionally.

Digital images are especially meaningful when they are distributed or shared over the Internet. They serve the purpose of quick, volatile communication and are easily forgotten. Digitalisation of photography is thus rather a means of communication than a memory. By contrast, memory is rather supported by analogous photographs. As a consequence, photographs which are not kept analogously, as objects, vanish, just as the not documented oral word of past generations did (cf. A. Schelske).

It would be wise to reflect on what you want to do with your photographs – even before you take them. Will you show your pictures to friends, will you share them, copy them, or publish them? Did you ask the people you photographed for their permission to maybe publish your photographs? And most of all: Have they consented to being depicted and did they have the opportunity to tell their story?

Right to one’s own image

When taking photographs on a journey, you should, as a matter of principle, respect the laws and customs of the country you visit. If you do so, and you only use your pictures privately, you will not have legal problems. If you photograph people, they have the “right to their own image”. This means that pictures – in which the person depicted is recognisable – can only be distributed or displayed publicly with their consent. Exceptions to the rule are pictures from contemporary history, pictures in which people are only “accessories”, pictures which were taken at public events and where single people cannot be recognised and pictures which serve the common interest of art. But basically, you should always ask for people’s permission before you take a photograph of them.
www.rechtambild.de



Sources and further information

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German:

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Thurner, Ingrid. Tourismus und Fotografie. In: Fotogeschichte: Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie 12 (1992)

Concord – Code of Conduct on images and messages: www.concordeurope.org

ipsum: www.ipsum.at

Global Responsibility – Austrian Platform for Development and Humanitarian Aid: www.globaleverantwortung.at

(Click here for the English version)

Nature Photographers – Code of Conduct: www.naturephotographers.net/codeofconduct.html

Naturefriends International – Brochure Travelling Respectfully: www.nfi.at/dmdocuments/NFI_Reisen_mit_Respekt_EN_web_2014.pdf

Responsible Photography: www.responsiblephotography.org

As of now, Naturefriends International – respect have published the following dossiers in English:

Outdoor clothing – More than a green raincoat? (2013) | Poverty alleviation through tourism (2012) | Aviation Part of the EU-Emissions Trading System (2010) | Tourism and CSR (2010) | Climate Change and Tourism (2008)

These dossiers and others in German can be downloaded from Naturefriends International's Digital Library:

www.nf-int.org/biblio/dossiers

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