

Better motorcycle travel photography



Left We don't recommend riding and photographing...
Below left Make friends with your camera and learn how to use it, and you'll be rewarded with some epic shots.

Two examples of a slow lens blur, the main image (left) shows what happens when you get it right. It can be a fine line between getting it right and getting it very wrong (below). Camera stability is key here.



Riding bikes gives you some of the best opportunities to get great shots. Simon Thomas knows more about this than anyone, and here he shares some of his pointers that have made him one of the best motorcycle travel shooters in the world.

Words & photography Simon Thomas

Do you want to come from your next bike trip with photos that make your mates drool with envy and have National Geographic beating down your door? By employing a few key techniques and with a little practice, it may just be possible.

Great photography is a mix of vision, location, planning, equipment and luck. Although, to be fair, and to quote the golfer Gary Player, "the more I practice, the luckier I get".

Travel photography is one of the most challenging of the photographic genres. The challenges are immediate; your locations are always new and the best photographic vantage points unknown. The climate is fighting your camera gear and unlike in a studio, the lighting is just doing its own thing, without regard for your artistic ambition.

By getting to know your camera gear before you ride off you can prepare yourself for those imperfect shooting conditions, and crucially you'll be ready to take 'that shot'.

What I'll share here are the techniques that I employ. Essentially the 'good stuff' that I wish someone had told me at the start of my own photographic journey.

Compact or DSLR?

It's all about the right tool for the job. Since the dawn of digital, there's been heated discussion as to whether travel photography is best shot with a compact camera (pocket sized) or with a larger DSLR. With compacts now on the market for as low as \$50, the argument seems redundant. It's no longer an 'either-or' debate. Take both!

Lisa and I always carry a compact. Our 'all-weather' Nikon AW100s are never out of arm's reach. They're waterproof and shock resistant and perfect for capturing candid shots (especially of kids), low to the ground dust filled action shots or for when it's just too wet and miserable to pull out the DSLRs.

So why not use just a compact? Like I said, it's about the right tool for the job. There's no way you're walking up to that feeding lioness with your compact, kneeling down and saying "cheese!"

What a DSLR gives away in terms of its extra size, it more than makes up for in terms of flexibility (interchangeable lenses) and overall image quality and control. I want the images I capture to be crystal clear, with depth and true to life colour. My DSLR Nikon D3 gives me that. Most DSLRs also use larger sensors, which means I can print larger images or substantially crop and alter an image's composition and still be able to produce a quality print from the result. ▶



If you have two cameras, and you have the storage space on the bike, take both!



Lenses: Minimal gear, maximum flexibility.

All DSLR manufacturers offer a dizzying choice of lenses. Choosing between a 800mm zoom or a 180° fisheye, tilt-shift, super macro or a prime lens can be daunting. Most photographers can simply purchase lenses that best suit what they photograph the most.

The problem we have when riding is we never know what photographic opportunities are around the next bend; one day we're shooting mates on motorcycles and another day wildlife, landscapes, sunrises and portraits. Motorcycle travel gives us endless photographic opportunities. So, ask yourself, "within my budget, what combination of DSLR body and lenses will give me the broadest range of photographic possibilities with the minimum of equipment?"

I use a compact and a DSLR with just two or three lenses. That's it. Lisa uses her Nikon D90 and typically just one lens, a Nikon 18-200mm VR II.

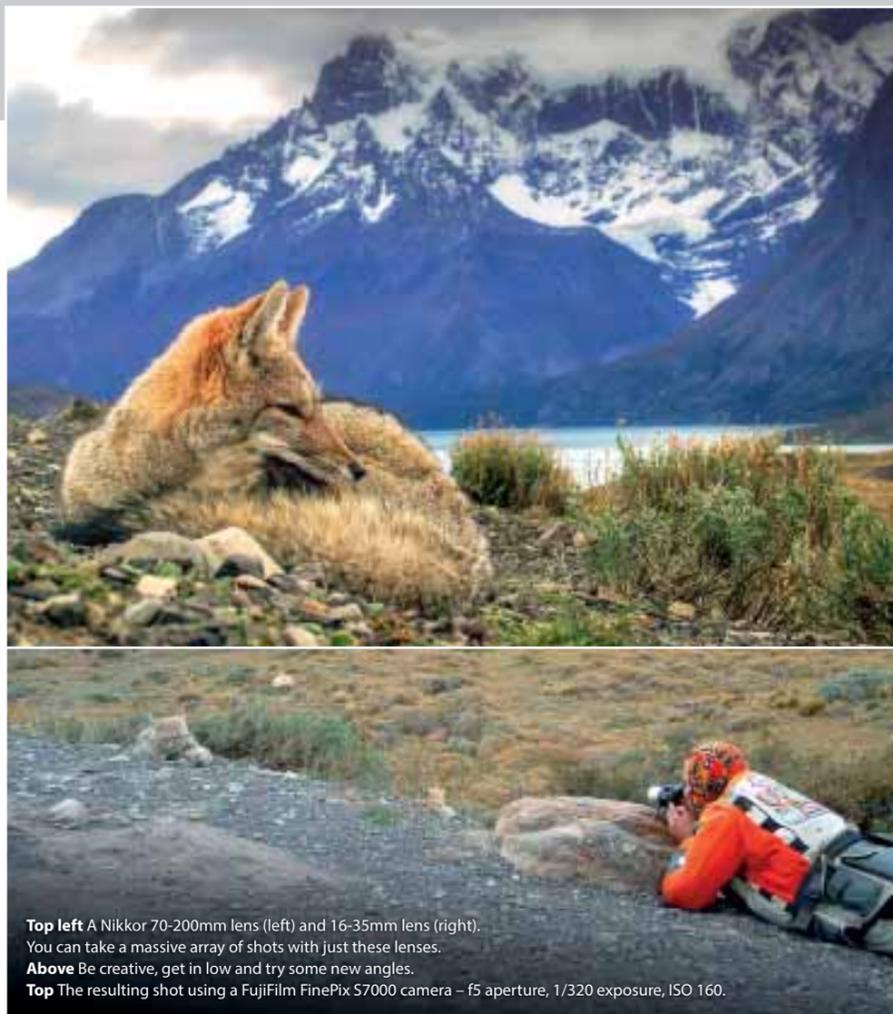
Which lenses for which occasion?

Wide-angle lenses between 14mm and 35mm allow you a wide field of view; they make things appear farther away. Just make sure you've got some great foreground material to lead the viewer's eye into the scene. Use a wide angle for shooting waves crashing over the near-to shore rocks at sunset, or a rider heading down a track and into the mountain on the horizon. They're also great for shooting in tight spaces like tents, motel rooms, cars, buses, etc.

TIP: Don't use wide-angles on female portraits as it makes the subject look heavier and broader!

Zoom lenses

Most DSLR manufacturers sell kits where the body and lenses ship together. Nikon ships their mid-range kits with an included standard zoom lens, like an 18-55mm. As a walk-around lens these can be great but eventually you'll realise that regardless of your situation, you feel either too close or too far away from your subject. Basic lenses are often labelled slow, which is 'camera speak' for not being able to capture moving objects without blurring.



Top left A Nikon 70-200mm lens (left) and 16-35mm lens (right). You can take a massive array of shots with just these lenses.
Above Be creative, get in low and try some new angles.
Top The resulting shot using a Fujifilm FinePix S7000 camera – f5 aperture, 1/320 exposure, ISO 160.

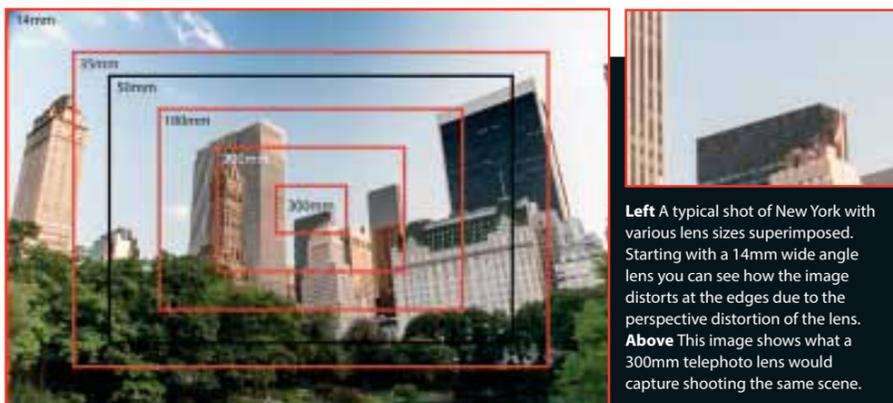
Telephoto lenses

Telephoto lenses are the ones that look impressive connected to the body of any camera. When used properly they can be magical and allow you to capture the impossible. Telephotos allow you to distance yourself when your subject is difficult to approach. I use my 70-200mm telephoto lens with a 2x Tele-converter attached (giving me a 400mm range) to shoot wild tigers in India, whilst Lisa used her telephoto to capture male portraits in Iran, where a female photographing males is frowned upon. Telephotos are also great for racetrack

photography, as, unless you're at the Isle of Man TT, it's hard to get close enough to get a decent shot.

The angle of the dangle

Today photography is becoming commonplace, so make sure your photos aren't common. We all walk around at 'head height'. So, photography all shot at head height gives us nothing new. If you want to add drama to a shot try photographing at different angles and heights. If you want to emphasise your foreground, perhaps a dusty rock strewn path or gritty highway that your riding >



Left A typical shot of New York with various lens sizes superimposed. Starting with a 14mm wide angle lens you can see how the image distorts at the edges due to the perspective distortion of the lens.
Above This image shows what a 300mm telephoto lens would capture shooting the same scene.



A picture is worth a thousand words, as they say. Notice how the moon's light gives the church and eerie, haunted feel.

buddy is about to cross, use a wide angled lens and get down, close to the ground for the shot. Shooting a portrait? Get the subject to hold out their arm and angle the camera down the arm towards their face, leading the viewer's gaze towards where you want it to be.

Carrying your gear on your bike

You need to make sure of two things when it comes to how and where to carry your camera gear on your motorcycle.

1. Make sure it's protected.
2. Guarantee you can reach your camera quickly.

Great opportunities can be lost as quickly as they appear. Make sure you can stop the bike, whip out your camera and fire off shots as quickly as possible.

I use a tank bag to secure my camera equipment. Placed almost directly above my front suspension, it's as protected as it can be from bumps and jars. I can also be camera ready without having to dismount the bike.

TIP: When travelling with lenses with built in Vibration Reduction (below), make sure you turn the VR switches to the 'off' position before hitting the road. VR system lenses aren't super happy travelling when not connected to a camera body.



Always have your VR switch set to 'OFF' when travelling.

Tell a Story

Think about what surrounds your subject. What are you really photographing? Here's an example; I took a shot of the full moon rising (above) some years ago. It was nice enough but essentially it was a bright orb in a dark blue sky. A friend saw the photographs I'd taken just before the moon reached its zenith and was amazed I'd not shown these shots. The foreground to the moon was the tallest spire of a cathedral in Cusco Peru. Sure, the spire cut into the symmetry of the moon but it gave the image some planetary perspective and depth, which was lacking in the shot of the moon alone. An old man in a room is just an old man in a room. Pull back and show the room had been destroyed and is crumbling around him, now that tells us a story.

Vision

Rather than just clicking the shutter release and taking a snapshot, envision the photograph in your mind – the angle, the colours and the composition. If what you're seeing through the viewfinder is different from what you've envisioned then relocate, zoom in or out and adjust before clicking the lens.



Shallow DOF – concentrates the eye to the foreground detail.

Strong DOF – background details become more visible.



Get in close

I find portraits both the most difficult to shoot and the most rewarding. If you need to use a telephoto then go ahead, but don't let the lens make you lazy. I've found that to get great street portraits, I need to get in uncomfortably close to my subject, and then I have to halve that distance again. I feel intrusive at this point but people don't seem to mind and the results speak for themselves.

TIP: Get closer than you think you should and then get closer again.

Be prepared

Have your camera at hand whenever you can and make sure the settings are all back to default. If you've adjusted any camera settings for a night shoot and then left them dialled in, your daytime shots will look dreadful, with blown highlights or worse.

TIP: Most modern DSLRs have a 'button combination' that when pressed automatically returns the camera's setting back to factory default. Great if you need to quickly get your camera ready for a shot.

Take control

No matter how expensive the camera body is, only shooting in 'Auto Mode' is like buying a Ferrari and only driving it in second gear. Auto is camera speak for 'best guess'. Shooting in your camera's 'aperture priority mode' will give you control over the 'depth-of-field' (DOF) in the image. You control how much of your photo is in sharp focus and the camera works out the shutter speed and other details for the correct exposure.

TIP: Want to get your subject in focus but want that fuzzy out of focus background that you see in magazines? Set the camera to Aperture mode, take the aperture down to its widest setting (f2.8 – f3.5) and take the picture.

Take time to get to know the various buttons and settings in your camera. Nothing bad will



happen, and you can't accidentally select a self-destruct button. Take more photos. Don't stop shooting when you get a good photo, the next photos could be great!

MASSIVE TIP: Remember hitting 'delete' when a photo doesn't work out is free!

Movement is the enemy

Whether you're using a compact or a DSLR, do everything you can to minimise movement in the camera. Don't have a tripod? Rest your camera on something solid, compose your shot and then set the camera's timer to 5-10 seconds. Voila!

Nothing at the right height close by? Try this: compose your shot and then rest your camera along the vertical edge of a lamppost, fence post or anything solid. Depress the shutter and you're good to go. Removing any movement in the camera gives you the best chance of capturing your subject in sharp focus.

A Golden Oldie: The rule of thirds

Photography 101. Don't put your subject smack in the middle of an image. Mentally slice up your image into thirds so that if you are taking a shot of a boat at sea on the horizon, place the horizon on the lower or upper third but not smack in the centre. **TIP:** Photographing a passing motorcycle? Put the rider and bike into the corner of the image where they first appear. If the rider is approaching from your right, put them in the lower right of the photo so that they have space to ride somewhere in the final image.

Dramatic Light

Photography is about your ability to capture light. So, don't rely on post editing effects but try to shoot early in the morning when the light is softer and usually warmer or late in the afternoon when the sun's angle casts long dramatic shadows and colours appear more vibrant and contrasting. **TIP:** Don't shoot landscape at midday, the overhead sun creates few shadows and your photos can end up looking flat.

Remember there is no 'one-size-fits-all' formula for producing great images but the more you familiarise yourself with your gear and the more time you spend honing your skills the better your photos will be. Safe travels and great shooting.

Centre left Getting in close can be uncomfortable but the results are worth it.
Above Focussing your rider towards the corner of the frame allows them room to ride in the image.
Right Shooting early in the morning or late in the afternoon is gold for awesome lighting. The lighting is softer, making colours more vibrant.



EDITING YOUR SHOTS

Post editing gives you the chance to enhance or correct an image to better allow you to express what you saw. Get to know programs like Adobe Light room, Photoshop and Nikon's NX2.

Editing, as a subject, could easily fill an entire book, in fact it does and they're available at your local bookstore. But ultimately the better the initial photograph, the less time you'll spend tinkering on the computer. The one edit I perform on almost all my images is to colour correct and sharpen them. Colour correction is what gives you the power to set how warm or cool your images appear and more than often enhances the saturation of your image. Here's one technique:

In Photoshop, open your image. Select the 'curves adjustment'. From the fly-out select the colour sampler tool at the top right left (with the dark tip) and then click on something in your image that you know should be absolute black.

Then choose the colour sampler tool at the lower left (with the white tip) and click on an area of your image that is the brightest or that you know should be white.

Lastly, select the colour sampler in the centre left (with the grey tip), and then select and click an area of your image that should be neutral grey. Have a look at the example I've given below at the before and after. I've added no colour or saturation I've just colour corrected it. Good luck. ■

