



Some Tips On Picking A Photography Tour

By Mountain High Workshop Staff Instructor Jeff Sullivan

Do you want to visit a national park, a beautiful scenic area or a foreign country and take a photography tour to ensure that you hit all the best locations in all the right lighting? Here are some things to look for that can help you find the tour that can best ensure your success.

Most importantly, evaluate the tour leader's photography and skills.

Is the tour company showing you the leader's photos, or the best of all photos they've seen from various people over the years? Make sure that you are seeing the leader's own photos so you can judge his or her qualifications.

Are the photos from trip's destination?

Are there dozens of shots in a gallery for you to evaluate or just 4 or 5 lucky moments on a brochure or single web page? Are the shots from the same season when you'll be there? The sun moves dramatically during the course of a year, and light is the key to good shots.

Do they include not only the common postcard views, but also enough unique views to show a depth of knowledge of that site to ensure that you will come away with more than cliché shots?

Spectacular weather can be a plus, but do the instructor's photos rely mainly on unusual weather that you might not have during your visit, or can the instructor help you be productive on boring days too?

A good tour leader is there to help you capture nice photos today, not show you a few unusual moments that they experienced over many years of visits.



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Determine whether the tour leader provides any photography instruction.

Some photo tours simply take you to an area and the leader says, "Well, there it is so start taking photographs." Make sure that if you are expecting the tour leader to offer some guidance in how to set up and capture that photograph you want, they are willing and capable of doing that.

Were the demo pictures taken on a digital camera or a film camera?

Being enticed to join a tour with the results from a film camera is also a huge warning flag. Digital cameras capture less dynamic range than film, so if you use a digital camera, software post-processing will be important to your results. Make sure that your guide is well suited to teach and assist you, not only with editing tools such as Photoshop and workflow tools such as Lightroom, but also emerging tools such as Photomatix for High Dynamic Range (HDR) processing. Even if you don't use these tools today, you might want to in the future, so it's good to get insight from someone who can tell you how to shoot to maximize your results with them. (Upon seeing what they can do, you may even decide to try them for the first time, if only to use free trial copies for 30 days upon returning from your trip.)

Make sure that the tour leader is knowledgeable in the type of photography you shoot, digital or film.

Some established photography tour and workshop leaders favor film over digital and will not give the digital photographers the assistance they require.

Next evaluate the itinerary. Does the tour even visit all of the most compelling spots for photography?

This is far more important than you might think. For example, if you consider a packaged photography tour to Death Valley, make sure that it includes the most compelling sites such as Eureka Dunes and The Racetrack. The vast majority of tours skip these destinations because they're inconvenient. Search sites like Flickr and MyparkPhotos.com to identify the specific sites where you want to shoot, then verify that the tours you're considering actually do shoot there!

Are the sites visited at the optimum times for the best light, or do you hit them mid-day along with crowds of other tourists?

If you are a serious photographer, or desire to become one, having the tour leader take you to the spectacular shooting sites for sunrise and sunset is critical to your success and enjoyment on the tour. Some tours can't be bothered with getting up and organized before the sun comes up but such a tour is cheating you of possibly the best time of day to capture that masterpiece.

What are the logistical aspects of the tour?

Are meals scheduled outside of the times for 'Magic Hours' or brought on location as appropriate so participants can eat when they are finished with that sunrise or sunset?

How many people will be on the trip? How many in any one location at one time? Many tour organizers would prefer to pack you into a bus with 40 other photographers. A crowd maximizes their profit, but it makes for lousy photography. Check not only the student to instructor ratio, but also the number of students that will be at any given shooting site at one time. Check to see how many people will be in each tour vehicle. The more people in a given vehicle, the longer it takes to get everybody out, get their gear ready and begin shooting and then back inside again.

If you simply want to take a trip and wing it on the photography, no problem. Book any trip and go. But if you want to make sure that the tour isn't simply a standard daytime tour renamed and marketed as being one for photographers, dig a little deeper. You may be surprised at how many tours will drop off your list upon performing these simple, common-sense tests.

Take your landscape photography to a higher level.

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