



GUIDE LINES

How to get the most from a photo tour, according to a workshop leader

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When *Outdoor Photographer* asked me to write an article about getting the most out of a photo tour, I was actually leading one in India. I was guiding a group of photographers on an incredibly productive 12-day tiger safari through three national parks. Having led photo workshops around the world – and currently traveling with a group of workshop participants – I started collecting ideas on what makes for the best photo tour experience.

Some of these tips come from my years of leading photography trips, while others come directly from workshop participants who have attended many tours and workshops themselves. Together, our conversations revealed common traits of successful trips – and pitfalls that can make a workshop less rewarding.

Tours vs. Workshops

The first thing to determine when choosing a photo trip is whether you're looking for a photo tour or a photo workshop. Understanding both your skill level and your expectations will put you on the path to success from the start.

To me, a photo tour is a travel experience built around photography. The itinerary and guide work hard to get you to the best locations in the best light, but instruction is typically limited. Think of a traditional guided tour with a photography-focused itinerary.

A photo workshop, on the other hand, also emphasizes access to great locations

Previous page: Photographing the Ibex Dunes in Death Valley as a thunderstorm builds in the distance. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 14-24mm f/2.8 S. Exposure: 1/60 sec., f/11, ISO 64.

Opposite: Years ago, I was hired by Yukon Tourism to photograph a river expedition on the Alsek River. During 14 days on the water, our group never saw another footprint or a single piece of trash — a reminder of how wild this landscape remains. Nikon D3S, AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8E FL ED VR. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/8, ISO 800.



I spent an entire day at the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, photographing from sunrise to sunset. After a midday break in the shade of a pyramid, I hiked into the desert and eventually found a vantage point that allowed me to capture camel trains passing in front of the pyramids at sunset. Had I visited for only a few hours, I never would have found this composition. Nikon Z7, NIKKOR Z 24-120mm f/4 S. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/9, ISO 360.

and light but generally features fewer participants and much more instruction. Many workshops include classroom sessions that complement time spent shooting in the field.

Which option is right for you depends on your goals. Are you still learning your camera and composition and looking for guidance? Or are you a self-sufficient photographer who simply wants the logistics handled?

Tours are often less expensive and may include 12 to 14 participants. Workshops typically cost more because smaller groups allow for a more personalized experience. As a former credentialed art and science teacher, I focus almost exclusively on workshops, where I have time to teach and provide individualized instruction.

My workshops generally maintain a ratio of three to four participants per

instructor, giving everyone ample personal attention and assistance with camera settings, technique and composition. Neither type of trip is inherently better than the other. The key is choosing the experience that best matches your needs. While there's always more to learn, highly experienced photographers who aren't seeking instruction may find a larger group tour perfectly adequate.

Even among workshops, the amount of instruction can vary widely depending on the logistics of the trip. During winter workshops in Yosemite, the days are shorter and driving time is minimal, leaving plenty of time for classroom sessions. By contrast, on a tiger safari in India, we're often in jeeps from dawn to dusk. If we do get a midday break, most people want to grab lunch and rest.

The same is true on Alaska brown bear



workshops. Because we fly from our lodge to different locations each day, we leave early and return late. By the time everyone has showered and eaten dinner, most participants are ready for bed.

On wildlife-focused trips featuring bears or tigers, we maximize our time in the field, and much of the instruction happens while we're shooting. Workshops that aren't entirely field-based often allow more time for formal image reviews and editing sessions.

Choose Your Pro Wisely

In addition to choosing a workshop or tour that matches your interests and skill level, think carefully about who you'll be spending the week with.

There are many outstanding instructors, but being a great photographer doesn't automatically make someone a great

teacher or workshop leader. In fact, I'd argue that strong interpersonal skills and a genuine desire to help others are more important than photographic talent when it comes to leading a successful workshop.

Over the years, I've heard plenty of stories from photographers who signed up with big-name pros or popular YouTubers only to discover that the instructor was more interested in making their own images than helping participants. I even heard one story about a "pro" who deliberately stood in front of clients to block them from getting a shot that might rival his own.

Do your homework. Make sure you know who you're traveling with and what their priorities will be.

Look at Logistics and Costs

Not all trips to the same destination are created equal.

Few wildlife experiences are more thrilling than watching brown bears charge toward you while chasing salmon. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR. Exposure: 1/2500 sec., f/8, ISO 1600.



Opposite: Tiger encounters can happen quickly, which is why it pays to keep a second camera body equipped with a wide-angle lens. You never know when a tiger might walk right past your jeep. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 24-120mm f/4 S. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/4, ISO 100.

Above: Tiger safaris in India are unlike any other wildlife experience. After days spent tracking tigers through the forest, seeing one emerge in its natural environment is unforgettable. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 24-120mm f/4 S. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/4.5, ISO 10000.

If one trip is significantly cheaper than another, take a close look at the details. Where are you staying relative to the shooting locations? Are you lodging in Yosemite Valley or outside the park and commuting each day? How much field time is included? What kind of access do you have?

For example, the permits we use on our India tiger safaris allow us to enter the parks earlier and stay later than standard safari operators. While those permits increase costs, they also greatly improve our chances of photographing tigers when the light is best.

It's also important to maintain realistic expectations about the images you'll create. The photographs used to market

a workshop are often a collection of the strongest images made over multiple trips and multiple years. You should absolutely expect to come home with great photographs, but there's a difference between visiting a location once and returning to it repeatedly over time.

Once you've selected the right workshop, preparation becomes critical.

Understand the conditions you'll be shooting in and pack accordingly. Do you have enough warm clothing? Extra batteries? The right lenses? If you're heading somewhere cold, can you actually operate your camera while wearing gloves? If you're photographing the night sky or the aurora, can you adjust your settings in complete



Fortunately, modern noise-reduction software is remarkably effective because many tiger sightings occur in the fading light at the very end of the day. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR. Exposure: 1/500 sec., f/6.3, ISO 10000.

darkness without relying on a flashlight?

More than once, I've watched participants miss opportunities because they couldn't quickly operate their camera in challenging conditions or couldn't find a spare battery when they needed one.

Practice beforehand. Preparation pays off.

Less Is More

Bring only what you truly need.

I know that's difficult, especially when you're visiting a location for the first time and don't want to miss an opportunity. But I often see photographers carrying so many lenses and camera bodies that they

struggle to stay organized or decide which lens to use.

In the worst cases, people carry so much gear that it becomes difficult to manage safely, increasing the chances of dropping equipment.

Pro Tip: Always zip your camera bag closed. You never know when someone might move it, and loose gear can easily fall out.

As I've gained experience, I've consistently carried less gear on trips. Rarely do I feel I've missed a photograph because I left something behind. More often, traveling lighter makes me more agile and better able



to respond quickly to changing conditions.

For wildlife photography, I typically carry a Nikon 180-600mm along with either a 24-120mm or 70-200mm. For landscape trips, I add a 14-24mm. That's usually enough. For commercial assignments, I may bring a few fast prime lenses, but for workshops I travel as light as possible.

Know Your Equipment

I know it's tempting, but don't buy a new camera or lens right before a major trip and expect everything to go smoothly.

We all love new gear, but it's far more valuable to know every menu and button

on a familiar camera than to own a brand-new model whose features you haven't mastered. If you're planning to upgrade, buy your equipment early enough that you can thoroughly practice with it before your trip.

The same principle applies to editing software.

Have at least a basic understanding of your editing program before arriving at a workshop. It's difficult to learn editing from scratch during a group workshop, particularly one that emphasizes field shooting. Workshops with a stronger classroom component are generally better suited

Yosemite can be crowded, especially around Tunnel View, but nothing compares to watching a clearing storm sweep across the valley with a few new friends. Nikon D800E, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8E ED VR. Exposure: 1/30 sec., f/11, ISO 100.



Leading workshops in Yellowstone is often about timing and anticipating wildlife behavior. Success depends on being in the right place, with the right light and a background that helps tell the story — even when people become part of the scene. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR. Exposure: 1/2000 sec., f/11, ISO 1400.

for photographers who want to focus on post-processing skills.

Regardless of the format, don't let the first time you open Lightroom be the day before your trip.

Consider scheduling one-on-one instruction with a professional — many of us offer Zoom coaching — or spend time watching tutorials to get comfortable with the basics. We were all beginners once, and there's nothing wrong with being new to photography or editing. Just make sure your expectations align with your current skill level.

Get Out There

No matter which type of photo tour or workshop you choose, photography is an

incredible window into the world. The experiences I've had and the places photography has taken me have exceeded my wildest expectations.

A workshop can help you see the world, learn new skills, create stronger images and make lasting friendships. Most importantly, it can deepen your connection to the places you visit.

So get out there. Take a chance. Book that trip to the destination you've always dreamed about.

Life is short, and there's no time to waste. Maybe someday our paths will cross in the wild, doing what we all love. **OP**

See more of Josh Miller's work at joshmillerphotography.com.