DOZEN DOYENS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

NEENAD PARULEKAR

FOREWORD by ROHINTON MEHTA (Uncle Ronnie)
Technical Editor, "Smart Photography"
Ajay Sood is a name that great number of travel and photography enthusiasts from India and abroad know about—especially the readers of Condé Nast Traveller, National Geographic Traveller India, Outlook Traveller, Smart Photography, and The Times of India’s Travel Time supplement. It is the result of Ajay’s passion about photography, travel, and his drive to give the society what he knows about travel photography and the experience he has had while traveling, both within India and abroad. He has already visited more than 40 countries.

Let’s see how his journey in travel photography started:

Ajay came in contact with photography when he found a camera in his house, which his father had stopped using for a long time—Kodak Brownie Flash II. He was just 11 years then. While he pursued the hobby for a while, they were a family of modest means and photography was an expensive hobby. So finally he gave it up after pursuing it for about five years. By then, that camera had also become battered.
But, the spark had been kindled. When Ajay’s elder daughter was born in 1992, he again bought a point and shoot camera. Started shooting again and subsequently, his wife, Manisha, joined Kodak as the Country GM for their digital products. There was no looking back after that since the newest digital cameras became accessible.

Those were the days of single digit megapixels - most of those cameras were 2-5 megapixels, with the highest resolution camera being 9 megapixel. So, though he had shot with those extensively, that quality is unacceptable in today’s day and time.

Finally, he bought a DSLR and started picking up lenses as and when he could afford them. Made some mistakes in picking up the equipment, sold some of it and finally settled with what he has today. He would still add a lens or two - macro and a long telephoto prime being on his wish list.

Travel was a break from routine for Ajay. As a small-town boy (Ludhiana in those days was a small town), his life revolved around home, school, friend’s place, family get-togethers, etc. That not-so-exciting routine would get a blip of excitement every time they traveled. These trips were few and far between and were pretty middleclass. In fact, he was in early twenties when he first travelled in a video coach (a luxury in those days) and in his mid-twenties when he first flew (an ultra-luxury experience back then). Ever since, he had loved travelling.

Though he started shooting extensively during all his inland travels, he remembers preparing with extra cameras, extra batteries and extra memory cards when he first travelled abroad. He must have clicked about three thousand images during a week in Kuantan, Malaysia. After that, there was no looking back.
After that, Ajay subscribed to a pro account on Flickr that paid back many times over when one of his images was bought by an advertising agency in UK for Prudential of Prudential World Cup fame. That was around the time he was calling it a day as far as advertising was concerned. Prior to that, few of his articles had appeared in The Times of India’s Travel Times.

When he exited advertising industry in 2010, photography was a natural second innings. After dabbling in and discarding fashion and food photography, he zeroed in on travel photography. It was a perfect amalgamation of his two passions!

To add robustness to his credentials, he started Travelography, a travel photography group on Facebook. It was also his way of giving back what he knew to the fraternity of travel photography enthusiasts. Over the years, they did around twenty Travelography trips all around North India, covering Punjab, Himachal, Uttarakhand, UP, MP and Rajasthan. As a result, he had an enviable stock of images from North India.

While all this was going on, he continued to invest in travelling to other destinations - both, in India and overseas. Today he has a stock of images from most parts of India and around 35 other countries.

Initial journey in this genre of travel photography was not rosy. This is not an established genre that pays you well in India yet. But he took it upon himself to be a pioneer and create a market for it. Today, he contributes regularly to a dozen magazines and also does architectural and interiors assignments for corporates. He also runs workshops on travel, architecture and heritage photography to earn additional monies. After around eight years, he is now getting a stable income from this field.

After years of persistence and hard work, Ajay’s work is now getting due recognition. Canon appointed him a photo mentor (2014-2016) to run their official photography workshops relating to travel and architecture. The Times of India asked him to cover their Times Passion Trails to Kaziranga and the Western Ghats in Kerala. He also was the experience architect for Times Architecture and Heritage Passion Trails in Bhopal and Jaipur. He had been on the Canon Photo Marathon Jury in 2012 and they asked him to be on the jury again in 2015. Many wins and awards have come his way during this journey. Notable wins amongst them being #NGTGetOutThere Grand Prize, #LonelyPlanetInstaFame and Cox & Kings’ #Grab Your Dream (Season2) Winner in which he won a trip to Israel. He was awarded the 2016 OSM (Outlook Social Media) Photographer of the Year and was adjudged the 2018 Photo Blogger of the Year by Gujarat Tourism and ICIT (Indian Council of Innovative Tourism).

Today, Ajay is a speaker on Architectural and Travel Photography in Travel Blogging Conferences across the globe. He has already spoken on these topics in Stockholm, Manila, Jerusalem, Ostrava (Czech Republic), and Huntsville, AL (USA).

Ajay’s family, especially his wife, has been extremely supportive of his endeavours in this area. As a result, today, more than ever, he is determined to continue pursuing this dual passion of his.
This spectacle called the Northern Lights in Iceland may be summed up in one word - _Magnifique!_
ABOUT - Travel Writing and Travel Photography

A person with a love for travel, a flair for writing, and a passion for photography can combine all three to tell effective stories about destinations.

This is an exclusive field and only a few can opt for this since competence in all the three fields is mandatory.

A travel writer-cum-photographer is in demand from various travel and leisure magazines, newspapers, supplements, travel publications, and tourism boards.

If your writing skills are superlative and your travel photographs unique, you will be invited to contribute in leading travel publications like National Geographic Traveller, Condé Nast Traveller, Lonely Planet, and more.

As far as travel is concerned, one should not restrict one’s travels just to known destinations, but should also cover less-explored locations known for their religious, historical, social, cultural, and heritage connects. Telling stories about these lesser-known places is part of a travel writer’s responsibility.

Committing to such a varied genre is not easy. Besides finding out how to get a destination, one also needs to research the best time to visit. Further research is necessary to figure out the mode of transport, stay arrangements, and availability of food.

It is not enough for a traveller to just wander about the place he visits. He needs to be a keen observer of the stories he stumbles upon during his travels. Additionally, he also has to observe the mundane. Things like nearby markets, schedule of public transport, availability of tourist vehicles, nearest airport, rates of the rental cars, type of accommodation, the food available and their prices, nearby attractions, their distances from the main town, frequency of transports, etc. are all equally important for a travel writer. All this, and more, helps him provide useful travel tips to his readers.

An inquisitive mind and a small notebook go a long way in documenting the journey and the destination. Your notes help create a gripping travel story that also provides useful tips.

As a travel storyteller, one must have his camera ready at all times. You never know when an interesting story may come along. Shoot in both – landscape as well as portrait orientation – as some of your shots may be needed as a cover image.

Also, shoot with some relief in your frames. This will provide some flexibility to the editorial team to compose the title or text in your images.

As a travel photographer, the camera gear you carry must follow the dictum of ‘less is more’. Don’t get weighed down by your equipment. For this, you need to have focus.

Do not over reach and try shooting everything at the same time. For example, while shooting architecture, just stay with your wide lens and don’t attempt birding or shooting wildlife at the same time, as that would necessitate a long lens.

Remember, the stock of images you create during your travels can also get you extra income through stock photo libraries! So, shoot, and then shoot some more!

Travel writing and travel photography not only can get you remunerated, but can also provide you with the extra thrill of seeing your articles in print.
Notre Dame Cathedral's rooftop gargoyle seems to be watching over the city of Paris.
Q&A WITH AJAY SOOD

Please tell something about you, your personal views about travel, photography, photo tours or anything you want to share.

Though not so young today, I am happy that when it comes to travel photography, I still possess a child-like excitement and abundant energy.

How did you come into the photography field and at what age?

I have been doing photography since my childhood. But I got serious about photography in mid-1990 - so, we can say that the dawn of digital photography and dawn of my seriousness in photography coincided. I was in my mid-30s then. Ever since, during my travels, my camera was my constant companion. And that companionship continues.

And how did you come into Travel Photography?

Though I have dabbled in fashion and food photography, I have always loved travel. In fact, I have a lure of travel (that's why, my cyber alias - 'Travelure'). I have been fortunate to have been accorded opportunities by life to travel, and travel extensively. I have been to over 40 countries across the globe. Initially, the differing look-and-feel of these places inspired me to capture images of these places. Subsequently, I started capturing not just the sights, but stories of these places.

What was your First Camera?

My first camera was a Kodak Brownie Flash II - a beauty that used to take a 620 film. It was an expensive hobby for a child, but I would save my pocket money to buy film and have it processed. Most of those images have been lost over the years, though.

How do you prepare for your personal travel shoot? (Planning, booking, stay, food, travel, and photography) And what things you carry in your Camera Bag and in your Travel Bag?

I use various ways to book my travel - internet, friends at the destination, friends in travel business, etc. I make sure that I cover as many things as possible in the available time in a given destination - e.g. in Ladakh, I'll ensure that I cover important monasteries like Hemis, Thikse, Lamayuru, picturesque lakes like Pangong and TsoMoriri, hop across to Nubra desert, cover passes like Khardung La and Chang La, etc. While I may carry a lot of equipment to a destination, I usually step out with minimal equipment for a specific day's shoot.

How many trips you arrange, for you, in a year?

I do anything between 12 and 24 trips per year. Most trips are 1-3 night affairs, but some are of a week or longer.

Do you go alone or with (like minded) group? What are the advantages and disadvantages in travel photography while going alone or with groups?

Both. On my serious photography trips, I am mostly alone - biggest advantage being flexibility. But, for doing a short feature or travelogue, I sometimes do travel with like-minded photo-enthusiasts. Some of the advantages of travelling with like-minded people are you get to see some angles you may have otherwise missed; you get help in lens changes etc. when needed, and your expenses get reduced as more people share them. Some of the disadvantages are - sometimes, they slow you down, they
may not want to cover all the places you'd want to, and they may inadvertently photo-bomb your frames while you are shooting.

**How do you manage your expenditure on travel photography?**

Variously. Some of my assignments are paid-for by publications. Some others fetch me monies afterwards once I write a travelogue and send those to a publication. Few of my photo-tours are all-expenses-paid and I additionally get an assignment fee as a photo-shoot director. I earn some monies from the photography workshops I conduct. Besides, I also do interiors and exteriors shoot assignments for architects and interior decorators.

**What are the important qualities a travel photographer should possess?**

Let's see if I can list these comprehensively. Here goes:

a. A travel photographer must do his homework about the destination before he embarks on actual travel. This homework must encompass weather, places to see, locating these places on a map, charting out a rough itinerary keeping the 'time of day' in mind based on the direction the place of interest is facing - e.g., you shouldn't reach the place of interest when you are forced to shoot against the light, unless, your plan is to capture silhouettes, likely issues you may face and your 'plan B' if such an eventuality arises, etc.;

b. A travel photographer must be open to frankly and persuasively talking to people who may pose likely impediments to his shoot;

c. He must be mostly-pleasant and humble, yet must have the quality to firmly assert himself, if need arises.

d. He must plan to step out with bare-minimum equipment - this is possible based on the 'homework' mentioned above. e.g., I try and step out with only one lens most of the time - if I am shooting monuments, I'll go out with a perspective-control lens; if I am shooting variety of subjects, I'll step out with my mid-range lens; if shooting wild-life, I'll step out with my telephoto; if I am likely to shoot waterscapes, I'll carry my super-wide with variable ND filter and tripod; etc. It is never easy to shoot if you are bogged down by lugging a huge range of equipment;

e. Carrying a 'Press Card' (legitimate) helps;

f. He must be innovative, e.g., if tripod is not allowed, he should be able to make do with available stable surfaces, or if it rains, how to still shoot while protecting your equipment;

g. He must be conversant with the technical aspects of photography like stops-of-light etc. since more often than not he'll be faced with dynamic range that's way beyond the capturing capabilities of even the most advanced digital cameras. Here, exposure bracketing, a foresight of how much retrieval of details in darkest and brightest areas is possible, and perfection in metering with built-in camera meter is mandatory;

h. Last, but not the least, he should have a passion - both for photography as well as travel.

**What are the ethics involved in travel photography?**

I used to run a group on Facebook that was dedicated to helping those who are serious about travel photography - 'Travelography by Travelure'. In that group, there were a set of guidelines we requested all members to follow in spirit. These may not be the last word in travel photography ethics, but for whatever they are worth, I list those out for you:

**General Guidelines:**

- Please respect the law of the land. Follow venue instructions/guidelines normally written clearly at the venue.
- Please ensure you do not put yourself or any fellow photographer at risk - of physical hurt, vandalism, public outrage, etc.
- Please be responsible citizens. Refrain from causing damage to any heritage site or property by littering or otherwise.
- Please respect caveats regarding photography rules, wherever mandated.
- It's important that we act responsibly and refrain from taking objectionable or candid pictures of fellow photographers, especially women. Utmost care to be taken while posting them on the internet. One may seek permission prior to doing this.

- Please refrain from inconveniencing others and intruding their privacy.
- Be sure to not get in the way/face of another photographer who has already set up the frame. Be kind and courteous to anyone who inadvertently gets into your frame anyhow.
- When a non-photographer has a question about your activity or gear, take a moment to answer them in congenial fashion. Offering the curious onlooker a view through the camera will often work wonders.

**Photography guidelines for wildlife:**

**Do's:**

- Familiarize yourself with the local rules concerning wildlife, such as the minimum distance to be kept between the animals and you, and be sure to obey those, as animal-behaviour can be unpredictable.
- Use a lens of long enough focal length to avoid going too close to the subject. Also, consider composing your photos to show more of the animal's habitat.
- Acquaint yourself with and respect the behaviour and ecosystem of the wildlife you may encounter. By doing so, you will enrich your experience tremendously.

**Don'ts:**

- Entice a wild animal/ bird with food (baiting) in order to get the photo.
- Force an action. Be patient! The most beautiful photographs result from natural action.
- Encroach on nests or dens as certain species will abandon their young ones.
- Interfere with animals engaged in breeding, nesting, or caring for young.
- Damage or remove any plant, life form or natural object. Finally, and most significant, remember that the welfare of the subject and habitat are irrefutably more important than the photograph.
Any good/bad/special experience(s) in travel or travel-photography?
a. During my trip to Rome, I could not find a convenient enough angle to capture Colosseum (also called Coliseum) completely. Whichever way I looked at it, it just wouldn’t fit the frame. On my return from that trip, I immediately invested in a super-wide lens.
b. I was told that London mostly has a moody weather - gloomy, overcast, grey on most days. But during my 3-day visit there, I was blessed with the most awesome skies a photographer could hope for.
c. During my steep climb over the ‘Great Wall of China’ at Mutianyu, I had lugged a two and a half kilo Manfrotto tripod. At every step of the climb, that weight was becoming increasingly unwelcome. After reaching the top, I realized that I didn’t even need the tripod. After my return from China, I went ahead and invested a princely US$760 on a 980gm Gitzo Traveller tripod.

Which are the two best places of the world and two best places of India you visited?
The best places out of the country are Czech Republic and Beijing, In India, Arunachal and Ladakh.

Which is the place that inspires you to photograph again and again?
I have been engaged in some serious documentary work for an immigrant settlement in Gurgaon - GhataGaon. I have shot this place extensively. Besides Ghata Gaon, Chandni Chowk in Delhi repeatedly pulls me.

Please throw some light on your shooting a particular object/time of shooting/camera setting etc. (In short, your travel-day shooting schedule and style).
For me, the most basic and important realization is that human beings have two eyes, therefore through the use of principle of parallax, we are able to ascertain the relative distances of objects in our line of sight; whereas, a DSLR camera has only one eye, and hence is unable to determine the relative distances of objects in a frame. This necessitates that we use ambient light and other aids like leading lines etc. to establish the elusive 3rd dimension in a photographic frame. I have even heard people complain of ‘flat light’. I feel that no light is flat. You just need to change your position in relation to the object you wish to photograph to have the available light provide the 3rd dimension to that object. My entire shoot is based on this simple principle.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, I keep an eye on the magnitude of the dynamic range in a frame and try and achieve that balance where the subject is well-exposed and the darkest and brightest areas have enough detail for me to pull them back during post processing.

Most of my shoot in outdoor locations happens between the sunrise blue-hour and 2-3 hours after the sunrise. Exceptions to this are astrophotography, night scapes, and some monuments where the harsh sunlight adds more drama to a shot. Sunsets, though nice, often have haze or clouds near the horizon; so, I avoid over-dependence on sunsets.

My camera settings depend on the depth of field I am seeking. If bokeh is necessary to highlight the subject, my aperture is wide open; if I want the sharpness up to infinity, my aperture is moderately narrower (I seldom shoot on aperture narrower than f/11).

Significantly, I only use ambient light for my photography.
Oculus Transportation Hub, Manhattan, New York City, USA
How do you get inspired for travel, photographing and writing?

I am past getting inspired. Now, travel, photography and writing about a destination is a passion. I am driven by a simple vision - making India photograph better. Here, I mean India as a destination, as well as India as a nation or community of photographers. My attempt is to present a destination in the most desirable manner - both for travellers and photographers. I am driven by an inner need to inspire them to travel and shoot.

Please elucidate about your programme: Travel Photography with Ajay Sood.

Besides leading photo-tours for money (for travel companies), I also used to run a Facebook group. Over a period of 3 years, I had conducted 18 excursions aimed at sharing my photography learning with budding travel-photography enthusiasts. These excursions covered diverse destinations like Bundi, Lansdowne, Orchha, Mandawa, Pushkar, etc. and were run on a cost-sharing basis. These destinations offered differing challenges and hence were useful for even those who wanted to come for more than one such excursion. The number of participants allowed in each such excursion was limited to 10. This was my way of giving back to the community.

What is the response from your family members about your activities?

They are extremely encouraging about my pursuits. Though, I wish my daughters would share my passion for photography and would pursue it.

What advice would you give to the newcomers coming in this field, keeping today’s scenario in mind?

Do not consider travel photography as a profession that affords you luxuries. Treat it as a profession that affords you experience of becoming a better human being. If you are seeking luxury, look elsewhere.

When you die, what do you want to be remembered for?

I would want to be remembered as someone who made destinations desirable.

What is your current photographic gear for travel photography?

i. Camera/Camera Bodies:
   a. Canon 5D Mark III
   b. Canon 60D
   c. Leica V-Lux Typ 114
   d. GoPro Hero 3 Black

ii. Lenses:
   a. Canon EF 24-70mm f/4L IS USM
   b. Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L
   c. Canon TS-E 17mm f/4L
   d. Canon EF 17-40mm f/4L

iii. Others:
   a. GitzoGT2545T tripod
   b. Assorted CPLs and Variable ND filters
   c. Bean bag for wildlife photography
   d. Rain sleeve for camera
   e. SD and CF cards totalling to approx 500 GB and card readers
   f. Battery grip for 5D Mark III
   g. Spare chargers and assorted connecting cables and cords
   h. An intervalometer for shooting time-lapse or for long exposure (e.g. astro-photography)
   i. Peak Design Camera Bag (Backpack)
   j. Lens cleaning kits
   k. A torch and a Swiss knife

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The speedy snowmobiles at Langi-kull Glacier (Iceland) outlined against a low winter sun look stunning.
DOZEN DOYENS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The book “Dozen Doyens of Photography” authored by Neenad Parulekar contains an array of India’s varied genres in the field of photography.

The selection spreads from nature, macro, landscape, wildlife, travel, commercial, wedding, photojournalism, architectural, industrial and fashion sites.

The featured photographers are Ajay Sood, Ashok Dilwali, Hari Mahidhar, Hira Punjabi, Isaac Kehimkar, Jagdish Agarwal, Milind Ketkar, Noshir Gobhai, Satish Parashar, Sudharak Olwe, Vickram Singh Bawa and Viren Desai.

The book presents a balanced mix of visuals with interviews (Q&A), narration and expert’s views in their chosen theme of specialization in photography. This is a contemporary book, the first of its kind to display the views from behind the lens and those captured through it by each of the masters.

It will be a source of inspiration for the young in the are of photography, a valuable reference to the learned in the fine arts academic arena and a splendid addition to the connoisseur of printed publications that exemplify visual quality with content.

“This is an enlightening compilation of works and proficiency of masters in the field of photography. The author has brought together the stories of the 12 veterans in a very informative way. He brings to you a candid Q & A which I believe every photography enthusiast will thoroughly relish as the author has asked each of these 12 artists from their first camera to their last wishes... Neenad Parulekar provides a learning experience to the readers who are seeking to understand, grasp and master the techniques of effective visual storytelling.

This book remains not only an essential reading for photography practitioners, but the beautiful work of each of the featured doyen is a visual treat for all the readers... and can be a well of knowledge. So go ahead. Enjoy. Learn. Grow.”

Rohinton Mehta,
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