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The Sunday Times - Doors

Cameras for a savanna safari

While travelling through West Africa, James Knight and Katrina Manson discover how digital photography can reap commercial rewards

We were told it would never work. There was no way that two amateur photographers (one keen, one hopeless, both professional journalists) could shoot the front cover for a travel guide they had been commissioned to write. When we had the added gall to suggest snapping in digital, raised eyebrows went stratospheric.

“You must be joking,” our publisher said. “Digital photography is for amateurs.”

So the perfect match was made. Armed with two digital cameras, aimed at very different markets (see below), we set off for Burkina Faso, in the dusty heart of West Africa. Our tasks: to write a guidebook to the third-poorest country in the world, a place so unknown that most of our friends call it Bikini Fastener, usually abbreviated to BF; and to prove that digital photography is up to the job of showing off BF to the world.

Our wretched capabilities as photographers went hand-in-hand with an exacting set of requirements. On the road for up to a year, we didn't want to carry film or wait until we returned home to see the results. We wanted to send our bush photography round the world, whether to friends' inboxes or magazines, and we needed a camera sturdy enough to withstand the heat, sand and dust. Top-level digital cameras can produce better quality than 35mm film, offering an amateur the kind of hand-holding that is difficult with a standard single-lens reflex (SLR) camera. For us, digital was the only option.

We felt the benefits immediately. In Barani, a forgotten outpost tucked up against the Malian border, an annual horse festival brought steeds dancing and kneeling before the local chief. In the golden sunlight of the first evening, we were so captivated by the spectacle of grizzled chieftains arriving on horseback, resplendent in fine African cloth and shiny aviator sunglasses, that both cameras were soon stuffed full of photos.

With traditional film, either a limited supply would have marooned us for two more days after it ran out, or we would have sunk under the weight of spare film, slowly melting in the 45C heat. With digital, we had the luxury of deciding which pictures to keep and which to delete, meaning we could try risky shots without wasting exposures. Purists would say that this turns you into an indiscriminate photographer, and it's true that a hatful of hastily snatched digital snaps will never match a single carefully composed photograph.

For all its benefits, a top-of-the-range digital camera will not automatically turn you into the next Cartier-Bresson, and developing an eye for composition is a hard-earned skill that technology can never replace. Nonetheless, repeated trial and error does mean that you can learn what works and what doesn't much more quickly.

The best way to avoid editing while on the road is to carry plenty of spare memory cards, the digital, and reusable, equivalent of film rolls. However, if you leave the spares behind in the car, as we managed to do in Burkina's premier game park before a nose-to-trunk meeting with an inquisitive elephant, they are no good to you at all.

Archiving is the constant problem with digital, and it's no fun lugging a laptop around on a romantic mini-break to Venice, or an intrepid safari through the Gobi Desert, in order to upload photos. One alternative is to rely on an iPod Photo (a muso's travel essential) or some other portable hard drive. With a USB cable and an adaptor, you can transfer images directly and quickly from your digicam's memory card, leaving it ready for the next batch of photos.

The camera could often be a leper's bell, for all the rapport it establishes with strangers. We've made it a rule to ask permission in preference to taking clandestine shots or paying, which often makes subjects stiffen up - imagine two idiots with a camera stopping you on the street and asking you to "act natural".

Digital makes it easier to bridge this divide. Nell Freeman, 25, of Little Apple Photographics, is one of a burgeoning bunch of semipro photographers who swears by digital. She uses a Nikon D70, "genuinely the best £800 I have ever spent", and has found her camera screen a lifeline when making a little flirtatious conversation with potential subjects.

"In Kenya, I would sit with Samburu women for ages, just shooting the breeze and pointing out good-looking men and laughing, before ever bringing my camera out," she says. "Then, when I finally take a photo, I have found that my digital camera can help relax subjects, because they can see their pictures straight after shooting."

Digital is making it easier than ever for keen, talented and experienced amateurs to take that much-dreamt-of leap into semi- or even fully professional territory. In a few clicks you can whizz your work halfway around the world, and into the hands of a potential buyer. Freeman recommends the Alamy picture agency (www.alamy.com) as a great first stop - as long as your work is good enough.

"They have strict technical and image-quality criteria," she says, "but it is a much more democratic process than taking your portfolio round agents. The website gives instructions on how to apply."

She also recommends ringing up the picture desks of local and national newspapers: "If you think you have a winning pic, or an event that other photographers have missed, they can always say no, but they might say yes."

If you are not ready for the front page, the web provides ample opportunity to display your work, whether the audience consists of friends and family or potential employers. Digital watermarking software such as MyPictureMarc, from www.digimarc.com (£45 to protect 1,000 images for a year), embeds information into an image so that you can prove it is yours if it is ever published without permission. There are also plenty of online management services, among them www.flickr.com, www.fotango.com and www.photobox.co.uk. These offer on-line gallery space and ways to print out your best efforts.

Once you have squeezed the shutter, digital means that you can also play at special-effects wizardry. While you cannot make a bad photo good, you can improve a decent one, and we have found it impossible to resist the temptation to banish blemishes and reduce red-eye. With a program such as Microsoft's Digital Image Pro, which is less powerful but easier to use than Adobe's Photoshop, we crop and rotate images, change colouring and lighting levels and, occasionally, erase something unsightly: there was no way we were going to allow a solitary piece of grass to obstruct our up-close-and- personal view of a young bull elephant at bathtime.

Although it is tempting to complete the whole process independently, from pixel to paper, some jobs, such as printing, are best left to the professionals. Even if your home colour printer is exceptional, it will guzzle ink.

Pete Watkins, a keen amateur photographer from Tamworth, always goes to his local lab after shooting on digital. "The wedding photographers I know use digital," he says, "but after cleaning up the files, they stick them onto a CD and whip them off to their favourite professional lab, which prints onto photographic paper. As far as archival quality is concerned, I would not trust anything hooked up to a computer that produces a photographic print."

Whatever the benefits of digital, the most important tools in a photographer's armoury remain the same — curiosity, sensitivity, good light and, most important, talent. However, it presents a new way in for anyone who has ever been scared off by talk of f-stops and exposure times. As for our little project, we haven't yet heard whether our pictures will make the front cover. If we don't succeed, we certainly won't be blaming our tools.

- *James Knight and Katrina Manson are the authors of the forthcoming Bradt Travel Guide to Burkina Faso (2006).*

Compact versus SLR: how digital fared on the road

A hardy £200 compact digital camera can take pictures to satisfy the most demanding holidaymaker, while £1,000 will readily buy a more respectable digital single-lens reflex (SLR) camera, which will take any same-brand lenses you already own. Second-hand digital cameras may have suffered damage from damp and knocks. You also need to buy memory cards, lithium batteries and chargers, a computer with enough storage (at least 40GB) and the right editing software, so expect to spend £2,500-£5,000 setting yourself up. Once you are, National Geographic is the limit.

Casio Exilim Pro EX-P600 — typically £400, or £200 from www.amazon.co.uk The Exilim's six megapixels make high-quality images a reality from what is essentially a point-and-click job. Operation and visual menus are intuitive, with a focusing wheel cleverly positioned around the shutter button. Once autofocus was turned off, the camera's built-in 4x optical zoom lens could capture good images of fabric patterning, beadwork or insects at distances within 5cm. However, the lens could not cope with the powerful African light, leaving wonderful, rich colours washed out even in the golden moments before dusk. One for the dedicated snapper who wants versatility, rather than the wannabe pro.

Pentax *ist D — typically £630, or £557 from www.warehouseexpress.com Initially, we found the Pentax's bulk, menus and buttons forbidding, and the small backscreen makes a killer shot tricky to recognise immediately. It also feels a touch fiddly, particularly when trying to extract and replace memory cards. Colours are outstanding, though the bottom ISO limit of 200 can pose a problem in very bright light.

At this end of the market, lenses are all-important: a decent telephoto for wildlife (300mm or greater); a wide-angle for big African skies; and a versatile everyday option (28-90mm). The pictures that illustrate this article were taken with this camera.

- *All you need to know about digital photography:* www.dpreview.com