

Culturally Sensitive Photography

Like Travel Itself, Photography Builds Bridges



A dignified member of the Good Death Sisterhood marches during the organization's annual celebration in Cachoeira, Brazil. Photo: Jim Kane

by Jim Kane

When I think of travel and photography it's difficult to separate the two. For me photography helps to capture and transmit the sense of place that makes the destination special. Through the personalities of its people, a country comes alive, both in person and through photography.

Inevitably, the question arises "How do you know when it's alright to take photos of people in other countries?" After all, there are major cultural differences in how being photographed is perceived and often an economic disparity between photographer and potential subject.

The answer is that responsible photography is very much like responsible travel. With a thorough knowledge of the place you're visiting, a genuine interest in sharing and not just taking, an alert intuition, an open mind, enough time, and a little luck, photography abroad—just like travel itself—can be a vehicle to build bridges.

By following these eight guidelines while abroad your photographic efforts will become more rewarding for photographer and subject alike:

8 Photography Guidelines

1 Be informed. Invest time before traveling to research the customs and photography mores of the place you will visit. Customs vary not only by country but by region and religion as well.

2 Get comfortable with yourself. Self confidence, an open attitude, and a genuine smile are important wherever you travel. People will generally respond to you with the same attitude that you exude. Conversely, if you are nervous and "sneak around" with your camera because of shyness or insecurity, they will feel this and, worse, feel they are being used.

3 Communicate. It only takes a simple gesture and a smile for a subject in a foreign land to understand your interest in taking a photograph. You'll immediately get a clear indication of whether they are a consenting subject. Not understanding the language should never be an excuse to photograph an unwilling person.

Learning some simple phrases related to photography in the language of the country in which you are traveling not only allows you to communicate more directly with your subject, explaining why you want to take a photograph, it shows your interest in learning at least some of the local language.

4 Take the at home test. You should treat people abroad with the same respect and courtesy as you would at home. If you find yourself questioning the appropriateness of a certain shot, ask yourself if you'd take the same picture in your home country without feeling awkward.

5 Spend time without shooting. Once while riding through rural Thailand on a moped, I stumbled across some kids playing ping-pong behind a temple. Wanting to capture this wonderful scene, I just stood there and watched the kids at play without touching the camera. After a few minutes I asked

(through gestures) if I could play. This was met with smiles and a paddle was immediately thrust at me. Five minutes later I returned the paddle, smiled, and thanked them. Only then did the camera come out. Not only did I feel at ease taking the pictures, the kids were also much more relaxed with my presence.

6 Use an ice-breaker. Instantly showing people the photos you've taken of them can be a wonderful ice-breaker. The photography becomes less intimidating and more fun for kids and adults alike. They may even want to turn the tables and photograph you!

7 Give and take? One of the most controversial situations while abroad is the question of giving money to people you photograph. We've all been in situations where a once untouched indigenous community becomes popular with camera-toting tourists. Soon, there is a bustling business in "authentic" photos for a dollar each and mobs of children running up to visitors shouting, "photo, Mister?" On the other hand, isn't a person you've photographed entitled to some form of compensation? After all, you're benefiting from their presence, personality, customs, clothing, etc.

Engaging people openly and sharing time, a story, or a drink together is often the greatest gift for both sides. However, if it is made clear that someone expects money for a photograph, the decision becomes not whether to pay, but whether to take the photo. That must remain a judgment call that each of us needs to make on a case-by-case basis.

8 No means no. When someone objects to your taking a photograph you must respect them, even if you don't agree with or understand their reasons. You are a guest and you must respect their decision.

One recent experience comes to mind. There's a church in San Juan Chamula in Chiapas, the interior of which is nearly indescribable, because of the blend of customs the people have adopted. There are no pews, only two long rows of saints bordering a wide, straw-covered

floor where scores of people sit in individual prayer areas and surround themselves with incense and colored candles.



Photo: Jim Kane

As a passionate photographer, it killed me not to be able to capture and transmit this unique display of spirituality. However, there was no misunderstanding the stern and repeated prohibition of photography inside the church. For the people of San Juan Chamula photographing this scene and the people inside would have shown a terrible lack of respect.

So the interior remains unphotographed. And perhaps that's not so bad. Now, in order to understand this wonderful and mysterious place, one must travel there, step inside, live and breathe it. Sometimes there's just no replacing the real experience. ✧

Jim Kane is the President and co-founder of Culture Xplorers. Having lived in 6 countries and traveled through 40 more, Jim now creates immersive trips to Latin America with a focus on people. Through festivals, home-stay opportunities, living traditions and positive impact projects, Culture Xplorers promotes genuine interaction between travelers and locals. Visit Jim & Culture Xplorers at www.culturexplorers.com

First published in Transitions Abroad Magazine July/August 2004 www.transitionsabroad.com. Email jim@culturexplorers.com with reprinting requests.