



Truckers Photograph America By Charu Suri

Feature Article

When you do a lot of cross-country driving, scenic landscapes can provide a breath of fresh air to the tired grays and blacks of macadam highways. America brims with opportunities to photograph landscapes. "Interstate truckers routinely see fantastic sights, both natural and manmade," says Paul Hartley, a former truck driver for D&A in New Ulm, MN. "Photography enables these people to relive those great sights and share them with others—long after the memories have thinned or evaporated." While it is entirely possible that a dilettante photographer could pull over and take photographs that would impress Ansel Adams, here are some tips to help you take professional-looking photographs that will wow your friends and family.



BEFORE BUYING...

"One of my favorite images was shot along I-80 in Utah," says Hartley. "The area had been getting a lot of rain at this time, and there were broad pools of water on both sides of the interstate. I was truckin' east through there early one morning, just as the sun was rising, and I noticed how the horizon was being mirrored in the water. It was a classic, Kodak moment." One of the keys to unlocking the secret of a good photograph, such as the one Hartley took, is strong composition (and here, the word "composition" means the arrangement of objects; a certain point of view that brings to focus select images such as people, cars, trees, light etc.) Development of the "photographer's" eye can be done without a camera. Some advocate the perusal of photography books featuring some good landscape photographers, like Henri Cartier-Bresson or Sam Abel. It is probably wise not to clutter your photograph with every beguiling object you find in the landscape, from the cute dog to the telephone booth. Instead, try to find a single object that will serve as the focal point for your photograph. It could be a single wildflower or a young girl looking at a lake. Shirley Jones and Al Smart are two truck drivers who travel across Utah regularly, who were struck by the beauty and grandeur of the landscapes they drive through. "I never knew taking pictures was so much fun," says Smart. "The good thing about taking pictures of landscapes is that they stay still for me," he jokes. But in the picture below, which they took, the object wasn't static. The object was a fast moving train. "We were just driving along, passing the train, and mountains were all around us," says Jones. "When we got way ahead of the train I told Al to stop so I could get a picture. Then I got out and just stood there and waited a few minutes and there it came. I must have taken six pictures of it coming towards me." This picture of the train is successful, because the object has been properly "framed" and positioned at the left side of the border, thereby giving it room to mentally "move" across the page. Had the train been placed at the right hand side, for example, we would get a sense of incompleteness—as though it was literally "running" off the border. Sometimes, putting an object in the center tends to create a static feeling. Some photographers tend to follow the "rule of thirds" in composing their pictures: that is, dividing the photo into three parts (horizontally and vertically) then placing the object into a corner that heightens its impact (not always the center). Hartley says, "The Rule of Thirds is probably the most well-known photographic dictate."

LINES AND GEOMETRIC SHAPES GIVE BALANCE AND DESIGN

Although not completely intuitive, lines and shapes add grace and design to a photograph. What makes this picture special are not only the snow-capped mountains but also the graceful curvature of the road as it disappears around the bend. Lines and geometric shapes can add great balance to a picture. An "S" shaped line is always graceful, as are interestingly placed lines like diagonals.

"Shirley told me that when I see something I like, to point the camera on it and then look all around the edges to make sure everything I saw is (still) there," says Smart. "I have learned to study what I am looking at."

SEE THE LIGHT

Doug Widdifield, a former truck driver who worked for Joyline Transport in Alberta, Canada, was struck by a particular landscape that he found in Lowell Canyon, Nevada. "I saw this snow-capped mountain in the distance, and I wanted to get it into the same picture as the yucca trees," he says. "The sun was almost overhead when I shot the picture, which worked to my advantage, because I could shoot in a lot of different directions."

Light is the oxygen that causes a picture to spark. It can create mood, texture and soft or hard tones. The picture above, taken by Widdifield, is a gorgeous combination of light and shadow, coupled with a motley of colors from sepia to snow and taken in strong, full daylight. But beware—taking pictures in too much light can cause overexposure. That's where skill and practice come in.

According to Sincevich, "Many of them will automatically turn off the flash outside, but this is when fill flash is needed to give light to darker objects."

IT'S THE BEST THING

In this world where everything is digitally and technologically advanced, it seems a moot point to even broach the subject of analog photography.

"Digital capture is rapidly becoming the standard photographic medium—much to the disappointment of nostalgic purists and the Kodak Corporation," says Hartley. "It's the best thing since sliced Velveeta. It offers quick turnaround, no film and processing costs and easier editing. Also, the quality of digital equipment continues to improve as the prices drop."

Ansel Adams said, "There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs." In the end, a carefully executed photograph that has obeyed all the "rules" can still lack energy, while one that breaks every rule in the book can dazzle. The key to good photography is to have a good time. As Sharp said early on, "I never knew taking pictures was so much fun, and when we developed them—they really looked great!"

So, take your rest breaks where opportunity strikes and have fun with your photography.