

THE LEARNING CURVE

Amateur photographer, blogger and writer, **MARIE T SMITH**, shares her account of the invaluable photography tools she learned whilst on safari in Botswana

The Learning Curve

I discovered Africa back in 2005, when a milestone birthday took me to Kenya for a taste of safari. My camera was a compact digital Nikon Coolpix at the time. While it doesn't even come close to comparing with the equipment you might be used to seeing, it served its purpose back then. The African wildlife got under my skin and I would subsequently travel to South Africa and Tanzania, more than once, although I did change my camera to a bridge Sony Cybershot.

Fast-forward fourteen years and I am just home from a 'once-in-a-lifetime' dedicated photographic trip to Chobe. The Chobe River borders Botswana and Namibia and hugs the Chobe National Park for a good length. I was part of a group of six, accompanying a husband-and-wife professional wildlife photography team, and it was time - time to discover the world of digital SLR.

After several months trying out various combinations here in the United Kingdom,

I opted for a Canon EOS 800D, along with a Canon Zoom EF 100-400 Mark II lens, which would hopefully cover the distance. I also had shared-use (with my husband) of a Canon Zoom EW-83E 17-40mm and Canon Zoom EF 24-105mm, providing options to switch for wide angles, close subjects and scenes.

I was a nervous rookie as I landed in Kasane, on a hot August day. Surrounded by camera club enthusiasts, a judge and published photographers, ►►

SEPARATION



► I was very much the amateur - a nail-biting, anxious amateur.

Nine days lay ahead. Seven days were spent on a specially adapted photography boat, fitted out with individual seats, each with a detachable arm and camera gimbal, allowing free 360-degree movement. The other two days were spent on a typical open-sided safari vehicle.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL

I confess the science confuses me. The maths often has me scratching my head. It's not yet second nature. When the action is happening, I panic and forget the logic, mixing up my ISO with my shutter speed, much like when you are in an exam. I kept reminding myself not to overthink it - photography is an art form. In fact, I thought I was good at composing images. I have literally thousands of images from five

previous safaris, yet I'd bet most are typical shots. So, when the professional tips began to filter down the boat on that first day, it was as if I had never held a camera before. How had I not appreciated the creative stuff?

WATCH YOUR BACKGROUND

We have all pressed the shutter, only to look later and find a vehicle has photobombed your best image, or that

perfect malachite kingfisher ended up lost on a fussy background.

I have always enjoyed playing with close-ups; a lion's paw, an elephant's eye or an oxpecker hitching a ride.

My gut instinct was to press the shutter as soon as I saw something. Yes, I knew ►►

FOCUS ON THE DETAIL



► where to place it in the frame, but everything else was secondary - except it isn't. Giving the subject the right canvas really makes a big difference.

While I couldn't control where the subject was, it helps a lot when your boat driver knows just what makes a good photo too. Ours worked incredibly hard to manoeuvre, drift, or simply move on, until a better backdrop came along. So I soon realised patience would be my best friend.

THE GOLDEN LIGHT

In the past, I have been out on safaris in the heat of the day, snapping away, regardless of the lighting conditions. It's fair to say, the results were not spectacular. This time the focus was on getting out in the best light; as the sun rises, and then again before sunset. Some call it the golden light. I can now see why. The light gets warmer and can turn the flattest of scenes into something quite breathtaking.

The beauty of the riverboat is that you are already at the same level as the wildlife.

The direction of the light matters too; shooting into the sun presents problems (though we also know it can have interesting results once it begins to rise/set). The same subject can look washed out in one direction, yet take on a warm, bronzy glow in another. I found it fascinating and, while I started out the week dismissing shouts of "it's bad light", within days I found myself lowering the camera with the exact same declaration.

SEPARATION

I struggle with groups. In a wide-angled shot, it can look impressive, but often it looks like a jumbled mess. I think I am now beginning to understand why - separation; allowing the subjects to happily share a frame, while still having enough independent space to be able to identify them. Otherwise, they just become a lumpy blob. Elephants, buffalo, hippos - they all present the same challenge. Unless the group is telling its own story, as one, then it's just noise.

It is not always easy to find the solution. I found splitting off smaller groups to be helpful. Also shifting position a few metres can put light and space between subjects that are sitting in different vertical plains.

The problem becomes more pronounced for sunset scenes. I waited for ages, and wasted a lot of shots, to finally get these elephants to emerge from one big hump and when the pro said "that's beautiful", I knew I had finally got the hang of it.

LANDSCAPE OR PORTRAIT

Sometimes the instinct is to stick with tradition, but when someone suggested a different view, I found it was good to at least have a look, as I love to experiment.

The tripod/lens collar allows you to easily change from one format to the other, while still attached to the fixed mount. I would loosen off the screw and play around a little. Instead of the elephant sideways on, in landscape, I would go portrait and take a slice from head to trunk. My suggestion would be, have a go. Take a few of each and then decide later. What have you to lose? ►►

REFLECTIONS



» FOCUS ON THE DETAIL

I have always enjoyed playing with close-ups; a lion's paw, an elephant's eye or an oxpecker hitching a ride. However, this trip soon had me looking at shapes and textures too.

Our pro photographer asked "how does it feel?" and that had me thinking about what I was seeing through the view finder in a completely different way. Did it make me want to reach out and touch it? Waiting for the skin to glisten on a crocodile, focusing on the hide of the zebra, or capturing the bronzed look of an elephant emerging from the river in the golden light before dusk. Now, when I look at those images, I imagine that I can just stroke the screen and be right back there.

As for those first-day nerves, I wish I could go back and tell my anxious self I had nothing to fear.

EYE CONTACT

I suppose I had never really thought about the importance of eyes until now. I have lots and lots of images where the subject has them closed, or the subject is looking away, although I also appreciate that can tell its own story sometimes.

Now I consider eyes much more. Take the example of the baboon drinking. Looking down, she was just a baboon drinking, however, when she glanced towards you, the image had another dimension entirely. It was as if you could see right inside her very soul.

MOVEMENT



Think about it. Imagine when you look at the leopard. It's that moment, when she appears to look right back at you, that your heart skips a beat - well, mine does anyway. I know that it is that exact moment I want the person viewing my image to feel as well.

GET DOWN LOW

The beauty of the riverboat is that you are already at the same level as the wildlife.

I soon began to appreciate this is a far more realistic and pleasing angle, compared to looking down from the back seat of a safari vehicle.

So, when I was invited to get out of my seat and lie on the bottom of the boat, I discovered a whole new perspective. At first I was self-conscious, but soon I was moving around with the best of them, looking for my own angle.

NICE REFLECTION

Gently drifting around, on the backwater inlets for the Chobe, provides lots of opportunities to photograph birdlife; Jacana on a lily pad, a bee-eater on the pampas and great white egrets and herons, with the breeze gently lifting their feathers, standing majestically on the water's edge. »

►► Having lay on my tummy for the low shots, I stood up. Wow – what fantastic reflections. Well worth me making the effort, not to mention some well needed exercise thrown in! I confess, I became a little bit obsessed with reflections. I now see them where I never saw them before, plus, it's another great way to play with some more portrait shots too.

MOVEMENT

At the start of this trip, I could only dream of being able to capture movement in an image. Yet, within a matter of hours, I was already trying bravely for that elusive flying shot.

I had discovered the shutter burst mode. Goodbye to 32GB of storage. Hello to downloading eight hundred images every day, but I was loving it. Okay, my cutting room floor has a lot of clipped wings, bad focus and bird tails exiting the frame, but I was gaining more and more confidence.

My portfolio now includes water drops, mud sprays and dust baths, but my proudest moment must be the male baboon who stole a baby. Had that happened at the start of the trip, I would have missed it entirely, but I heard it, swung on it, focused and prayed as the rat-tat-tat-tat of camera shutters filled the air.

INTERACTIONS

I find the most touching times are the interactions within the social wildlife groups.

When I was asked at the start about my experience of safari, I said "I often like to just put the camera down and



INTERACTIONS

watch". That is still true, to some extent, yet this photographic trip has brought me closer to the action thanks to the view finder. I don't feel detached, in the way I once did looking on the back of the my old Nikon or Sony.

I also know I have captured details I would never have seen with my own eyes. Panning around and focusing on the little things has brought me so much pleasure. I don't think I could ever tire of the baboons and the elephants especially; they provide so much

entertainment and truly tender moments.

The turning point for me, was when I finally understood that a big group often provides more subject matter if you zoom in and look at what is going on underneath, or in this case, between the legs of the elephants.

LESSONS APLENTY

So, there it is - nine days and my first dedicated, specialist, photographic safari

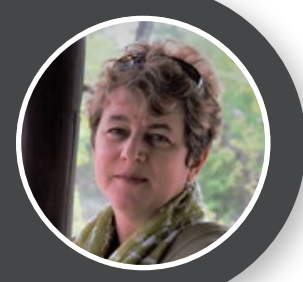
completed. I should point out, there were no structured lessons on this trip. Everything I learnt was from two generous professional wildlife photographers and a bunch of like-minded and good-humoured individuals, sharing ideas. Indeed, what could be better than learning techniques, while drifting down a river in Africa with no timetable, no homework and no end-of-lesson bell? ►►

» As for those first-day nerves, I wish I could go back and tell my anxious self I had nothing to fear. It took me a little while to stop thinking I wasn't good enough or didn't belong there, but now I get it - we were all people with cameras, simply looking for our own angle, our own image and our own viewpoint. Once I relaxed, then I started to have fun with it.

I am just at the start of my learning path, but I have come away with so many fantastic tips, not to mention six thousand images to prune and remind me. I cannot wait to get back in the field now and practice those techniques. ●

MARIE T SMITH

I live in rural Scotland, surrounded by wildlife, with so many fantastic photographic opportunities. However, it was on a trip to Kenya in 2005, that I discovered a real love of photo composition. Africa is where I am happiest with my camera. I also love writing about my travels and experiences through my blog.



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PHOTOGRAPHER AND AUTHOR



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