
HOW MUCH GEAR DO YOU REALLY NEED?

Essay: Thoughts on Equipment Needs

by
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Now here is a never-ending topic for debate and discussion. Of course the operative word in the question is “need” as distinguished from “want” or “nice-to-have.” And unfortunately the real answer is the same one used by countless lawyers to antagonize hapless clients, “...it depends.”

Don't you just hate that answer? Sorry. It is, alas. the correct one and it forces us to ask and answer a preliminary question first: “Depends on what?” Well, it depends on what you need to produce as a photographer and that is wrapped up in two parts: what are you shooting and how are you delivering or presenting the results of that work? Of course, never ones to be a slave to reality, photographers have quickly jumped into various “camps” with a ready answer and a desire to live in a “one size fits all” world of easy solutions to all questions.

On one side is the camp that insists that all things can be done with a single tool. In the mechanical world these are the folks who point out that farmers for years have fixed everything from barn roofs to tractors with pliers, a screw driver, and some baling wire so who needs anything other than that? In the photo world that leads to the opinion that a single camera and lens kit is quite sufficient to deal with any potential visual treat that might befall their eyes.

And they point to history (in both the larger sense and in the specifics of an individual photographer's case) for reinforcement. Some iconic photos have been taken by photographers with a single camera and lens at their disposal. Early photographers often went into the field with a single camera and lens. And modernly, many of us started our careers with a single camera and maybe one lens. Often, those of us of the “older” persuasion, started even a professional career with a tool such as a Rollei Twin Lens Reflex (the famous Rolleiflex) or similar camera that did not even have interchangeable lenses.

Yet somehow we managed to not only survive but also to build the foundations of a career with a kit that did not require a pack mule and several man-servants to pack around. The camera and a few rolls of film were all we had. Press photographers went into the news arena with a Speed Graphlex, a 127mm “press” lens, and a pouch of film holders and were expected to cover everything from gangster murders to boxing matches with maybe a dozen sheets of film and a very slightly wider than “normal” lens.

So, the One-Camera-and-Lens-is-Enough camp argues we didn't really need more... did we?

The truth is that we all yearned for greater flexibility. There were simply shots that could not be done properly, if at all, that paraded in front of our lens. Sometimes physically we could not get close enough or far enough away to compose the ideal shot; sometimes the aesthetics and perspective of a given lens were not ideal to our vision so we shot what we could. But we were not always happy about it. We worked very hard to maximize our images working to the strengths of the equipment we had. We certainly came to know that gear inside and out and adopted a habit of careful working that, at least in my case, has stayed with me. I still tend to shoot my serious stuff just like I shot with a view camera even if I am working with digital. But there are times when a limited equipment inventory is simply not enough to be competitive. And we all knew it. Good as I might have been with my TLR there were shots I could not take as they needed to be taken until, later, I was able to purchase my SLR-MF with 3 lenses: wide, normal, medium tele.

That led us pretty quickly into a state of lens envy. We'd see some lucky character with his SLR and a bag full of lenses and start to drool like a Pavlovian dog at supper time. Oh man, if we only had THAT kind of gear we could do anything. And quickly that led to the position of the opposite camp that holds with equal conviction that "a photographer can never have too much equipment" and the corollary that "the photographer should have all of their gear with them at all times" to be ready for anything.

These two camps have slung mud at each other from early on. As with all things prone to polarization and partisanship the true believers from each side start to see adherents from the other in less than flattering terms. What is amusing to me is that both sides point to Pros in the field who fall into their particular camps and thinking to prove their point.

I believe that as with all things polarizing and all partisan concepts, the truth does not lie in the extremes but much closer to the center of the argument. I believe the truth, frustrating as it may be, is as I indicated earlier, "It Depends." I was a working professional photographer for a lot of years and knew colleagues from both sides of this argument. But interestingly those colleagues tended to fall into very specific genres of work but seemed to be able to see the world only through the filter of their own needs. And they were in the minority. Most working pros I knew (and know) had multiple cameras and lenses regardless of genre. However the type of work they did had an enormous impact on just what types of equipment a particular photographer needed to employ.

SPORTS. Those who shot sports used to hit the playing field with 2-3 camera bodies each sporting a lens with a different focal length and sometimes with (depending on whether they shot for newspapers or magazines or both) with color or black and white film. Digital has made the issue of film moot but still most sports shooters have a couple of bodies hanging on their necks with various long lenses or telephoto zooms on each depending on what they anticipate their needs for that particular event and their assigned or chosen vantage point. The vast improvement in the quality of zoom lenses has often reduced the bodies from three to two but still to be instantly ready for any situation, a single camera and lens may simply not be enough.

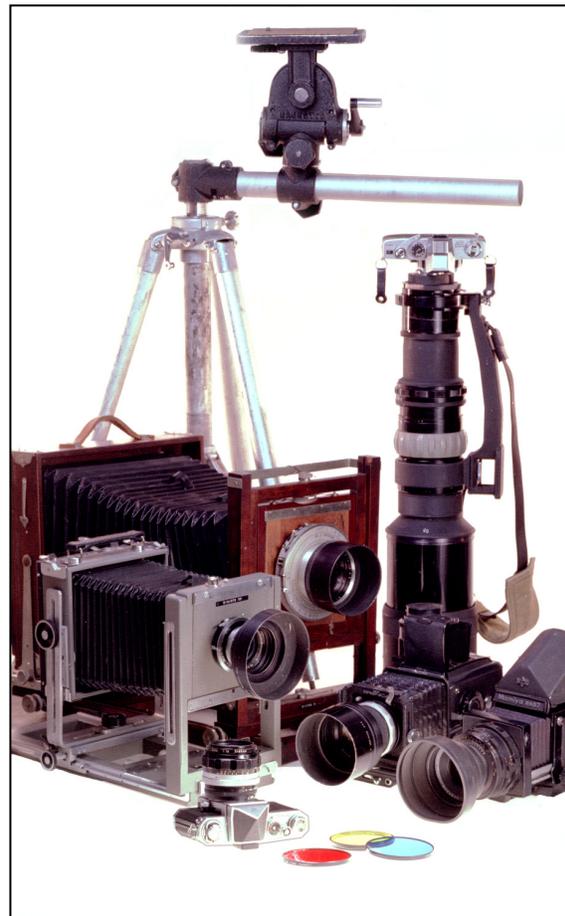
PRESS PHOTOGRAPHERS. Journalists were quick to adapt to zoom lenses to make their life easier and their kit less cluttered. Digital solved the choice of film issue as it did in the sports world. But still whenever possible a photojournalist would hit the streets

with two bodies and two zoom lenses, one more to the wide angle and one more to the telephoto. Now, newer so-called “Super Zooms” are making even this less necessary but most pros are still wary of not having a back-up available for the inevitable system crash.

WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHERS. Now that wedding styles are increasingly in the so-called “documentary style” camp, an SLR (or high-end RF with interchangeable lenses) and super zoom may be the only camera gear needed. Early in my career I shot weddings with my medium format SLR and 3 lenses (actually the first was shot with my TLR) but things were far more staged and traditional in those ancient days when you did not count on repeat business from your wedding clients. But as the documentary style approach so popular today becomes the standard, some photographer down the road is going to establish a name for him or her self by producing a brilliant and beautiful new style album that is actually a return to the traditional look.

COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHERS. Studio photographers specializing in products and advertising appeared to have it easier in the equipment inventory sense. Because the world in front of your camera, whether you shoot products or people, is completely controlled, you then can control the elements that would, on location, have you switching lenses and maybe formats throughout the shoot. Easily 90% of my studio work was accomplished with a normal and medium telephoto lens. I rarely had any need to change lenses in mid shoot once I had determined the correct one for the project at hand. Based on client needs I might shoot anything from medium format roll film to 4x5 and even 8x10 sheet film, but only rarely needed to shoot both sheet and roll film for a given project nor did I often need to change lenses during a particular shoot.

However I still needed the format inventory as well as the familiarity from constant use to be able to grab the format and appropriate lens for the shoot. And I also needed back-ups in case of disaster. The client may see only one camera and lens on the set but the closet was full of gear just a few steps away. And when the shoot went on location then the camera inventory became more important. On the right is a shot of some of my camera inventory from the commercial days. 35mm, 6x6 and 6x7 cm, 4x5 and 8x10 in were all employed. And this does not show the studio view cameras in 4x5 and 8x10 (these were my location/field camera) or the cases of lenses and accessories.



Today there is the occasional need for large format film, but most commercial work is shot with MF digital and occasionally with high-end DSLRs.

FASHION. When fashion was an exclusively studio based world the photographer did not need more than a couple of cameras (a large view camera for serious cover work – often 8x10, and a medium format SLR with 2-3 lenses for “action” shots). When shooters like Newton and Avedon took the genre on location they did not change their equipment overnight. But slowly, except for the staged cover shots, fashion grew more “documentary” in look and while MF was still the workhorse, 35mm started to appear more and more. Now the competitive high end fashion shooter needs to be able to grab any of those formats as the client and subject needs dictate though digital is taking over that genre as it has the others.

PORTRAITURE. The traditional studio portrait photographer could certainly get by with a single camera (usually a ‘portrait’¹ or sometimes full ‘view’ type sheet film camera) and lens (usually a mild telephoto equivalent to about a 100-135mm on a 35mm camera). But, spurred on by fashion trends, as portraiture went outside and on location, the ability to choose how to incorporate the background and how to render the spatial relationships between subject and environment, mandated several lenses be added to the kit. This was more than simply an issue of cropping and positioning. To attempt to do everything with a single camera was akin to painting everything with a single brush.

LANDSCAPE. Until very recently professional landscape work was still the province of the large format and sometimes medium format film shooter. Cheap calendars and magazine articles might be done with 35mm but put side-by-side with even MF shots they looked less and less appealing. Only magazine shooters counting on small reproductions and course line screens in the separations (usually about 133 lines for a consumer magazine) could consistently get by with miniature/small format shooting. Only very recently has film stock reached a point where for moderate sized reproduction could 35mm be considered and still, many places would simply not accept it. Unless you had a very exotic location with one-of-a-kind shots about the only outlet you would have would be photography magazines. The only exception of any note was National Geographic where the demands on the photographers mandated light travel oriented gear. But they traveled with backup bodies and a complement of lenses shooting Kodachrome 25 most of the time to wring the last vestige of quality out of that tiny negative. And the magazine itself was a smaller format so that even its cover did not require all of that big an enlargement.

Now the truth is also that the world of the pro is changing. The day of the generalist, where the pro was judged by their ability to meet virtually ANY visual challenge such as existed for me, is evaporating in favor of the specialist. So even in the commercial/product world there are certain practitioners able to meet all of their professional requirements with a reduced camera kit. That certainly saves them inventory and equipment money. But it also limits their ability to do break-out work. And after a while it limits their ability to see the world around them in different ways.

¹ A “Portrait” camera was traditionally a type of view camera in which only the rear standard was capable of moving and the front (lens) standard was often fixed to the bed or rails.

As in verbal communication, if you do not know the word the odds are good you do not comprehend the concept. In the visual world, if you do not know the potentials available through the use of other tools you will not see those potentials even when they exist.

So do you NEED all that gear? Of course not. Can you be competitive without it? In my day the answer was “No” but those times may be changing and a reduced inventory is more and more workable. How much reduced? Ah... that is something competition may decide more than reality. It is still a world looking for the special shot.

We are often the ultimate gadget freaks; wanting to have EVERY thing available, every latest new lens or other accessory. I admit I fall right into that trap, partly because as a working pro I was always looking for something that would give me an edge but also because I simply love the stuff and love working with it all. But there is a point of diminishing returns and that point is reached when we need to go on location whether for a commercial shoot or for nature and landscape work.

If we can shoot exclusively out of the car then we can take it all. And I frequently do. I prefer to let the subject tell me what it would like to be portrayed with. But when the time comes that I need to take that trail into the unknown or even to a specific vantage point, or when I just want to wander around an area to see what wily image happens to leap out in front of me, then practicality raises its ugly head.

My choices of approach are based on my experience of being a large format shooter. I often carried a large camera and its gear into the woods so the concept of being loaded down does not bother me and also the idea of speed shooting is not something I do. I am not a photojournalist or “decisive moment” shooter but rather am used to having some scene resonate with me, analyzing it and then setting about methodically to capture it in such a fashion as to allow me to render an image that corresponds to me vision for it on the scene.

That removes me from the world of the snap shooter and travel shooter. Their need for fast shooting and light gear is critical to them but not to me. I am not a quick draw master with the camera and have no interest in it. Nevertheless, there is only so much I can carry reasonably and as the years progress my load levels have decreased noticeably. I used to trek forward with heavy tripod over my shoulder and my 8x10, lenses, and film holders in a backpack and think nothing of it. Now I look back and think I must have been nuts.

Even when shooting medium format I would put a couple of bodies and half dozen lenses in a backpack and set off. As a personal matter I did not often use shoulder bags. Not because I did not like them, but because some trails in the Rockies were sufficiently precarious on their own, and a swinging shoulder bag that could take you off balance was too dangerous for me. The backpack centered the weight and did not shift around as I walked. On pavement the shoulder bag was far more convenient but in the rough it made me really nervous to have it swinging around.

Then, sometime in the late 70s or early 80s someone gave me a custom photo vest made by Quest Vest in Bozeman, MT. It was a revelation. It had padded pockets with dividers for lenses, smaller pockets for meters, etc., and spread the weight nicely. It became part of my standard gear — and still is — which is a testament to its quality. I do not think

that company still exists and I know of only one other person who has (or had) one of their vests but we both loved them. I could have sold mine many times over but likely never will.

Now I try to select 2-4 lenses from my cases that will fit in the vest along with any accessories such as meter, extenders, batteries and extra cards, maybe a sandwich and sometimes with a canteen on my belt, throw the tripod over my shoulder or carry it on a sling, and am set for nearly everything. If I have done my homework on the area and guessed my lens selection well then I am completely happy. Once in a while I will wish I had made a different selection and try to make do with what I have, making a note to return someday with a different lens.

Could I find something to shoot even if I had only one lens? Of course, And sometimes for practice or to learn the properties of a particular piece of equipment, will purposefully head out with a single prime lens, or tape a zoom, but it is always a place I can come back to easily... just in case.

Tripods

What about accessories such as tripods. There are those who write that “tripods are for weenies” and in the day of IS/VR lenses it is true that many shots previously problematic or even impossible can now be taken. But not all of them.

If the end use of the shots is the web or a newspaper, ultimate crispness is a true waste of time because those mediums will not show the difference between a perfect shot and one with slight focus or motion problems. But I like prints... large prints. I have worked with other colleagues testing this and concluded to my satisfaction that neither I nor students have any trouble picking out hand held shots done even a stop or two faster than the traditional acceptable hand-held speeds. And the differences are even more pronounced as the enlargement increases. Perhaps there are those out there so steady of hand and able to control their breathing and even the micro-spasms of their musculature that they can hand hold shots impossible for me. But I can't do it and see no reason to try and risk a killer shot just to pretend I am far steadier than I know I really am. I have as large an ego as anyone on the planet but in my case it is totally wrapped up in the quality of the finished product not in what anyone else thinks of me or my shooting style or needs in the field. If I am a weenie so be it but my shots, at 24x36 and larger, are sharp.

So what is the answer to the initial question? It remains the initial answer... it depends. But you, the photographer have to remember that incredibly beautiful shots have been taken with the simplest of gear. In the end, it is the photographer and their choice of view, light, timing, and the use of whatever it is they are carrying that makes for the best shots. The gear, fun and wonderful as it is, is simply a tool.

There are people who have no trouble pounding nails and even turning screws with a pair of pliers. When my back is tired and shoulders ache I sometimes envy them. But personally, I still prefer to also carry a hammer and screwdriver.

