**ESC SYMPOSIUM Saturday 10th November**

**Photography and Ski Touring**

**Introduction**

To combine successfully an interest in photography with a ski tour is a challenge but one that can be overcome with preparation, anticipation and co-operation.

Preparation involves having a camera with which you are very familiar and has a range of settings and operations that will enable you to get the pictures you want. It means that the camera is immediately accessible for spontaneous shooting, together with spare batteries, a secure strap and other ancillaries, (mini-tripod, cleaning cloth and filters etc.). Your camera handbook will help you familiarise yourself with the menu and all its functions. You need to be able to alter the settings at a moment’s notice.

Anticipation involves having your wits about you in order to ‘see’ pictures in advance. You need to be in the right position in relation to the tour group and the landscape to capture the shot. You need the lighting from the sun to be in the right place and you need to be able to scamper to get into position. If the photo has been taken from behind you’ll need to be fit enough to catch up. This all becomes more important if you are using prime (fixed) lenses; a zoom lens gives you a bit more flexibility in terms of your point of view. The camera, in terms of settings, should always be ready to use.

Co-operation from the members of the tour group is critical if you want to take good pictures. Action shots need very specific co-operation for them to work well. Some shots do need careful planning, good communication with precise instruction as to what you want your skiers to do to be successful. Such shots are rarely successful if they have been snapped in a hurry on the off-chance. This is a dilemma because most folk are on a ski tour in order to ski and quite often resent it if too much time is taken “setting up a shot”. The ideal scenario is one where a small group goes out with the specific purpose of getting some good pictures, down to the detail of wearing photogenic colours. And being able to ski well.

**Equipment**

There are plenty of lightweight cameras, compact systems, digital single lens reflex cameras (DSLRs), and phone cameras on the market for you to be able to do your research and find a camera that suits you in terms of size, weight and function.

This is a list of criteria you might want to consider in making your choice. Talk to other ski tourers about what they use. Look in the YB and study the photos and make contact with the photographers. Members of the ESC are usually very generous in sharing their time, knowledge and expertise in giving advice.

The list is not exhaustive, nor is it compulsory. Some folk are happy with a minimum of technical function and place a reliance on using the Auto functions on the camera. But if you want a bit more versatility from your camera then read on.

Once you have your camera, practise with it until you are so familiar with the settings that the adjustments become intuitive and automatic. You don’t need to wait for the ski touring season to use it. Get out and about in your own locality.

**Optical Viewfinder:** In bright sunny conditions in a snowscape it is very difficult to frame your picture well if you are relying on the viewing screen at the back of the camera/phone. The same applies to the playback function when it becomes even more difficult if you need to wear reading glasses to see the detail. Framing your picture using the optical viewfinder in combination with a zoom lens ensures you are including what you want in the picture and excluding stuff you don’t want.

**Zoom Lens:** Optically not as good as a prime or fixed lens but usually good enough for our purposes. A fixed lens means that you might have to walk around a bit to get into the best position to take the shot. That may be easier said than done. You might also end up carrying more than one lens. A zoom lens gives much more flexibility and can get you closer to your subject; modern zooms are also light with good exposure range.

**Modes and Functions:**  Many Compact System Cameras and DSLRs operate through modes, ie you can set your camera to work in a mode that gives priority to exposure, shutter speed, manual, auto or other programmes. In addition, the menu gives you access to a range of functions, some of which may be more important for you than others. Ease of access via menus or function buttons can make all the difference in terms of how well you get on with your camera.

This is my personal list of preferences:

+ The ISO setting governs the speed of capture. I like my camera to have a range from about 100 to 1600. This is sometimes an issue of dealing with available light and sometimes it’s about capturing fast action.

+ Exposure Compensation allows you to override the response of the camera in Aperture Priority mode. In a snowy environment the camera ‘shuts down’ because there’s more than enough light. If, however, you want to have more light on a subject, say a figure of a skier, you need to compensate positively. If you want your figures to be silhouettes and you want your snow scene to have texture then you compensate in the other direction. Fill-in flash can help but the photo tends to show that it is artificially lit.

+ Fast Focal Tracking enables you to lock onto a skiing figure as they hurtle towards you and to maintain the sharpness of focus as they pass. This is usually used in combination with Multiple Frame Shooting which enables you to fire off several frames per second without hitting the buffer of what the camera can process. The Shutter Release also needs to be fast. You do not want any gap in time between pressing the shutter on a speeding skier and the capture of the image. Mid-range DSLRs and above are better placed to do this well, generally.

+ White Balance matches the quality of the available light and can leave an ugly colour cast across the picture if the wrong WB setting is used. Sun, cloudy or overcast, or artificial lighting of different types are the main settings.

+ Filters can both protect the outer coating of the lens and filter out UV light as well as providing a range of special effects. They simply screw onto the front of the lens though it is important to check the precise measurement of the front of the lens to ensure you obtain the right-sized filter.

+ Accessories play their part. A pair of thin thermal gloves with which you can manipulate the settings is vital, underneath a loose-fitting pair of overmitts which dangle from your wrist on tapes when removed. A cloth to clean the screen, eye piece and lens is critical especially when they are plastered with sun cream. On a single day-tour one battery may suffice. For multi-day tours or extended expeditions you should have a number of spare batteries plus re-charging capability. In especially remote areas you may need a portable solar charger.

**Planning your shot**

Portrait, Square, Landscape or Panoramic? Use the framing format best suited to the subject. Remember that although the ESC Yearbook uses photos using all framing formats, it is a portrait style publication. Photos taken in landscape format need to be cropped to be used in portrait format and this could result in a loss of resolution. Ski tourers tend mostly to submit photos in landscape format; this may be because the camera handles better this way, especially if you’re struggling with gloves, you’re out of breath and you’re giddy from altitude!

You are looking to achieve interest from front to back in your photos. Photos with huge expanses of snow in the foreground or sky in the background are usually dull, unless the sky is particularly interesting with, for example, a stormy cloud scene. Summit pictures, other than team summit shots, tend to have huge amounts of sky and the landscape below has a much flattened perspective. John Ruskin favoured what he called the “middle view”, where the point of view is confronted with both height and depth and so adds to the sense of situation more dramatically. A rock, a skinning track, a tent, a figure, a signpost etc can all provide some foreground interest as well as leading the eye to the main interest of the photo.

Rules of composition in photography are of course meant to be broken but the “rule of thirds” has some basic merit to it in helping to achieve balance, or creative imbalance in a photograph. Using it vertically or horizontally helps to structure the composition of the photograph whilst exploiting it flexibly to add interest.

Colour or Black and White? B/W photography is certainly making a comeback and can be extremely dramatic. Some cameras have a b/w option at the time of shooting. Otherwise it is a matter of going into the digital darkroom and converting a colour image. It enhances what is often already a monochromatic mountain scene, especially if any human subjects are wearing dark colours. It is worth trying to “see” your black and white picture in advance; human figures can be lost in a rocky background so need to be prominent against a clean background such as sky or snow.

Close-ups? Robert Capa’s mantra – if your picture is not good enough you are not close enough – is worth remembering, though he probably never used a zoom lens to achieve the c/u result. Summit shots, group or individual portraits etc are a staple of YB photos but they are frequently too dark and the subject too small. You may need to increase the ISO slightly. You will certainly need to use the exposure compensation function; you can also use fill-in flash, though personally I always prefer to use available light. Take care with group shots; pose them so that everyone’s face can be clearly seen, with no shadows masking part of the face, and no squinting into the sun. If it is a group portrait then make it a portrait; trying to get the wider landscape into the picture for context often results in shrinking the people beyond identification. An individual portrait can be very effective in landscape format. With the aperture opened to the full, this will have the effect of reducing the depth of field and focus. Sharp focus on the subject on one side of the frame is balanced with an atmospheric out-of-focus mountain background on the other. The other application of the close-up is in the capture of incidental detail such as a memorial plaque on a refuge, a sundial in a village in the Queyras, a broken ski binding, a rodent, etc. They provide interesting alternative fare to the diet of skinning/skiing shots that dominate the YB.

Action shots need the most planning yet tend to be snapped on the hoof. They need co-operation and clarity of purpose to achieve the best results. An example of how it might work: you have a pitch of good untracked snow providing a good line for the skier. You ask them to wait for your signal once you have got into position. You have already told them where and how you want them to ski. If you want a close up they will need to ski quite near to you without risking injury to either party. Tell them which side you want them to pass on, especially if you want to capture some background. Once in position take off your skis so that you establish a stable platform. Check all the settings on the camera ie, aperture, ISO, WB, shutter speed, exposure compensation, multiple frame setting etc etc. Make sure there are no extraneous objects in the background, including other skiers. Are you in portrait or landscape mode? Check that you can manage a comfortable rotation from the start to the finish of their run through your panning action. Lock the focus onto the skier at the start and give them the signal to ski. Your finger will already be depressing the shutter. You should be looking for a burst of 8 – 10 shots until they are past you. You only need one!

GIRFT. Try to Get It Right First Time. Then you won’t have to rely on post-capture adjustments to correct any faults or problems.

**What To Shoot**

A close study of the current and previous Yearbooks would be well worthwhile to help you understand what kind of photographs work best in the context of ski touring. Analyse the photos with a view to how they might be improved. The Editor prefers to illustrate each ski tour with at least one photograph but that is not always possible if the contributions are not good enough.

A bit underexposed, slightly out of focus, bits of the subject sticking out of the frame, bits outside the frame sticking in, not enough resolution, too much sky/snow, too little interest. And many photographs looking like so many others. If you are going to shoot a picture of a group skinning up a snow slope or a group sitting on a summit, at least strive to make it technically accomplished and somehow a little bit different.

One way of shooting subjects a little bit different is to reflect something of the locale, a cultural dimension, wildlife, inhabitants, vernacular styles of domestic architecture, customs, costumes.

Landscapes in the mountains can be spectacular. Sometimes they need figures to give a sense of scale. Sometimes they can simply stand for themselves. If you are looking to take a photograph of a mountain scene in limited available light, and you want a focal range that stretches from the front to the rear of the picture, then you may need a tripod to hold the camera steady for a longer exposure. If no tripod is available you can rest your camera on a rucsac lying on the snow, together with a release cable or a remote or a timer in order to remove the possibility of camera shake.

Don’t be afraid to experiment. Plan a day, with a friend who has a brightly-coloured jacket, and who can ski well, and go and play.

**What Do You Do With Your Photos?**

When it comes to reviewing a day’s shoot it helps to be disciplined and rigorous. You need to “kill your darlings”. For example, on a sequence of action shots taken using multiple frame mode, you only need to choose one. Have a close look at the two or three in the middle that seem most likely and then decide. It’s usually easy. The alternative is that you clog up your computer with them.

A few of your photos may be produced in hard copy, printed and framed and put on the wall. Some may be printed in book form produced professionally by companies such as Blurb. Some may go into traditional photo albums, some into presentation boxes. Some may go into the ESC Yearbook. One may even go on the front cover.

Most will lurk in the virtual shoebox that is your computer.

**Further Reading**

**ESC Yearbook 2012:** “Photography and the Yearbook”,

pp 29 - 30

“Submitting to the Yearbook”, p 170

**ESC Yearbook 2013:** “Photography and Off-Piste in Arolla”,

pp 34 – 39

Mike Spencer

15.11.2018