



Have you ever been jealous of all those sports “fantasy camps”

where you get to leave the real world behind and concentrate on honing your skills in your favorite sport with the pros?

Well, we took our digital safaris to a new level, creating a “fantasy camp

for wildlife photographers.” Participants were able to combine world-class animal photography with a full digital workshop even while on location.

We decided to try and push it to the limit for the safaris to Africa and Alaska, taking not just a projector and screen, but also a printer and a full set of color-management tools.

That way, we could teach a complete digital workflow on-site. In the process we learned some valuable lessons that we’d like to share with you.



One of the best things on a wildlife shoot is the clients' excitement when they can safely approach large animals.



There's nothing quite as delightful as the interaction between a mother animal and her cub.

If you're going on a photo safari, preparation is a key ingredient. We spend hours via email with participants, helping them to select the correct photo equipment and providing practice tips. (There's nothing worse than getting to a location without something you need.) For us, the preparation starts at least a year in advance, scouting the locations at the same time of year when we'll be going, and then developing a plan for how to work the locations with a group. Many locations just aren't suitable.

DIGITAL WORKSHOP On the Road

I recommend reading about a destination before going. For example, I had seen photos of the temple (shown below) before I went, and was determined to capture my own image.

Preparation, equipment, and logistics

Assembling the gear we need to create a complete digital workshop takes some doing. While participants bring their own cameras and laptops, we provide everything else. For these safaris, it started with a full set of color-management hardware and software from ColorVision, a portable printer from Canon, a portable screen from Draper, and a portable InFocus projector. We also brought along a box of universal power adapters and extension cords. And all the electronics and chargers had to be 220V-ready for Africa.

The next challenge was to get all of the equipment to the sites without damage. Pelican cases were the order of the day for anything that had to be checked and, as always, they did a perfect job. One of the most exciting innovations are the new Pelican soft cases, such as the PCS183. They are sturdy enough to protect gear under most conditions, but don't scream out "expensive gear inside" the way the hard cases do. This helps reduce the chance of theft. But we still worried about letting anything out of our sight so we brought as much as possible with us on the planes using sturdy carry-on products, such as the Swiss Army Rolling Trevi briefcase, the Roadwired Roadster Convertible for electronics, and packs from LowePro and WRP Trading Post for camera gear. In particular, the WRP MP-3 pack is thin enough to fit in any of the overheads we encountered—even on the smaller RegionalJets.

Photo groups have a lot more gear than almost any other tourists, so we made sure that we had plenty of aircraft space on the small charter planes we used from camp to camp...no lines, no security, and as long as the weather's okay, no waiting. This made transfers in Botswana very efficient (we didn't leave our camp until the plane was on its way) and we were often in the next camp with only 90 minutes of travel time.

As you plan for your camera safari, one provision you should make sure of is that you're allowed to take the gear you need for your style of photography, as many standard safaris allow only point-and-shoot cameras. The same is true for vehicles; for instance, if you show up on a crowded truck with a long lens and tripod, you'll likely be unpopular from the start. That's why we limited our vehicles to just a few members of our group, who are all interested in photography.

A day in the bush

Once on location, the key is to get out in the field and start shooting (it's time to stop worrying about logistics). Always use a local guide so there won't be a learning curve in getting the best opportunities to photograph. Time is too valuable to spend learning what the locals already know about the location and the animals. Fortunately, we can often use guides that we've worked with before and already provided with basic photo instruction. This makes it easier to work with them to get the best photo angles without stressing the animals.

In addition, all participants receive instructions on how to approach and behave safely around the animals we'll be seeing—for both the animals' safety and ours. It may sound

obvious but one of the first lessons when you're in the field with wild animals is just that—they're wild—they're not in a zoo. Talk softly and move slowly. The animals will hang around longer and be more cooperative. Remember that almost all animals hear, smell, and see better than we do and they're very sensitive to possible threats. Learning to be calm and move quietly even when you're witnessing the wildlife event of a lifetime is one of the best lessons any photo safari can teach for improving your wildlife images.

If we could only teach one thing on our trips, it would be that photography is all about communicating. If your photos tell a story, they'll get looked at. Sometimes the content of an image is so compelling that you can throw all the other rules away. For example, this family of bears (above) was patiently waiting their turn to feed on a fish carcass. The strength of their pose makes the image well worth capturing despite the misty conditions, lack of light, and distracting background.

Just as important is knowing when enough is enough. Working with guides and operators who are interested in the long-term wellbeing of the animals is essential. Be respectful when the guide or safari leader decides it's time to leave a particular animal. (Be aware that some guides may be encouraged by bigger monetary tips to take more chances with the animals—to the detriment of the animals and future visitors.)

A bounty of wild animals

The reward for all this preparation and patience was a mind-blowing, wildlife experience, with hours of high-quality photographic opportunities every single day in Africa and Alaska. Most of the participants experienced a sense of euphoria as we took frame-filling shots of the beautiful leopards in Botswana as well as grizzly bears in Alaska.

And, of course, everyone was overwhelmed by how quickly their flash cards were filled with images that were "keepers." Some of the participants hadn't believed us when we told them how many cards they'd need but fortunately, we always bring along some extras.

Learning while doing

When comparing wildlife photography to shooting a landscape, the biggest difference is that the subject changes constantly and opportunities come and go quickly (see Hippo on page 40). We did any teaching primarily between sightings so that when we came upon an animal, everyone was prepared and had a shooting plan.

At the beginning of each game drive, we discussed what we were likely to see. Then after each animal sighting, we'd answer questions so participants would know what they might want to do differently next time. Much of the instruction, however, would wait until after the drive when we'd review everyone's images and provide constructive suggestions based on their

results. (See also "Practical Problems" on page 39.)

Not every safari is about the wildlife. In Burma, the exotic scenes and colors, like this monk crossing the U Bein bridge in Mandalay, can be just as challenging and rewarding as photographing exotic animals.

One of the most difficult but rewarding skills to teach on a photo safari is an eye for visually interesting patterns. These wandering dunes in Namibia (on facing page) provided participants with lots of fun as they worked to create interesting compositions.

Digital workflow

Other than getting everyone and their gear to camp, the hardest part about teaching digital workflow on safari is keeping the participants' attention. Who can blame anyone for rushing off at the sight of a lion or elephant wandering past the camp? So each day, we allowed prime time for game drives and photography and worked in the digital sessions during the slow hours of mid-day and after dark.

Once back in camp, the safari participants realized that they'd never had to review and file so many images before. So the first evening was a major digital workflow boot camp. First, we calibrated and profiled all of the systems using ColorVision's Spyder2PRO. This step was critical as many of the laptops, even brand-new from the factory, showed washed-out images before

Practical problems

As you'd expect on a safari, dust was a constant problem requiring lots of lens changing while out on game drives, and every couple of days, we had cleaning sessions for sensors. Usually a simple brushing with a Sensor Brush from VisibleDust was enough but for the worst cases, we had to use a swab with a sensor-cleaning solution. Fortunately, sensors are fairly sturdy (although we always hold our breath when tinkering inside the cameras).

As inveterate Photoshop users, it's also been a struggle to have a good, portable tablet. The small Graphires aren't quite pro grade, and the larger tablets require power. But Wacom's new Intuos 4x6 turns out to be perfect. A single USB connection provides a widescreen-compatible tablet and mouse that's small enough to tuck into your bag next to your computer.

Vibration Reduction (called VR by Nikon) and Image Stabilization (IS by Canon and others) technology proved to be invaluable. There's no good way to keep several people perfectly still on a truck for an extended period of time. Beanbags are a great help for resting lenses, but VR/IS dramatically increased the percentage of sharp images captured. The most popular stabilized lenses were the 100–400mm USM Canon—an incredible safari lens because it has great range, is stabilized, and can be handheld—and the 200–400mm f/4 Nikon, which is also awesome but a little awkward to handheld.

they were profiled. Several participants thought something was wrong with their cameras or their technique.

Next we demonstrated how to load, review, and file images quickly using DigitalPro software or the individual participant's image-cataloging solution. The goals here were to cull out inferior images—for example, out-of-focus or not sharp—and also file images by species and location so that everyone's cards were empty and ready for the next day's shoot (and so they'd have less work once they went home).

One of the best things about great wildlife images is that they don't require much work in Photoshop. A little Photoshop Levels or Curves made the subjects pop, then a touch of selective sharpening using PhotoKit Sharpener and many of the images were ready to print on our Canon portable printer.

Comparing shots after the game drives enabled everyone to see how even small factors can make a difference; for example, when the photographer shoots low or stands up in the vehicle, there's a difference in image composition and background. Color management turned out to be the key to this portion of the process. Once we profiled everyone's display, we then moved on to the finer points of exposure and composition.

The payoff

When we saw the clients' smiling faces as they viewed printed images of animals they'd seen that same day, it was worth all the effort it took to get the printer to Africa! The printer also proved very popular with the local guides and camp managers as we

could give them prints of the animals for their scrapbooks or to show future visitors.

As well as being an excellent teaching tool for our image workflow and editing sessions, the best part of having a projector with us was viewing the participants' images as a group to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their images. And the highlight of the trip was definitely the participant slide show on the last night. Using Magix PhotoStory, we combined everyone's best images with local music from CDs we'd brought for a quick "pro-quality" presentation.

Understanding how you'll be able to complete your vision on the computer has become an increasingly important element of photography. We had participants photograph the scene at night even though the low light levels meant that our cameras captured only muted colors, and then we used the power of Photoshop and the LAB color space to turn the image on the computer into the one we visualized in our minds.

At the end of the safaris, everyone was amazed by how much they'd learned and how much their photography had improved. They all went home with many images they happily described as "images of a lifetime." ■