

About my equipment

"Great meal. What pots did you use?"

Pots and knives do make a significant difference when cooking -- you can't make sushi without a sharp knife, and you can't cook a steak without a frying pan. However, most people wouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the pots and the knives made the meal -- but interestingly enough, many people do think that the camera makes the picture.

I get asked a good deal about what equipment I used to take the pictures in my portfolios. In fact, I have rather a lot of photographic equipment, more than I regularly use, and some of it a good deal better than I need. I am a bit of a gearhead, after all. I haven't listed the equipment with my pictures, though, because I like to think that whatever merits they may have are due to the way they were taken, rather than what tools were used. Since the tools of the trade do play a big part in the kinds of pictures that can be taken with them, though, I decided to write this piece. If this interests you, read on.

A bit of background

I got into photography pretty early. Both my mother and my father are photo enthusiasts. They gave me a plastic-lens fix-focal 110 camera to play with when I must've been about seven years old; after this, my father let me use his old Olympus 35 mm rangefinder. By age ten, I was borrowing their Minolta SLR with Vivitar 35-105/3.5 zoom. By age 12, they had helped me set up a darkroom in the basement, and I was happily making prints. It wasn't until I was 16, though, that I got my first very own camera, a Canon T70.



Gosainkunda, altitude ca 4,500 m above sea level, Nepal, 1987. Kodachrome 64, with a Canon T70, polarizer, and an el-cheapo Vivitar zoom.

However, my interest in photography waned after I moved out from my parents and lost access to that darkroom. I was disappointed in the quality of the prints the minilab could get me, and started to feel that

lugging around the T70, two or three lenses, a tripod, and a flash just wasn't worth the effort. So I ended up selling them and buying an Olympus Centurion APS point-and-shoot instead.

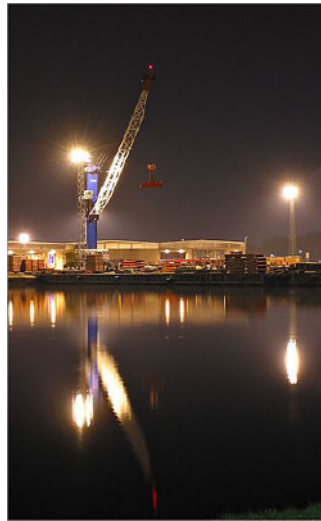
For about seven years, I didn't shoot anything more ambitious than holiday snaps (even if some of these turned out quite nice). I liked the extra cropping flexibility APS gave me, and I also liked the print quality. I was pretty happy, actually.



A blossoming cherry tree in spring of 1999, Provence.

2002: Enter Digital

My mother has been shooting digital for a few years now. I'd been quite impressed by the quality of the work she could produce with her little Digital IXUS -- the prints were crisper, more saturated, and generally nicer than anything the corner minilab could do. So, in 2002 I and my wife Joanna decided to take the plunge and go digital. After a lot of research, we bought a Canon S40... and from then on, I was lost.



One of the first pictures I shot with the S40... and also a reason why I wanted something even better.

I was amazed by the technical quality of the stuff this little camera could produce, and the control I could get by combining it with the digital workflow. Suddenly I was making 8 x 10 color prints that were better than anything I managed in the chemical darkroom (I admit I never got very deeply into color printing).

We had chosen the S40 on the grounds that eventually I might want something bigger, and a small, take-anywhere camera would still have its niche. Despite what I've done, I don't like to think that I want to change equipment all the time: I hope I've reached a plateau by the time I'm writing this. (Hey, this did eventually happen with bicycles -- but that's another story.)

So, only a few months later, I couldn't stand it any longer. DSLR's were still out of my range, and I was still leery of falling into the same trap as with my T70: that of having a lot of nice equipment but being too lazy to carry it to where the pictures are. So I bought the next best thing: the zoom-lens EVF camera that I decided to be best suited for me, the Minolta DiMAGE 7i, figuring that it would cover the gap until DSLR's shrunk in price and weight so that they were below my pain threshold. I really like this camera: it provides comprehensive creative controls, is very flexible with its nice, bright, 28-200 zoom lens, and handles a lot like an SLR. However, some more things happened...



Joanna attempting to herd an uncooperative sheep in the south of France. Shot with the D7i...

The Scanner

In the autumn of 2002, I bought a slide scanner, to scan and present some of the family's huge collection of slides over the years. I liked it a lot: it really made me appreciate what film can do. So much, in fact, that I went and bought back something very like I had sold nearly ten years ago -- a manual-focus, near-manual vintage Canon SLR: the AE-1.



A jogger in the Hippodrome of Tyre, in Lebanon. AE-1, 50 mm SSC, Kodak T400CN.

Now that, friends, is a real camera. There's no SLR on the market today that can touch it in feel and viewfinder size and clarity. It's a simple but unbelievably functional and reliable design. No matter what happens to my other cameras, the AE-1 is a keeper, for the sheer pleasure of handling and shooting it. It's also a very convenient size and weight: with a 50 mm lens, it's light enough to swing from the wrist, and it's rugged enough (and inexpensive enough) to take along trekking. With the AE-1, I quickly rediscovered the joy of shooting black-and-white neg, and got some of the best photos I've ever taken.

Come 2003

This year, 2003, was a bit of a tough one, not least photographically. The AE-1 had gotten me interested in rangefinder cameras, and I spent an enjoyable month or so hunting for one. Unfortunately, this adventure did not go well. It is a story in itself, and not one I want to share on the Internet. By April, I was rid of the Leica, having exchanged it for a new EOS-10D. Since it replaces the D7i, that camera is looking for a new home at this time (well, it's already practically found one).



Dawn before spring, in Tammisaari, southern coast of Finland. EOS 10D, Canon EF 50 mm f/1.4 at f/1.4, ISO800, 1/100 s. I already love this lens: wide-open, it flares very delicately, and gives the branches an almost translucent quality.

Current inventory

So, our current inventory of photographic equipment includes the following:

- Canon EOS 10D -- my "first camera" at this time
- Canon AE-1 -- for shooting black-and-white negative film
- Canon EOS 500 -- Joanna's "first camera," and shaping up to be a very good back-up for the 10D
- Canon FD 50 mm f/1.4 SSC -- the "normal" lens for the AE-1
- Canon FD 85 mm f/1.8 SSC -- for a little more reach (I don't use this that much, actually)
- Canon EF 50 mm f/1.4 USM -- the low-light and "portrait" lens for the 10D, doubles as a "normal" for the 500
- Canon EF 28-85 f/3.5-5.6 USM -- the "normal" lens for the 500, doubles as a normal to short tele zoom for the 10D
- Canon EF 35 mm f/2 -- the "normal" lens for the 10D
- Tokina 17 mm f/3.5 AT-X Pro -- wide-angle for the 10D, ultra-wide for the 500
- Canon PowerShot S40 -- the "take-anywhere" camera
- Welta Perle 645 with Schneider-Kreuznach 75 mm f/4 lens, from 1936 (only put one roll through this, focus needs to be calibrated)
- ...plus some stuff like filters, tripods, camera bags, cable releases, and so on.

That's a lot of cameras and lenses.

So, how do we use them?

A pattern is starting to emerge. I take most of my pictures when traveling. We usually take along at least three cameras: the S40, the DSLR (formerly 7i, now 10D), and a film body. A crucial discovery happened on our recent trip to Lebanon. I had taken the AE-1 along as backup, thinking of the 7i as my first camera... but I ended up taking more pictures with the AE-1. This even when I counted the more or less random shots, bracketings, and general horsing around that's such a big part of the fun of digital. The reason was that I simply enjoyed using the AE-1 more; I especially loved the control over depth of field and the responsiveness. This experience was a major reason why I decided to dump the 7i for the 10D. While I quite enjoy scanning, I also really like the freedom of being able to shoot as much as I like, and of seeing what I shot immediately. (The metering on the AE-1 let me down badly a few times in low light, and I wasted about two entire rolls of film; I really would have liked a few frames on them to succeed. I know, more practice needed...)

We get around on foot a lot. When we're actually on the road, Joanna usually carries the S40, and shoots her pictures with that. I carry the big camera -- either the film one or the digital one. Especially with the real SLR's, this produces a nice synergy, as I generally only carry one lens. If I just can't get the shot at that focal length, the 35-105 zoom on the S40 comes in very handy. Or, if I have the film body with B/W film, Joanna's camera can get the color shots.



I had B/W in my AE-1 when we got to this scene; it's in a wadi east of Jbeil (Byblos) in Lebanon. I'm really glad Joanna caught the color on the S40.

Choosing the right tool for the job

We're in a lucky position to have a choice of cameras for the different kinds of things we like to shoot, even if we're constrained by what we can comfortably carry. No matter what equipment you have, there will always be shots you can't get because of some limitation. In my view, it's far better to first pick the tool you think is best suited for the job -- whether it's choosing your only camera or selecting one or two from your collection -- and then work with it, looking for the pictures you *can* get on it, instead of the

ones you can't. From that Lebanon trip, I can remember one picture I would have liked to get but couldn't because I only had my AE-1 on me, and Joanna hadn't brought the S40 or the 7i: it was a wide-angle view of the Tyre hippodrome. I had it visualized, the light and color were very good, and I'm pretty confident that it would've been a winner... but I had B/W film and the 50 mm lens. On the other hand, I got a few pictures from that shoot that I simply could not have gotten on either of the two other cameras -- including the runner that I included in this story, which I happen to think is one of the five best pictures I've taken last year. And you remember what they say about a bird in the hand being worth ten in the bush?

So, you basically have the choice of thinking your glass is half-full or half-empty. No matter how much money you spend or how much weight you'll carry, your equipment will constrain your photography. The trick is to decide what kind of photography you want to do (now, today, this year, ever) and select the tools suitable for that. Specialize. If you want to shoot wildlife like the folks at National Geographic, landscapes like Ansel Adams, situationals like Cartier-Bresson, nudes like you see in Playboy, and sports like the you see in Sports Illustrated, you'll end up spending everything you earn on equipment, and never have time to actually learn the technique. Instead of letting your camera constrain you, make the choice consciously. Decide that you'll give up long tele or ultra-wide angle or zoom flexibility or exposure flexibility or portability or responsiveness, and work from there. In today's competitive environment, there are very few bad cameras or bad lenses; there are merely cameras that are good for different purposes. And do try to keep the focus on the photography!

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