

Taking Better



By Frank Van Riper

A Professional Photographer's Tips for Capturing the Bel in Bel Paese!

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Back in the pre-digital, pre-iPhone past, tourist destinations, especially in Europe, often would prohibit photography in hopes that you would buy pre-packaged sets of color slides to wow the folks back home.

Did someone out there just ask, "What are slides?"

Times certainly have changed. I recall only a dozen years ago being told that I could not photograph the interior of Venice's glorious La Fenice opera house because slides were available downstairs. I made the shot anyway, on atmospherically grainy black-and-white film, and it now appears in our book "Serenissima: Venice in Winter."

Today, La Fenice and other places have succumbed to two important facts. One, cameras now are ubiquitous—in phones and in miniscule easy-to-use point and shoots. And, two, money can be made by accepting this now-inevitable and unpreventable snapshotting. Today, visitors to La Fenice can purchase a reasonably priced "Foto Pass" and, except during rehearsals, shoot to their heart's content, even from Napoleon's box

Still, being allowed to photograph and being able to produce good pictures can be two very different things, especially when photographing in Italy, arguably one of the most photogenic places on earth. If you ever have returned from *la bella Italia* and been disappointed in your photographs, following these few simple steps can vastly improve your Italian vacation photography.

Photos in Italy

Watch the Light

Ernst Haas, a great fine-art photographer and photojournalist, once observed that most people look but do not see. He was referring to how light plays on a subject: something that any first-year art student studies. Light literally gives shape and form to every subject, and mediocre, flat or dull light inevitably will lead to disappointing photos—regardless of how you think you will make things right in Photoshop when you get home.

Look at these two examples of the exterior of a church in the Umbrian hill town of Bevagna. It was a lovely day in the fall, with the sun going in and out of the clouds. With the sun hidden, a photo of the church in the resultant flat light produced little more than a record shot—an architectural passport photo, if you will.

But when I waited a few minutes for the sun to re-emerge, see how the colors of the brick, the sky—everything—pop. Note too how the raking sunlight creates deep shadows that give more pronounced shape to the rounded element in the center of the image.

This quality of raking, or specular light, is most apparent at the “Golden Hour” just after sunrise and just before sunset, when the sun is closest to the horizon and creates gorgeous warm color and long, dramatic shadows. Conversely, one of the worst times to shoot can be at high noon, when light from directly above can create unflattering shadows, especially on people. My advice: do what the Italians do at this time—have a long lunch, then take a nap. ➤



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Details Trump Vistas

The Coliseum in Rome is rightly on any tourist's must-see list. But it also points up a conundrum: how to best shoot this oft-photographed structure.



I deliberately made the first photo to illustrate a point: trying to make wide shots of grand places like the Roman Coliseum, or amphitheaters in Verona, Gubbio, etc., too often can include a ground-level layer of *turisti* appearing like so many ants at the bottom of your picture. Better to point your camera upward, eliminating the tourists, and concentrate on specific architectural elements—as well as on a brilliant sky if you have one. In my case, I included the rounded side of the Coliseum with the more rigid architecture of the Roman Forum to create an interesting photograph.



Zoom with Your Feet or Your Lens

The great photographer Robert Capa (his on-the-scene photos of the World War II D-Day landings are classics) was fond of saying “if your photos aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” In most cases—in

both wartime and peacetime—getting closer really is better, and Judy and I do this routinely in our photography, but in sometimes different ways.

I prefer to “zoom with your feet” and get closer to my subjects, often interacting with them. Judy does this too, but she also has gotten wonderful results using her 70-300 mm zoom telephoto.

Take the following two images, made with her long lens, followed by a more traditional closeup above that I made of a potter in Gubbio. In every case, closer is better. Judy notes that a telephoto lets her capture a candid moment without intruding on her subjects. In addition, a zoom can significantly compress perspective, adding drama to a photo.



Engagement, Not Estrangement

I may be prejudiced but I think Italians are great, *molto simpatico*, subjects. (My mom was Italian so I come by this naturally.) And they love *gli Americani*. Still, most amateurs hate the idea of asking strangers if they can take their picture, especially when they are abroad

Surprise: it's not that tough and it doesn't take a lot of effort—or language skill. Consider this photo: of a lovely group of *nonne* chatting at midday in Montefalco.



The photo was made by one of our workshop students, who shot from afar using a zoom lens. It's fine but it could have been better.

"Here, watch me," I said.

I walked over to the women, and immediately saw that one of them had a dog.

"Che bello cane!" I said, "come se chiama?"

She told me the dog's name and, after a few more pleasantries, I said: "per favore, un foto?" and pointed to my camera.

By now the ice had been broken and I was able to make what for me has become one of my favorite images from Italy.



And you do not have to speak Italian to do this. Judith Goodman, my wife and professional partner, relies on me to speak the language as we navigate through Italy, but she still was able to make these beautiful closeup shots below, in Assisi and Bevagna.

In Assisi a group of *anziani* was having a fine time playing with a new puppy. Judy simply approached them and joined in the smiling and laughter. After a minute or so she raised her camera and made a wonderful shot. But it was important that she first become, even tangentially, part of the puppy-loving group so that the old gentlemen could resume their interaction oblivious to Judy and her camera.

Parents with children—especially, so it seems, Italian grandparents with children—love to pose with their little ones. This *nonno* in Bevagna was no exception. Once again Judy just smiled at the two of them and after a minute or so was able to photograph at will. The bottom line is that respectful, friendly interaction—using the international language of a smile—can work wonders. ▶



Better Pictures in a Flash

Think that pop-up flash on your camera is only for use indoors or in the dark?

Even this comparatively small, unsophisticated light can improve your pictures when used creatively to open up shadows.

In the following available-light photo of an old street in Montefalco, I loved the composition and the textures, but the afternoon's harsh shadows drew me inexorably to the darkest part of the image. Solution: without changing my exposure, I activated the flash on my Nikon D300 (using the flash's default automatic setting) and shot the picture again. Look how the flash added just enough light to open up the shadows on the side of the building while having no effect at all on the rest of the sunlit scene.



Another time, seeing an interesting doorway, using the flash rendered the rich wooden door beautifully while still showing the dramatic raking light of the sun.

Night Time is the Right Time

It used to be that atmospheric—and sharp—night photos were the domain of pros using tripods and fast, expensive lenses. Now though, even inexpensive point and shoots can be cranked up to previously unheard of ISOs to allow for even handheld shooting at night. This frees you to capture moody moonlit images, or noirish scenes under street light, like this one that I made by a vaporetto stop in Venice—handheld, but bracing myself. Granted, when shooting at ISOs as high as 6400 and beyond, you will get some digital grain, or noise, but not nearly as much as you would have gotten even five years ago, so much has digital sensor technology improved in that time.



So, is there a secret to good travel photography? If I had to pick, I would say the two greatest aids to making great photos are watching the light and getting as close as you can.

Waiting for the right light will give you great shots of people, places and things, be it a landscape in Umbria or a mother and child in the Veneto. Getting closer not only will improve your photography, it even might help you make a friend.

And what a great story you will have when you get home. ▲

Frank Van Riper is a Washington, D.C.-based photographer, journalist and author who works in collaboration with his wife and professional partner Judith Goodman. For information on their book, "Serenissima: Venice in Winter," and on their photography workshops in Venice and Umbria, go to www.veniceinwinter.com and www.GVRphoto.com. You can read Frank's online photography column at www.TalkingPhotography.com.