



Cultural Sensitivity for Today's Traveler

*A reference to understanding and working
with the cultural differences and issues
facing photographers, artists, visual journalists & travelers
in today's global environment*

by **Michael A. Mariant**



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Cultural Sensitivity for Today's Travelers

This reference manual was written for photographers entering, for the first time the realm of global travel and cultural immersion. While intended for photographers, the insights and approach presented transcends all types of art and media.



Udagamandalam, India

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INTRODUCTION

*“Some Native Americans believe that a camera,
as a creator of pictures, can steal a person’s spiritual power.*

*The ancients used pictographs and carved and drawn images to tell
their personal stories. Each story was owned by the individual who lived it, and was
to be shared or not shared on that person’s own terms.*

A ‘stolen’ picture would diminish its owner, and therefore was a profound insult.

*Sometimes a photographer captures the essence of a human being.
You can look at a subject and see right through the eyes to the heart.*

The stealing of such an image is a crime.

*However, if the image is given by the person in the photograph, it is not stolen.
It is a gift, to be received respectfully and treated with care and dignity”.*

— Bryan Moss

» REVEALING THE DIFFERENCE «

BECOMING SOMETHING OTHER THAN A TOURIST PHOTOGRAPHER

For most photographers, their photography has always been of the ‘travel’ variety. Pictures of family and friends in front of landmarks or famous sites, fun moments relived from trips, or photographs to share with others showing where they have been, what they did and, maybe subconsciously, what their friends missed seeing!

Photographs have been mostly of the snapshot style, never capturing more than their immediate surroundings and lacking any cultural depth to the image.

In no way is this a critique of the photographer’s skill, desire or intentions but rather an observation of where the photographer’s focus has been. (And not the literal camera focus!)



St. Petersburg, Russia

In many and most photographic situations, the scene presented to the photographer, while in a foreign land, is somewhat sanitized. Prepackaged. Sterile.



Tokyo, Japan

In other words, staged.

Thanks in part to the surrounding environment — that has been sculpted and created for tourism — it drives the photographer through visual prompts such as vista points, photograph-complementary landscaping, designated photos spots, or from the ‘lemmings-effect’ (this is where a photographer is drawn to another large group of photographers, camera in hand, aiming at who-knows-what, but certainly something worthwhile or else they all wouldn’t be in there in the first place, right?).

CULTURE SHOCK

At some point for a photographer, they enter into a foreign world that is not sanitized for them, has not been prepped for the photographic opportunity and does not have signs or visual cues to guide them to the best photograph to bring back home.

Their surroundings are the real thing. The foreigners around them aren’t on a payroll to ensure the guest’s comfort or to assist them in their ‘exotic’ travels. Rather, they are in the foreigner’s city. The foreigner’s home. Their life. Their culture. Their world. And for the photographer, a switch in the brain has just clicked.

Their focus has shifted. It now longer sees the scene as a candid snapshot of family and friends standing in front of a scenic or significant backdrop, but rather one of the culture they are witnessing reveal itself to them right before their very own eyes. It takes them to a deeper level in their travel experience, beyond the polished surface of a culture displayed for the tourists and into one of an opportunity to connect with the people in front of them.

The journey has begun. The shift in seeing the world has occurred, introducing the photographer into a complex and confusing gray area of sensitivity in their approach, one as diverse as there are different cultures in the world.

Street photography takes scenes from life and transforms them into something different in multifarious ways. It’s not about people grinning for the camera. It’s about capturing real life.



Ooty, India

SEEING A DIFFERENCE

“Avoid making a commotion, just as you wouldn’t stir up the water before fishing. Don’t use a flash out of respect for the natural lighting, even when there isn’t any. If these rules aren’t followed, the photographer becomes unbearably obtrusive.”

— Henri Cartier-Bresson

» PERCEPTIONS «

ARE WE TOO FULL OF OURSELVES?

Few people in the world live like people in the U.S., especially in regards to our sprawling use of space, luxurious amenities and consumer-based lifestyle. Let’s face it: when compared to cultures in other parts of the world, we are heavily-engrossed in our consumer-based society. And when we take that mindset abroad in our journeys, it can clash horribly with other cultures and their respective lifestyle.

The Japanese could see our use of space as wasteful when compared to what they see as their compact and efficient means and ways. A family living in a one-room home in a small village in India might be abhorred at the sight of the many electronic devices and amenities we collect out of ‘necessity’ for our daily tasks. A small boy in Brazil might find a year’s worth of toys and entertainment just from the piles of refuse we deposit each and every day. A woman picking tea leaves in India might never imagine the luxury of a drawn bath and the pampering one receives at a day spa.

Our reputation precedes us. In order to understand the cultural differences, and in turn document them with your camera, it is your responsibility to break down that reputation — not that of Westerners as a whole, just yourself — as the first step in finding a comfort zone with your subject.

Yet when we leave home, most photographers truly believe they have broken free and left behind the U.S.-binding attitudes for a more open approach to the world, attempting to introduce ourselves as caring... compassionate... understanding. With a \$1000 camera setup hanging from our neck.



Ooty, India



Tamil Nadu, India

WE ARE WHAT WE SHOW

Your camera represents an image reflected to your subjects and those around you. When you pick up the camera and put it in front of your eye, more so than the clothes you are wearing, the color of your skin or the shoes on your feet, you are telling people that you are a tourist, and that often suggest that you have money.

It is all too easy to forget what might be 'standard' or 'expected' in the U.S. is something completely foreign — just as you are a foreigner to them. The Western personality is often times aggressive, wanting more and more.

Remember, you are a guest in their country, on their land, in their homes. Your actions and mannerisms, your words and expressions, and the equipment you carry speaks volumes about who you are in relation to them. Those actions, mannerisms, words, expressions and especially your camera, can threaten, offend and make other people feel nervous.



Busan, South Korea

It is understandable why street photographers use small, compact cameras, such as a Leica, where at just 1-inch x 6-inches and nearly silent, is far less imposing than a large SLR camera with a hefty zoom lens and motordrive firing off eight frames a second, emulating the sound of a machine gun. If you were the subject at the other end of the lens, which camera would you prefer aimed at you? Which would you be more conscious of its presence?

PRIVACY VS. SINCERITY

“You can find pictures anywhere. It’s simply a matter of noticing things and organizing them. You just have to care about what’s around you and have a concern with humanity and the human condition.”

— Elliot Erwitt

» DRAWING THE LINE «

SELF-CHECK YOUR SENSITIVITY LEVELS

There are several considerations and concessions that need to be made in understanding cultural sensitivities. How we live and operate in the U.S. when it comes to taking pictures probably will not be the same as in other countries, and could be unacceptable or even illegal.



Pop singer Michael Jackson, Santa Maria, Calif.

In the U.S., anybody can be photographed as long as the photographer is standing on public property. Why do paparazzi rule the streets of Los Angeles? Because they can. Because it’s legal.

It is safe to say that what we deem as acceptable in regards to where the line is drawn between privacy and sincerity is far more lenient than in most other countries.

We have been bombarded with in- your-face media stories, delving deep into the private lives of individuals and watched as network television shows operate their own sting operations to catch criminals. We have become numb and desensitized to the volume of violence, sex and drama that surrounds us in our media- rich entertainment world.

We must be mindful of our sensitivity to others, not only when at home but more so when we are on foreign soil. There is a fine line between good street photography and just plain gratuitous invasion/exploitation. Where does one draw the line to determine if a picture is exploitive? There is no defined set line, but there has to be a fine line there ... somewhere.



Above: Actress Jennifer Aniston, Santa Barbara.
Below: Paparazzi, Hollywood



WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE

And so the question arises, “How do you know when it’s alright to take photos of someone in another country?”

After all, there are major cultural differences in how being photographed is perceived and, as we have discussed, there is often an economic disparity between photographer and the subject. So how far do you go, when are you pushing it, and when have you crossed the line?



Iraq War Amputees Surf Clinic, Pismo Beach, California

There is a comfort level for every photographer when they are shooting the unknown. Most psychologists would call it your conscious, but photographers are a bit more intuitive in an esoteric spiritual approach to their subjects — whether or not they know it.

Speaking beyond the technical means of a photographer, most photographers, from amateurs to professionals, know a good subject when they see it. Their level of photography, which is also reflective of their cultural awareness,

greatly determines how they approach capturing the scene they have been drawn towards.

It is common for ‘young’ photographers to rely on a telephoto or zoom lens to capture the scene. The long lens provides a pocket of security and anonymity from the subject.

Photographs easily can be determined if they were taken at a distance with a telephoto. It becomes obvious to whoever is looking at the photo that the photographer either couldn’t get closer or, more likely than not, didn’t want the subject to see the photographer taking the picture.

Photographs like this are easily deemed and judged by society as invasive, especially more so when the subject seems exploited. (However, in certain cultures, such as those in Eastern Asia, it is disrespectful to encroach on a subject with a camera without respectful permission, and the use of telephoto lens, while still sometimes considered invasive, can be regarded as necessary.)

The kind of street photography or street portraiture that rely solely on zoom lenses, to put it simply, usually lacks an emotional value to it. If the photographer were to walk up to the subject and chats for a minute or two, the subject’s willingness to being photographed usually is very receptive, and the photographer could have something insightful and engaging to show.

OBSERVER OR BEING OBSERVED

The point of when a photographer is beginning to cross the line can be ascertained very quickly, if one is to use a simple rule of street photography: If your subject sees you taking the picture, then you are no longer capturing a slice of life. They are responding to your actions of being a photographer. It's over.

There is a bit of a sly nature or secretive approach that die-hard street photographers adhere to in their processes. However, street portraiture along with stealthy measures aside, once a subject is watching you, they no longer are in their own surroundings; they are in your surroundings that you and your camera have created. You have torn down a wall between you and your subject, a cultural wall that protected your subject.

Once that happens, (photo top right) a sense of place and emotion has been disturbed and, sometimes, permanently altered. The photo becomes more of the subject's reaction to the photographer, frozen in time as if they were caught in the act. The line has been crossed and the photographer is no longer the observer but is being observed.



Ooty, India

This presence of photographer in someone's life can disturb the reality of subsequent events, as the subject cannot help but react to the photographer's presence.

But sensing that line of demarcation, and reaching it while not crossing it (photo, above right), is the key to capturing strong, emotional photos that evoke a sense of time and location with the viewer. Taking good pictures of people has everything to do with empathy and understanding. And most importantly: respect.

WHEN RESPECT BECOMES EXPLOITATION



Salvador, Brazil

As photographers, it is our natural inclination to document what we see, to share our surroundings with others and capture a moment in time that might otherwise be forgotten or lost to memory.

For photojournalists, this documentation of mankind and history is fuel that fires the engine. Documentary and historical photography is acceptable as it records events of significant, but a serious invasion of privacy and preying on the misfortunes of others — just for a photo — is unacceptable.



Santo Amaro, Brazil

Photographers should bear witness to what they see, but realize that exploitation is a deliberate act, not something that occurs by chance. The “exploitive threshold” will vary from photographer to photographer. There are photographers out there who have no conscience. If you are apprehensive after you took a photograph, you’re probably close to your limit.

If, as a result of risking toward exploitation, we tread softly, good — but do we eliminate all documentation about our times or experiences? Now, if you expressly shoot photos of a sect that you know shuns their portrait, that is a whole other story.

Respect is the key to avoiding exploitation. You must, as a photographer of cultural conscience, have a reason or explanation for the scene you are composing.

You have to assess the likelihood of being challenged by the subject, more so if you are not in a busy place with millions of tourists with cameras. If you focus on a person, rather than the scene, you need to have a satisfactory and friendly answer ready; the person just wants reassurance about what you’re up to. The subject needs to know you are respecting them as a human being.

What is fair game? What is within the realms of being sincere? There’s no guidebook on this one, but if you want to look to precedent, than anything can be photographed. Only you can decide if it’s right. But don’t be surprised at how easily some can pass judgement on what others photograph.

A very simple, easy way to answer this dilemma is from within. When you are set to photograph someone and you are feeling that level of anxiety or uncertainty, ask yourself: If you were the person with the camera pointed at you, would you want this image to be preserved forever, seen by many possibly on blogs, scrapbooks and elsewhere? Make your decision after answering that question. Respect other’s photographic space, their cultural differences and integrity just as you would expect it from a tourist in your home town.

THE APPROACH

“A photograph of an intimate moment in a person’s life is a precious gift. The most intimate moments happen when there is a comfortable relationship between photographer and subject.”

— Bryan Moss

“To me photography is the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second of the significance of an event, as well as the precise organization of forms that give that event its proper expression.”

— Henri Cartier-Bresson

» PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER «

WHERE TO START

You must be able to answer the question, “How can I develop a well-rounded subject that is realistic, accurate and interesting?” You need to know why you are taking the picture you are about to create. You have to know what you want the pictures to show.

Whether or not you realize it, you are creating a story through your photograph(s). And we know how the importance of respect and sincerity can play a role in capturing the subjects in our photos and, in turn, share the story of the experience with others.

Those questions you must answer for yourself are the same questions you have to answer to the person you are photographing. How can you share with them that they are an important sub-



Can Tho, Viet Nam

ject? Their existence in that place and time characterizes the cultural differences between you as the photographer and they as the subject, a cultural difference you are trying to preserve. An understanding of why you are taking the picture only deepens the cultural connection you can have with your subject.

And without that cultural connection — and respect — the resulting photograph lacks the emotional value of the experience you are having with your subject.



“Day Without Immigrants” protest and march, Santa Barbara, Calif.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Dedicate the time to understanding the people, the region and the culture you are about to immerse yourself into. Read recent news reports to find the stories, issues and concerns that are affecting those in the country or region you are about to visit.

Understand the historical struggles they have been enduring. Remember, U.S. history is only 250- years-old; Asian and European history goes back several thousand years. As photographer Peter Howe once said, *“America has never been particularly fascinated with history, partly because she has so little of it.”* What might seem like history to you might be recent news to them.

Be informed on their ancestors struggles and you will have a better understanding of why, for example, the favelas in Brazil are stacked floor-by-floor, generation-by-generation. It is important to understand that greater insight leads to stronger compassion which lends itself to more dynamic and telling images.

WOULD YOU DO THE SAME THING AT HOME?

Often times the inhibitions drop when we travel as we believe we “will never see them again, so just take the picture; what harm can be done?”

Ask yourself if you would do the same thing in your own hometown ... with your neighbors ... with your friends. Question the appropriateness of a certain shot that draws out uncertainty within you, by balancing it against the courtesy and respect you would extend in your own comfortable surroundings.

Your actions might not affect you at the moment, but will reflect on you when other photographers follow in your footsteps. Just as you would expect the photographers ahead of you to ensure a receptive situation on your arrival, extend the courtesy to your subjects and future photographers.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

In a world where the greatest barrier amongst people is language while the greatest communicator is our behavior, how you present yourself is a reflection of your intentions. Showing an open mind and receptive attitude will help greatly in fostering a relationship with your subjects. Your own self-confidence will show and people generally, all throughout the world, will respond to you in the same attitude that you exude.

On the flip side, if you are sneaky and elusive (even due to shyness or insecurity) while trying to take photographs, your subjects will sense that and become reclusive and withdrawn out of fear and uncertainty. Take confidence in expressing yourself as you travel. You will be surprised at the number of doors to photographic opportunities that will open up.

OPEN COMMUNICATIONS

A smile can go a long way. It only takes a simple gesture and a smile for a subject in a foreign land to understand your interest in taking a photograph. You'll immediately get a clear indication, be it affirmative, hesitation or denial.

Not understanding the language can't be an excuse for not taking a photograph. If that was the case, we have a lot less photographs from global adventures.

Learn the simple phrases for the language of the country you are going to visit. A simple inquiry about taking a photograph in their native tongue not only explains your intentions to them, but also shows a willingness to learn and understand their culture.

With today's digital cameras, showing the photos on the LCD screen on the camera back can be a quick, easy communication with your subject, allow the photography to be less intimidating, and will usually garner more candid, free-spirited photo opportunities that reveal the personality of your subject.



My Tho, Viet Nam

GET INTO IT!

Disorientation of a new location leads to a sense of being uncomfortable and uncertain. A sound-proof remedy to this cultural confusion is to put the camera down and be a part of the cultural experience. By waiting to take pictures, you show a willingness to partake in the experience and, in the long run, have a better understanding of your surroundings and environment.

By doing so, cultural barriers are shattered in a positive manner as you have quickly gained the trust of your subjects and, at the same time, are able to translate and capture at a deeper, more emotional level the experience or scene after having been a part of it.

CONCLUSION



My Tho, Viet Nam

» THINK CULTURALLY «

PARTING THOUGHT

*“Live your life as a tourist, and you’ll record it like a tourist.
And your images will be just pictures. As cool or “artistic” as they may be,
they will just be consumable, disposable pictures.
Street photography is about immortalizing a moment, a mood, an image.
It’s about capturing the essence of a moment,
with all its emotional weight and/or its poetry and/or its flavor.”*

— Patrick Kahn

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael A. Mariant is a 25-year veteran visual journalist, travel photographer and lecturer based on California's Central Coast. Michael's travel assignments have taken him around the globe, documenting landscapes to social issues, while his visualjournalism work with The Associated Press as a contract photographer has kept him focused on domestic stories with the same enthusiastic passion.

"I'm always asked how I got into photography and it's just something I have done all my life. I knew when I was 10 that I wanted to be a photographer and I dedicated myself to attain that goal at the highest caliber I could reach."

After graduating from Brooks Institute of Photography, Michael jumped into the world of journalism, but not straight into photojournalism.

"I also worked as an editor on the desk doing editing and page design. It turned out to be very advantageous in the long run. Looking at thousands of photos — literally — each night that moved across The Associated Press wire, I saw what photos worked and which ones didn't. I spent a lot of time analyzing them — the good and the bad — as to what made them click or fail. This analysis of over two- years worth of daily wire photos helped me down the road in making sure I captured a photo that really 'clicked' again and again. And at the same time provided the sound base for my critical thinking."

Michael spent well over ten years immersing himself in the theories and applications of photography, industry changes, and the evolving work of the photographic masters. During this time, Michael began honing his lectures on theories and processes in the realm of documentary and travel photography and presenting them in mini-workshops in the newspaper industry.

When digital was taking over the film world, Michael was hand-picked by the Institute for Shipboard Education to overhaul the Semester at Sea photography program and facilitate the transition to digital. Semester at Sea takes students on a 100-day 'Voyage of Discovery' as they embark on an itinerary to several countries, immersing themselves in the host country's culture for a week, all while calling a former cruise ship-turned-floating university their home. Michael implemented a myriad of change to accommodate digital photography while introducing several lectures to assist the emerging photographer, including his highly-acclaimed "Visual Thinking", "Cultural Immersion in Documentary/Travel Photography" and "Visual Journalism & Storytelling".

In 2008, Michael once again provided a new direction for the Semester at Sea program by bringing visual journalism and multi-media projects into the workflow for the staff photographer and videographer. At the same time, Michael began the transition to cinematography through the revolutionary new HD-DSLR cameras producing personal documentary and editorial assignments for The Associated Press in the stylized vein of documentary films. In 2010, Michael introduced this stylized HD-DSLR workflow into Semester at Sea productions.

Today, while still taking on travel and Associated Press assignments, Michael focuses on his visual journalism and cinematography projects, educational travel workshops for Nikonians Academy, along with university lecture engagements so as to instruct others on the analytical, cultural and visual approaches to photography and visual journalism.

Michael currently lives with his wife, Dawn, and their two daughters, Rachael and Riley, near Morro Bay, Calif. Free time used to be spent hiking, biking, climbing and exploring. Now it's mostly spent happily chasing his daughters as they climb, hike, bike and explore.