

Match Equipment to the Task

Cameras

I can't tell you how often I am asked, "what's the best digital camera for me to buy?" I can't possibly answer that, so what I do is sit down with the person and ask them a slew of questions that enable them to proceed. Here's a sample from a couple of weeks ago.

Amy works at a private school near Cincinnati.

Amy: I'm thinking of taking up photography. What kind of camera do you recommend?

Eric: That's great! What kinds of things do you want to photograph?

Amy: Uh, I guess mostly family, when I have one, and the kids at school.

Eric: OK, mainly people pictures, right? Are you interested in little kids or older ones?

Amy: Uh, both, really.

Eric: Where will you do most of your shooting, indoors or out, or both?

Amy: Mainly indoors. But some out, too.

Eric: How about the sports teams?

Amy: Oh, definitely!

Eric: Do you want to make prints, or mainly web use?

Amy: Mainly web, Facebook, like that.

Eric: Anything bigger than 8x10?

Amy: I don't think so.

At this point, Amy has told me more than she knows. I can now help her list the camera features that will matter to her.

- Resolution is not a big deal, 6-8 megs is plenty (no big prints).
- Hot shoe and external flash are really important if she's doing lots of indoor pictures of kids. Built-in flashes won't cut it.
- Shutter lag is an important consideration: little kids and sports teams both move in the blink of an eye, and by the time a slow camera shoots, it's too late.
- Fast autofocus capability matters for the same reason. This, I tell her, means more money, but will make a real difference.

- Good zoom lens for sports and kids running around outdoors, or on the stage indoors.
- A viewfinder, not just a display screen, is essential.

I explain some basics so Amy understands (dimly, at least) what sorts of features are critical for her intended use. Then I tell Amy she should consider a very good point and shoot, or an entry-level DSLR. I suggest she visit the <http://www.dpreview.com> site and use the camera reviews (exhaustive and kept current) to narrow her choices, then hang out in the Forums there to see what problems people have had with them.

I also suggest she join a local camera club like the Ohio Valley Camera Club and ask for help and suggestions.

Amy is appreciative, but far from satisfied because she's realized some uncomfortable truths.

1. She has to learn a lot, much of which is strange to her
2. No one will make her choices for her
3. She can spend a lot of money and not get what she needs, or spend a reasonable amount and be more satisfied – or the other way round, unfortunately for her.
4. She'll need to spend time and effort to find her camera
5. Once she has it, she'll need to learn to use it. But that is what she swears she wants to do, so OK.

The point of the exercise, and of this article, is that you have to match your equipment to your needs. There's no point at all in throwing money away on stuff that is far more or far less capable than you need.

The need to ask the same questions I asked Amy applies, however advanced you are:

- What will I be shooting?
- Where will I be shooting?
- What kinds of lighting requirements will I face?
- What will I do with the images once I have them?
- How important are prints, and how big will I need them to be?
- Will I need to beam my shots wirelessly (news and sports shooters may well need this capability)
- What is my budget?
- Do I need remote control?
- Do I need to shoot while tethered to a computer? (Product shooters take note)
- Am I interested in architectural photography? (Raises questions about lenses and resolution)
- Am I a birder? (Huge lenses, specialized flash equipment, excellent tripods all go with this particular obsession)

- How will this equipment pay for itself? When will it have paid for itself? Does it need to?
- What will it allow me to do that I couldn't do without it, and how much of that do I realistically expect to do?
- How soon will it become obsolete?

The more of these questions you ask before you even **think** of looking at gear, the more satisfied you will be with your eventual purchase. Of course, we all know that gear-lust overtakes us all at some time or another. Maybe I'll make enough from this book to get the Phase One IQ180 with the 80 megapixel back I really, really want!

Reason only takes us so far.

That said, I'm going to work through some of the basic considerations in buying camera bags and tripods.

Camera Bags

Camera bags are like the Middle East: warring factions everywhere, and compromises are hard to find. Basically, there are backpacks, shoulder-hung bags, belt-mounted bags, pistol or chest-mounted holsters, hard cases, and rolling cases. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Questions for camera bags are the usual: what do I need to tote, over what terrain, for what distances. How fast do I need to get at the camera? How many lenses do I need to carry? And so forth.

The point is that you approach bags the same way you approach any gear question: what do I need it for? What will I do with it? How often do I need it? What can I afford?

Backpacks come in a wide variety of sizes. They can hold quite a lot of gear and pad it well, and they allow the weight to ride high on your back while your hands are free. But you have to take the pack off to get at your camera, and you need to find ways to attach your tripod to the bag. Some make this easy, some don't. Another problem is handling a backpack for camera gear AND a back-pack for overnight camping.

Shoulder bags carry less than backpacks (if they are big enough to hold plenty of gear, shoulder bags are a real pain to hike with because they pull your weight off-center, fatigue your arms and shoulders, and can cut into your neck). On the plus side, they're convenient for day hikes when you don't need a slew of different lenses, and they allow you to get at your camera more easily.

Belt mounted bags require, gee, guess what – belt loops, or an independent belt like a utility belt for cops. They're best for light weights, but they do leave your hands free and permit easy access to your camera.

Hard cases protect your gear. Pelican cases, especially, are the top of the line for gear protection. You can toss your most delicate camera, encased in a Pelican case, over Niagara Falls and expect to pop the case open and start shooting – if you can find it again. But Pelican cases are a pain to tote – I know, I’ve done it, down a cliff to the Pacific Ocean in Washington State. Add a tripod, and you’re in trouble.

Rolling cases are great if you’re doing urban work and don’t have to deal with mud, water, sand, camel turds, or other impediments to easy travel. Even cobblestones make rolling cases unpleasant. But they do take the weight off you and protect your gear.

I haven’t personally used either chest-mounted rotating holsters or belt-mounted holsters. If you’re not changing lenses and need quick, stabilizing access, they might work for you.

So we’re back to square one: what you choose depends on what you need. I like to shoot with two cameras, a Nikon D700 for fast stuff and a Mamiya 645 medium format with a 22 mp digital back for landscapes. I’ve tried jamming them both into an oversize backpack, I’ve tried a backpack plus a shoulder harness, and I’ve tried a Pelican case plus a backpack. No combination is really great – IF you want to be prepared for a wide range of shooting conditions. Otherwise, it’s best to pick one camera and a couple of lenses and pack accordingly – knowing you’ll miss out on some shots you’ll wish you’d taken.

My real advice is TRY IT OUT before you buy. Rent a case, or just put 12 pounds or so of rocks in one (in plastic bags so they don’t scratch) and go for a demo hike.

Tripods

Here are the key questions for tripods.

What kind of shooting do I need it for?

How far and over what terrain do I expect to carry it?

How heavy a weight must it support? (1 pound for point-and-shoots, 2 pounds for DSLRs, 3-5 pounds for DSLR’s with ginormous lenses, 5 pounds for medium format gear).

How important is the weight of the tripod (including head)?

Do you need a built-in compass and spirit level? (yes, if you’re doing panoramas).

What sort of head do I want? Ball head, pistol-grip, or 3-lever axis adjustment?

How big a ball head do I need (bigger is better, but more expensive and less convenient). If you’re using 300mm f2.8 lenses, the answer is “huge.” What happens is leverage of the lens makes the head slip, or makes the camera slip on the head. Both are bad.

How important is vibration resistance?

How sturdy is it?

What does it weigh?

I have a Gitzo carbon fibre tripod which is about 3 pounds lighter than the very sturdy aluminum tripod I used to use. That's a huge difference. But the feet on my Gitzo are not locked in, so they have a tendency to work loose and vanish. This louses up stability and causes vibration problems. So watch out for small details when buying a tripod!

Summary

All gear purchases should start at the same place, by asking yourself how you'll use it, what are the specific features you need for your kind of shooting, and how it will pay for itself, either in dollars or in satisfaction. Asking these questions, and living with the answers, is a hard habit to form, but it will add immensely to your satisfaction and save you a ton of money in the long run.