

# Road Trip Photography Project

By  
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## Introduction

Travel photography is a fantastic creative outlet, educational, and fun. It's very popular, and there are many books and articles written about it. This article focuses on road trip-based photography projects. A photography project starts with ideation and definition of the project objectives and concludes with a collection of photographs that tell a story. In most travel photography the goal is to get trophy pictures that stand on their own. A photography project represents an idea and a theme. It may include high-impact images as well as "glue" images that support the story and the transition between images. Most projects use consistent style and processing that give the final images a consistent look. Some larger projects that include a few types of images, may maintain a consistent look for each type of images.

Of course, learning about locations and people and the experience of being there are very important too. These road trips may not take you to exotic locations or wildlife, but give you the experience of a lifetime.

## Defining the Project

Before even starting to plan the trip, it's important to define the project. What is your story going to be about? Is it about life, culture, architecture, wildlife, landscape, nature in general, or maybe about your adventure? It could be about a location or a region, covering a wider range of subjects, or about a very specific topic. However, think of it as building a story; avoid spreading too wide. Think about the final product(s). The project may result in a book, a slide show, an exhibit, a picture album, an article, or in multiple forms. As mentioned earlier, think of the overall style and look that you want to give the final product. It may change later when you

review and process the images, but if you're set on a certain look, you'll need to consider it in your plan and when you are in the field. For example, you may want all the images to be taken in a certain light, a specific focal length, or all to be in black and white with a vignette.

## Planning

Once the project is defined and the objectives are clear, it's time to start the planning phase. While the definition phase concentrates on WHAT the project is, the planning phase is about logistics. It concentrates on the HOW. Identifying the locations and general subjects should be the first and most important task. This is a photography project trip, so unlike in most general travel photography, where we visit places and photograph scenes that we find attractive or interesting, here the plan must consider the project objectives and story idea.

As with any travel photography plan, consideration must be given to the season, possible weather conditions and alternative plans for various conditions, lodging and reservations, gear, and other essential items.

### *Gear and other essentials*

#### Photo gear

Cameras and lenses – the types of cameras and lenses must fit the types of subjects that will make up your project. I chose to take one DSLR with a general, long-range zoom lens, a second DSLR with a short zoom with a wide aperture, a small point & shoot and one infrared camera. A backup camera is critical. I've seen wonderful travel photography projects that were shot with smartphones.

Filters – the only filters I use are UV to protect the lens, polarizer, and neutral density to allow for slow shutter speeds.

Tripod – used for night photography and landscapes.

Flash – used mostly for fill light, but also for low light situations.

Memory cards – memory is not very expensive these days. For still pictures, you don't need the fastest memory that is expensive. I prefer to have enough memory that I don't need to format and reuse cards during the trip.

Spare batteries for all equipment and battery chargers.

Camera rain jacket. You may also use a clear plastic bag. I insert the camera backwards into the bag, with the front of the lens at the bag's opening. A rubber band tightens the bag opening around the lens hood.

Camera cleaning kit and towel will help you keep the gear clean and dry.

Laptop with an external drive – used to view and back up images and access the internet.

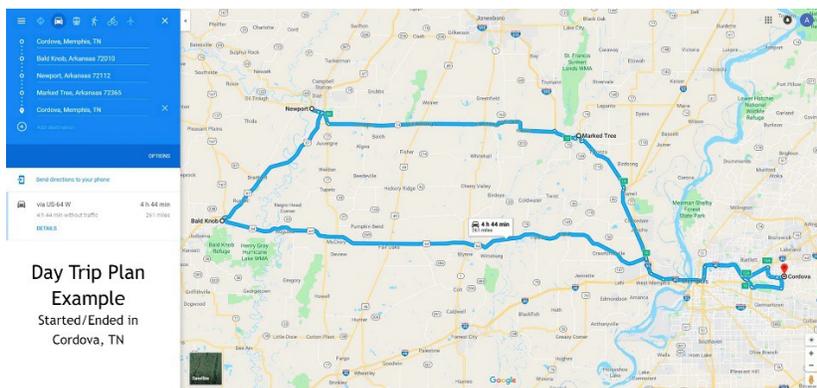
Digital Voice Recorder – used for taking notes after every shoot and visit.

Flash light, head light, cords for all devices, and a first aid kit.

Paper maps of all areas on your route – get paper maps and travel books that cover the areas on your route. It’s very difficult to plan excursions to small towns and back roads using electronic maps. When you zoom out to view a larger area, the small towns and roads disappear.

Make reservations. A few weeks before the trip, I identified the hotels and made a list of them (See table below), their addresses and phone numbers, and the driving distance from the last place. I tried to space the hotels 250-300 miles apart. The actual driving distances were usually about 50% longer due to the many excursions to visit small town along the way. Based on the season, day of week, and location, I determined where I should make reservation well in advance or only a couple of days before arrival. Plan to stay a few days in some locations and possibly make short day trips to near-by places. I wanted to keep my itinerary flexible and open to last-minute changes. I could cancel any reservation until the afternoon of the day of arrival.

Date(s)	Location	Hotel	Miles	Driving Time
MM/DD	City, State	Hotel name Hotel address Phone number Reservation number (added when reservation is made) Daily rate or total hotel cost	Distance from previous stay	Google estimated driving time from previous stay
:	:	:	:	:
:	:	:	:	:



## Getting Ready

Get the car checked and ready for a long road trip. A rental is a great option for a long trip. It can be more economical and you can get a replacement car just about anywhere if you had a mishap. Having your own car in the shop for a couple of weeks 3000 miles away from home can get costly.

Get snacks and drinks for the ride. You may want to stay in some spots for a few hours and not rush back to town for a meal.

Check the weather forecast for the next few days and plan accordingly. Every night, I check the forecast and determined whether I should adjust my itinerary or my photography plan.

Synchronize the clocks on all cameras and computers. It will help you later when you try to sequence images from different cameras based on date and time taken. Unless most of my trip is in the same time zone, I prefer to keep my home time throughout the trip. Phone time will change as you move from one time zone to another.

Format all memory cards and charge all batteries.

## Embarking on the Trip

There are a few daily activities that I found to be useful:

In the morning

Record the number of miles driven the previous day and reset the trip odometer, or record the total mileage driven so far. Recording the actual mileage each day and seeing the difference between the Google Map and the actual miles driven helps the planning for future days and trips.

In the evening

Back up your images and voice recordings to the laptop and to an external drive.

Review the images to verify that your project is progressing as designed and that you capture images that meet your objectives. It's possible that the project needs to be modified when your on-the-road experience differs from your initial expectations.

Charge the batteries.

Clean your gear, if needed.

Check the weather forecast and plan for the next day. Identify locations to visit and backroads to drive. It's important to have plans for various weather conditions. Weather is the one thing you can't control, or even fully predict, when you plan your trip.

Make reservations, if needed. I made adjustments to my travels during the trip. All my hotels allowed cancelations until 4 PM on the day of arrival.

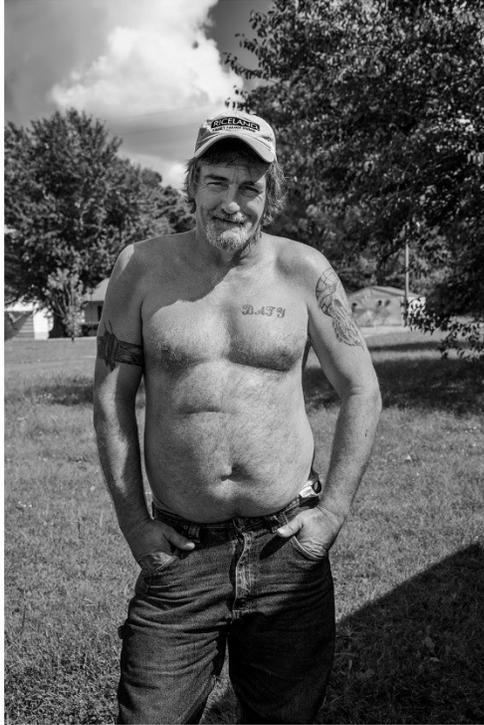
## On The Road

Always keep your project and the story that you want to tell in mind, but be open to seeing and enjoying other things. On my trips, my focus was life in small towns in the Midwest. My goal was to visit them, meet local people, engage in conversations, learn about their life, and capture images. However, I also visited parks and enjoyed and photographed nature. After each stop, I used my voice recorder to record information about the place, people, their stories, my experience, and my impressions. The recorded notes were essential for reconstructing the trips accurately. Voice notes required a few hours of typing later, but I was able to record them while driving, immediately after I got back to the car. I didn't have to memorize names, stories, and places. I didn't take notes while talking to people.

With the exception of a couple of long-distance travel days, I limited my driving to 5-6 hours a day, not including time spent in each location. I also had a few days with minimal driving and more walking or resting. I didn't pack my schedule with planned activities that filled every day. I gave myself time to relax and even change my agenda for the day or the next few days. The trip is not about getting the most trophy pictures. It's about being creative as you execute your project. Delays due to weather or slow mornings didn't cause unnecessary stress. I even stopped at a few dog parks to let my dog have her time and for me to meet other dog owners and engage in conversations.

As you drive, allow yourself to stray away from the highways and visit small towns. Some of my most fulfilling experiences happened when I stopped in very small towns, approached local people, and engaged in long conversations. Having my Beagle-mix dog helped me connect with strangers and not appear threatening.

Think of your story and photograph to capture the mood. When you photograph real life in a small town, early morning or late afternoon light, that is perfect for landscape photography, may not create the right mood. The harsh mid-day light may be more appropriate. Most of my people photos are not candid. I take the time to learn a little about the person, explain who I am and what I'm doing, and then ask if I can take a few pictures. Besides being more respectful of my subjects, the images mean more to me when I know something about the person. The best experiences and memories from the trips involved engaging with strangers. When I photograph people, I hand my business card and offer to send them the pictures, if they choose to email me and request them.



People I met in Amagon, Arkansas



## Back Home

Create another backup of all images and voice recordings.

Organize the images based on date/time taken and location. If you visit a location multiple times, you may want to keep all the pictures together, regardless of the date/time. Rename images to meaningful names.

Review the images and rank them. I use the 5-star system. I delete images that got 1 or 2 stars, save but not process the 3-star images, and process the 4 and 5-star images.

Type your recorded notes, but expand the stories with additional interpretations and your experiences during the trip. I also add the location, where each picture was taken, to its metadata.

Edit the pictures to fit the objective of the project. Whether you create a book, a slide show, or an exhibit, make sure that your story develops and has a good flow. Avoid repetition or just making a collection of pretty pictures that are randomly put together. The challenge is to reduce the size of the collection and limit it to images that have impact and build a story. Be clear on what your story is about. In my case, I had to decide whether my story is about life in small towns in the Midwest, small towns and cities, or about my whole trip, including nature and landscapes.

My projects resulted in books that contained images and text. The books covered the trips including nature, cities, small towns, and people. In addition, I put together a slide presentation and an exhibit that focused on the small towns.

Your project scope may be wide or very focused. Make it your own. Have fun with it. It would be a very rewarding experience.



Arkansas stores



Abandoned gas stations



## Final Thoughts

### ***David duChemin - The Soul of the Camera***

Shoot what it feels like, not what it looks like. Show your own interpretation.

Make a photograph ABOUT something, not OF something. You do that by making it your interpretation, using visual tools and language (timing, light, composition, shutter speed, aperture, exposure, ISO, noise, tones, post processing technique, etc.)

Without the interpretation, the picture is a “Me Too” photograph.

It is not the sharpness of the image to which people will respond. They will not one day in the distant future, speak about your stunning histogram.

Craft can be measured; art cannot.

### ***Bill Jay and David Hurn - On Being a Photographer***

You must be passionate about the subject. Otherwise, your work will be a derivative of the work of other photographers whom you admire.

***Guy Tal - Another Day Not Wasted***

The three factors that hinder creativity:

Laziness – It's easier to do what's done before and is already accepted.

Conformity – Following aesthetic rules limits the development of own style and self-expression.

Fear – Photographers fear rejection and avoid exposure, especially with new ideas and styles.

It is not your fault if your art fails to satisfy some people. It is your fault if you compromise your art to satisfy those people.

Don't worry about creating a personal style. Follow your passion and vision and it will evolve.