

Taking Photography in South Africa

by Jim Roberts

I consider myself to be a fledgling photographer – and, I feel very humbled by the opportunities that were presented on our six week trip to South Africa. We scheduled our trip to take place in February and into March. This period immediately follows the rainy season when the grasses become lush and green. Many animals have also just given birth. The downside is that it can be somewhat more difficult to see and find the animals. During dry times the foliage is sparse and animals tend to collect at water holes. For this reason, wildlife photographers also like to shoot during dry months and in October. That said, I will now go about to describe how we prepared, photographically speaking, for the trip and the process that evolved along our journey.



Well, let's see. Where do we start? Ah! -- the equipment. I phoned Bob Knupp (Riverwoods Camera Club) and Len Messineo (<http://lensnaturephotos.com/>) to get their suggestions on a few questions I had: Foremost, what long lens to get; and secondly, what camera settings did they use most frequently on their photography trips to Africa? They were both very sharing of their time and we discussed many things (Bob and Len have made presentations to the Arlington Camera Club). I also talked at length with my travel agent, Bob French, of Wayne Griffin Travel in Arlington Heights (www.waynegriffin.com). Bob has been to South Africa numerous times on safari and has some amazing shots and stories to tell. He was a very helpful resource in setting up our trip and providing info on photography.



There was an ad in "Outdoor Photography" magazine for a book titled 88 Secrets to Wildlife Photography by Rod Barbee and Scott Bourne. I purchased it and crammed as though I was about to take finals in college again. Being an educator, it's typical for me to outline things and make note cards. So, I studied my camera's Guide and other publications, and then made titled 3 x 5 note cards on how to set up for various shooting situations. I took a little time to practice before the trip and during the flight down. I

was very concerned that I would go brain dead in the field and forget what to do with my camera and the new lens.

When you are on safari, you are shooting from the hip. You never know what is going to come up ahead of time. But, you can pre-set the camera for situations you want to capture when using the "Creative Zone" in Aperture-Priority, Shutter- Priority, Manual, and Program modes. The ISO was also changed depending on the light, time of day and environmental conditions.

I decided that we would bring my Delsey photography backpack as my carry-on luggage for the airplane. I asked my wife, Bonnie, to help by allowing me to store all the battery chargers and miscellaneous equipment in her carry-on. You don't want to pack any of your equipment with your regular luggage or it is likely to be stolen. It's also a good idea to make a photocopy of your trip documents, airline tickets, credit cards, I.D., passport,



etc., and keep the copies with you in a safe place as you travel. In addition, I heard that some people have had difficulty with U.S. Customs getting their equipment back into the States. You can pre-register the equipment with a "19 CFR 148.1" form and have it checked at the Customs Office (in Rosemont east of O'Hare Airport). So, I did that. The following is the list that we kept handy during the trip. The Customs Agents are mostly interested in documenting the Serial #s.

 Cameras and other equipment include accessories such as bags, lenses, filters, chargers, cords, batteries, CF & SD Cards, Lexar USB Flash Drive, etc.

ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT

Camera: Canon EOS 30D, Digital SLR, Black	Ser # 0000
Camera: Nikon Coolpix 4500, Digital, Black	Ser # 0
Camera: Casio EX-Z750, Digital, silver; in black case	Ser # 0
Flip Video Camcorder: by Pure Digital Technologies, Ultra Series Model F260N; Description: 4" x 2" x 1", White & Orange	
Lens: SIGMA, AF80-400/F4.5-5.6 APO EX DG OS	Ser # 0
Lens: SIGMA, AF18-200/F3.5-6.3 DC OS	Ser # 0
Polarizer Filter: Sunpak CF-7062-CP, 72mm	Rainsleeve: Optech 18"
Polarizer Filter: Sunpak CF-7063-CPL, 77mm	Lens Cloth: Micro FibreRemote
Switch: Canon RS-80N3	Eyepiece: Canon EP-Ex15
Multimedia Storage Viewer: Epson P-2000	Ser # 0
Digital Voice Recorder: Olympus WS-311M	Ser # 0
2 Cell Phones: Samsung (T-Mobile) , SGH-E315 (847) 000-0000 Description: Silver in black leather case	
2 FRS Communicators: Motorola Talkabout, TA280SLK FCCID: AZ489FT4818 Description: Silver & Black; Also, Motorola battery Charger	
2 Motorola black earpiece with boom microphone; all in brown zippered case	

OTHER EQUIPMENT

Monopod: Promaster 1600, Code #7073	Bronze/Black
Ballhead: Manfrotto Model 484RC2	Black, S/N 0
Binoculars: Brookstone 10 x 25, with case	Black, 6.6", waterproof
2 Headphones: AA (airline issue), and Olympus	Black
Backpack: Delsey 85 Go-Pix	Black/Gray fabric
Equipment Bag: Tourmaster	Black fabric

Shortly before the trip I purchased the SIGMA AF80-400 telephoto lens. I had already been shooting with the 18-200 SIGMA lens for about a year. After researching Canon and Tamron telephoto lenses, I settled on the SIGMA 80-400 because it operated similarly to the 18-200 lens and was less expensive than the others (it also had excellent write-ups). For our travels on the motorcycle and in the Cape Town area, the 18-200 lens served admirably. It gives a really nice wide angle for landscapes. While on safari, the 80-400 with Optical Stabilization did the trick. Most all shots were hand held, except a few with the monopod while we were in the Land Rover (the big lens with camera can become quite heavy while holding them up for a long time waiting for a good shot).

My homemade bean bag was filled with black eyed beans that we bought in Cape Town at a supermarket by the V&A Waterfront. Though I was quite proud of it and for saving some weight of our luggage by not filling it ahead of time, I never got to use it. A tripod would not have been practical on our trip either. The nice tank bag that was mounted in front of me on our rented BMW R1200GS motorcycle worked quite handily to access the Canon and Bonnie's Casio when we stopped to take scenery shots in "Landscape" mode while on the road for 4200 km.



The safari vehicles have stadium seating set up with three levels plus a low driver's seat. The Tracker usually sits on a separate single seat mounted at the front left fender of the Land Rover. After trying all three levels, we liked the seats just behind our Ranger (the driver). This position gave less obstruction to the view of the camera, and was closer to eye level with the animals. It was also nice to be near the Tracker and Ranger as they explained what was happening with the animals. The upper seats also seemed to be more in the way of branches as we drove along in the bush. However, the lower seats caught the spider webs - YUK!



We had been told by several people that it was good to let the Rangers know what you would like on the safaris. If you're a camera bug, let them know. They will try to group you with others of similar interest, and they will try very hard to position you for good shots. We tried not to shoot toward the sun and the driver would usually position the Land Rover so that the animal(s) would be on my side of the vehicle. It also helps to tell them what types of animals you want to see. They keep in radio contact with other groups so everyone is up on what animals are in what locations. We were quite lucky having the very best Rangers and Trackers available at our camps. It was great fun learning how to track the different kinds of animals, even according to their gender.



Surprisingly, the wildlife, especially the "big five" (Lion, Leopard, Rhino, Buffalo, and Elephant), were not at all spooked by our Land Rover. We could drive very close to many of them. You could almost reach out and touch the cats. We're told that they do not see the vehicle as a threat because they are so used to seeing the vehicles (so long as us humans stay in the vehicle, we appear as just a part of the vehicle). On the other hand, you absolutely can not

leave the vehicle when animals are in the area, and the drivers will not let you stand up in the vehicles. The animals will stalk you and take you down for the kill. In the next Arlington Camera Club Newsletter I will tell you some interesting stories.

My camera was set to Aperture-Priority most of the time while on safari. But, I did mix in some other settings for comparison purposes. The long lens worked to make the background out of focus when



the aperture was set open (less depth of field at F4.5 to 5.6). But there are trade-offs: sometimes you want to give the context of the animal. We usually shot at an ISO of between 200 and 400. When there was little light, very early in the morning and beyond sunset, I needed to run the ISO to 800 and higher just to get the shot. I'm not real pleased with those shots. You also lose a lot of light when extending the telephoto way out. It's probably best not to use extreme telephoto (back-off). Later you can crop in on the image with a computer while doing your workflow processing.

We were treated to a couple of star gazing sessions by our Rangers who knew all of the constellations and would carefully point them out with laser beam wands. Looking up at the heavens from South Africa, in the bush, is magnificent. The air is clear, the sky jet black, and almost all of the stars in the universe twinkle back at you. I have never seen the Milky Way so distinctly. One night I set the Canon to "Bulb Exposure" operation and took a few photos to get star trails. To do this, the camera was first focus locked to infinity, and I set it on a stone slab facing up. The Canon Remote Switch was used to control the exposure time.

On several occasions I took care to clean the CMOS sensor in the Canon. With good weather most of the time, the lovely blue skies provided a consistent subject to shoot in order to check for specs in the image. By scrolling to "Sensor Cleaning" in the Menu system, the camera locks up the mirror to expose the sensor. I used a Giotto "Rocket Air" bulb to blow off the dust. Sensor cleaning fluid and special swabs can also be used if necessary.

Photo gurus recommend that you bring two camera bodies already set up with your long and short lenses. It takes time to switch over lenses and it can be dusty out there on the fly. I did, though, bring along my old steed, a Nikon 4500 Coolpix, for back-up.



It's only 4.0 megapixels, but takes sharp and color correct pictures. The camera's operating software is really what makes the difference. Bonnie brought her 7.0 Casio with a 3x zoom: super photos but the lens jammed open before we got on safari. Good that I had the back-up. One nice thing with the point and shoots is the video feature. The MPEG movies we took at the Cape Town Celine Dion concert with her Casio are great. We also brought a "FLIP" video recorder on safari.

Bonnie received it as a gift when she attended an Oprah Winfrey show. It's very compact, easy to use, USB downloads directly to your computer, and takes clear 640 x 480 movies for more than an hour. We wish we had used it more!

Years ago I used a micro-tape audio recorder for transcription in business. Gee, wouldn't it be neat to have it along on our trip to journalize instead of using a pencil and notebook. I learned that the tapes can be de-magnetized when you go through airport security. Whew! Glad I didn't bring it. Instead, we purchased an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder that is 4"x1½"x ½" in size. Does it work great, and you can listen to your best tunes while passing time on the 18 hour airplane trip. We made 45 voice audio recordings on the trip. I get excited all over again when I listen to them. I guess I'm getting a little emotional in my old age.

Back to photography: Storage of images was a concern. Some good deals at COSTCO over Xmas resulted in two 4GB CF cards for the Canon and a 2GB SD for Bonnie's Casio. We already had some 512MB's, 256's, and 125's. As it turned out, I needed another 4GB. On safari the 8.2 Canon was set to shoot at the highest resolution (3504 x 2336) and JPEG-RAW concurrently. This uses up the CF card capacity really fast. I plan to get into RAW processing (now that I'm retired). Again, the gurus say that RAW is best because you don't lose any details that you would with JPEG compression. We'll see? Our Epson Multi-Viewer was used to download the photos from the CF and SD cards as each card became full. This is back-up in case the cards were lost or damaged, and it's nice to look over your shots on the big 3.8 inch LCD screen each night and on the airplane going home. You can also check the photos better to see how your camera settings are working.

I decided it best NOT to clear and re-use the cards. We just put them safely away. However, on our last day of safari there were no more empty cards. I had to erase and format a 512MB card, and changed my setting to JPEG alone in order to expand the number of shots available.

Wouldn't you know it – the best shot of the whole trip came into my viewfinder: two gorgeous mating leopards posing briefly on top of a rock -- absolutely beautiful.



I took the shot, it came out fine, but in JPEG. I had also moved back to the 18-200 lens that morning and was not shooting on Aperture- Priority. I wish I could have acted fast enough to reset the camera. As I now look at the image, the background trees and foliage take a lot away from the composition. I'm going to try a little massaging in Photoshop to improve it.

It would have been nice to have my new Gateway 17" screen laptop along on the trip. But, it's not that light and we were just about already at our limit for luggage by weight and pieces. The international flights restrict you to **two** pieces of regular luggage at 50 lbs. each or less, and one carry-on per person. The small aircraft going into the remote areas for safari require that you use one piece of soft luggage each (such as a satchel that will stow easily) and it must be less than 44 lbs. One carry-on (kept on your lap) is also permitted. We weighed everything at home first and worked out how we would transition down for the safaris. This was a challenge because we were actually doing three types of vacations in one trip: First our 16 days motorcycling (helmets, protective jackets, boots, rain gear, etc.), then some R&R in Wine Country and Cape Town (nicer dress), and finally the safaris at Ngala, Jabulani, and River Lodge by Kruger (clothing for the bush).

As it turned out, there were Windows XP configured computers at most of the lodgings on our itinerary. The hotel and camp staff were very helpful and pleased to let people use their computers. Typically, the computers had at least one program that was adequate to size down digital photos to 640 x 480, appropriate for attachment to the e-mail messages we sent out. I would first type up my message using WORD, and then select and size down the photos that complimented the storyline. I would then save

the message and photos to a Lexar Flash Drive that we had brought along on the trip. All of the e-mail addresses were also saved ahead of time in WORD on the USB flash drive. It was a simple matter to paste the batched e-mail addresses, message, and photos into the e-mail messaging window. We use Comcast cable at home. You can bring up Comcast's homepage on the internet, and then click on your e-mail to read or send out. It was that simple from South Africa.

We were very happy to receive e-mail messages from many of our friends and to know that they were following along on our journey. Also, a big thanks goes to Cindy Kuffel and Norm Plummer for getting our messages and photos out to the Arlington Camera Club members.



Since our return home to Arlington Heights, our new friend, Jim Weber of Grand Rapids, sent me his photo gallery from our SAMA motorcycle tour in SA (www.SAMATOURS.co.za). He had used a software program called "Picasa" that is available free to download from Google. I have used PowerPoint and some other photo gallery programs in the past as an Applied Technology teacher at a Junior High. But this little program, Picasa, is very user friendly. I found it easy to quickly put together some of the nice images from our trip. So, the folks on our e-mail group list can now view the photos as a slideshow at home on their computer. Picasa is a PC program and has been around for awhile. It has recently received some nice upgrades to its capability. It is pretty much on a par with the "iPHOTO" program, popular with Mac users.

Would we go back to Africa again? Absolutely YES! I'd like to photo safari some of the open grassland areas, deserts and dunes, and see Victoria Falls. It would be great to capture the wild animals migrating in large herds across the plains and to experience the beautiful sights and native cultures of other neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia.

After our wonderful time in South Africa, I believe I see things differently now, especially "Through the Lens".