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International Adventures

Lessons Glen Johnson Has Learned on the Road to Becoming a Master Wedding Photojournalist

Glen Johnson, owner of Aperture Photographics (www.aperturephotographics.com), has been a wedding photojournalist for more than three years. In addition to working with clients in his Eugene, Oregon area, he's traveled to various locations throughout the world, photographing weddings in exotic locations such as Cozumel, Mexico and the Bahamas.

Rather than limit himself to local weddings, Johnson has marketed himself as a destination photographer since the beginning. "It doesn't matter where you live, as long as you can get to an airport," he says. "I'm competing with photographers from all over the United States—all over the world, actually. One can fly to Jamaica from Oregon as easily as from New York. It may take a little longer, but it costs about the same."





Johnson blends undirected candid photography and conventional techniques into a style he calls wedding photojournalism. When combined with destination photography, it takes on another dimension of travel—generally, travel to an exotic location. That opens the door to situations and opportunities that may not exist at a more traditional locale.

According to Johnson, “Working in a photojournalistic style is much more difficult for the photographer.” In addition to candid and behind-the-scenes action, “the couple still expects to get the group shots and customary images of the flowers, cake, and other details. So it requires a balance of techniques to achieve desirable results.

“I concentrate on the subjects’ activities,” he continues. “When members of the wedding party are actively doing things like getting dressed, fixing their hair, and doing the bride’s makeup, that’s when we become as unobtrusive as possible. That’s when we can tell the story without words. Later, I’ll sneak away with the couple, down to the beach or other appropriate spot for a short creative portrait session.”

Johnson’s ingenuity applies to customary shots as well. He’s not a person who enjoys doing the same old shot over and over, and has deliberately devised techniques to stay fresh—even when pursuing



traditional must-have images like the obligatory photo of the couple’s wedding rings.

“One day while shooting the standard ring shot at a wedding,” he says. “I realized that I, and a million other photographers before me, have done that same shot, the same way, practically forever!”

So Johnson challenged himself to shoot a ring shot at each wedding that was somehow different from anything he’d done previously, and ideally something truly unique and different from anything anyone had ever done. This discipline caused him to rethink each and every aspect of wedding photography overall, and made him more aware of the creative possibilities that can be incorporated into a wedding photograph. The payoff was huge—as can be seen in the images on these pages.

Keeping a fresh approach isn’t the only challenge. Sometimes just getting to the destination can be an ordeal. One thing Johnson is insistent about: he makes all of his travel arrangements himself.

“When I was just starting out, I used to let the client’s travel agent handle the details,” he says, “until the time I landed in Montego Bay one hour after my connecting flight departed. Thanks to the diligence of a friendly airport ticket agent, we were able to avert disaster. But I learned a lesson then and there.”

Because most trips usually last about three days, Johnson travels light. He uses a pair of carry-on-size Pelican 1510 cases to transport his equipment. He keeps all of his camera gear and other important items with him at all times. Shipping your equipment, he warns, can be unreliable. And sending it along with checked baggage can be equally risky. The only sure way to control your gear is to carry it on.



“You have to love to travel,” says Glen Johnson. “That’s Number One. If you’re in it just for the money, you’d do better to stay home.”

“I only check my clothes,” he says. “I never let my camera equipment out of my sight.” To secure his gear, Johnson uses TSA (Travel Sentry Luggage) locks that can only be unlocked by airport security.

“There’s one thing you always have to keep in mind,” he continues. “Most of the destinations are wondrous and beautiful places, but in many respects still very Third World. A photographer has no possibility of getting back-up gear in the area. None. Nothing. Not even a four-pack of AA batteries!”

Johnson’s partner Amy Lizotte usually travels with him and provides additional professional coverage for weddings. The bride and groom are not charged for her services, nor do they pay any



of her expenses. Johnson and Lizotte always plan to arrive at the destination at least one full day early, just in case they lose time to flight delays or other unforeseen circumstances. If all goes well and they arrive as scheduled, they make a quick exploration of the wedding site, then spend the rest of the day as tourists—an obvious added bonus for the traveling photographer.

Johnson believes that his clients prefer an all-inclusive price for his services, so he adds the travel costs plus an additional sum to the rate instead of providing a line-by-line invoice. Altogether, including travel expenses and depending on the location, he charges between \$1,200–\$3,000 more for a destination wedding than for a local ceremony.



His final advice for photographers interested in destination photography: Get your vaccinations. “I have a doctor who specializes in travel medicine. I tell him where I’m going, and he takes care of any immunizations I may need before I go there. That way I don’t have to worry about bringing home any surprises.”

Jon Sienkiewicz

