



Arctic Photography Advice

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By Tanya De Leeuw June 12, 2013 In August 2012, I had the pleasure of visiting the Canadian Arctic and Greenland on a 10-day [expedition cruise](#). Before I start sharing Arctic photography advice by suggesting what gear to take, and how to capture the incredible sights that unfold before you, there is one huge thing you can do to improve your photos: KNOW YOUR GEAR! Before you leave for your Arctic cruise, learn how to get the best from the equipment you have. It is not necessary to go out and purchase the latest and greatest. Take all your gear outside and practice in different lighting conditions with different body/lens combinations. Shoot into the sun, in very bright conditions, and duller overcast conditions. Get accustomed to the effect different shutter speeds, apertures and ISO settings can have on your results. You might also want to practice some indoor shooting, for interesting shipboard events. And pack your manuals, just in case!



Beechy Island

The first thing that worried me when I was packing for this expedition was the “travel light” directive. Anyone who is halfway serious about their photography knows that the terms “gear” and “lightweight” do not go well in the same sentence! I always travel with a laptop. As my machine is older and heavy, and doesn’t fit into my camera bag, I ended up stuffing it into the middle of my checked suitcase – and praying that it would survive the rigors of modern airline baggage handling! Also squeezed into my big case were my tri- and mono-pods. As it turned out, I could’ve left both at home. But don’t take this as gospel, it really depends on you and your style of photography as to whether you’d need one, or both, of them. I took them both because I didn’t ever want to be thinking “I wish I’d brought X with me!”.



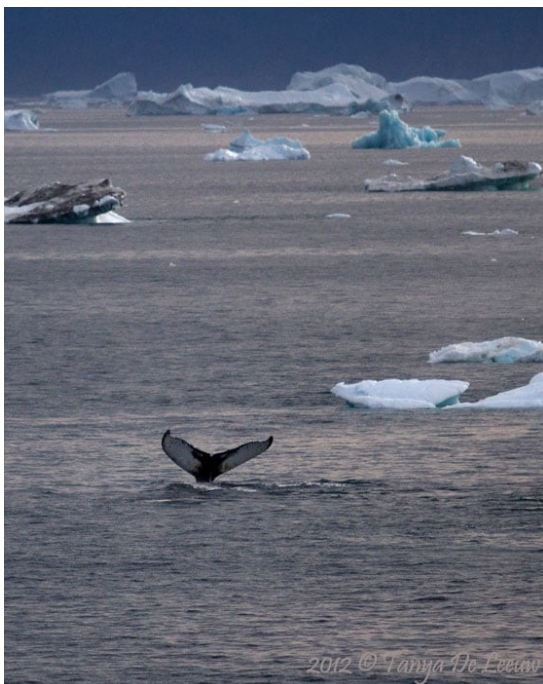
I had all my can't-live-without photography equipment in my carry-on bag, with very little else besides my travel documentation! Make sure you have a carry-on bag that will fit beneath the seat in front of you because, if you're short like I am, the effort of hefting a bag with couple of camera bodies and several lenses above your head will be challenging!



My camera bag is soft but heavy-duty so, for daily use during the cruise, I packed a light backpack to use when we went ashore. I was very happy I did! I just lined the bag with a plastic bag to make it more waterproof for splashy zodiac trips, and a hand-towel to soak up any leaks before they got to my gear. I also took along a couple of grocery bags to protect my equipment if it started raining while I was shooting (I don't have a proper raincoat for my gear yet. Its near the top of my wish list - if you can get a purpose-built cover to take along, do so!) Be sure to wipe your gear down with a soft damp cloth at the end of every outing to ensure that salt residue doesn't have the chance to get into the camera/lens workings!

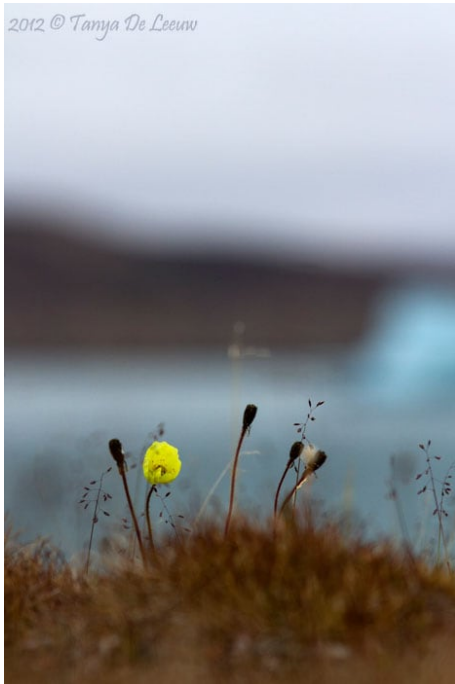


If you can, take more than one camera body, with one lens good for wildlife (ie: longest you can get your hands on, preferably minimum 400mm), and one wide-angle for scenery. If you're into people-photography, definitely have your favourite portrait lens along, too, because with the focus on cultural exchange, there'll be plenty of opportunities for interesting captures! One of the biggest challenges for me was constantly having to switch lenses - sometimes in a blinding hurry - which doesn't bode well for using proper technique when exposing sensitive parts of your gear! Many photographers swear by filters. I have (and took) a polarizing filter for each of my lenses, but didn't use them. Not because I didn't need them, but because I forgot they were there! Probably because I don't use them often at home!



As to how to shoot while you're in the Arctic, a once-in-a-lifetime trip for most people, here are a few

tips: - Take your camera everywhere with you, and shoot everything! Even to meals – you never know! No matter how tired I was, or how frustrated with dreary weather and uninspiring low-light conditions, I just kept telling myself “Keep shooting, you won’t be coming this way again!” - Take more than one photo of everything, if you can. Recompose and refocus with every shutter release to make sure you get the shot. Remember that the auto-focus function isn’t a mind-reader, and you’ll kick yourself if you take a single frame of the one polar bear you saw on the whole trip, only to discover later that the camera focused on the background instead of the bear! - Be aware of, and look at, your surroundings – the light, the colour, the contrasts, the huge skies, the tiniest tundra flower. Don’t fall into the trap of allowing all that wonder to unfold before you without consciously absorbing it. And don’t forget to look behind you, too!



- Be diverse and creative: Shoot scenery in both landscape and portrait (vertical) orientations. Take lots of ground-level shots (take kneepads – I will if I get to go again!), take views from above and below, take photos into the sun, with side lighting, and in full sun, take photos through things (windows, holes in the ice, through plants, etc), take big-picture shots, take detail shots. - Don’t always follow the crowd. Where possible and if time allows, take a different route to other passengers on land. The caveat is that you must be aware of your surroundings at all times, and heed the instructions of the guides and gun-bearers who are there to ensure your safety. Get some shots with people in them - they give viewers a good idea of the immensity of the landscapes. Other photos will work better without anyone in them.



- Spend lots of time on deck. Unless it was raining, I spent most steaming hours on the upper deck looking for wildlife and shooting the ever-changing scenery, when most other passengers were snug and warm inboard. And I'm glad I did! I don't think I shot all that much - only about 2000 images over the 10-day period. Not all were keepers, either, so don't expect that! What I did do every day, was make sure that I downloaded and culled the image files, and formatted my memory cards, putting each day's photos into its own file-folder on my storage drive. It would have been an overwhelming task to get it all done after I got home! I also made brief notes at the end of each day because remembering my thoughts about each day's activities and experiences to share on my blog would have been impossible without them!



A quick note on clothing to take: there are laundry services (no dry-cleaning) aboard, but no self-

service machines – if you can allow for this expense in your budget, you’ll be golden! Otherwise: more underwear, less outerwear. Do not skimp on padded/windproof/waterproof shell gear - you’ll be miserable without it. Take a couple of different “strengths” of toques and gloves – this will allow for different weather conditions and also for one set to dry out while you wear the other. Try to take enough underwear to last the whole trip. If you bring the expensive quick-drying stuff, be warned that there’s not much room in most cabins to be air-drying stuff that you hand wash. And if you’re sharing with a stranger ... well, you get the picture. Take a handful of pegs with you! The same goes for the layer you wear closest to your skin (t-shirts, long johns, etc). Take minimal sets of outerwear like jeans and fleece jackets/jerseys – plan on wearing each piece for a few days before washing. Layering is the trick – it might be chilly when you’re standing still on the deck or on zodiac transfers, but you’ll soon get warm hiking the uneven and sometimes steep tundra. Shipboard dress is very casual. There’s no need to “dress for dinner” although a few will. Most people didn’t even change from their day wear. Indoors, your bunny-ear bedroom slippers will be just fine. For out on the deck, you’ll need warmer non-slip footwear.



I was very impressed with the shipboard staff - the “hotel” crew. Not only are they friendly and polite, but they look after us SO well, too! They are the people doing the chores that we wouldn’t want eating into our experience on this trip-of-a-lifetime: Making beds, cleaning bathrooms, cooking, serving, washing up, etc. They certainly earn their gratuities! I’d like to add a short but heartfelt message of appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the Epic High Arctic 2012 expedition and experience some amazing Arctic photography. Much as I was excited to see my family at the end of my Arctic cruise, all I could think as I disembarked was “Again, again!”

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