

Capture amazing digital photos

It took a week to get my sleep pattern back after our trip to Alaska since it was not just the three-hour time difference, but also the daylight lasted 19 hours a day.

The downside of the sun being up three-fourths of the day is trying to sleep, but the good part is plenty of time to take pictures of Alaska's beautiful landscapes and wildlife.

Months before we left, I began to get serious about digital photography. I bought couple of books and they basically told me exactly what kind of camera to purchase and explained the numerous techniques to ensure vivid and clear digital images.

Both books helped me set up the shot, forced me to slow down and configure the camera for optimal digital exposures. My digital photography mentor, Scott Hill of Brenham Portrait Gallery, gave a talk at our Rotary Club explaining how careful preparation and strategic utilization of light are the keys to great digital photography.

By the way, Scott's the man for excellent professional photography.

Number one was the digital camera. Had used small point-and-shoot cameras for years since they were compact and easy to whip out to grab quick shots. Turns out that was my problem which kept me from getting crystal clear images with perfect focus and good content.

After some saving I bought



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a Nikon D5000 SLR (Single Lens Reflex) with a 18-55mm lens and a 8 gigabyte SD card online for \$900. The D5000 is a full size advanced digital camera with a maneuverable LCD screen that can take digital images in 12 million pixel format.

Since I bought the camera a couple of months before the trip I was able to read the manual and practice with the user interface. Good thing I got familiar with it since the D5000 has quite an extensive menu and literally hundreds of settings and option combinations.

It will take me years to learn how to take pictures on the manual mode but until then I am relying on the numerous pre-programmed scenes options that are quickly available to me. Other than the quick and easy auto mode, I can set the primary dial to Scenes and then scroll to scene options like beach/snow, action, inside, twilight, or a dozen others that automatically set the exposure times, shutter speed, and numerous other digital parameters that help me get the perfect digital image.

My responsibility was to get a good frame of the shot and stabilize the camera as much as possible. Those books laid it out for me very clearly on how to do that. Simply put, to get a good clean shot on a digital camera — you can't touch the camera.

I accomplished this by buying a good tripod along with a

wireless remote for the shutter trigger. Utilizing this hands-off procedure, I can focus on the subject then stand back with no physical contact on the D5000 and then take the shot remotely. This eliminates any type of movement, shake, jerk or vibration from my touching the camera and blurring the exposure.

During our trip I frequently jumped out of the rental car, quickly set up the tripod, focused on a gorgeous mountain vista and then took the shot clicking my wireless remote without disturbing the camera. For other fast shooting scenarios I had my 10-year-old stand very still and I placed the camera on her head to shoot less critical subjects.

One thing I realized quickly was my lack of a telephoto lens in the 200mm range. I had serious lens envy with guys taking extraordinary long range shots at bald eagles from 200 yards away. For such good glass I'll need at least another thousand for the Nikon VR 55-200 mm telephoto lens I've got my heart set on now.

Using the mountain scene option on the D5000 automatically configured the camera to capture some breathtaking digital images. When we were at Denali National Park I took over 900 shots which included the 20,000-foot Mt. McKinney that is usually visible only 30 percent of the time.

After a day of taking hundreds of digital images, the first thing I did when we got back to our inn was back up the pictures to my laptop. When my picture count exceeded 2,000 images, I got even more paranoid and backed them up to the 30-GB hard drive inside my digital movie camera. That way I had two sets of backups to our vacation pictures.

I had originally planned to upload my digital pictures nightly to DataDepositBox.com but I underestimated the transfer speeds that were limited due to only having DSL or satellite connections so that did not work out. Finally, before we got back on the plane I made a third copy of our 2,500 pictures to a second 8 GB SD card just to be on the really safe side.

Another thing I learned was the default of the camera was

set to start a new internal folder on the SD disk after 1,000 shots and restart the numbering. This caused a problem with duplicate image file names like DSC0001. I wrote a quick script and renamed the sets to AKA0001-AKA0999, AKB0001-AKB0999, etc.

When we arrived home and got some sleep, I immediately started reviewing the pictures on the 20-inch monitor of the iMac within iPhoto to start flagging the keepers of the trip. My wife and I chose about 600 and then uploaded those to ShutterFly.com.

ShutterFly.com allows you to upload as many pictures as you want and keep them there indefinitely. We later e-mailed out the link to our friends and family so they could view them in an online slideshow. Next we purchased a bulk order of 4x6 prints for only 10 cents each which meant we only paid \$60 plus a small shipping charge to get hardcopies of those 600 pictures.

Next we plan to mount those physical pictures into two 300-picture photo albums to put on a table in our game room. Also, we are going to pick out a couple of our favorite mountain scenes have those blown up into 30"x20" posters by ShutterFly.com for our walls.

Bottom line: The expense of a new high quality digital SLR camera coupled with good picture taking techniques enabled us to capture brilliant snapshots of a truly amazing and beautiful family vacation in Alaska.

Next week's column: Carbonite.

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