

Snap Judgements

Picture-perfect holidays aren't as difficult as they sound

Text & Photographs by CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

The first thing Hellmuth Conz teaches me about my camera is how to hold it correctly—with my left hand under the lens, cradling it, and not above it. “There is no need to raise your little finger,” he says. “You are holding a camera, not a tea cup.”

I am in Hampi with ten other enthusiasts for a workshop on the basics of photography. Hellmuth, our instructor, has politely made it clear that an eye for composition is all very well, but without technical knowledge, I may as well be using a simple point-and-shoot instead of an expensive DSLR camera. By the end of that first session, my head is swimming with principles like aperture and ISO that I’ve known about vaguely but have never made a serious effort to understand. Luckily, most of the other participants seem to be groaning under the weight of all the information too.

Soon, we head out to Anegundi village across the river from Hampi, with its barren brown rocks, a typical feature of this region. Hellmuth lets us loose with very specific instructions. To photograph boulders that look like something else—I found a fish—and to treat the digital SLRs as we would cameras with film, restricting the number of shots we take so that we carefully choose our frames. It ensures that we try to get everything sorted out in our heads

before we actually shoot any images.

There are 12 of us walking on the narrow lanes of Anegundi and we soon find ourselves playing pied pipers to a large troop of village children, who’re eager to pose. While these are great exercises in framing and composition, the twilight puts to test what we have learned about controlling light conditions in the camera. It’s fun to experiment. The aperture goes up and down and

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correspondingly, the shutter speed. As it gets darker, the third point in the light triangle, the ISO, comes into play too.

Back at the resort, we download the photographs from the cameras to choose our three best images from the walk. A review session begins after dinner and goes on till well past midnight. Hellmuth insists that

all the images should be straight out of the camera and not edited in any way. Most of the images we show are pretty ordinary but, considering it is our first day, he decides to be kind in his critique.

Early next morning, we visit the Vithala Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site. To get there, we cross the Tungabhadra in coracles—round boats lined with buffalo hide and tarpaulin. The temple is one of Hampi’s most popular sites, gracing countless advertisements for the Karnataka tourism board. It is almost empty at that time of day and we wander freely. It is interesting to see how each of us sees unique frames from the same place. I manage one that finds approval from Hellmuth and the gang: an image of the wheels of the stone chariot in front of the temple’s main *mantapa* (hall). My image suggests the subject rather than showing it completely. We have more information flying at us—white balance, metering, the rule of thirds. The night session focuses on using studio lights for portraits and techniques like panning and zoom burst. By then, some of the earlier lessons have sunk in and I can process more information.

Our third day in Hampi is easily the best. Managing the settings manually comes more easily to me now and I try unusual frames as we walk through the main bazaar

This is a scene from Tulsi akhada capturing a small part of a wrestler’s exercise regimen before he gets into the main wrestling arena. It is a quiet moment he has to himself while other students and the masters are busy either doing their own warm up or wrestling sessions. I shot with a forward tilt to make the frame more interesting and to emphasize the feeling of motion. And I also like that this kushtiwala is totally oblivious to the photographers swarming around him.



I found this tailor’s shop as I was walking in Hampi Bazaar. The clothes in the background were bright and cheerful, with the dull metal machine in the front of the shop. This is one of my early attempts at an abstract picture, trying to suggest a subject instead of fully displaying it. It was also an experiment with opening the aperture fully to get a shallow depth of field—with the foreground sharply in focus and the background a blur.

of Hampi, right outside the towering Virupaksha temple. There is no dearth of interesting subjects here: small roadside shrines to Hanuman, vendors of brightly-hued *kumkum* and glass bangles, the banana vendor in her yellow *sari* to match her wares, a small darkroom inside Virupaksha Temple that was a precursor to the modern pinhole camera.

In the review session just after lunch, we can all see clear improvements from the first day’s photographs. We have better light control, more unusual compositions and are more experimental in our framing. Hellmuth is a little more critical now. He wants us to go out and shoot every day. “There is no better lesson,” he insists.

Two years later, I attend another workshop, this time in Varanasi. I am here not so much to go through the basics of photography again but to discover and shoot the many small secrets this town contains. There’s an early morning boat ride followed by a couple of hours by the ghats watching the world wash away its sins in the Ganga. Another morning, at the Tulsi *akhada*, I shoot a dozen young men twisting themselves like pretzels as a workout before wrestling in the mud, unaffected by our intrusive cameras.

Varanasi’s evenings are dominated by the Ganga *arti*, which attracts hundreds of locals and visitors. Then there is a quest for the town’s famed street food and a boat ride to Ramnagar, on the way to which a dozen old men grind ingredients for bhang. While in Hampi, I was thoroughly focused on learning a new craft; here in Varanasi,



I am more relaxed. I take in the sights, sounds, and smells and capture some of them with my camera. I photograph kids diving into the river, as corpses burn behind them, Benarasi sari looms in the narrow lanes, Westerners meditating by the water, spicy *puri-sabji* for breakfast and banana *lassi* at the famous Blue Lassi shop. In Varanasi, everything seems photo-worthy and all of us are here with our cameras, so the real challenge is to find our own unique perspectives and frames.

Could I have learnt all these new things about photography without visits to places like Hampi and Varanasi? Sure. But they wouldn’t be half as much fun. ■

I call this photograph “A coracle takes a walk”. While one lies unused on the shore, the other is being carried by its owner, whose head is completely covered by it. This image is a result of Hellmuth’s advice to stop and notice the little things that would make an interesting shot, instead of clicking away in hundreds.



THE GUIDE

TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

Amoghavarsha is known for his nature and wildlife photography. In the past, he has been a naturalist and is interested in conservation issues. He now conducts workshops both in India and Africa (www.amoghavarsha.com).

Darter Photography invites enthusiasts to embark on photography day-trips around Bangalore, as well as longer tours to Bhutan, Rajasthan, the Andamans, and other Indian locations. They also conduct workshops in Bangalore and Hyderabad (www.darter.in).

Kalyan Varma conducts photography workshops in Bangalore for novice and intermediate photographers, with a focus on wildlife photography. He also organises photo tours to the

Western Ghats surrounding Coimbatore, and to Masai Mara in Africa (www.kalyanvarma.net).

Photography On The Move

in Bangalore offers workshops for beginners and the option to go just on the tour if you are comfortable with your camera. There are several workshops through the year which are planned around cultural events and festivals such as the Goa Carnival, Alleppey Boat Race and the Nagaland Hornbill Festival (www.photographyonthemove.com).

Sephi Bergerson If you have already been a photographer for long enough and know that wedding photography is your interest area, then look out for Goa-based Sephi Bergerson's advanced wedding photography workshops (www.sephi.com).

Toehold Travel and Photogra-

phy offers courses on various aspects of photography from basics to advanced post-processing. They also have courses for children and use different instructors for each kind of workshop (www.toehold.in).

Note Costs and duration of each workshop varies. When booking, inquire about what is included in the fee and extras.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Evaluate your skill levels honestly before you enrol and be very clear on what you want to learn from the workshop. If you are a beginner or just want to learn how to get the best out of your camera, you are better off attending a workshop that orients you to the basics. If you know your specific area of interest and want to enhance your skills, look for specialist courses.

Wherever you are on the pho-

tography curve, there is a lot to learn from both, your instructor and colleagues. Make a note of which aspects of photography you find tricky or need more advice on and discuss these with the instructor and the team. It might even be a good idea to email your expectations or specific queries to the instructor, perhaps with a few samples of your work before the workshop.

WHAT TO TAKE

- Camera, charger and additional memory cards.
- Different kinds of lenses that you may have or want to experiment with.
- Data storage device like a thumb drive, transfer cable and laptop.
- Weather-proof gear for the camera
- A comfortable pair of shoes since you're going to be on your feet most of the time.



Here I have tried to capture the mood of a typical morning by the ghats in Varanasi. The steps are crowded with pilgrims, priests, and vendors of all things that people use in their search for salvation—from incense sticks to sandalwood. By keeping the frame tight, I portray how people are squeezed together, but also how there is space for everyone to do his or her own thing.