

100 top street photography tips



JOHN LEWELL

with 100+ illustrations

100 Top Street Photography Tips

by John Lewell

"Streets are like balls of twine. They can be unrolled indefinitely."
— Lawrence Osborne, *Bangkok Days*.

Preface and Introduction

"From Getting Equipped to Developing a Personal Style"

Preface



This little e-book started out as a document with relatively few pictures, but I've expanded it by placing a photo on every page.

Please don't expect the photos to illustrate precisely the content of every tip. There's usually a connection, but I found conventional illustrations to be too dull. I mean, who wants to see a timetable or a map for "#39 Plan Your Day"?

If you've already read my book "Street Photography Is Cool" you'll be pleased to hear that I've used a fresh set of images (apart from two which fitted particularly well).

Despite all the fresh material, this current book is very inexpensive, while the other, being an in-depth guide to street photography, costs a little more.

That said, I think these "100 Tips" represent a distillation of the art of street photography. It's quick to read, but contains ideas which linger in the mind.

I hope you find it useful.

— John Lewell

Introduction



There's no better way for photographers to overcome a creative block than to go out on the street and — without preconceptions — take candid shots.

In fact, I think street photography can work the same magic for painters and writers, too. It makes you look more closely at people. It places people into a particular city context where they may appear to be either at home or out of place.

While you can record only their outward appearance, at least you can capture moments when they reveal themselves through gesture and expression.

For me, the overriding priority is composition, but I'm sometimes willing to sacrifice perfection in composition for emotional content. By this I mean "art emotion" rather than "raw emotion," in other words the impalpable feeling you get by looking at the image.

Getting to a point where you can venture out, regardless of light and weather, and return with plenty of good shots takes time. An aspiring street photographer needs to find a set of strategies for being in the right place at the right time, then taking each shot at a favourable moment.

The following tips are designed to help in every way: in getting equipped, in finding inspiration and advice, in making technical improvements, discovering new compositions, dealing with the psychology of street photography and developing a personal style.

There are 10 sections, so let's get started!

Section One

"Getting Equipped"

#1 You Need a Camera



Shooting street photography with a mobile phone is like playing cricket with a baseball bat. Tricky. So consider buying the best lightweight camera/lens you can afford.

#2 Forget the Zoom



Street photographers rarely use zoom lenses — and for very good reasons. They're bulky, heavy, and they tempt you into hunting for the perfect focal length so you miss a vital shot.

#3 Choose a Focal Length



28mm 35mm 50mm

The best prime lenses to use fall within the range 24mm to 50mm, with the most popular being 28mm and 35mm. When starting out, a bit more reach can be useful, such as 50mm on full frame cameras.

#4 *Keep It Light*



If you're serious about street photography you'll be carrying your camera all day, in one hand. Hence lightness is a virtue, with around a kilo being the absolute maximum weight.

#5 Go for Quality



Google

Best Photo Sites --...



John Lewell - Fine A...



Google News



Other bookmarks

THE BEST CAMERA FOR STREET PHOTOGRAPHY 2019

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by: Photo [Start Sheet](#)

THIRTEEN CAMERAS: Evaluated by John Lewell, author of "[Street Photography Is Cool](#)"

They're all GREAT, but which one is ideal?

For several years I've been saying:

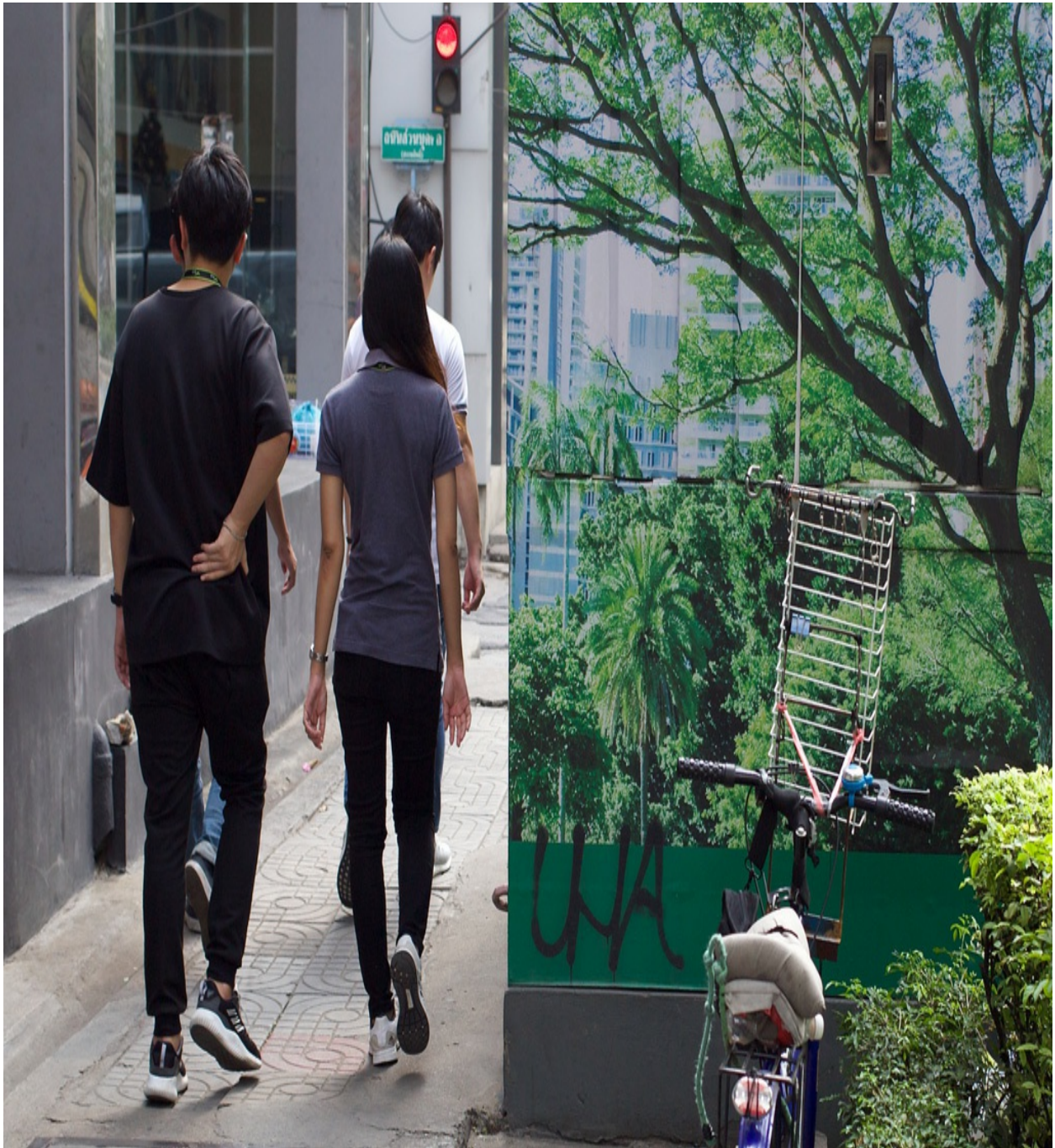
"There's no ideal camera for street photography." Then one day I woke up wondering if this opinion still held true.

Yes, there are plenty of excellent cameras...

...for street photography, but the word "ideal" goes a bit further into quibble-free territory. Photographers tend to be outrageously

If you're buying a camera for street photography, image quality is almost as important as lightness. Check out "[The Best Camera for Street Photography](#)" and "[The Best Lens for Street Photography](#)."

#6 Consider Versatility



Fixed-lens cameras like the Fuji X-100F or Leica Q2 are great for street photography, but consider the versatility of system cameras. That way you can use standard and wide angle lenses.

#7 Accessorise Wisely



Street photographers need hardly any accessories. I'd recommend only a strap with no brand name, a wrist strap (if the camera has a good grip); and a third party grip (if your camera lacks it).

#8 Buy Spare Batteries



Depending on the make of camera you've bought, you'll probably need a spare battery. Small Sony cameras like the RX1RII use up the juice in a battery very quickly, so you'll need two spares.

#9 Read the Manual



It seems pretty obvious, but at the very least, you need to know what all those buttons do. It's surprising how many people don't. Keep a PDF of the manual on your phone for emergencies.

#10 Keep It Together



A light canvas bag. Water bottle. Snack bar. Spare memory cards. Lens cloth. Stout pair of shoes. A little money. Maybe a gun (if you're a U.S. citizen heading for a dangerous part of town).

Section Two

"Get Inspired!"

#11 Inspire Yourself



Somewhere among the pictures you've already taken there'll be one or two that will inspire you to say: "I like that, but I can do better." This is the best inspiration of all, because it's personal.

#12 Check Out the Greats



Look at the work of the classic street photographers such as Vivian Maier, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Daidō Moriyama. I've listed these and hundreds of today's practitioners on [StreetPhotoIndex.com](https://www.streetphotoindex.com).

#13 Study Others Too



Travel, dance and even fashion photography can tell you a lot about the role of movement, composition and colour in producing a great photograph, so don't limit yourself to street photographers.

#14 Study Classic Painters



If you can become familiar with the visual languages created by artists of the past you can use this knowledge to help you find compositions in the reality of the street.

#15 Read About the Tech



Getting a thorough grasp of photographic principles and techniques is essential for taking shots on the street. You can't leave your camera settings on Program and hope to get the shots you want.

#16 Go to Photo Exhibitions



Some photos look pretty good online but they don't stand up to scrutiny when printed large and hung on the wall. See my essential guide: "[200 Photography Galleries You Can Visit in the Real World.](#)"

#17 Follow Blogs/Collectives



I hope you'll follow [my own blog](#) where I address all the issues that crop up in street photography. I've also listed many other [Street Photography Blogs](#) and [Street Photography Collectives](#).

#18 Join a Forum



For every brilliant, articulate poster there's at least one troll plus a dozen well meaning people who offer unsubstantiated opinions. But hey! Forums can still be a source of inspiration.

Section Three

"Taking First Steps"

#19 Go Out on the "Street"



I define street in the broadest sense to include markets, malls, seaside promenades, boardwalks, pathways through parks, pedestrian underpasses, even underground railways. It's where you need to be.

#20 Go Where People Are



For street photography, busy streets offer more shooting opportunities than you'll find on quiet streets. And without people it's not really a street photo; it's just a photo of a street.

#21 Observe What People Do



You don't have to look for extreme behaviour. The most telling moments in street photography are subtle glances, shrugs, gestures, and expressions of ordinary people as they move around the city.

#22 Try to Capture Movement



By freezing movement your photos will be more dynamic, more alive. It's ironic, isn't it, that by stopping movement you can bring a photo to life? You may even get a visually compelling "decisive moment."

#23 Observe and Concentrate



Apart from finding photos you need to be aware of potential dangers: uneven pavements, overhanging wires and awnings, passing traffic, people, bicycles on the sidewalk.

#24 Explore Alleyways



The main shopping streets of a city can be daunting places, full of muddle and confusion. Start with the narrow streets and alleyways: they're usually full of photo opportunities.

#25 Shoot Across the Street



Standard advice is to "move in close" — easier said than done for beginners. It's OK to shoot across the street with a 50mm lens. Henri Cartier-Bresson rarely moved in close. And he was no beginner!

#26 Be Aware of the Light



Light is the most important factor in photography. I deliberately go out on showery days when there's a variety of lighting conditions, including a useful kick-bounce from standing water.

#27 Feel Comfortable



Some places can make you feel more at home than others, so go there. You'll have plenty of time to step outside your comfort zone when you get more accustomed to street photography.

#28 Look Like a Tourist



This technique is actually easier for a beginner than it is for an experienced hardcore street photographer. Affect an interest in landmarks when photographing people in the street.

#29 Pre-Set the Camera



Be ready for most eventualities by setting your camera to cope with prevailing conditions. Use Aperture mode or Shutter Priority mode and change the settings when the light changes.

#30 Pick Up Focus, Recompose



There are many ways to focus your camera and you need to find the way that gets you the best images. I like to pick up focus (by half-pressing the shutter release button) and recompose.

#31 Keep It Candid



Apart from impromptu street portraits, all my shots are candid. The truly candid shot has an intrinsic quality which is notably lacking when the subject sees the camera.

#32 Don't Delete



Some images may not look good at first glance, but at a later date you may notice hidden gems within them. A little straightening and cropping can make all the difference.

Section Four

"Getting Adventurous"

#33 Move to the Thick of It



When you feel more confident about your skills with the camera you can explore busier streets and move in closer to your subjects. Go to stations, marketplaces, street corners, intersections.

#34 *Choose Background and Wait*



This classic technique sometimes works but frequently fails. It's reassuring to find half the picture but a background's no good without the right subject. Don't wait too long!

#35 Look for Reaction Shots



Sometimes the spectators are more interesting than the event they're watching. If the only game in town is a boxing match outside a city mall, turn your camera on the spectators to see their reactions.

#36 Look for Rhythms



For backgrounds you can look for repeating patterns in street furniture, iron girders, lamp posts, and columns. Many have been placed there by architects aware of their visual charm.

#37 Find Rhythms in People



Four women walking shoulder-to-shoulder towards the camera (a cliché since "Sex in the City") is an example, but there are plenty of others. Similar dress, height, even hairstyle, can create rhythm.

#38 Take Other Shots Too



A one-track mind is no good for street photography, so don't limit yourself to this genre. The best approach is to notice everything, including details that invite you to switch to macro mode.

#39 Plan Your Day



I don't like to have a fixed route when I set out to take street photos, but I have a general idea of the areas I wish to visit. In unfamiliar cities I take a map or use Google Maps on my phone.

#40 Dress the Part



You can't dress to be invisible, but at least try to be inconspicuous. Wear dark clothes. If you dress for warmth in the early morning you may have to carry your jacket later in the day.

#41 Get in Character



Doctors have a bedside manner. Barristers have courtroom presence. They are both playing roles. If you act and behave like a street photographer you'll gradually become one.

#42 Shoot Generously



There's no need to "save film" if you're shooting digital, so take as many shots as you like. However, I take one shot at a time and reserve "burst mode" for episodes of sustained action.

Section Five

"Getting More Adventurous"

#43 Stalk Your Subjects



In the movies, secret agents follow people all the time, but yes, it's a bit creepy. I might occasionally hurry on ahead of a potential subject and wait for them to pass a background I've spotted.

#44 Attempt Full Frontal



It's challenging to take candid shots of people heading towards you. One solution is to photograph people crossing the road when you're crossing it yourself in the opposite direction.

#45 Work Quickly



You'll kick yourself if you miss a great shot because you didn't react fast enough. I take a first shot to get something "in the can" then take more to see if I can improve on it.

#46 Carry Your Camera



You can't react quickly if the camera's merely slung around your neck and bobbing against your chest. It's essential to carry it in one hand, ready to shoot at all times.

#47 Be Confident, Positive



You don't need many social skills to be a street photographer but if you act like you know what you're doing people will accept you. Maybe they'll think you're a pro on assignment for a magazine.

#48 Set Shyness Aside



If you're a shy, introverted person you may think street photography is not for you. Think again! Many famous actors are shy when they're not "in character." The answer is fairly obvious.

#49 Defuse Confrontations



Eventually, someone will object to having their picture taken. Prepare your response in advance. I suggest several strategies in my book "[Street Photography Is Cool](#)." Denial is good. Never delete.

#50 Go Further



Go where tourists fear to tread. Get away from the Disneyfied areas to where you can find the authentic, native inhabitants of a city. You'll be closer to the spirit of the place.

Section Six

"More Technical Tips"

#51 Carry Spare Cards



Don't just buy them! I rarely need a spare card but I carry one with me. My Canon has slots for two cards, so I can switch to the second one easily when the first is full. Total space is around 2,000 RAW files.

#52 Treat Full Cards As Sacred



Remove a full card from the camera and store it safely in a pouch, labelled "full." Carry it on your person until you get home to upload it to a computer. Ignore this advice if you wi-fi to the cloud.

#53 Chimp Your Photos



Only amateurs don't chimp because they're afraid of looking unprofessional. Pros don't care how they look. You can tell a lot by checking photos immediately after taking them.

#54 Check the Histogram



Occasionally look at the histogram to make sure you're capturing a full range of tones without too many blown highlights. It's a useful check if you're taking shots with brightly lit areas.

#55 *Expose to the Right*



Over-expose slightly when shooting light-coloured scenes. For example, auto-metering makes snow scenes look grey — and does the same in brightly lit areas, if not quite as extremely.

#56 *Expose to the Left*



If you want a night scene to look like a night scene you need to override the automatic metering by reducing the exposure. It's the opposite of the previous tip. Both are counter-intuitive.

#57 Use Function Buttons



Make sure you have easy access to +/- exposure override. If this, or any other much-used function is buried in the menus, rescue it and make it available on a function button.

#58 Visit the Optician!



I'm slotting this advice into "technical tips" before addressing manual focus because sharp eyesight is clearly of benefit to the street photographer. New glasses can be inspiring.

#59 Try Manual Focus



You can try "zone focusing" by switching to manual, then setting the focus to give acceptable sharpness over a given range of depth (for example: from 4 feet to 8 feet.)

Section Seven

"Upping the Quality"

#60 Cure Camera Shake



An efficient image stabilisation system (IS) cures camera shake, but so can good technique. Tripods are out, but keep your elbows together when taking a shot and use fast shutter speeds.

#61 *Keep the Lens Clean*



Always glance at the front of the lens before shooting — and check it regularly during the day. The streets of most cities are dirty, dusty places, so carry a lens cloth with you at all times.

#62 Set the ISO



I like to know what ISO I'm using, so I fix it rather than allow it to vary. More tonal values are available with lower sensitivity (lower ISO number). My favourite setting is an all-purpose ISO 400.

#63 Find Best Shutter Speed



Use experience to find the slowest shutter speed with which you can get a tack sharp image, hand held, containing average pedestrian movement. It's probably around 1/250th second.

#64 Start "Pixel Peeping"



But don't get obsessed with it! Check out barrel and pincushion distortion, chromatic aberration, processing artifacts and the like. Begin to understand all the quirks of modern lenses.

#65 Try Going Gritty



Many street photographers downplay the need for image quality in their art. So-called "hardcore street" can look better when the images are rough and gritty. You can use a lighter camera, too.

#66 Upgrade Your Gear



With recent advances in sensor design, APS-C cameras achieve full frame quality while new full frame delivers the quality of older medium format cameras. Any upgrade improves quality.

#67 Upgrade Your Lens



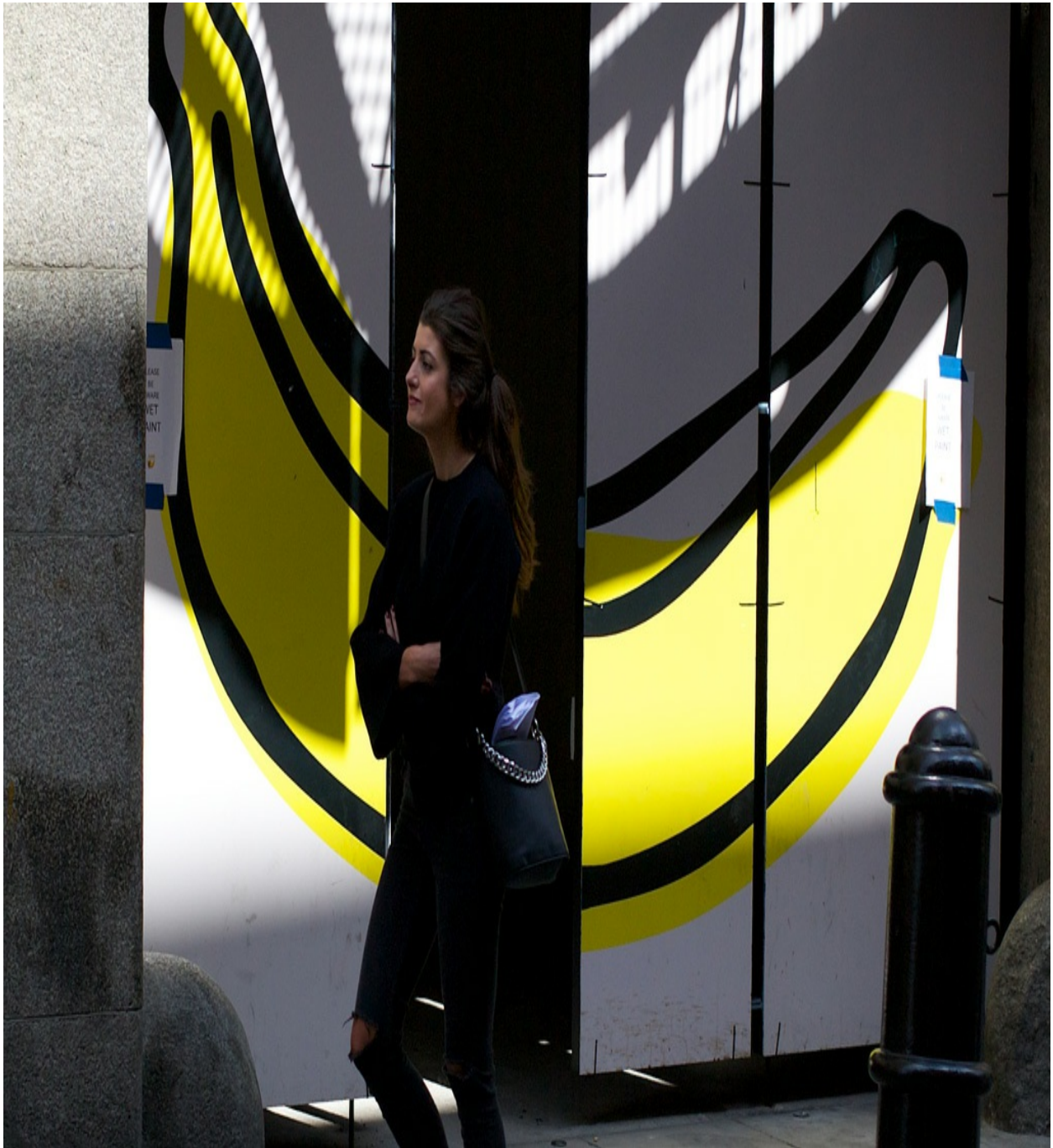
Make sure the resolving power of the lens matches the quality of the camera. Unfortunately, the lightest, cheapest lenses are unsuited to the 50MP+ sensors of the latest models.

#68 Stop Down



Find the "sweet spot" of the lens by stopping down. It makes focus less critical by giving greater depth of field. Just two or three stops below maximum aperture is usually sufficient.

#69 Post Process Carefully



It's OK to straighten the image, adjust tonal levels, tweak the colour balance, remove dust spots, dead pixels and chromatic aberration. It's not OK to erase pedestrians.

Section Eight

"Tips for Composing and Shooting"

#70 *Work the Scene*



Find a subject and take a series of shots before moving on. Alas, this is possible only when the location has visually interesting activity that lasts for a minute or two. It's great when you find it.

#71 Vary Your viewpoint



An inch to the left: great shot! An inch to the right: ruined! The difference can be dramatic when you make minor adjustments to your viewpoint and framing.

#72 Try Looking Down



If you always see the world straight ahead of you, pause and look down when you're crossing walkways and bridges. Everything will be foreshortened, but often a bird's eye view is revealing.

#73 Try Looking Up



Usually this is more successful than looking down because it makes the subject look more important. Even better, it's a useful way of eliminating background clutter from the image.

#74 Anticipate Movement



If you see two people converging on the blind corner of a building, you can reasonably expect a minor incident to occur. Watch people moving and try to anticipate the next few seconds.

#75 Look Out for Layers



Not chickens; these layers are successive planes of interest within the picture frame. Don't try to hunt for them, they're as rare as, well, hens' teeth. But grab them eagerly if they're there.

#76 Shoot from the Hip



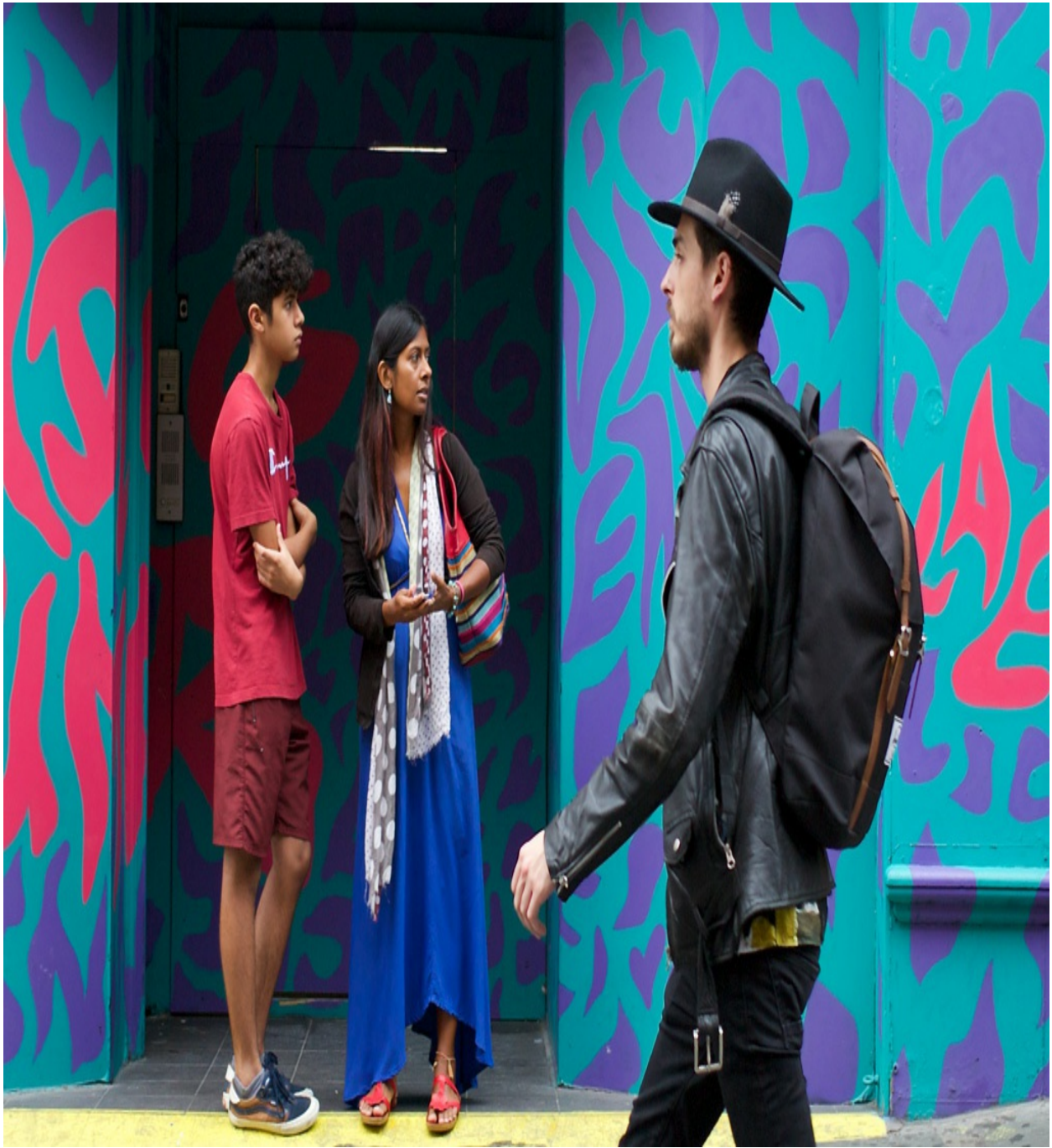
Here's a technique that's now much easier since the introduction of tiltable electronic viewfinders. Everyone looks better in shots taken at waist-level or chest-level.

#77 Compose in Colour



If you're using colour, compose primarily in colour in preference to form. A splotch of bright red can ruin a composition if it's off to one side, but you'll have taken this into consideration.

#78 Look for Contrasts



Contrast in content: a street urchin leaning against a Rolls Royce; contrast in colour: a blue parrot standing on a yellow table; contrast in form: a complex silhouette against a plain wall.

#79 Beware of Fuzzy Foreground



Bokeh (the quality of blur in out-of-focus objects) is uglier in the foreground than the background. Street photography is prone to this problem because people often walk into frame at the last moment.

#80 Use Reflections Sparingly



They can bring symmetry and balance to your photo, but use reflections sparingly to avoid cliché. Avoid including your own reflection, unless you mean it to be part of the composition.

Section Nine

"Psychological Tips"

#81 Limber Up



Take some "warm up" shots on your way to your chosen location. You'll be surprised how quickly this gets you in the mood for serious street photography, even if the shots aren't that great.

#82 Clear Your Mind



You need to tap into your creative self, so clear your mind of anything that may be bothering you in order to concentrate on the task in hand. Think instead about light, shade, form, and colour.

#83 Address Your Fears



Some people say: "I'd love to take street photos but I'm afraid of people's reactions." I say: "Start doing it anyway." Once you really get into it, your fear will subside.

#84 Be Anxious. It's OK



Henri Cartier-Bresson said: "It develops a great anxiety, this profession, because you're always waiting: what's going to happen? What, what, what?" My tip: "DO worry, it's OK."

#85 Bring Order from Chaos



Somewhere in the chaos of the street there's order. Find it in rhythms, repetitions, contrasts, juxtapositions, but don't confuse order with simplicity. Order can be more complex than chaos.

#86 *Try to Be Original*



Originality is probably overrated in our culture, so don't jettison everything you know about life, art and photography in order to achieve it. Yet there's always magic in true originality.

#87 *Trust Your Intuition*



Sometimes, your intuition says you're about to get a great shot. Trust it. It's been triggered by the light, by people moving into position, by factors you'd probably find hard to identify.

#88 Train Your Intuition



Photography is primarily a task of selection: of choosing place, subject, and moment. Your accumulated experience can train your intuition to make the right choices.

#89 *Grab the Gestalt*



It happens when everything falls into place and the whole is more than the sum of its parts. You need to grab it when it comes, because it's not a common occurrence.

#90 Keep Your Inner Critic



You need to know when you've failed and be prepared to face up to it. There's no point in persevering with an unsatisfactory subject or a poorly taken shot. Keep moving on.

Section Ten

"Developing a Personal Style"

#91 Babble Then Speak



Toddlers babble then gradually make sounds that are intelligible to grown-ups. The same process happens in art: children scribble before making recognisable sketches. Don't be afraid to babble at first.

#92 Listen to Your Photos



Let them speak to you. Perhaps your attention will be drawn to a detail — an expression or a gesture — but one that generates a feeling you can evoke in future work.

Find Your Best Photo



Identify which of your photos is most satisfying artistically. Is the subject a friend, a family member, or a stranger? If it's a stranger, yes, you can certainly develop a personal style as a street photographer.

#94 Flee the Comfort Zone



Have you started imitating yourself? Then change your approach. Look for new subjects, explore new places, try new techniques. Go fishing in a different pool.

#95 Go Beyond Your Culture



Your pictures will be seen as falling within national traditions unless you deliberately step outside them. Very often, travel photography can be a stepping stone to street photography.

#96 Avoid Sitting Ducks



Men slumped in doorways, street musicians, market traders endlessly serving bags of oranges: avoid them. You may as well photograph static objects like shop window displays or manhole covers.

#97 Develop Motifs



Cultivate recurrent elements in your work, but don't let them become clichés. Create variations so that several of these images can stand side by side without seeming repetitive.

#98 Show Your Attitude



A passer-by, a botanist, a photographer, a bird: each looks at a tree differently. So let your images proclaim your relationship to the world, whether you find it amusing, tragic, pitiful or beautiful.

#99 *Let Style Evolve*



When you acquire a camera you point it at family, friends, and pets. You get more serious only when you turn the camera on the world beyond, when the picture is closer to you than the subject.

#100 Keep Grounded



While cultivating your creative self, never lose sight of the practical aspects of your craft. Did you install the battery? Have you cleaned the lens? Trivial pitfalls bring you back to earth with a bump.

Afterword

Pointing the Way



Cryptic, Weren't They?

My 100 Tips have been quite cryptic, but I hope one or two of them have pointed you in the right direction.

I make no apology for sometimes giving old-fashioned advice, like "#61 Keep the Lens Clean." Good housekeeping is important, even on the street.

If you want longer explanations of my points about psychology, composition and a whole lot of other stuff, please see my blog johnlewellphotography.com and my book "[Street Photography Is Cool](#)."

The End



About the Author



John Lewell is a street photographer, author, and web directory developer. As a street

photographer he works mainly in London and Bangkok, with occasional trips to other cities in the Far East.

He graduated from Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he studied Fine Art, later spending a year in the film/TV department of what is now the University for the Creative Arts, in Surrey.

On leaving, he worked in various capacities in the film industry as a researcher and writer. One summer he even joined the staff at the London Film School — behind the red door featured in tip "#94 Flee the Comfort Zone" — before moving to the United States. There he became a freelance journalist, specialising in animation and computer graphics.

John Lewell is author of the biographical encyclopaedia "Modern Japanese Novelists" (Kodansha) and has written many other books, including two on computer graphics and two more on digital photography. He often collaborates with his partner, Thai cookery writer Oi Cheepchaiissara, recently producing the Kindle book "Oi's Ultimate Guide to Pad Thai."

John Lewell created (and still edits) the popular web directory photostartsheet.com — the most convenient way to find top photography sites on the Internet.

Other Information

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