Hunters on safari often think of only one shot while they are in the field - the moment when the game is located and the crosshairs find their mark. Photography is oftentimes only an afterthought, a task undertaken in a narrow window of time between the celebration of finding the animal down and a triumphant return to camp. Yet while taxidermy displays the essence of the trophy, good photography captures the moment and provides a reminder of the excitement of taking an animal.

Photography was the farthest thing from my mind when I came upon my zebra stallion after a successful hunt with Mashete Safaris in Namibia. Overwhelmed with the excitement of the hunt, I certainly would not have been able to relive that moment were it not for Ben and Veronica Gettiner of Crisp Photography. They had accompanied me on the hunt and created a photographic record of the stalk, the shot and the recovery of my mountain zebra. Those pictures now serve as a photographic storybook of one of the best hunts of my life.

It is not necessary to have professional photographers accompany you when hunting to take good photographs, though. Good pictures tell the story of the hunt in a way that nothing else can, so photography should be a consideration for anyone investing in a safari.

I asked Ben Gettiner of Crisp Photography what basic elements are necessary to capture a safari with good photos.
“Sunlight is an important consideration,” Gettinger says. Oftentimes photos appear washed out because the direction of sunlight is not taken into consideration.

“If you want to have a blue sky in photos be sure that the sun is striking the subject’s face. If you want a photo with a white sky place the sun behind your subject. Having the sun in the wrong position can make objects appear as silhouettes.”

Oftentimes, hunters purchasing a camera place too much emphasis on the number of megapixels, spending more than necessary on cameras with ultra-high resolution that far exceeds their needs.

“Megapixels really don’t matter that much since almost any camera you buy now has at least 8 megapixels. That’s plenty for an 8 ½ by 11 inch photograph, so unless you are planning to take poster photographs most cameras have enough megapixels”.

Megapixels aside, it is essential to understand your camera’s settings before heading to the field. Cameras generally have different settings designed for different applications and knowing which setting to use may make the difference between a good shot and a bad one. Most cameras have an automatic setting that greatly reduces the chances for operator error. Sensors in the camera dictate shutter speed and light transmission levels to meet the needs of each particular shot.

For most shots automatic settings will work well. However, manipulating camera settings allows the photographer to change standard settings in situations requiring special shots. Most cameras offer a sport mode that increases shutter speed and captures moving objects. Most cameras also offer landscape modes and the option to change ISO levels between speeds of 100 and 800.

It is also important to set the scene before photographing a harvested animal. Theodore Roosevelt was often photographed with his foot atop his fallen quarry - a pose that has long gone out of style and taste. It is important that photos show respect for the animal and are taken in good taste, as photos are often the most striking impression of safari hunting many non-hunters ever see.

Animals should be set upright when possible and grass should be removed from in front of the hunter and the game. If possible, blood should be cleaned away.

Most photographers are familiar with the Rule of Thirds, which helps to balance any photo so that subjects are correctly aligned in the frame. The principle behind the Rule of Thirds is that by positioning subjects at the intersection of certain lines within the frame the photo will always appear well balanced. Some cameras are even equipped with a grid that shows the intersection of these lines, though it is not necessary to have such a grid to take good photos.

When taking photos of a hunter and quarry, divide the photo frame vertically and horizontally into thirds. Important subjects in the photo (hunter’s face, horns, rifle) should be centered at the points...
where these lines intersect. By taking the time to position subjects correctly photos will appear much more balanced and professional.

The Rule of Thirds should also be applied to horizons. When taking a photograph of a downed animal, the horizon line should be one-third or two thirds of the way up the frame, depending upon which position looks better. “Remember you can always adjust as needed so that your photos look better. These are just basic rules,” Gettenger says as he shows me a photo of Etosha’s salt pans that runs nearly to the top of the frame, changing the dynamics of the photo and giving the picture a unique perspective.

In many photos, hunters wearing hats appear with a large shadow cast across their face as a result of sunlight hitting the brim of a hat. With a single light source (the sun), shadows will always be present and can mar an otherwise good photo. To combat this, photographers carry reflectors to redirect sunlight onto the subject. Reflectors fill in shadowed areas, reducing shadow lines and greatly increasing the quality of photos. Most photographic supply stores carry portable reflectors that are small enough to be easily carried to the field in a pack and cost less than $25. Even silver windshield covers designed to redirect heat out of an automobile will work and are a cheaper alternative to standard photographic reflectors. With a little practice the use of a reflector will greatly improve the overall quality of photos and should be taken on any safari.

The professional alternative, when available, is having a good professional photographer accompany a hunter on safari. This results in a portfolio of premium quality photographs at the end of the hunt. A professional photographer will spend time concentrating on capturing the essence of the hunt while the hunter concentrates on the task at hand - finding and shooting good trophies. PHs will also benefit from allowing a photographer to accompany hunters on safari, as professional quality photos will help sell safaris.

Hiring a photographer for a safari is not cheap - many photographers charge travelling fees, daily rates and package prices. It is also important that the PH, hunter and photographer understand the roles that each is to play during a safari - the PH is responsible for finding game for his client, the safari hunter is responsible for taking good shots and the photographer is responsible for capturing the process on film without interrupting. The photographer and hunter must work well together. It greatly helps if the photographer has some practical field experience, especially if he and the client or PH have hunted together before or have each been on hunting safaris.

Photographic tastes vary, so be sure to find a photographer that produces images that you like. Some will take only classic photos, resulting in a more traditional portfolio of photos at the end of the safari. Other photographers are more contemporary, taking artistic photos that may or may not suit the needs of the hunter. Be sure to find a photographer capable of taking the kind of photos that suit your personal style and taste. When it comes together, the result is a lifetime of memories captured forever.

The Authentic Safari Experience

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