

Considering A Photography Workshop? Here Are Six Good Questions

Text and photography copyright © Richard Bernabe. All rights reserved.

If you want to take a quantum leap forward with your photography in a short amount of time, there are very few things as effective as attending a photography workshop. Photographing beautiful, awe-inspiring locations under the guidance of professional instructors can expand both your photographic knowledge and vision while sharing the experience with other like-minded souls. For many, the knowledge and experience gained during one of these events far exceeds anything that could be gleaned solely from a book. All you need to do is choose which one you want to attend.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of nature and wildlife photography workshop offerings. For example, when I began doing nature photography workshops in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1999, there were only two or three events offered each year by photographers, including my own. Today, there are dozens conducted in the Park and they are growing ever so numerous each and every year.

The options available to you are nearly limitless. From local weekend camera clinics to multi-week treks to exotic destinations, mountains, deserts, coastlines from Alaska to Antarctica, and most locations in between, you can find *something* that fits your style and tastes.



Mount Moran, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming © Richard Bernabe

But before you plunk down your hard-earned money on a plane ticket and tuition for the photography workshop of your dreams, there are some questions you should ask first. Aside from the obvious *who*, *where*, *when*, and *how much does it cost* considerations, there are other important, not-so-obvious factors you should take into account. Here are six questions that you may want to ask that could possibly make or break your workshop experience.

1. Is this an instructional workshop or a “photo tour?”

You (and they) should know the difference. A photo tour is just that - a tour. This might be okay if you are only interested in learning the best photo locations in a particular area. But if you want actual hands-on instruction from a pro or you're interested in learning a new technique, a real workshop will be more useful. Be sure to ask.

2. What is the maximum number of participants to be admitted?

An instructional workshop requires much more student-instructor interaction than a photo tour. If you are one of 40 students and there is only a single instructor, you might be lucky to get a handshake and a greeting and that's about it. In my opinion, anything greater than a 10:1 student to instructor ratio is not conducive to a productive learning environment in the field.

3. What is the necessary fitness level required to fully participate?

This information could work both ways. If you are overweight, severely out of shape, elderly, or disabled in any way, you may not be able to participate if there are long or strenuous hikes involved.

Conversely, if you're a hiker and you prefer more of a wilderness experience or you're hoping to photograph locations in the backcountry, you might be disappointed if the group never ventures from parking lots or the roadside.

Know your comfort level and abilities then seek out a workshop that adequately meets them. If this is not stated in the workshop description, ask.



Red-eyed tree frog, Monkey River, Belize © Richard Bernabe

4. What level of expertise is the workshop?

It may seem obvious that an instructional workshop should cater to one's skill level, but many attending photographers never even bother to ask. A novice is going to feel intimidated and uncomfortable in an event designed for advanced students while an experienced photographer will be frustrated and unfulfilled in a workshop for beginners.

You didn't pay good money to feel intimidated, uncomfortable, frustrated, or unfulfilled.

5. Does the workshop company or instructor have the proper land use permits or Commercial Use Authorization?

Most public lands, especially National Parks, require photography workshops and tours to obtain a permit or Commercial Use Authorization (CUA) from the Park in advance of the event.

There are many reasons for this requirement, which could include the workshops company's level of liability insurance, bonding, or first-aid training in the event of an injury to a student.

One recent student of mine shared a workshop anecdote where the instructors drove up to a popular National Park, declared they did not have any permits, and instructed the students to split up and photograph on their own before meeting up later at an appointed time. Some rogue outfits without permits try to fly under the radar illegally, giving instructions to their attendees to say they are only a photo club – *just in case any official-looking person asks*.

You deserve better.



Snow geese taking flight, Pocosin Lakes NWR, North Carolina © Richard Bernabe

6. Does the instructor practice his or her own photography during the workshop?

This is a valid question and hopefully you will receive an forthright answer. The three possibilities are as follows:

- 1) "No, never." That's a good answer if he or she is being honest.
- 2) "Sometimes" or "It depends." Most workshop leaders and instructors would answer the question in this way.

An instructor might use the camera to demonstrate a photo technique, compose a scene for others to see in the viewfinder or LCD, or capture that epic light that only occurs a handful of times each year, right alongside his or her students.

- 3) "Of course I do. How else could I afford to pad my travel portfolio unless you guys were paying for it?"

The point here is that the instructor should always put you, the student, first. The workshop should not be a veiled scheme by the instructor to finance his or her personal photography projects during *your* time with *your* tuition. Nor should it solely pay for the “privilege” of hanging out with Mister Big Shot Professional Photographer or watching him or her practice their trade. Why not ask in advance? Mister Big Shot might just be arrogant enough to admit it.

There’s obviously a lot of grey area on this question, but the bottom line is that any instructor or workshop leader who puts his own photography ahead your needs as a student should be avoided at all costs.

When it comes to attending a photography workshop, it would be nice if you could create a few good images, learn a thing or two from a working professional, and have plenty of laughs and fun too. And by asking the right questions before you choose where to attend, you greatly increase your odds of acheiving all three goals.

Comments on NPN nature photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#). NPN members may also log in and leave their comments below.



NPN Editor-in-Chief, **Richard Bernabe** has been a full-time professional outdoor photographer and writer since 2003. He's had thousands of publishing credits over the past 20 years and he regularly leads photography tours and workshops across the United States as well as internationally with [Mountain Trail Photo](#) and [Creative Vision Workshops](#). Richard also offers regular [Online Classes with NPN](#).

For more information about Richard's photography, be sure to visit his personal website, [Richard Bernabe Photography](#).