



Nick Turpin

Nick Turpin has worked as a staff photographer with *The Independent* newspaper and in 2000 founded In-Public, the influential international street photographers' group. In 2010, he established Nick Turpin Publishing. www.nickturpin.com

After 9/11, Nick visited all of the airline ticket offices in London. Here the sticker on the office window has thrown an ominous shadow into the scene

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Life on the street

If you want to improve your street photography, then **Nick Turpin** is here to offer some first-hand tips and tricks...

The first thing you should know about street photography is that the debates about what it is and isn't are quite vociferous. Search the web for 'street photography' and allow your eyes time to focus on the plethora of images, books and websites that fill your screen. It's almost overwhelming, isn't it?

However, there's a problem. I would argue that a majority of the stuff that you – and the internet – assume falls under the banner of the genre doesn't really fit the criteria of what I would consider true street photography. For example, I'm not a fan of what I would term 'interventions' within the scene. I would class the use of flash as an intervention. Flash is strange because we all know that life isn't lit by a single-point light source. When you introduce an artificial photography-focused source of light, you alter the scene. When artificial elements of any kind are introduced into a scenario, the candid nature of what you're witnessing evaporates. Make a note of that word: 'candid'.

For me, the definition of street photography is very simple: candid photography in a public place. But even that simple phrasing puts a lot of restrictions on the photographer. My definition and my restrictions in street photography inform my output. It's why I only work in colour these days. I actually worked in black & white for many years (you can see some examples on these pages) but I eventually came to realise that it's a lot easier to make images in monochrome. The fact is, colour references our everyday lives and the decisions we've made as a society. We live in a bright, fast and gaudy world, one full of advertising and televisions in public places. Everything is loud and noisy. In my opinion, straight colour photography is the best way to represent that.

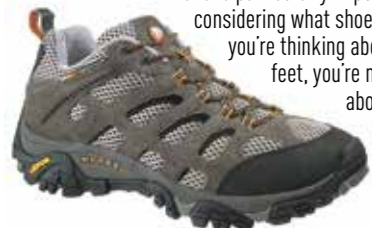
Getting started

The first thing you should consider is to think about the type of camera you're using when you're trying your hand at street photography.

KIT LIST

◀ **Shoes**

Comfort is key for street photography, and is particularly important when considering what shoes to wear. If you're thinking about your aching feet, you're not thinking about photography. Thick soles are usually the best option.



◀ **An umbrella**

Many of us know the horror of getting stuck in a downpour. But rather than running inside, try and make the best of the situation. Some great street shots can be taken out in the rain. The reflecting colours on the pavement during and after a shower are a beautiful sight.



◀ **Thumb grip**

Not an essential item but one to make a note of if you feel like taking your street photography up a notch. The thumb grip is designed to provide a little more comfort while holding your camera, and also helps in the covert stakes (see page 13). Visit www.matchtechnical.com.



◀ **Spare memory cards and batteries**

It's heartbreaking seeing a brilliant scene reveal itself, only to realise you're either out of battery or have a full memory card. Always carry a couple of spare batteries and at least four or five cards.



◀ **No tripod**

This is one item you definitely *don't* want with you. Tripods are cumbersome and, like carrying a bulky DSLR, instantly identify you as a photographer. Not only do they slow you down, you can easily miss a shot while you're setting up the tripod.



Using a compact camera with a relatively quiet shutter means you can approach your subjects with ease and take your time finding the right composition and angle

Whenever I shoot, I make sure it's a full-frame camera, a decision informed by the fact that full-frame models have an incredible resolution. That's why I use a Leica M9. It's a tiny camera but I know I can face a scene containing 30 or so people, make a big print to put on the wall, and the audience will be able to see every expression and hand gesture within the frame.

Using a full-frame camera also means I can stand a little further back from my scene. Earlier on in my career I would get

close and make precise, clean compositions. Now I can take a step back, juggle a lot of the elements within the scene and then crop in later to tidy up the frame. I like to include a lot of elements within my images, particularly when I'm shooting in a place like Piccadilly Circus in London.

Another reason for shooting with a Leica as opposed to something like a Canon DSLR is because as a street photographer you must be an observer, one who watches silently, taking pictures. If you go into a

scene with a bulky DSLR, then you look like paparazzi. Try photographing an unfolding candid scene when you're wielding a miniature starship in your hands. People's reactions will immediately change and the candid moment is gone for ever. A compact camera makes you look like an everyday invisible tourist.

Lens choice is also important. When you attach a 50mm lens to a full-frame camera, it almost approximates what the human eye sees. However, a 35mm on something like the Leica will give you a smidgen more depth of field at any given aperture. That kind of lens length also seems to be the optimum length for the size of UK streets – you can get a person full length. In my opinion a 50mm always seems a little tight.

The thing I don't like to use on location is a zoom lens. I'll often get students coming onto my workshops with zoom lenses. I'll actually gaffer tape their lens so they can't extend them. Your legs are your zoom. If you want to get closer to a subject, walk closer. Don't be afraid to get involved. Not only does it give you more confidence, it also allows you to empathise more with your subject, put yourself in their place, and be able to predict what will happen next.

Blending in

So you've got your camera and lens. Now what do you do when you're out on the streets? Answer: you become invisible. The success of much street photography depends on how well you can blend into



On occasion you'll miss a shot. However, if you stick around you may be lucky enough to see it happen again



Nick spent three years shooting in gallery spaces. The focus of the project was to show how the presence of people can serve to bring inanimate objects to life

your surroundings. Much of it is about body language. I'm 6ft 3in. I've grown my hair back now but I used to have a shaved head. I was an unusual presence, I think it's fair to say. What I learned was that the way you present yourself is key to getting your shots.

I never stand facing the subject I intend to photograph. I'll always stand at a right angle and address a completely different area of the street to the bit I want to shoot. If I see a situation begin to develop, I'll turn away slightly, take an exposure reading off the pavement, gauge the distance – if I think the scene is around 4m away then I'll set that on the lens barrel – and shoot one-handed once I think the elements are aligning in the shot's favour. That's why I choose to have a thumb grip on my camera (see *Kit list* on pages 10-11). It allows me to comfortably shoot with just one hand while still turned away.

Make sure you don't make eye contact with your subject. If you do, then you're on their radar and the shot is over. You'll invariably find yourself having to hang around, so while you're waiting light a cigarette or pretend to read a map. These are excellent diversionary tactics to help you blend in even more.

Never worry if you miss a shot. Often scenarios happen two or three times. Take, for example, my monochrome shot on page 12. I was shooting in the Tate and noticed a large pot that people kept looking into. I missed it the first couple of times but I knew if I stuck around it would

Through a glass darkly

WHILE I favour shooting in bright conditions, there are plenty of great shots to be found in the rain. This image was one of a series I took of buses in the winter. I'm intrigued by the idea of the commute. Some people do an hour to an hour and a half every day. It's like dead time.

The images were taken on a Canon because with lighting conditions like this you're pushing what you can do – even with a Canon. It was

incredibly dark in winter weather and I was shooting at 1/40sec with a 200mm lens and handheld with image stabilisation. I had to run up and down each time a bus pulled up, looking for the most interesting person sat by a window. I had less than a minute to find my subject before the bus pulled off again. Once I found them I braced myself, stopped breathing and shot about four or five frames per second.



happen again. Lo and behold, it did and there was my shot.

Camera settings and light

I'll generally keep my camera on shutter priority mode, because while depth of field is nice, the moment is even more important. Most of the things I shoot – with a few exceptions such as the scenario just mentioned – are happenings and one-of-a-kinds. I tend to favour a minimum shutter speed of 1/250sec. On a bright day, I can use that in combination with an aperture like f/8 or f/16. When you have those kinds of settings, your camera becomes almost point and shoot.

Light is one of those things that photographers can get a little funny about. Some will only shoot in the so-called 'magic hour'. I'm really not that fussy about it. I can't afford to be, particularly if I'm working on a commissioned project. That



An example of a stake-out. Nick found a scene he thought could work and then patiently waited until all the correct elements aligned in the frame

said, I tend to shoot more when it's bright because then I'm able to achieve a nice amount of depth of field. With a camera like the Leica M9, you can set your camera to ISO 800 and it will still give you small apertures and fast shutter speeds so you can freeze the action. In my images, I tend to juxtapose things in the background with

things in the foreground and you can only do that with a good depth of field.

Finding the shots and dealing with confrontation

The next question is how do you find good shots? Clearly the kinds of subjects you'll want to focus on are personal to you, so all I can say is there are two ways to find your images: stake-out and surveillance.

My shot on this page (left) is an example of a stake-out. I thought the griffin in the window was a really nice element. I then had to wait while I constructed the rest of the shot around it. I must have taken around 300 images in two hours before it all came together. Eventually, I had details of the three people with newspapers, all placed equidistant to one another and the image runs boy, girl, boy, girl.

An example of surveillance is my shot of the two bald gentlemen, pictured below left. They looked like they were from a sci-fi movie. I followed them around for a while, past a shop selling hats that had a lot of bowler hats on spikes. That gave me a nice Magritte-style image. I then followed them some more and just a little further down the road two builders in hard hats walked by, giving the content an extra push.

The point with both of these examples is that much successful street photography is a result of patience and perseverance.

On a final note, the question I get asked most often is what to do when someone you're photographing confronts you. This rarely happens, but there are easy ways to diffuse the situation. A simple smile will often suffice. You can even compliment them on their shoes or hat. As a last resort, you can always say you're a student, although if you're anything like me and pushing 45, it's a stretch. And what to do when confronted by those ever-present police and security guards? Check out your rights on the page opposite.

AP



Sometimes what you exclude is as important as what you include. This image actually shows a child abseiling in Grenoble, France



Nick's surveillance shot. Nick followed the two bald gentlemen until he found this contrast

Your rights as a street photographer

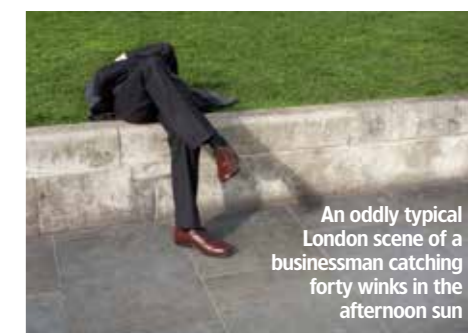
SECURITY guards and police officers sometimes lay down the law on street photography. So remember these key points and you'll be within your rights to take photographs in a public place:

1. There is no restriction on people taking photographs in public places or any building other than in very exceptional circumstances.
2. There is no prohibition on photographing front-line uniform staff.

3. The act of taking a photograph in itself is not usually sufficient reason for a police officer to carry out a stop.

4. Unless there is a very good reason, people taking photographs should not be stopped.

5. Officers do not have the power to delete digital files, destroy film, or to prevent photography in a public place under either Section 43 or 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000.



An oddly typical London scene of a businessman catching forty winks in the afternoon sun

NICK'S TOP TIPS FOR STREET PHOTOGRAPHY



1 Travel light

Carry the smallest amount of equipment possible: preferably one camera and a short, wide, fixed-focal-length lens. Wear comfortable shoes and take a small umbrella, bottle of water and sun cream in a small rucksack. Basically, go out looking like a tourist photographer.



2 The right camera

Selecting the right camera is a crucial consideration. Your camera should be light, compact and, if possible, quiet. Big, bulky DSLRs will immediately identify you as a photographer, meaning that you risk losing any candid moments you happen across on your journey.



3 Be realistic

You must start with realistic expectations. Most of us get perhaps 10 to 15 really nice street photographs a year, so don't start down this road unless you are prepared for a number of fruitless trips. Once you get your first corker however, you'll be hooked for life.



4 You're in control

The camera is just a tool. It's the person behind it that makes the pictures. Consider two important decisions you make with every picture: where the frame falls over the scene and the moment you select. It's with these two simple selections that you make or break the picture.



5 Be patient

You can't make street photographs happen; you can really only make sure you are ready when they do happen. My friends and I always say 'you know it when you see it' and when you see it you mustn't hesitate. When something unfolds in front of you, keep watching and keep snapping.



6 Stay off the radar

Avoid making eye contact with people or groups you want to photograph. If you are waiting and watching, don't face them. Stand at 90° to your subject or do something else: eat an apple, look at a guide book, pretend to make a call... anything to look like part of the furniture.