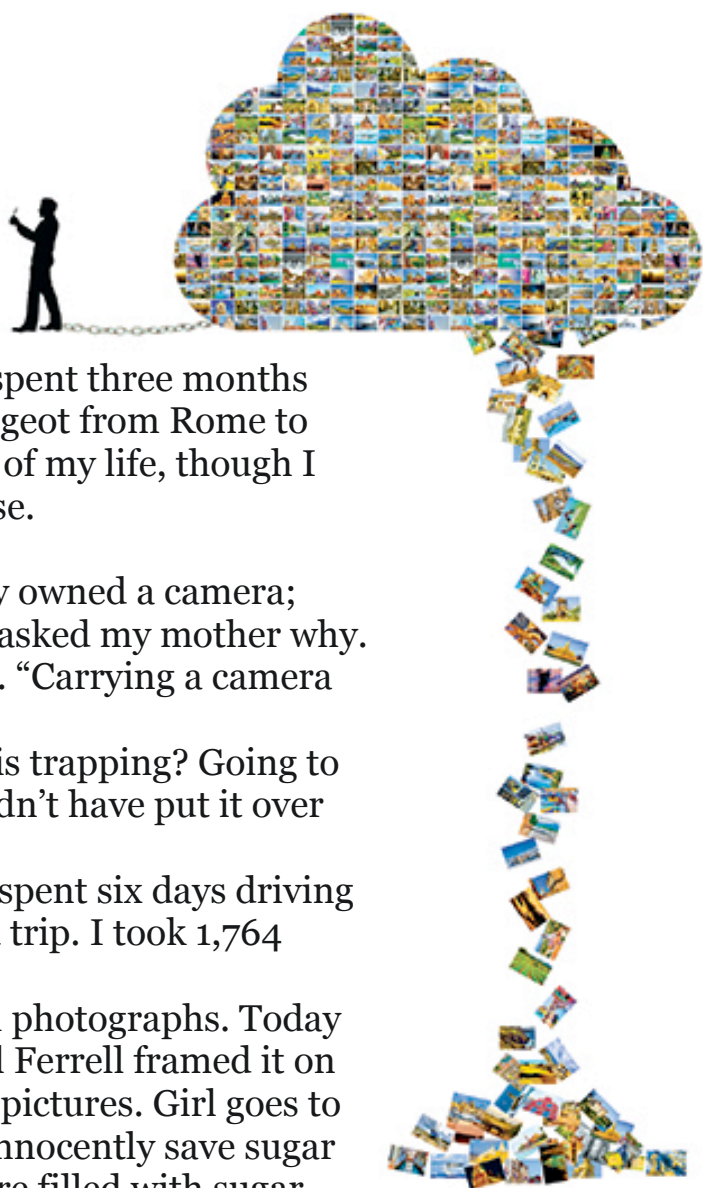


Why Are We Obsessed With Taking Travel Photos?

By Peter Jon Lindberg Commentary

Peter Jon Lindberg shot 10,438 photographs in the past 12 months alone. Now he wonders where our obsession with travel images is taking us.



The summer I turned 11, my parents and I spent three months traveling around Europe, driving a tiny Peugeot from Rome to Amsterdam. It was one of the seminal trips of my life, though I don't really "remember" it in the visual sense.

We took not a single photograph.

My parents didn't even pack a camera. They owned a camera; they just decided not to bring it. Recently I asked my mother why. "We were proud hippies," she said, proudly. "Carrying a camera seemed like a bourgeois trapping."

(Hey, Ma: You know what else is a bourgeois trapping? Going to Europe for three months. The camera wouldn't have put it over the top.)

Flash forward to this past February when I spent six days driving around the Desert Southwest. It was a good trip. I took 1,764 photographs.

In 1970, mankind as a whole took 10 billion photographs. Today that number is close to 400 billion. (As Will Ferrell framed it on Twitter, "Neil Armstrong lands on moon: 5 pictures. Girl goes to Starbucks: 46 pictures.") Like people who innocently save sugar packets until all their drawers and closets are filled with sugar packets, we've become compulsive image-consumers, virtual hoarders. Can you blame us? For the first time in history, photographs are essentially free, like sugar packets, and provide much the same endorphin rush. So we point, shoot, then shoot and shoot again, until we've amassed 1,764 photos from a single week's vacation.

Climbers climb mountains because they're there. Travelers take photographs because *we're* there—and we want to convey how amazing that feels. That's why we overcompensate with digital

effects: retouching, recropping, and auto-enhancing our humble snapshots into oversaturated cartoons, to make our pictures look as incredible to others as reality looks to us. Yet no amount of filtering or Photoshop fakery could ever adequately capture the scene—or the mind-blowing sensation of being there, face-to-face with the real thing.

When, as a teenager, I finally got a camera of my own, I didn't know my aperture from my ass, so my photos were blurred-out and indecipherable—like Turner paintings, or early R.E.M. songs. With their flares, halos, and squiggles, they had atmosphere, but little documentary value. Nor could I readily learn from mistakes, since film was costly to buy and to develop, and took too long besides. (This, kids, is how it was: You'd point your camera at a sunset, click the shutter, and then...nothing else would happen. For, like, weeks. Back at home, you'd drop the film off at a "lab." A lab! Then you'd wait again. Finally, the proof would come back: test results negative. Your pictures are terrible. That sunset was ho-hum. You did not have a fabulous vacation after all.)

These days you don't even choose to carry a camera, because *everything* is a camera; you're carrying one right now. And it's practically idiotproof. Technology has pretty much removed trial and error from the equation, along with most of the skill prerequisite. Now, just as *Guitar Hero* can convince a tone-deaf arrhythmic he's musician material, 2014 cameras can fool anyone into thinking they're Richard Avedon.

I recently got myself a Sony DSC-RX100, a magical device that seems as giant a leap forward from my high school Kodak as that was from a pinhole. Not only does it perform the miracle of turning light into image; it transforms my stabs-in-the-dark into something resembling art—or at least a half-decent screen saver. Nothing like positive reinforcement: now I snap upwards of 10,000 pictures a year. (I've adopted that old adage "Leave only footprints, take insane amounts of photographs.")

Granted, only a few hundred are any good. Of these, three or four might wind up in an actual frame. A few dozen I'll deem worthy of sharing online. The really bad ones will be deleted, if I'm diligent. But the overwhelming majority will languish in digital shoeboxes, buried in the cloud or a spare hard drive, seldom if ever to be seen again. So why, then, are we taking so damn many photos? And whom are we taking them for? Are we just outsourcing our overtaxed memories, excusing ourselves from recalling every fleeting moment and detail? Or are we just lazily honing our photography skills, now that it costs next to nothing to do so? (We've certainly raised our collective game in the digital age—or learned to fake it well enough.)

For travelers, "the very activity of taking pictures is soothing," Susan Sontag once wrote, "and assuages general feelings of disorientation." (She said that in 1977. Imagine what she'd think today.) Perhaps, then as now, we simply use photographs to ground and orient ourselves—to put a familiar frame around an inscrutable scene. Then again, maybe this *Onion* headline sums it up best: 6-day visit to rural african village completely changes woman's facebook profile picture.

Social media, of course, has introduced us to a whole new form of travel anxiety. Perhaps the real issue isn't that we take too many travel photos; it's that we rely too much on what those photos—and their reception—say about our travels. (*Did people like it? How many favorites?*) I've certainly questioned my own motivations for charting a trip in pictures, as well as the conclusions I've drawn from them. Would I remember the Painted Desert less positively had my photos gotten fewer likes on Instagram? If dappled sunlight falls in the forest and nobody retweets it, was it really so beautiful after all?

I'd like to think I shoot photos not just to impress followers, but to help my future self remember where I was and what I saw there. However, a recent study suggests that photo-taking may *inhibit* recollection. Fairfield University's Linda A. Henkel led her subjects through an art museum, asking them to photograph 15 specific artworks and to merely "look at" 15 others. When tested, they recalled fewer details from artworks they'd photographed than from those they'd simply observed. (Some didn't even remember which works they'd shot.)

So, has relentless picture-taking corroded our memory? Not necessarily. Henkel cites a phenomenon called "the enactment effect," wherein "people better remember actions they have performed than actions they have only thought about or observed." Thoughtfully composing a shot forces one to focus more intently on the object in question. Indeed, when the Fairfield subjects were told to zoom in and shoot certain details from the artworks, they remembered the works more clearly.

There's another twist, though. It's not enough just to take the picture; you also have to revisit it later. Photos help us to remember "only if we actually access and interact with them, rather than just amass them," Henkel writes. But how often do we do *that* anymore? Have you spent any time reviewing old Flickr sets, or browsing through last year's Instagram feed? Me neither. The sheer amount of images our eyes ingest in a given day makes us far less inclined to flip through pictures from the past.

A photograph used to be a physical souvenir, like a ticket stub or a snow globe (or, yeah, a postcard). It translated sensation into substance, the temporal into the tangible. A digital image is as ephemeral as the moment it captures: snap it, post it, and for all intents and purposes it's gone from your life. For most of us, photography is about immediate gratification more than about posterity—a document of the present for the present, not the future.

I actually do have one picture from that trip to Europe 33 summers ago. It's a glossy 4x6, snapped by a photo vendor as we boarded a canal boat in Amsterdam, then grudgingly purchased by my dad when I insisted we needed proof we were there. The scene is like a paparazzi ambush: my dad fumbling for our tickets, mom digging in her purse for a Kleenex, and gawky little me, hand over face, startled by this stranger with a flashbulb.

Decades later I can summon up the sensations of Europe in 1981 as if they were last Tuesday—my lumpy twin bed in Amsterdam, the curious bubble-gum flavors of

Belgium, the *pffit-pffit-pffit* rattle of our rented Peugeot, the weird taste of French o.j., the distinctly Roman smell of sewers and pastry. But actually picturing the trip—what Europe looked like, what Europeans looked like, what *I* looked like behind that upraised palm—is another thing altogether. Perhaps my nonvisual recollections are more intense for the lack of pictorial evidence, so often a substitute for memory. But would a few more photos have helped? Would a thousand? As it is, I have just the one, along with a shoebox full of boat-ticket stubs and bubble-gum wrappers to show for that mind-altering summer. The postcards we bought were all mailed elsewhere.

Type to enter text