# Taking Better Deck Photos

## Get great shots without spending a lot of money on equipment

by Clemens Jellema

When I started building decks in the early 1990s, I was also a semi-professional photographer with a 50-pound bag filled with cameras, tripods, light meters, and filters. Digital photography has made taking deck photos and sharing them with clients a lot less complicated. And because most photos are now viewed on a computer monitor, tablet, or smartphone, you don't need a lot of megapixels to share your photos, unless you plan to have your work published or do some serious printing.

But whether you're using a pro-grade DSLR or the camera on your smartphone, you need to understand basic photographic principles and learn how your camera works to take professional-looking photographs.

### Equipment

More important than the type or brand of your camera is that you have some control over its functions (**Figure 1**). To control the lightness and darkness—or exposure—of the image, for example, you need to be able to manually set the lens aperture and shutter speed. To avoid "grainy" images, you should also be able to adjust the light sensitivity of the image sensor by changing the ISO setting.

***Sensor.*** The image sensor is the heart of any digital camera. Its pixels capture light and convert it into electrical signals. Pro-level DSLR cameras typically have what are called full-frame sensors, which are the same size as the 36mm x 24mm film frame of a standard 35mm film camera. Your smartphone has a smaller—or "crop"—sensor. The size of the sensor is more important than sensor resolution—as measured in megapixels—in determining image quality. A full-frame sensor may contain the same number of pixels as your smartphone, but the pixels themselves will be larger and capture more light, so the images will be cleaner with more dynamic range.

**Figure 1. A mirrorless camera, such as the author's Sony a7R, has an electronic viewfinder that displays depth of field, exposure, and post-processing info before the shutter is pressed.**


**Figure 2. An image is well-exposed when there aren't peaks (too much information) or gaps (missing information) on the sides of the histogram (inset). The number of pixels devoted to highlights is indicated to the right of the histogram, while the number of pixels devoted to shadows is indicated to the left. Shadows are easier to recover in post-processing than highlights.**

*Lens.* The angle of view and the magnification of an image are determined by the focal length of the camera lens. For shooting outdoor projects with a full-frame camera, the ideal focal length is between 15mm and 70mm. A 50mm lens will produce an image that will be similar to what the human eye sees.

Unfortunately, most lens specs are based on full-frame sensors, which can be confusing if you have a camera with an APS-C sensor, such as one of Canon's popular EOS Rebel-series SLRs. APS-C sensors have a 1.5 crop factor, so if you use a lens with a focal length of 50mm, then you are really getting a 75mm lens. If your camera has a 4/3 sensor (with a 2.0 crop factor), the 50mm lens would be the equivalent of a 100mm lens—a better full-frame lens choice for this camera would be between 10mm and 50mm. There are, however, many lenses designed with shorter focal lengths and smaller image circles that are optimized for smaller sensors.

*Tripod.* I own a Gitzo GT531 carbon-fiber tripod with a ball head, and a Gitzo GT1541 with a Novoflex ClassicBall 5 head; I probably use one or the other in my deck photography 90% of the time. With a tripod, I can slow down and take a good look at my composition, making as many adjustments as I need to. In low-light conditions, the shutter speed will be slower, so a tripod is essential for stabilizing the camera and avoiding a blurry image.

*Filters.* Most filtering can be done with photo editing software, but there are a couple of filters that I can't do without. A circular polarizing filter removes glare on water (great when you've just cleaned the deck and it is still wet) and saturates colors, making a scene more vibrant.

I also often use a graduated neutral density filter to darken a bright sky by a few stops, which improves the exposure of the image. The same filtering can be done with editing software, but you run the risk that the sky will be over-exposed or even clipped.

## Camera Settings

In "program mode," a camera uses algorithms to automatically set shutter speed,

**Figure 3. The dining set is the focal point of most decks. To stage it, the author uses one of several sets of dinnerware he owns and often asks the homeowner to supply accessories.**

aperture, and ISO to get a proper exposure. "Aperture mode" presets the desired lens opening, or f-stop, and the camera chooses the proper shutter speed and ISO. When there are moving objects in the scene and I want to increase the shutter speed to freeze the action, I use "shutter mode," and the camera adjusts the aperture and ISO. In "manual mode," of course, you'll need to set the aperture, the shutter speed, and the camera's ISO.

*ISO.* The lower the ISO setting of your camera, the more light will be required for a proper exposure. Low ISO settings are generally used with bright outdoor lighting, resulting in an image with less noise and finer "grain." As you increase the ISO, the sensor becomes more light sensitive, so high ISO settings are generally used indoors and in low-light situations. Since the higher the ISO, the noisier or grainier the shot, I usually keep the ISO setting between 100 and 400. If you're in doubt, you can use your camera's auto ISO setting.

*Exposure.* Your camera has a metering system that creates an average reading of what you see through your viewfinder that is not too dark and not too bright. Based on that information, the camera will determine the settings for a correct exposure (if it's in an automatic mode). But sometimes you need to fool the camera a bit. For example, when the sun sets and the backyard gets darker, I underexpose the image, adjusting the f-stop by a half stop, a full stop, and then a stop and a half as it gets darker.

Most digital cameras now have an AEB (auto exposure bracket) setting. When you press the shutter, the camera takes multiple pictures: typically, one with the correct exposure, one that's underexposed, and one that's overexposed (usually in one-stop increments). This function is useful when there is a high degree of contrast between light and dark areas. Editing software can later be used to combine the three images to produce a photo with the proper exposure. iPhones and many other smartphones perform this task automatically when you turn the HDR (High Dynamic Range) setting on.

To see if the exposure reading is accurate, I check the image's histogram (**Figure 2**). The histogram is a graphical representation of the tonal distribution in a digital image, with the left side of the graph showing the dark areas or shadows, the right side showing the bright areas or highlights, and the middle area showing the mid-tones. The peaks in the graph show how many pixels are being used to represent each particular tone.

## Capturing the Image

Photography is all about light. The best time to shoot an outdoor project is two to three hours before sunset until twilight. Depending on the season and your location, prime time is anywhere between 3 and 8 p.m. Of course, the light is just as good in the morning as in the evening; if the deck is completely shaded in the evening, then I go in the morning and set up a breakfast table. But I prefer evenings, because I can set up the table for dinner, and because I have more time for the set-up. I always bring a few cheap construction lamps with 3,500K daylight bulbs in case I need extra light.

To prevent harsh shadows, I prefer to

**Figure 4. Some cameras offer auto panoramic stitching. If yours does not, editing software can be used to create a panorama, but camera settings (including focus) will need to be set manually, and the camera lens will need to be rotated around its pivot point where the light enters the lens to avoid stitching problems later on.**

Figure 5. Keep your camera level or pointed toward the horizon; angling it downward or upward will cause parallel vertical lines to appear as if they are converging. A good height for shooting is at about 3 feet, or the height of a top railing, rather than at eye-level, to minimize this effect.

Figure 6. Most lenses have a "sweet spot"—usually around F/5.6 to F/11. With the camera on a tripod, use this setting with aperture-priority mode and let the camera set the shutter speed. Keep the ISO as low as possible (around 100 to 200) to avoid graininess.

shoot on a slightly overcast days. Most digital cameras aren't equipped to easily handle bright, sunny days with deep shadows, which typically results in areas that are either over- or under-exposed (this is where functions like AEB and HDR come in handy).

*Props.* Instead of taking photos of the deck or outdoor structure immediately after you've finished it, plan to come back on another day when the weather is good. That way, you can dress up the area you are going to photograph. I like to add furniture, such as a dining set or a coffee table, perhaps a grill, and often some plants to make a space look like it's being used for the purpose that it was originally designed for (**Figure 3**).

*What to shoot?* I try to capture at least one image that covers the entire project. Sometimes this means climbing up on a ladder to get a better view. I also like to shoot the image at different times—about every half-hour or so—to take advantage of the light, as it changes quickly.

If I can't capture the image in one shot with the lens I'm using, I sometimes take multiple shots, each overlapping the other, and stitch them together on my computer. It can get a little tricky to stitch with editing software, though many cameras and phones now have a built-in stitching function that simplifies the process (**Figure 4**).

I also like to take individual shots of each section of the deck, such as the dining, grilling, and relaxing areas (**Figure 5**). I set up the shots to make the areas look inviting and tell a story. Your potential clients may not be able to tell you exactly what they are looking for, but they can usually point to a photo and say, "That's it!"

Detail shots—of post or stair lights, graspable handrails, borders, and trim work—are useful too (**Figure 6**). I take lots of photos, since I've invested a lot of time getting to this point, and find it rewarding and enjoyable to capture my work. And who knows—one of my photos might lead to my next deck project. ❖

*Clemens Jellema owns Fine Decks Inc., in Calvert County, Md. finedecks.com.*