The Case for Tripods

Why buy a tripod when lenses have mechanisms for reducing camera shake, and cameras with high ISO ratings are reasonably priced? Are tripods really necessary these days?

A tripod’s sole purpose, other than fending off aggressive wildlife, is to keep your camera and lens completely still when you are taking a photograph. To a limited degree Image Stabilisation (IS) and Vibration Reduction (VR) lenses will help you cope with poor light. You can also use a high ISO setting to increase your shutter speed, but high ISO settings reduce the image quality, particularly with entry-level DSLR cameras.

Tripods give you the freedom to choose any ISO, any shutter speed and any aperture even when there is very little light, e.g. photographing the night sky. You can take your time and carefully examine the scene in your viewfinder before you press the shutter. They are particularly useful with landscape photography.

At the entry level end of the market tripod legs are sold together with a non-removable head, which will suit those on a tight budget.  With a little more cash to spend, a combination of a separate head and legs is a good choice.   With either option you’ll get on best with a tripod which will allow you to take photographs without bending over.  Here are some more advice for you if you are considering buying your legs and head as separate items. And be realistic about how much weight you are prepared to carry. Tripods are of little value if they are left in the boot of your car.

**The legs.**  Aluminium is strong and light, carbon fibre is lighter, stronger and more expensive.  You have a choice between 3 and 4 section legs.  4 section legs pack up slightly shorter, are a little heavier and they may be more stable.  4 section legs take a little longer to set up.  3 section legs tend to be a little cheaper for the same quality.

Most of us want to avoid having to adjust the legs for every photograph. A central column makes it quick to adjust the height of the head.  They can be a little loosely geared where you want firmness, but a quality product from a high end manufacturer should be stable.

Most manufacturers use locking tabs on the legs to set the height. These are quick and easy to use. Gitzo legs have a collar mechanism to lock the legs; it’s an acquired taste.  A 3 section set of aluminium legs with a central column and locking tabs would be a sensible purchase on a tight budget.

**The head** should allow you to move through all the angles easily, and support your camera at all times.  Some photographer buy a large and heavy head; this is unnecessary.  The main choice is between a pan and tilt mechanism, or a ball head.

With a ball head you use one knob to adjust your tripod in all directions but it requires precision and care to move it to the right position.  The pan and tilt head separates horizontal movement (pan) from vertical movement (tilt) with two separate knobs.  You set one, then the other.  It can take a little more time, but they are relatively simple steps.  With practice a ball head can be faster, although most tripod based work doesn’t require lightning speed.  Either head should have a quick release mechanism with a locking plate so that the camera can be detached easily and quickly. Most photographers find ball heads very user-friendly.

Adrian Stone Curator – The Photographic Angle