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WORDS & PHOTOS JON SPARKS

# PICTURE PERFECT

Good cycling imagery is more about preparation than having a high-megapixel camera. Photographer **Jon Sparks** puts you in the picture

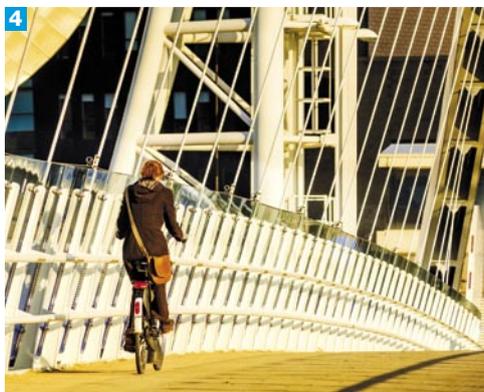
**Y**ou wouldn't ride the West Highland Way on a road bike. On the other hand, a skilled rider on a simple hardtail MTB could do it far better than I could on the latest full-suspension wonderbike. It's the same for photography. A simple camera used well can deliver a far better set of pictures than the finest digital SLR (DSLR) in careless hands. In the right hands, the DSLR can do more, and do it better, than a compact or smartphone, but it's still the alliance of eye and brain that matters most.

Successful photography starts before you pick up the camera. Professionals don't just turn up and hope for the best; they prepare and plan. We can all do this, and it costs nothing. It just means thinking ahead about the sort of photos you want from your ride or tour. It might also mean looking at photos you admire or which inspire you, and trying to work out what makes them successful. Above all, it means understanding that great shots rarely, if ever, 'just happen'.

## STOP RIGHT THERE

A fundamental fact is that, to photograph your rides, you need to stop. Yes, you can shoot video – and stills too – with a 'point of view' camera on your helmet or chest, but the vast majority of POV-cam footage is diabolically dull; 'point of view' mostly means the same point of view, over and over and over. I have taken handheld shots while riding, but that's not always safe nor practical; 99% of the time, shooting means stopping.

If you stop too much, every ride will take twice as long, and eventually no one



will want to ride with you, so you really need to make those stops count, especially when the miles are long or the schedule tight. Above all, getting good photos means stopping in the places that are right for pictures, rather than just hauling the camera out when you stop for other reasons. Naturally, the moments that make the best pictures are usually the ones when you least want to stop and take photos: grinding up a Pyrenean col, descending a tricky mountain bike trail, or just spinning joyously along a country lane.

Dedication may not mean carrying a huge camera and battery of lenses, but it does mean you'll have a more stop-start ride than everyone else. And you generally need to get well ahead before you stop. Either you'll have to be stronger and faster than the folks you ride with (in my dreams!) or you'll have to negotiate with them to wait, or at least ease off, while you forge ahead.

When you do stop, it's in everyone's interest to keep the delay to a minimum. Clearly it pays to keep the camera accessible. A compact or smartphone can ride in a back pocket, while an SLR is more awkward to carry. On-road, a bar-bag is best for speedy access, but cameras will need additional protection from road-buzz, whether it's a dedicated pouch or layers of bubble-wrap. Off-road, the vibration issue is far worse and few people use bar-bags anyway. A pouch on a waist-belt is a good solution when walking, less so when riding; stashing the camera in your backpack is safer and less distracting while riding but makes access slower. I've found a chest-harness the best compromise but initial setup and fitting can be tricky. >

### In the photos

**1** Little room to get off the trail, but I scrambled up as best I could. Wish I'd had a wider lens!

**2** Bikes are for riding – mostly. The occasional off-bike shot can tell part of the story

**3** A slower shutter-speed (1/80th) preserves the sense of movement in this panning shot

**4** Standing well back with a long lens reduced the view to just a few elements

**5** If you're riding alone, use a self-timer. I shot a burst of 9 frames at 1/2 second intervals



## THE BIGGER PICTURE

[thinktankphoto.com](http://thinktankphoto.com)

– Excellent range of camera bags, belts and harnesses

[joby.com/gorillapod](http://joby.com/gorillapod)

– Uniquely flexible tripods that support cameras where nothing else can

[dpreview.com](http://dpreview.com)

– Comprehensive and authoritative camera review site

[connect.dpreview.com](http://connect.dpreview.com) –

Sister site dedicated to mobile photography

[sansmirror.com](http://sansmirror.com) –

Expert site devoted to the new breed of interchangeable lens cameras

[sebrogers.com/blog.html](http://sebrogers.com/blog.html) –

Inspirational images and insight from top mountain bike photographer

[lowepro.com/intl](http://lowepro.com/intl)

– Another source of great backpacks, pouches and more

[iphoneography.com](http://iphoneography.com)

– Blog devoted to 'shooting, editing and sharing' with an iPhone

[sigma-imaging-uk.com/lens](http://sigma-imaging-uk.com/lens) –

Sigma is better known for lenses than for cameras

[store.aquapac.net](http://store.aquapac.net)

– Weather protection for cameras and other devices

[www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)

– publisher of 'Outdoor Photography', by Jon Sparks and Chiz Dakin. £14.95, ISBN 9781852846466

› While an SLR may be more trouble to carry, it can be left switched on and will be ready to shoot instantly, which beats waiting for a compact to extend its lens or swiping to wake up an iPhone. To save more time, before stowing the camera away, make sure that its settings are, as far as possible, how you'll need them at the next stop.

### TAKING THE SHOT

One reason why it pays to get well ahead before shooting is that it's generally better to shoot riders coming towards you rather than in rear view. However... do your mates normally ride with cheesy grins on their faces, or only when the camera comes out? In general, images will look more natural if riders are engaging with each other or with their surroundings – chatting with each other on a safe road, or focused on the line ahead on a tight corner or a rocky descent. Ask people to ride normally, without

looking at the camera.

All riding shots are action shots, and action shots depend on timing. This is one area where cameras are far from equal. Some respond virtually instantly when you press the button, but sadly far too many still exhibit significant 'shutter lag'. You can try to compensate by anticipating the decisive moment, but this is tricky, especially with fast action. Shutter lag is often due to the camera trying to focus, so one remedy is to prefocus on the crucial spot, picking a marker on the road or trail. Usually you can prefocus by half-pressing and holding the shutter release.

Prefocusing works well for single shots, but trying to shoot a sequence or burst with a moving target demands either a really good autofocus system or highly-developed manual focusing skills. Many cameras simply can't follow focus on fast-moving subjects, especially head-on, when the camera-subject distance changes most rapidly.



**Sigma DP-1 Merrill**  
£799

For careful users this solid little camera delivers incomparable image quality on landscape, architecture and the like. But it's too slow for action shooting and lousy battery life makes it hopeless for long trips travelling light. Very nice, but very niche.

[sigmaphoto.com](http://sigmaphoto.com)



**Olympus OM-D E-M5**  
£839 (body only)

Chris Juden's system of choice, as a tourist who wants to cover the full range of focal lengths at SLR quality, but with only about half the weight and bulk. It produces consistently excellent JPGs and has a wide choice of lenses. (Jon prefers the Nikon 1 V1 for its superfast autofocus.)

[olympus.co.uk](http://olympus.co.uk)



**Nikon D7100** £999  
(body only)

Nikon's latest DSLR has the same focusing system as the D4 which top pros use, so it's great for shooting cyclists in action – and pretty much anything else besides. It'll shrug off a few knocks as well, and image quality is outstanding. Not revolutionary but nicely evolutionary.

[nikon.co.uk](http://nikon.co.uk)



**Pentax WG-3 GPS**  
£283

Shockproof and waterproof, this is one of the toughest compact cameras you can buy. It's designed to be operated when wearing gloves. It's a good job it has a fast lens as image quality suffers at higher ISO ratings. There's a cheaper version without GPS.

[pentax.co.uk](http://pentax.co.uk)

#### In the photos

6 Evening shadows, both on the road and on the landscape beyond, add depth to this simple shot. (Twiston Moor, Lancashire)

If your camera can't handle this kind of shot, don't despair. There are other ways to capture action. Ideally suited for cycling, the classic panning technique involves standing to the side and tracking moving rider(s) with the camera. The side-on view keeps camera-subject distance relatively constant, making focusing much easier.

If you use a relatively slow shutter speed when panning, riders stay relatively sharp while the background becomes blurred by the camera movement. Sports mode, which would appear to be the first choice for action shots, doesn't work for this as it will set too fast a shutter speed. Look for 'shutter-priority mode' instead. Panning is easier with a bit of distance, using a longer lens or zoom setting. This may mean stepping well back on a wide verge, or crossing to the other side of the road.

Extra distance can bring other advantages: stepping a few paces off the road or trail can introduce foreground interest, and helps to show the rider in their setting, whether a majestic landscape or grimy urban commute. Even more simply, side views make a change from head-on ones. However, extra distance translates to extra time required to get the shot.

#### PEOPLE AND PLACES

Not every shot has to be an action shot, or even include bikes at all. The story of a ride includes the places you see and the people you meet. People pictures are one thing that almost every camera can do pretty well, and getting good portraits relies on your 'people skills' as much as on photographic ones. My key tip for better portraits is to turn the flash off whenever possible. On-camera flash is fine for 'fill-in' light, to brighten hard shadows, but generally horrible as the main light for a portrait.

One person can easily get forgotten: yourself. In a group, hand the camera to someone else occasionally. If you're riding on your own, you can use the >



#### iPhone 4 and iPhone 5 £319+

The iPhone 4 proved once and for all that smartphones (well, some smartphones) can take decent pictures. It's no match for a DSLR but competes with many compact cameras, and there's only one device to carry. Shooting fast continuous sequences is a weakness.

[apple.com/uk](http://apple.com/uk)



#### Think Tank Photo Digital Holster 20 £44

Neat, tough camera pouch. Low profile with minimal superfluous bulk is ideal for on-bike use. Shown on a waist-belt but there's a chest harness available or you can clip/bungee it to backpack straps.

[thinktankphoto.com](http://thinktankphoto.com)

NB. All prices shown are RRP. Actual prices may be lower.

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Lightweight, high performance wheelsets with Nano Technology for pure speed

[www.use1.com](http://www.use1.com)



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**In the photos**

**7** A tight corner brought the speed right down but the body-lean still gives lots of dynamism – and in a 40-lap race there were lots of chances to perfect the shot! (Rob Hayles, Tour Series race, Blackpool)

**8** A wet, cold day – the weather was even worse than it looks. But at least the rain filled up the puddle and made this shot possible (Kirroughtree, 7stanes, Scotland)

self-timer. Keep an eye open for suitable places to perch the camera for this. It's hard to ensure you'll be in the right place when the shutter fires; I noticed a great improvement when I acquired a camera that could shoot a burst of up to nine shots on self-timer.

Taking pictures of places – grandiosely called 'landscape photography' – is as rewarding as it is challenging. With an action shot or a portrait you generally have a clear idea what (or who) the subject is. With landscape, this is not so clear. You can say that the subject is 'the view' or 'the landscape', but where does this begin or end? The problem of capturing that vast three-dimensional landscape around you in a small rectangular frame is often called 'composition'. Composition is a loaded word; above all, it's weighed down with far too much talk about rules.

Of course, great pictures don't happen without thought. But too much thought can paralyse you. The so-called rules of composition frequently do just that. In fact, there's more than enough to think about without them: what you can see and what you want to say about it; what's in the picture and what's left out; where you shoot from and the focal length you use.

So, my first rule of composition is: forget Rules of Composition. If I had my way we'd dump the C word and talk about 'framing' instead. Above all, ignore the pundits who determine the worth of an image by whether or not it follows some arbitrary 'rule'. One of the greatest of all landscape photographers, Ansel Adams, said, 'There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.'

Adams also said, 'A good photograph is knowing where to stand.' This is as true for action shots as it is for landscape. Shoot from the right spot and there's a good chance other things will fall into place. Be mobile: and

be aware that zooming the lens does not have the same effect as physically changing your position.

**SHOOT MORE**

In the end, the best way to improve as a photographer is to take more pictures – as long as you think about what you're doing. I grind my teeth when people say digital means you can 'take loads of shots and one of them will be good'. It hardly ever works that way; fire off 50 shots without thinking and you'll get 50 shots that look like you weren't thinking. However, digital does give you the freedom to experiment without wasting expensive film – and because you can review your shots instantly you can see what works and what doesn't, which can speed up the learning process no end.

Even if you're not wasting film, you can be hammering your batteries. The worst battery life I've encountered is a measly 60 shots; my SLRs can rattle off well over 1,000 shots between charges. Know how your camera performs, and carry a spare battery rather than run dry just before the top of the Tourmalet. On tour it's a toss-up between carrying extra batteries and carrying a charger. (Make sure you have enough memory card capacity as well.)

In fact, big rides (whether 'big' means long or just important) may not be the time to experiment, but to consolidate. Get the practice out of the way beforehand; take the camera on those 'ordinary' weekend or evening rides when the stakes aren't so high, and use those to learn what it can and can't do. Most cameras can do more than you think – just as many bikes can. To get better on the bike, you ride more; to get better with the camera, shoot more. But don't let it become a chore. Photography is like cycling: it's meant to be fun. ☺

**PICTURE THAT**

WIN AN ORTLIEB BAR BAG WITH CAMERA INSERT AND GORILLAPOD CLASSIC WORTH £107.50, PLUS OTHER GREAT PRIZES



We're running a competition for the best cycling photos by members. The pictures can be about any aspect of cycling. The winner, as judged by Gordon Seabright CTC CEO, will win an Ortlieb Ultimate Handlebar Bag with padded camera insert and a GorillaPod Classic mini tripod. Two runners up and six best-in-category winners will receive their own GorillaPod. There are six categories: Family, Performance Road, Commuting, Touring, Group Riding, and Trail. All submissions will be also added to CTC's photo library so you could see your handiwork in CTC's publications. To enter, upload your images at [www.ctc.org.uk/photo-comp](http://www.ctc.org.uk/photo-comp) by following the simple instructions given there.

**Rules and regulations**

1. Entry deadline is 31 July 2013.
2. Digital images only, inc. scans.
3. Entrants may submit multiple images, at any file size.
4. Prizes as described. Each entrant is eligible for one prize only.
5. The decision of the judge is final.
6. Entrants must have personally taken the image(s) supplied.
7. Entrants undertake that the image(s) supplied will not, to the best of their knowledge, infringe copyright or other actionable right.
8. Entrants recognise that CTC may crop or cosmetically edit the image.
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