



Taking pictures
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Cell Magic

The power of convenience entices a pro shooter

BY NICK JANS

THAT EARLY MAY EVENING ON THE upper Klehini, the light was going wild. Snow-streaked mountains, the river, budding stands of cottonwood—the whole world was bathed in low-angled sun that might as well have been honey. Dropping whatever I was doing to make the rounds of prime photo spots was a no-brainer. So there I was, tooling around with not so much as a single professional SLR camera, let alone my whole kit. Instead, all I carried for picture making was tucked in my pocket: an oblong rectangular gadget less than a half inch thick. Yep, a cell phone. Even though its camera ranked at the top of the heap, I couldn't escape the notion that I was guilty of being professionally underdressed and more than a tad lazy. Still, I'd made the decision to leave my 20-pound camera bag at home, and focus (pardon the pun) on what that toy-sized gizmo could do.

Just a couple of years ago, I was one of the last smart phone holdouts in the known universe. The cell I sometimes carried was a 20-buck flip phone that I used for on-the-move calls, period. I swore that I would never be one of those bazillions of people relying on some hunk of plastic and miniaturized circuitry to order his life, meanwhile taking snapshots of pretty much everything from pets to his dinner plate—and most annoyingly of all, himself. But my wife Sherrie kept insisting that due to my solo adventures and work travel, I needed to be in better contact. Especially with her.

Though she was right as usual, she had to drag me into the phone store. After an hour-plus of browsing, fiddling, and asking, I found my baby. No accident I chose one featuring a big, bright screen, a 16-megapixel camera, and an image-processing chip that seemed just short of magical in its ability to create great-

High quality cell phone cameras produce good wide-angle shots.

looking images, even in sketchy light.

I've been in love ever since. Not with the phone, which I like just fine; but with that camera. Suddenly I found myself taking hundreds of shots that I otherwise wouldn't have, and shooting at least a few frames almost every day. I'd always found the heft of a full-size camera to be a definite barrier, both physically and psychologically. It's work to lug that thing around on your everyday routines, let alone up a mountain; and awkward to bring it out in a crowd of strangers and start pointing it around. Plus, a big camera is an expensive, delicate chunk of gear that you need to constantly protect from weather, breakage, and theft. Then there's the self-imposed pressure when you've got that kind of gear: Get on it. Be serious and keep looking for shots. There goes at least some of the fun, whether it's a wedding or a walk in the woods. Even a much smaller point and shoot camera seems to bear some of the same personal stigmas. I've got a couple, but I just don't seem to carry or use them as much as I should.

My smartphone, on the other hand, slips right into my pocket and rides flush; I scarcely know it's there until I need it. Plus, it's got all those other uses, from helping me find an address to jotting down my errand list to (of course) texting Sherrie. If one of my real cameras did all those things, I'd probably carry it more often. Too, since everyone's got a cell and is using it, if you're shooting in a crowd, you blend in rather than stick out.

There's something more going on. Taking pictures is not only easy; it's fun again. I don't end up twiddling dials, changing lenses and filters or zoom length, and fussing about depth of field and shutter speed. The cell camera doesn't offer many choices, and those are made by quick taps and drags. I just compose and shoot. Thanks to that cool processor, the image often looks fine, right there on the screen. If not, no big deal—it was just a cell snapshot. Not only that, sharing an image is as simple as click and send; with a pro-style camera, you need to download the image, process it on your computer (even a JPEG on my best Nikon needs Photoshop tweaking), then

share via email. It ends up happening later, or not at all.

Here's the kicker: in capable hands, a top-end cell camera can be a useful professional tool. The images for this column were made with my phone camera; and all three pictures from my two pieces in last month's issue were cell shots, too. Those images illustrate the smartphone wheelhouse: they're great for grabbing wide-angle scenics and people shots, tight detail images, and inches-away macros of sometimes surprising quality.

That's the good news. Now the caveats. First, most cell cameras of the current generation aren't good enough to produce such results. I chose my phone, the Samsung Galaxy Note 5, because of its superior 16MP front camera and that big, bright screen. In side-by-side tests with other top brands, I've not seen one come close to equaling it—though the latest Google phone and Apple iPhone 7-plus are highly rated (oddly enough, Samsung's just released Note 8 features only a 12MP front camera). Also, a phone camera may be a useful tool, but its application is limited. It's usually not capable of producing professional results beyond a single magazine page size, and to be safe, I'd say

half that. If you want up-close wildlife or any telephoto at all, forget it. Touch that digital zoom or crop in more than a tad, and the finished image collapses into artifact-riddled, detail-void mush. You can buy various optical zoom gadgets to attach to existing cells, but I'd say that's defeating the whole point. That said, cells with built-in optical zooms and other more advanced features are right around the corner, and they're only going to get better.

So, am I ditching my professional kit? Hell, no. In fact, I'm contemplating the next expensive upgrade. There's a reason I lug around all that stuff. It's necessary. But I'm also keeping my totally scalable and fun new toy handy. Keep in mind as you cell-snap away that the most important element of any image remains the person holding the camera. For optimal results, you need a sharp eye, good light, a rock-steady hand (always brace on something if you can), and an understanding of basic photographic craft. Go for it, and see what happens. 📷

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The author took this close-up of a boreal toad, one of only three amphibians that live in the state, with his cell phone camera.