

Shopping for a tripod

Even the steadiest hand sometimes needs a little help.

by Russell Shaw

As an ardent amateur photographer who loves to take outdoor photos, I never go anywhere without my digital camera and my tripod. But I wasn't always so well prepared.

To paraphrase the opening line from a famously bad novel, it was a dark and stormy day in January of last year. I was perched on a blustery outcropping,

several hundred feet above the pounding surf of the Oregon coast. The icy wind had chilled me to the bone and set my teeth to chattering as I desperately tried to

hold my camera still. But I knew that capturing this incredible scene would render it all worthwhile.

When I returned home and transferred my shots into my computer, I was crushed by the realization that the slow shutter speed and wide-open aperture necessary to make the shot, combined with my hands trembling from the cold, had produced nothing more than a series of blurry and useless images.

A few days later, I found myself in my girlfriend's house, taking photos of a small pendant that had been a gift from her late grandmother. The macro setting needed to photograph the jewelry close up required an absolutely steady camera—the slightest twitch of my hand would have ruined the shot. When I loaded these shots onto my computer, the pictures were perfect.

How did I manage this feat? Well, it wasn't reduced coffee consumption on my part. Between the coast shoot and the pendant session, I broke down and bought a tripod. What took me so long, you ask? I had resisted the notion of tripods for many years because I thought they'd be more of a hindrance than a benefit to my photography. I considered the three-legged gear to be a necessary

evil for the pros, but an avoidable nuisance for the rest of us.

I was only fooling myself; deep down, I knew that a good tripod delivers crisper pictures because it holds your camera steady under the most challenging conditions.

→ A lightweight monopod.



STEADY AS YOU GO

You won't want or need to use a tripod in every situation, but once you own one, you'll find it to be indispensable in many circumstances: Shooting a nighttime cityscape using a long exposure; shooting outdoors in cold, windy weather; taking close-ups using your camera's macro mode; and anytime you include yourself in the shot are just a few examples.

A tripod lets you set up your shot for whatever shutter speed, aperture, and other camera settings are most appropriate for the scene, without having to worry that your shot will be marred by camera shake during an extended exposure. Using a tripod takes your mind off the physical act of holding the camera and allows you to concentrate entirely on composing your shot, adjusting the height



→ Bogen Imaging's Manfrotto model 3258 tripod will raise your camera as high as 9 feet, or hold it as low as 17.4 inches.

and camera angle, and choosing the right camera settings until everything is just so.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Tripods can be divided into three broad categories: full-size, table-top, and monopod (okay, technically that last one isn't—by definition—a tripod). Within these categories, you'll find that not all tripods are created equal: generally speaking, the stronger and more stable the tripod, the more expensive it will be.

Monopods, as you've probably guessed, have a single leg. Unlike a three-legged tripod, a monopod can't support a camera on its own, but they're one of the tools of the trade for sports and nature photographers who use heavy cameras with very long telephoto lenses. A monopod requires less physical space on location, and it's much easier to pick up and move from one spot to the next. Monopods range in price from about \$30 to more than \$100.

If all your photography will be done in a single location—a photo studio, for instance—you won't mind trading weight for rigidity, stability, and a bevy of features. Bogen Imaging's Manfrotto model 3258 tripod (\$605), for example, weighs a staggering 17.5 pounds, but it's capable of supporting up to 44 pounds (rendering it suitable for large video cameras, as well as still cameras). It can squat as low as 17 inches or reach as high as 9 feet.

If your photography leans more toward location shooting—traipsing through the woods looking for the ideal bird photo-op, for instance—you'll be more interested in light weight. Bogen's Manfrotto Compact Digi-Tripod (\$127) can only support 5.5 pounds, but it's only a little over a foot long when closed and it tips the scales at just 2.2 pounds. And then there's the

unique ClamperPod, which sells for just \$12.95.

Table-top tripods are handy for shooting close-ups both in the studio and on location. As their name implies, these devices are short and compact. Although they might only rise five or six inches, you can put them on a table, a rock, or even a tree to gain additional height. Their primary purpose is to provide a stable platform. Table-top tripods are less expensive than their full-size cousins, generally ranging in price from as low as \$15 to as much as \$100.

MEANS OF SUPPORT

When shopping for a tripod, rigidity should be your first consideration. A tripod that flexes easily won't provide much stability for your camera. Tripods with legs divided into three sections are typically stronger than four-section models, and models manufactured using tubular metal are typically more rigid than U-shaped designs. If you want to go all-out, check out the exotic models made from carbon-fiber, which are both stronger and lighter than most metal alloys.

Leg locks prevent an extended tripod from collapsing, and these come in two styles. Twisting leg locks are sleeker, because there are no protruding knobs; quick-release clamping leg locks, on the other hand, are easier to work with. If you find yourself frequently shooting outdoors, you'll want a tripod with retractable spiked feet. The spikes will dig into the soil and offer additional stability.

Legs aren't the only component you'll want to consider. The tripod's head—the component that the camera actually mounts to—is at least as important as its legs. Most tripods use a pan head with two or three control knobs for adjusting the angle of the camera. As you can imagine, it can take a lot of effort to

get just the right angle when you're fiddling with three different knobs. Better tripods use a ball head with a single knob that allows virtually unlimited camera positioning.

Some tripods use a 1/4- or 3/8-inch threaded bolt to hold your camera; others feature a quick-release plate that mounts to the bottom of the camera and then clamps to the tripod head. The latter design is much easier to work with, particularly if you frequently take the camera on and off the tripod. The presence of a bubble level on the tripod head will prevent off-kilter shots.



→ Turn a chair into a tripod with the unique ClamperPod (\$12.95).

It's far easier to determine a tripod's suitability for your purposes by physically handling it than by reading a spec chart, so we'd encourage you to visit a store and try out several models, preferably with your own camera, before settling on one. ■

CONTACT INFO

Here are a few notable tripod manufacturers.

BOGEN IMAGING
www.bogenimaging.us

CLAMPERPOD
www.clamperpod.com

SLIK
www.thkphoto.com/products/slik

SUNPAK
www.tocad.com/tripods.html