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# Better Asian Market Photography

*8 Tips to Get Great Shots*



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## Get Better Asian Market Shots!

Asian markets have long been a popular draw for photographers, particularly street & travel photographers. It's easy to see why – they're a riot of colour, shape, and activity, full of people who are too busy working to worry about that weirdo pointing a camera at them.

And yet a lot of the market photography we see online tends to be samey and cliched – piles of fruit, smiling stallholders (a staple of any photographer's visit to a market in SE Asia in particular), price tags etc.

I spend a lot of time shooting in the markets of Bangkok with my photo walk clients, and always try to help them get shots that are a bit different to the norm. That usually involves having more confidence in getting up close to people, thinking a bit differently, and taking more of a 'set it and forget it' approach to camera settings so we can all focus on what's important - getting good shots.

So this ebook is the result of countless hours spent in markets in Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, India and beyond, and features my top tips for making sure your next market shoot produces the goods. Happy shooting!

## Tip 1: Get Closer

Robert Capa's "If your pictures aren't good enough you're not close enough" is probably the most famous bit of photography advice of all time.

It's a particular issue for beginner photographers or those who haven't done much street photography, and have yet to overcome their fear of approaching strangers (which is why Bangkok, with its friendly locals, is a great city to learn in!).

Many photographers overcome this fear with long lenses, but these create a distance from the subject. I like to get right up close to people and, if they have the time, interact with them. It's the only way to get intimate, engaging people shots.



*Butcher, Mapusa market, Goa, India*

You'll probably also find that people will pose a little stiffly, or give you the standard Asian two-finger peace sign salute. If you want more relaxed shots, take a couple, then show the person the shots you've just taken - they'll usually laugh and relax, and that's the time to fire off a few more - and these will usually be the keepers.



*Fishmonger, Khlongtoey Market, Bangkok*

Most of the time you won't even need to ask permission at all - people busy working in the market won't even notice you're there and you can shoot away unnoticed.

If you do get spotted, chances are you'll get a smile and a wave, but if the subject objects or gets angry, simply apologise and move on - quickly if you have to!

## Tip 2: Embrace the Blur



*Man making rice flour pancakes, Plaeng Nam market, Bangkok*

When shooting in markets you don't always have time to perfectly compose the shot and adjust your settings – there's simply too much going on.

I usually shoot in A or P mode at an ISO of around 800, and don't always care if there's a bit of motion blur, as it helps convey a sense of movement and activity.

As the great Henri Cartier-Bresson said, “Sharpness is a bourgeois concept“, and that's particularly true of street photography. Don't get hung up on having a super-fast shutter speed – embrace the movement and chaos of the market and add some dynamism to your shots.

## Tip 3: Use Frames

Markets are a great place to find framing devices, some more obvious than others. Stall frames, hanging produce, awnings and so on all make great natural frames for your shots.

It's a case of having an eye for geometry, finding the right frame, and then waiting for someone - or something - to come along and fill it!



*Duck seller, Chinatown, Bangkok*

The most common framing device is the market stall itself, either literally - the framework of the stall - or, as in the example above, in the form of hanging produce. This makes for an interesting shot and featuring the produce itself adds some context to your pictures.



*Chicken stall at Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*

Not all frames are that obvious though - I must've walked past the stall in the above shot dozens of times before noticing that the cutout price tags made excellent frames.

And the picture below is an example of finding an interesting framing device - in this case the stacks of baskets - and waiting for someone to wander into the shot.



*Produce baskets, Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*

## Tip 4: Look at the Hands



*Old woman at Mapusa market, Goa*

Too often, photographers focus on faces without paying attention to the rest of the body – a particular lapse in markets where the hands are invariably doing interesting things!

So when you're photographing market workers, look at what they're doing and, if it's interesting, focus on the activity rather than the person.

Also, markets are home to people who work hard and have gnarly, wrinkled old hands to prove it! I met the old lady in the picture above at Mapusa Market in Goa, & as I was shooting her I noticed she had amazing hands, so they suddenly became the focus of the picture.



*Woman making garlands at Mapusa market, Goa*

## Tip 5: Get Quirky



Market stall at Khlongtoey market, Bangkok

If you're not too squeamish, the meat section is a goldmine for unusual shots. I squatted down next to this pig's head, also at Khlong Thoey, & waited for something to happen, and this girl very obligingly came and stood next to it to make a phone call!



Khlongtoey market, Bangkok

Don't just think about people & produce shots – look for unusual, quirky or humorous shots. In the picture above, taken at Khlong Thoey Market in Bangkok, I spotted the advertisement and waited a few minutes until someone walked behind it, to get the perfect shot.

## Tip 6: Use Layers

Layering – ie combining multiple subjects in the foreground and background (and, if you're really good at it, or lucky, the middle ground) is a difficult but very effective photography technique. You'll need a very narrow aperture to ensure maximum depth of field – F10 or narrower if the light permits – and be patient, but pictures with multiple layers invariably make the eye linger longer and convey a very dynamic atmosphere.

Layering can also be used to portray interesting contrasts such as in this picture, with one guy working hard whilst his friend does exactly the opposite!



*Fish sellers at Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*



*Cleaning time at Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*



## Tip 7: Light & Lines

Photography is, of course, all about light – the name literally means “drawing with light”. And markets, with their indoor and outdoor areas, and narrow beams of light shining down between awnings, are a real playground for light-aware photographers. The picture below, using spot metering to expose for the chopping boards and the seller’s hat, creates a real atmosphere of mystery in an otherwise busy market.



*Chopping board seller, Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*

An awareness of lines, and how they draw and direct the viewer’s eye, can be used to create really dynamic images and markets are full of them. In the shot to the right, the guy’s muscular arms, flying hair and visible effort already create a dynamic photo, and the lines of the shutters behind him and the umbrella in front of him really enhance the sense of movement.



*Umbrella repair man, Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*

## Tip 8: Tell Stories

A good picture doesn't just capture a moment – it tells a story. When composing, think about what you're seeing through the lens. Are you just taking a portrait or an action shot, or is there something more going on? Look for context, look for emotions, look at what else is happening within the frame and try to capture a picture that either tells a story, or leaves unanswered questions as to what is going on or what the subject is feeling.

The images below tell stories (respectively) of boredom, struggle, exhaustion and loneliness...or maybe you can read other stories into them?



*Bored market trader, Mapusa market, Goa*



*Man wrestling with chickens, Khlongtoey market, Bangkok*



*Sleeping market workers, Plaeng Nam market, Bangkok*



*Market worker surrounded by boxes & sacks, Old Market, Bangkok*

## Bonus Tip: Join My Photo Tour!

I regularly run photo tours/workshops in interesting locations in Bangkok - Khlongtoey market & slums, and the temples, alleyways & markets of Chinatown. I've helped hundreds of photographers get memorable shots of their visit to Bangkok and been able to help beginners improve their photography. Click the link below to find out more and make a booking!

[Tim Russell Photography Tours](#)



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