

Remember your early lessons in photography? Maximum sharpness requires minimum camera movement. If you've gotten into the handheld habit, reconsider the benefits of a tripod.

BY LAURENCE CHEN

Ready steady

CREATING NEW POSSIBILITIES WITH YOUR TRIPOD

Some photographers consider a tripod about as essential as a fish-eye lens—a nice thing to have on hand but seldom used. Moreover, some proudly proclaim they never need a tripod because there's always *something* to brace against. Trained in photojournalism, I subscribed to the anti-tripod theory, until I visited the Manfrotto/Gitzo tripod factory. I started thinking, *How can I be creative with a tripod?* and, *Here's another gear-toy I can spend money on—what's the latest in tripods?*

The folks at Bogen were happy to extend

a quick education on tripod use, and supplied three models for me to compare. I began by brainstorming about situations where I'd want to have a tripod. I thought about something I'd heard *National Geographic* photographer Sam Abell say: In slowing down to use a tripod, you give more thought to the light, composition and meaning of the photograph. With that in mind, here is a refresher on some of the practical things tripods enable us to do:

- Shoot in low-light situations
- Use maximum or minimum depth of field

- Capture motion blur and other time-lapse effects
- Maintain camera position and angle consistently
- Shoot from positions otherwise impossible
- Move from behind the camera to interact with the subject, set, lighting, etc.
- Shoot tethered to a computer
- Hold big telephoto lenses and precise tilt/shift lenses

I've probably left something out, but this list may inspire you to think of new creative opportunities possible with a tripod. Then consider what tripod features (height, weight, number of leg sections, portability) will meet your intended use. Next, you have to choose a tripod head, usually sold separately, on which to mount the camera.

The three models I tested illustrate just how different tripods can be, despite their common functionality. There's little things, like having or not having a built-in bubble level, and big things, like twist-to-lock versus flip-to-lock (the Bogen people say that's right up there with politics and religion). The combinations are not fixed; you can mix and match any tripod head and leg configuration as desired. I worked with three combinations.

MANFROTTO 190XPROB TRIPOD, list price \$162, and the **MANFROTTO 804RC2 THREE-WAY PAN/TILT HEAD**, \$70.

This combination might be mistaken for a basic tripod, but the aluminum 190XPROB with its patented horizontal center column is anything but basic (all basic tripods should be this good). The marvel of this model is its pivoting center column mechanism, which enables you to shoot down and at other odd

Happening upon this fisherman on a blustery day, I quickly set up my tripod so I could wait for just the right moment to capture the action.



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The tripod here is set up with legs at odd angles to position the camera over the rocks in the foreground. Given the lack of adequate footing for the legs, the center column was raised as necessary. The inset shows the composition from the camera-tripod position.

angles with ease—great for tabletop food photography or copy work.

It takes about 2 seconds to go horizontal by extending the center column to the limit, pressing the release button in the base, and lowering it into position. In horizontal position, the center column pivots 360 degrees, and can be extended outward from the center of the tripod. To shoot close to ground level, pivot the column to horizontal and flatten the legs, or remove, invert and reinsert the column.

The 190XPROB legs sport Manfrotto's new quick-action flip-locks; having used the previous twist-style lock levers, I can say these new levers are outstanding. The legs deploy and retract rapidly and fine-tuning is just as fast and easy. The clamp tension can even be adjusted as needed. There's a bubble level nestled into the legs' top plate, but you'll probably find having a level on your camera or head more useful. The height of the 190XPROB is my only concern. For me, it's just barely high enough for shooting vertical portraits of 6-foot-tall people without tilting the camera up.

The 804RC2 three-way pan head is a pleasure to use. The Manfrotto Adapto

material it's made of weighs less than other metal alloys, yet has superior vibration-damping. The arms on the head have large textured rubber grips that are easy to grasp and to adjust for proper tension. The head holds up to 8.8 pounds and includes a quick-release plate that tightens onto the camera without special tools. Three-way pan heads such as the 804RC2 are generally less expensive than ball heads, which can cost even more than the tripod.

MANFROTTO NEOTEC 458B TRIPOD, \$468 list price, and the **KIRK ENTERPRISES BH-1 BALL HEAD**, \$355. I'll cut to the chase: The Neotec 458B is the fastest tripod I've ever used. No need to individually lock/unlock six or more clamps. To set up, just push down the legs; they lock automatically wherever you leave them. Each leg can be set to any one of four angle positions, including flat down (90 degrees). To retract, hold down the gray button and push the legs back in. To speed-collapse all three legs, bring the legs together and hold in the lock buttons while pushing

the whole tripod down. The 458B is so fast and simple it takes some getting used to.

Like the 190XPROB, the 458B's center column has horizontal and inverted positions, but has two sections. One very short section can be used by itself for ground-level work. For horizontal or inverted shooting, simply reassemble the column in the clamp as desired. It's not as quick as the push-button release on the 190XPROB, but the assembly takes just a few more moments.

The potential drawbacks of the 458B are its weight—the heaviest tripod of the three—and surprisingly, its construction, albeit top-notch. Watch out for a couple things related to the legs. With usage, every aluminum light stand or tripod I've owned gets bent out of totally perfect alignment, so that the leg(s) don't slide smoothly and get hung up a little at the bent spot. It didn't happen in my tests, but it's something to be wary of in the field. Second, the leg sections seem to require much closer tolerance than those of light stands, so I'd be careful to keep them dust and dirt free.

My own tripod head is the Kirk Enterprises BH-1 ball head. A fairly large and heavy

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(read: sturdy) model, it works well with big, fast lenses. The latest model even has a mini-bubble level built into the mounting plate.

Ball heads are preferable to other styles because of their simplicity and speed. One or two knobs do the trick quickly and easily. Over time, ball heads have become so good that as long as you don't have really heavy gear, I recommend using one of the many light-weight ball heads available from Acratech, Arca-Swiss, Gitzo and Manfrotto as well as Kirk. The main discord about ball heads is their weight and cost. (You'll probably need to purchase specific mounting plates for your head.)

GITZO EXPLORER GT2530EX CARBON FIBER TRIPOD, \$600 list price, and the **GITZO G1276M UNIVERSAL OFF-CENTER BALL HEAD**, \$250. This combination must be the ultimate in versatility, and is almost as fast to use as the Manfrotto 458B. If you thought a horizontal center column was cool, the GT2530EX tripod will wow you. Gitzo engineers and Manfrotto engineers take different approaches to tripod design. Rather than a traditional

center column, the GT2530EX has an offset center column mounted in a pivoting clamp at the top of the legs. This makes it quick to set the column at any angle, including straight down. I wish I'd had this tripod during my last food photography shoot.

Gitzo uses the same clamp concept for the legs, too. Did you ever wish you could lock the angle of a tripod leg between the detents? You can do that with the GT2530EX and its flip-lock clamps in place of the usual ratchet mechanism. (Take care—it's easy to pinch yourself while opening or closing the levers.) This feature is extremely useful outdoors on uneven terrain and in tight spaces. Indoors, imagine what you can do over and around tables or other objects!

In the leg sections, the twist locks have a very short throw, so tightening or loosening takes a mere quarter turn. The slight detent on the releasing turn lets you know when the leg is released.

Gitzo's off-center ball head design is a hybrid of a pan/tilt head and a ball head. The ball head itself is offset from the center of the head. The body rotates 360 degrees and locks independently of the ball head.



Gitzo Explorer GT2530EX Carbon Fiber Tripod and Gitzo G1276M Universal Off-Center Ball Head with center column in horizontal position, plus counterweight on built-in hook.

This provides a little more flexibility in camera positioning when using the head with the GT2530EX tripod in an unusual configuration. Constructed of magnesium, the G1276M ball head comes with its own quick-release plate. It may look bulky, but it's relatively lightweight and compact with the top plate stored down. My only complaint is that the head's motion is not as smooth as a usual ball head.

So you see there's more to tripods than meets the eye. If you're not sure what you need, I suggest investing in a model that feels comfortable to you. Try out the different features before you buy. It won't help your shooting if you feel that operating and positioning a tripod is inconvenient. My teachers always encouraged me to try new things to capture the essence of the subject, and a tripod is certainly one of those tools that can open new doors for your creativity. ■

The Manfrotto 190XPROB with 804RC2 Three-way Pan/Tilt Head.



The Manfrotto Neotec 458B tripod with Manfrotto 804RC2 Three-way Pan/Tilt Head.



The Gitzo G1276M Universal Off-Center Ball Head atop the Gitzo Explorer GT2530EX Carbon Fiber Tripod.

