

Taking Photos through the Windows of a Moving Vehicle

Stan Johnston, 11/02

All of us have shot photos out the windows of planes, trains, boats, busses etc. when traveling. It would be ideal to stop the vehicle and get outside to take the picture, to avoid the vehicle motion and the window glass. But this is often not possible. So what is the best way to get a good image?

To start with the most obvious, turn off your flash, which would likely produce horrible reflections in the window glass. Then turn off any automatic focusing and manually focus on infinity, to make sure the camera is not trying to focus on the window glass instead of the scene beyond.

Now choose a fast shutter speed and a wide lens opening. The fast shutter speed will stop the motion of the vehicle, and the wide lens opening will give a shallow depth of field. This will throw the dirt and scratches on the window glass far out of focus, hopefully making them invisible. If you have a choice, shoot out the shady side of the vehicle, so that the window glass is not illuminated by direct sunlight.

Then get as close to the window as possible without actually touching it. Getting close to the window will keep the window imperfections very out of focus, but if you touch the camera to the glass, you risk transmitting the vehicle vibrations to the camera resulting in a blurred image. This is one situation where a rigid tripod would actually do more harm than good, by transmitting the mechanical vibrations. Human flesh may be trembly, but at least it tends to damp out high frequency mechanical vibrations.

Your biggest problem at this point is likely to be reflections in the window glass. Look carefully in the viewfinder and be especially alert for reflections of bright objects inside the vehicle, such as light fixtures, illuminated signs, or any objects hit by direct sunlight. It will help to get close to the window and shoot nearly perpendicular to the glass. Try to block any offending reflections with a lens hood, your hand, or some other object.

You could try using a polarizer to cut out the reflections. However, I have found that many commercial vehicle windows have coatings which interact with polarizers to create strange colors and patterns. Check your viewfinder carefully before shooting.

If you can't successfully overcome all the window glass problems, you might consider taking a wider angle shot that includes some of the vehicle interior as well as the view out the window. This could be a nice travel photo, especially if the vehicle and/or your fellow travelers are, picturesque. But the problem is likely to be that the interior is not illuminated nearly as brightly as the scene out the window, so it may be difficult or impossible to expose properly for both. You could try using a flash to illuminate the interior, but you would need to be very careful to avoid direct reflections of the flash in the window glass.

Of course on some vehicles, you may be able to get to an open window and avoid the problems of the glass altogether. In this case, the only special problem is vehicle motion, which can be stopped with sufficient shutter speed. Be aware that the apparent motion of nearby objects will be much greater than for distant ones, so choose shutter speed and composition accordingly.