

Chapter 10 - Miscellaneous

HINTS ON TROPICAL PHOTOGRAPHY

by C. J. Lathrop

Fear and uncertainty are the photographer's worst enemies when it comes to photography in the tropics. The photographer who comes from a temperate zone into the warm humid tropics finds his formulas and calculations, based upon temperate conditions, upset. Temperatures in the tropics are generally no hotter than summer in many places in the United States, and the other factor, humidity, may be just as high. New York when it is summer and in the "90's" can be just as humid and hot as most tropical localities in the Pacific, but, of course, not as continuously.

Selection of film (black and white)

If you plan to use a miniature or 35mm size film in your work be sure to select a film of the finest grain available. Either (Eastman) PANATOMIC X or (AnSCO) FINOPAN are excellent. While it is true that these films are rated as slow films the results in enlargement will more than compensate for the loss of speed. I enlarge all my shots to 8"x10" and without exception they are better shots than 4"x5" shots on fast (100-125 speed) film. Insist on all film being tropical-packed. If your film is ordered or purchased in Honolulu it will be tropical-packed. (KODAK HAWAII LTD.) For cameras using ordinary roll films my selection would be (Eastman) VERICHROME.

Care of film and equipment in the field

Two conditions that are not favorable to films are heat and moisture. If your film is tropical-packed the problem of moisture, before the package is opened is not a factor for consideration. After the tropical package is opened and the film loaded in the camera the best thing to do is use it up as soon as possible. The film should not be returned directly to the tropical package. (In most cases the tropical package is a screw type metal can.) All film must be desiccated before it is resealed in the tropical can.

Desiccating is a simple process whereby the moisture that the film has picked up after leaving the tropical container is absorbed by a desiccating agent. Common dried rice may be used but silica gel is easier to handle and can be re-used again and again. A large friction top or screw top can or jar is used as the desiccating container. The dried silica gel is placed in the bottom of the container. The film should never come in contact with the silica gel. One should purchase a chamois skin bag for the film to be placed in while desiccating. An indicator should be put in the container. These indicators change color when the moisture content increases to a danger level. When the air is dry the indicator will be blue, as the moisture increases the color will change to a pink. As an easy way of remembering the color, Red means Danger. The indicator should be in the container at least 4 hours before a reading is taken, as the moisture in the air will turn the indicator pink before the silica gel has time to pick up the moisture. The film may be resealed in the tropical cans after being in the desiccating can for 48 hours (and the indicator is blue).

To reactivate the silica gel it must be heated in an oven at about 300° to 400° F for 30 minutes. Some times it is done by placing the silica gel in a metal can or container and securing the can over the gasoline lantern during the evening. After the light is turned out the silica gel is placed in a container with a screw or friction top. The top is not put in placed tightly, as, on cooling, the container would collapse with the contraction of the air within, forming a vacuum. WARNING: Do not put the plastic indicator plugs in the hot silica gel or in the oven as they melt at a low temperature.

In resealing the tropical film containers after desiccating I find the SCOTCH MASKING TAPE 3/4" that is used by auto painters to be excellent. Adhesive tape can be used but electrical tape (black) is not satisfactory.

Cameras should be fitted in cases and packed in moisture tight cans when not in use. The metal parts should be treated with wax. I find that transparent (clear) Esquire shoe polish is ideal for this use. I have experienced no film discoloration from fumes with this preparation. Some types have an objectionable compound that will spoil Kodachrome due to the volatile chemical content, even though used sparingly. Clean your lenses frequently with a lense brush or tissue. As a fungus inhibitor, a small wad of cotton is placed in a glass in the camera case or can and a small amount of formalin added. The formalin gas in many cases will keep your camera free from mold and fungus. This may be done several nights a week with the camera empty (no film).

For processing the film in the field I find that the early morning is the best time as the temperature is at its lowest point. Eastman Kodak has produced tropical developer, tropical hardener, and tropical fixer that give a fine grained, fog-free negative at temperatures up to 95°F.