The Mouth of The Kenai

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Plugged In: Camera accessories are gifts that keep giving

By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter

Stocking stuffers are small and to the point, as is this week's discussion of useful, less-expensive photo accessories that qualify as stocking stuffers.

- Spare batteries are a necessity for any digital camera user. Third-party branded batteries are much less expensive, and some brands, particularly Wasabi Power, seem to be as good as the branded batteries. A Wasabi Power kit containing two batteries plus a convenient wall charger usually costs under $30 at Amazon. They're my personal choice.
- Protective UV filters screwed into the front filter ring of every interchangeable lens are another necessity. They're relatively inexpensive and often absorb the scratches and damage that would otherwise ruin the front glass element of a lens. Depending on size, expect to spend about $12 to $25 per UV filter. A well-made filter should have only a negligible impact on image quality.
- Polarizing filters were common during the film photography era, but for some reason fell into disuse more recently. That's unfortunate, because polarizing filters are one of the best ways to deal with overly bright skies, haze, glare reflected from wet surfaces and other outdoor photography challenges. A decent polarizing filter will cost about $15 to $25 more than an equivalent UV filter. I'd suggest buying one for the lens you're most likely to use outdoors.
- Professional photographers commonly use neutral density filters to reduce the amount of light entering the lens. That results in a slower shutter speed or wider lens aperture when special effects are desired. Some neutral density filters have a graduated, smoothly diminishing density from top to bottom. They're specifically designed to reduce an overly bright sky for a more-balanced exposure.
- Buying the cheapest possible filter is poor economy and often noticeably degrades image quality. Low-grade, non-multicoated filters can cause a great deal of image-ruining flare, so be sure to get multicoated models. Hoya makes a wide variety of reliable and reasonably priced standard filters. Hoya EVO, Sigma and B+W UV filters are even higher quality but rather more expensive. Be sure that you purchase filters of the correct diameter to match each lens.
- Nearly all modern digital cameras use some form of SD memory card. Buy newer, faster SDXC cards if you can. They're backward compatible with nearly all current camera models at only minimal extra cost. There are many excellent brands, including Lexar, Sandisk, Kingson, Sony and Transcend. 16-gigabyte SDXC cards usually sell for $7 to $15 at Amazon, depending on brand and read-write speed. UHS-3 speed SDXC cards are the fastest although not all cameras can make full use of their fastest speeds. Still, they're a good investment.
- Be sure that you have a fast USB 3 memory card reader to plug into your computer. I like WeMe and Transcend backward-compatible SDXC USB 3 card readers. They cost about $7 to $10 at Amazon.

- Using a lens hoods is one of the best ways to avoid the streaking flare that often ruins photos when the sun or another bright light source directly strikes the front glass of a lens. The worst flare usually occurs when bright light strikes the lens at an angle, rather than head on. Although many new lenses include a bayonet-mount lens hood designed for that particular lens, that's not always true. You'll often be able to find third-party lens hoods that are low-cost, exact copies of a manufacturer's expensive hood for a specific lens model. That's the cleanest solution because it provides maximum protection without blocking the corners when used with wide-angle magnifications. Metal, Leica-Contax-style lens hoods that screw into the front of the lens or its UV filter are a widely compatible option. I like the Fotodiox-brand Pro Angle metal hoods. Avoid collapsible rubber lens hoods. I find them awkward. Expect to spend $7 to $20 per lens hood of any type.
- Many of us who bought our first good cameras during the 1970s and 1980s remember when every decent camera shipped with a nice protective leather case. Unfortunately, even expensive new cameras rarely ship with a protective case anymore. The least-expensive options are one of Opt/Tech's neoprene cases that come in several standard sizes and slip over a camera and its basic kit lens. They provide a reasonable degree of protection against bumps and moisture for $20 to $25. Stewart's Camera on Fourth Avenue, in Anchorage, has a nice range of Op/Tech neoprene cases. Leather cases provide a nice aesthetic touch but are more expensive and probably less protective than the Op/Tech neoprene cases. Name-brand leather cases are expensive, usually costing more than $100. I've been disappointed with the poor fit and low quality of most lower-cost, third-party leather cases. MegaGear cases seem to be the best third-party, form-fitting leather camera cases I've found. Plan on spending about $40 for one but be sure that it fits smoothly.

- Although many lens makers include protective cases with new lenses, many do not. Many lens cases have disadvantages. Some are nothing more than thin nylon, not very protective against bumps, while other cases are padded but too bulky for easy use. The best compromise I've found are the Pentax lens cases for Limited Series lenses available in several sizes from Bhphotovideo.com for $15 to $25 each. I've found that inexpensive neoprene lens cases rarely fit well.
- If you've been really good and put out a very large stocking, perhaps Santa may bring you a decent tripod for those nighttime, low-light and high-telephoto occasions. Cheap tripods are rarely satisfactory but a good one will be a useful investment for decades. Manfrotto and Slik are the leading brands, and for good reason. They're excellent tripods and usually a good value. I prefer tripods with an adjustable ball head rather than three separate handles. Carbon-fiber tripods tend to be lighter but more expensive. Generally, aluminum alloy tripods made by Manfrotto and Slik are less expensive and only a bit heavier than carbon-fiber models, costing about $60 to $200, depending on your needs. And don't forget a remote release designed for your specific camera.

Local attorney Joe Kashi received degrees from MIT and his law degree from Georgetown University. He has published articles about computer technology, law practice and digital photography in national media since 1990. Many of his articles can be accessed through his website, http://www.kashilaw.com.