

True Tales of a Traveller: The Way of the Shoestring Outdoor Photographer

Chapter One: Life-changing Decisions

Can a Camera Change Your Life?

That was an interesting question, and one that I recalled having seen being asked in some photography publication or other, in a review of a top-of-the-line professional model.

It was also a question I felt certain I knew the answer to, based on my own direct experience. At least as far as I was concerned. And the camera that had changed my life was not even in the same league as the one I seen the review of. As I finished loading my Minolta Maxxum 7000 with a 36 exposure roll of 200 ISO colour film, I leaned back, rested my right arm on the top of the cold wooden bench, and cradled the camera in my left hand, looking down at it. I had a long day ahead of me and it was still barely light enough for me to see the camera, let alone the trail I intended to hike, so I decided to sip the first cup of coffee from my flask there and then.

'There' was Port St. Mary, a small town at the southern end of the Isle of Man, and 'then' was late summer, 2002. The bench I was sitting on was located on the sea-facing pavement of the aptly-named Bay View Road, which, slightly elevated, overlooked the sandy beach of Chapel Bay. Port St. Mary was home to about 2,000 people at the time, but to anyone able to discern me in the dim light of pre-dawn, they may well have thought I was the only inhabitant.

Only a few minutes previously, my mother had driven away in her Daewoo, back in the direction of the family home in nearby Port Erin, having dropped me off at this spot. I didn't like to bother her to drive me to Port St. Mary, especially so early in the morning, but I wasn't licensed to drive in the Isle of Man, and there was no other way for a shoestring traveller like myself to get where I was so early apart from walking. That walk would have added perhaps 40 minutes to my planned hike for that day, which, if I completed it, would already be an epic, and one of the longest one-day hikes I had ever taken at about 47 kilometres. So I didn't want to add to it a 40-minute walk in the wrong direction.

The hike would take me around the southern tip of the Isle of Man and much of the way up the west coast, from Port St. Mary, to another similarly-sized little town called Kirk Michael. I would, once I had finished sipping my coffee, walk down a path sided by gardens to the shore, passed the harbour where my father's catamaran - the 'Manx Cat' - had once been moored, and then I would continue south along the coast in the direction of The Sound - the southernmost point of the island - following a coastal footpath known in Manx as the Raad Ny Foillan, or the Way of the Gull. The total length of this trail around the island is just over 160 kilometres.

I checked that I had both my lunch box for lunch, and the apple which would serve as my breakfast somewhere along the way to The Sound. And then I finally answered the question that had now been in my mind for several minutes: "Well, you certainly changed *my* life", I muttered to the camera. Then, rolling the SLR over until its lens was pointing at me, I added the question: "Didn't you?"

With no-one else around, I wasn't really concerned that onlookers may have regarded me as a madman for talking to my camera. Even with a clear sky which I could see would lighten rapidly as morning approached, there was still nobody about at this hour, save for a solitary seagull that was perched on a stone wall just a few paces from me in precisely the direction I planned to hike. I chuckled to myself at the coincidence, then continued my conversation with the camera: "That was a good few years ago now, wasn't it? Back in 1993, as I remember..."