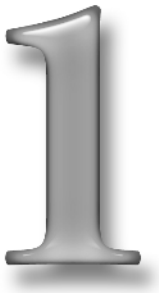

Taking Interesting Photos

In This Chapter

Composing your picture • Telling a story with a picture
Using light to your advantage • Adjusting for your camera's shortcomings
Reviewing digital results before it's too late

iPhoto lets you organize and fix up photos like never before, but there's only so much it can do. Hey, there's even only so much that the venerable Adobe Photoshop can do. The bottom line is that good photos start in the camera, not in the computer. Like the ancient Buddhist photographer monks like to say, "Garbage in, garbage out." If your picture is out of focus, the highlights are flared out, or the material just isn't interesting to begin with, there's not really much you can do to fix that in the computer. So, let's start off with a few pointers to help you take better pictures. The goal is to have shots that can be enhanced with a little bit of iPhoto magic to make them into photos you'll want to share.

FILL THE FRAME — BUT NOT TOO CLOSE!

You've all seen pictures in which the main subject is too far away or occupies such a small portion of the image that the picture simply isn't interesting (see Figure 1-1).

Make sure to fill a good part of the frame with your subject. Something out there got you to pull up your camera, so make it obvious what the viewer is supposed to be looking at.

Figure 1-1
Here are some of my buddies on a beach. I doubt even the CIA lab could tell who's who

Figure 1-2 is a picture I took in Times Square in New York. Visually, this area is about as busy as it gets, but one thing in particular caught my eye in the midst of it all that made me want to snap the shot. The steam rising up from the intersection across the street, lit up by the car headlights (Figure 1-3) looked extremely cool, but I was in a hurry and didn't zoom in so I got a much less dramatic shot of the street. If I didn't tell you about the steam, you'd never have even noticed it was there.

Because I was zoomed out *so far,* I couldn't effectively crop the image without losing image quality. You start to see digital artifacts in the picture when it is enlarged to where it should have been zoomed into in the first place. Digital artifacts are what you'd call that blocky mosaic pattern you see when you zoom in too close on a digital picture. (They can also be seen around fine lines and details on pictures that are poorly compressed.) Obviously the fix here is to let your subject material fill a good part of the frame. You want someone to look at the picture and know why you took it. A rousing game of *Where's Waldo?* isn't usually the effect you're looking for in a picture.

Figure 1-2
Empty street. Big whoop

Figure 1-3
Mysterious mist. Now that's got whoop

There are, however, reasons not to get *too* close to your subject, filling the frame completely.

First, be careful of a concept called *parallax*. This means that what you see when you look through an optical viewfinder isn't exactly what the lens is seeing because the

optical viewfinder and the lens are separate. On most cameras, the optical viewfinder (where you compose the picture) is above and to one side of the lens where the light for the picture comes in. There are exceptions to this. Single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras (digital versions of which are finally starting to become affordable) combine the viewfinder and the lens into a single mechanism, which means that what your eye is seeing is the same as what the lens is seeing. So, if you compose the picture using the LCD on the back of a digital camera, you will get an accurate reading of what the picture will look like. But because using the LCD drains the battery quickly, some people continue to use the optical viewfinder. If your digital camera isn't an SLR type, and you attach a wide-angle or a telephoto lens to the camera, then you *have* to use the LCD. The image that is seen through the attached lens will be far different from the image seen through the optical viewfinder.

Another issue you will encounter when composing your shots has to do with aspect ratio. Most digital cameras take a photo that has a length-to-width ratio, which is called an *aspect ratio,* of 4 to 3. A common example of this is a standard screen resolution of 1024 by 768. This aspect ratio works well for images that will be used for your computer Desktop, screen backgrounds, onscreen slideshows, and the professional photo books you can create with iPhoto, but this aspect ratio does *not* work well with photos that you intend to print for framing. For example, a photo print size is 6 by 4 inches, which works out to an aspect ratio of 3 to 2. In order to prepare a standard digital photograph for printing, you'll need to crop a portion of the image to obtain the correct aspect ratio. Figure 1-4 shows an example of how you would need to crop a 4-to-3 aspect ratio image to turn it into a 3-to-2 aspect ratio image. iPhoto calls this aspect ratio *4 x 6 (Postcard)* and makes cropping easy to do, but it does mean that part of the picture will be thrown away, and you'd rather that it not be an important part!

PERILS OF PARALLAX

As a young boy I was really into stop-frame animation. Early in my career, at about age 9, I decided to immortalize a flip-book cartoon that I'd drawn in the margins of my parent's dictionary. I set up my 8mm film camera on the tripod. I set up some lights. I looked through the eyepiece. I focused on the page. I spent what seemed like hours tediously shooting page after page after page.

When I got it back from the photo lab, I threaded the film through the projector and watched in horror as a rather dull sequence of the kitchen countertop flickered onto the screen. Because the eyepiece was quite a bit higher than the camera lens, I'd *totally* missed my target.

Who knows? If it weren't for that devastating setback, I might be an executive at Pixar today.

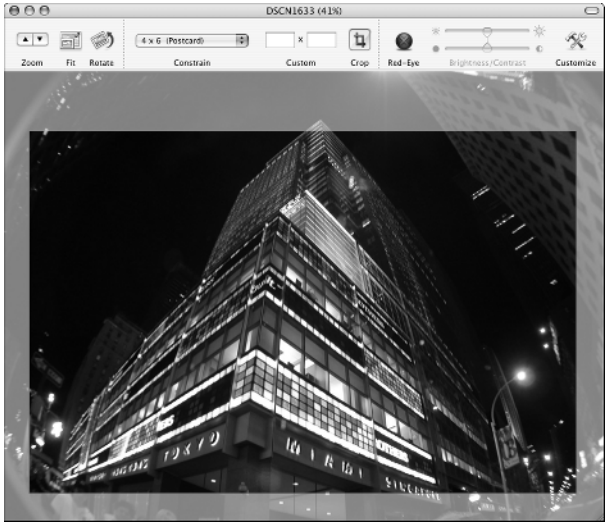

Figure 1-4
The light areas around the edges will be cropped to change the aspect ratio of this image

SHOOT WIDE. FIX IT IN POST.

Since I've switched to shooting just digital pictures, I've gotten in the habit of shooting wide pretty much all the time, and then cropping it in the computer. Well, looking at Figure 1-2, I'm not in the habit of shooting that wide, but I do like to make sure I back off or zoom out a little just to make sure I've got plenty of picture to work with later. This trick of zooming out just a bit also takes care of that pesky parallax thing. There's nothing worse than pressing the button for the perfect shot and seeing that you've cut off part of your target, especially if your target is long gone when you see you missed it. Always shoot in high-resolution and a little wide to increase your odds of catching the shot. Sure, you lose a bit of resolution when you crop and zoom in, but if most of your pictures will be seen on a computer screen or on the Web, you've got resolution to burn.

Note

If you don't crop the images to the correct printing aspect ratio before you take them to the drugstore to have them printed, the photo technician will decide which part of the image to crop. Don't let some stranger decide how to crop your pictures!

When you shoot pictures with a film camera and scan them into iPhoto, if you intend to print them out for framing, that will work fine, but you'll have to adjust the aspect ratio if you want to use the images for slideshows or Desktop pictures without the image distorting or getting cropped off willy nilly. Again, you'll be throwing away part of the image, so you need to keep that in mind when composing the picture.

MAKE EVERY PICTURE TELL A STORY

A good photo consists of one or more main subjects, as well as enough additional information to establish a context for the photograph. For example, you might take photos of family members during a vacation. The family member(s) are the main subject, but you should be able to see enough background to get an idea where the photo was taken. If you *aren't* careful about getting enough context, all your photos tend to end up looking the same. You've all seen those pictures. There's the family all standing in the same formation with their arms at their sides and the same tired smiles on their faces but with a different background in each shot. You shouldn't be in a rut when you take pictures. Take a look at Figure 1-5. I'm just riding on a train and looking out the window, but the layout of the image with the reflection in the glass and the blur of scenery streaking by makes this a much more dramatic picture.

Figure 1-5
Good composition can make a rainy train ride look cool

Note

The obvious exception to including a lot of background is when you are taking portraits. With a portrait, the whole point is to get a good-quality image of an individual. Even with portraits, however, including some background that doesn't clash with the portrait can lead to a better picture. You can see an example of such a portrait in Figure 1-6.

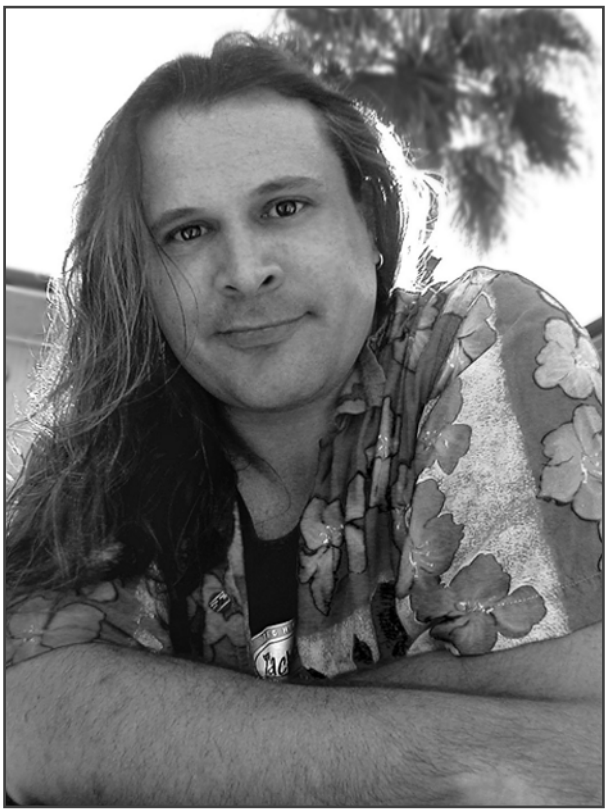

Figure 1-6
Even portraits can have some interesting background

YOUR OWN PERSONAL SERIES

You don't have to think of every picture as an island. Shoot a sequence of shots that work together. Use wide shots to establish the scenery, medium shots to show more details, and close-ups to show the highlights. With iPhoto, you can make slideshows or print books that really make a picture sequence work.

For example, some friends of mine took my camera over to Ground Zero in New York City several months after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. They took a few pictures of the area that work together as shown in Figures 1-7, 1-8, and 1-9.

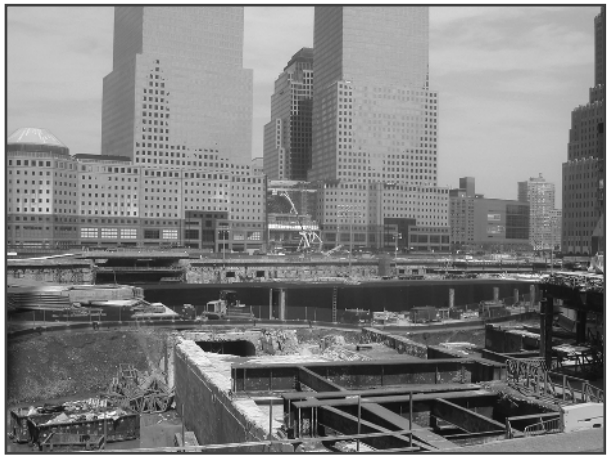

Figure 1-7
Ground Zero crater

Figure 1-8
Memorial wall

Figure 1-9
Close-up of tributes

COMPOSE YOUR PHOTOS CAREFULLY

It can sometimes be hard to tell exactly what the photographer was trying to capture when he or she took the picture. You can help someone viewing the picture understand the subject by using parts of the background to guide the viewer's eye toward the main subject(s). A line of trees, a road, railroad tracks, or other objects can guide the viewer's eye. Figure 1-10 uses a weathered fence on a beach on Maui to focus the viewer's attention right where I wanted it. The picturesque nature of the fence doesn't hurt, either!

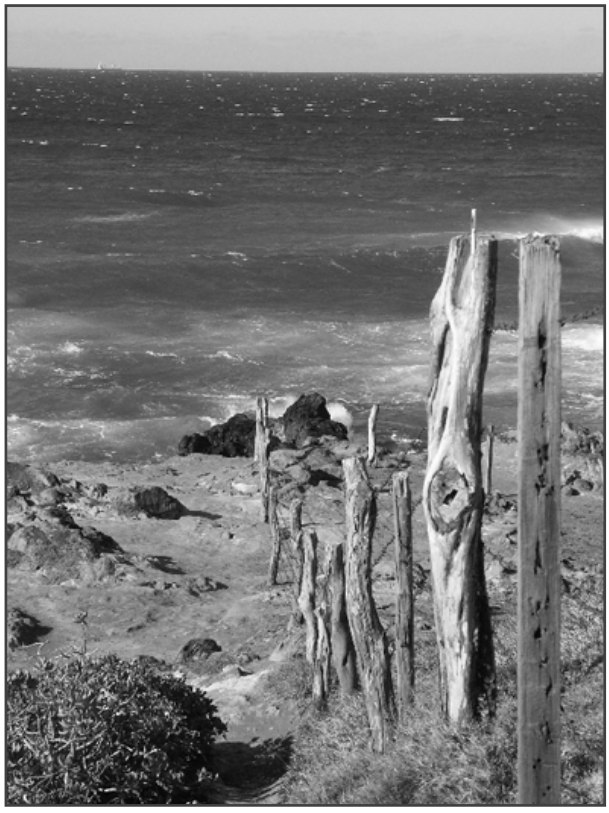

Figure 1-10
Use elements in the picture to direct the viewer's attention where you want it

TAKE LOTS OF PICTURES

Digital pictures literally cost nothing to take, so don't be shy about pressing the button. Shooting several shots of the same subject comes in real handy when you aren't sure of the lighting. Take a picture using the camera's default

settings, and then adjust the exposure compensation controls (assuming your cameras has these) and take more pictures using varying exposure settings. Later, you can look at them and choose the best one, or use a powerful tool such as Photoshop Elements to combine elements from multiple pictures to get a perfect shot. To paraphrase a cliché from the publishing industry: *The first picture you take with your camera costs $500. The second picture is free.*

Tip

Taking lots of pictures uses up space on your memory cards, so get a large-capacity card or two. A 512MB card in a 3-megapixel camera at the largest JPEG setting has enough space for about 300 shots before you have to download your files to the computer. With a 5-megapixel camera you can get around 200. Load up on batteries, too, because you'll run out of juice long before you fill up a good-sized card in most cases. Oh, and yes, that 16MB card that comes with most cameras *is* a joke. It's just not a very *funny* joke. At the highest quality setting on my camera, that 16MB card will hold *one* picture. "Yeehaw! We're havin' fun now! Click. Oops. Gotta download."

CHECK YOUR WORK

Digital pictures may not cost anything to take, but get in the habit of reviewing your pictures in the LCD as often as possible. Those pictures get mighty expensive if you have to fly back to Paris because your camera was in a funky mode and every picture you took was totally underexposed. And, no, I don't think your boss will accept that excuse as a reason why you have to go back to Paris and double your vacation days.

Most cameras pull up the last picture on the LCD with the push of a single button, and then you can usually toggle through all the pictures on the card from there.

We've all seen that family reunion shot. (See Figure 1-11 for mine.) You know the one, where the naughty nephew sticks out his tongue just as everybody else is saying "cheese." That nephew is the one who grows up to be the guy who puts up bunny ears behind people every chance he gets. You know who I'm talking about. I've got a couple of them in my own family.

Reviewing your photos immediately will help you head off problems like that. One thing to remember though is that the LCD does take up a fair amount of juice. It will run your battery down faster when you have the LCD turned on. Just how much faster depends on your camera. I prefer to load up on extra batteries and use the LCD all the time, but if you need to get the longest life out of your battery charge, use the LCD sparingly.

Figure 1-11
There's one in every family (I may have been *partly* to blame in this case though)

Tip

To find little glitches like the family prankster just mentioned, you may have to zoom in on the picture in the LCD. It's pretty small and it doesn't give you much detail. However, on most cameras, just by pressing a few buttons, you can zoom in on part of the picture and then move around the image with the camera's navigation buttons.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE LIGHT

Most of today's digital cameras work great in auto mode where it takes care of all the exposure settings on the fly regardless of the conditions. There are times, however, when the camera won't catch what *you* want it to catch. Lighting sources are critical to making great pictures. Lighting sources are also responsible for a great deal of bad pictures.

Essentially, all cameras like lighting that is relatively even. If there is too much contrast between the brightest point in your picture and the darkest point, you'll end up losing something somewhere. Figure 1-12 is a shot I took in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1998 when there was a citywide art display called CowParade. The sculpture was under a shade tree, and the bright sun reflecting off the sidewalk dominated the picture. This was before I'd gone digital so I was going by the exposure meter in the camera and I got burned for it. The picture was underexposed and the *Harley-Davidson Motor Cycles* emblem on the cow's forehead is barely visible in the print. Care to guess what made me want to take that picture? Yup, the Harley emblem. DOH!

If I'd taken that picture with a digital camera instead of a film camera, I could have spotted the exposure problem in the LCD. I would have squatted down so the sidewalk would be out of the frame and the picture would have been what I was hoping for instead of what I ended up with.

There are a number of things you can do to combat uneven light. The first thing you can try is to use "open shade." Open shade is what you get when your subject stands in a big shadow but with plenty of ambient light around. Essentially you're just trying to get people out of direct sunlight so you don't have harsh shadows messing with you. As an added bonus, open shade will cut down on squinting shots big time!

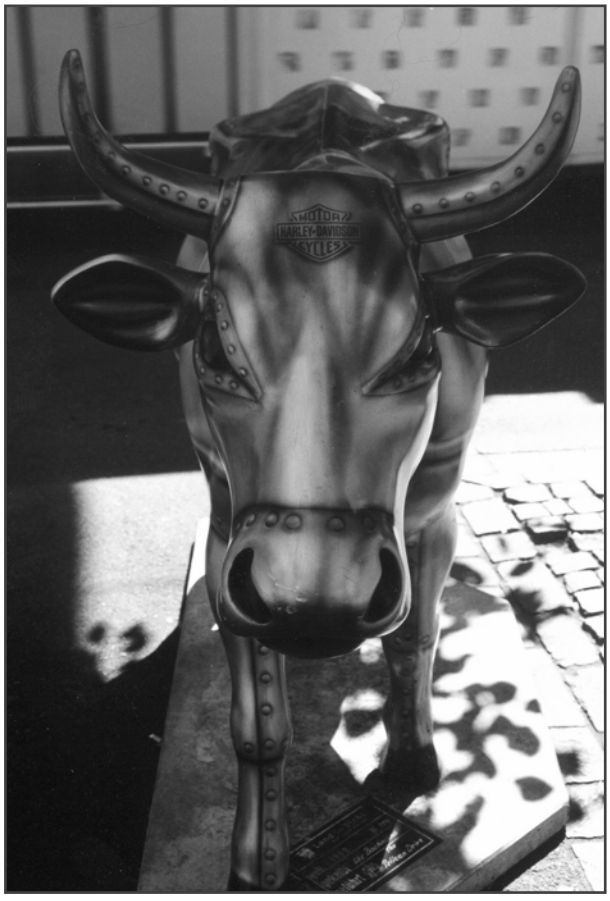

Figure 1-12
You can't always trust your automatic features

Another way to deal with uneven light — especially the harsh shadows around midday — is to use "fill flash." Basically, your camera has a flash that is meant to provide light on a subject when there is insufficient ambient light. But on most cameras, you can force the flash to fire even when there is sufficient light to take the picture. If your subject isn't too far away, the flash can fill in the shadows (hence the name fill flash). Be careful not to overdo it, however, because the flash can provide too much light. If that happens, try

LIGHT SPOTTING

Here's a fun activity you can do while watching your favorite TV show. Make a note of how many lamps on the set are turned on. Probably not many. Additional light sources in your shot kill your picture. The gaffer typically sets up the lights you do see in sitcoms and movies on dimmers so he can control the brightness in a typical 60-watt bulb. He probably will lower the output to something in the 5- to 15-watt range. Nightlights are usually about 4 watts. The lights that fill up the room are all out of frame so you don't see them in the picture.

When you see people sitting in a diner on a bright, sunny day by the window, the film crew has put up big sheets of tinting film that cover the windows to dim them. Without that window tinting, the director would have to choose either the people inside or the scene going on outside. Make the people look good and the outside is just a white field. Make the outside look good and the people are just black silhouettes. The window tinting evens out the light window so the director can see both the people and the background.

I'm assuming you don't have professional film crews working with you on your vacations, so the moral to this story is to keep away from putting people in front of bright windows or lamps. Position yourself so that windows and your light source (or the sun) are to the side or behind you and your pictures will work much better. Of course, there's nothing wrong with a nice silhouette shot if that's what you ***want*** to shoot. Just know what to expect.

In the shot in Figure 1-13, I wanted the sculpture and the torches to be completely in silhouette with the sunset filling the background. I used the high contrast for effect. Now why is the boy in the sculpture holding a sea turtle by the legs? That's another artist's statement. Don't ask me.

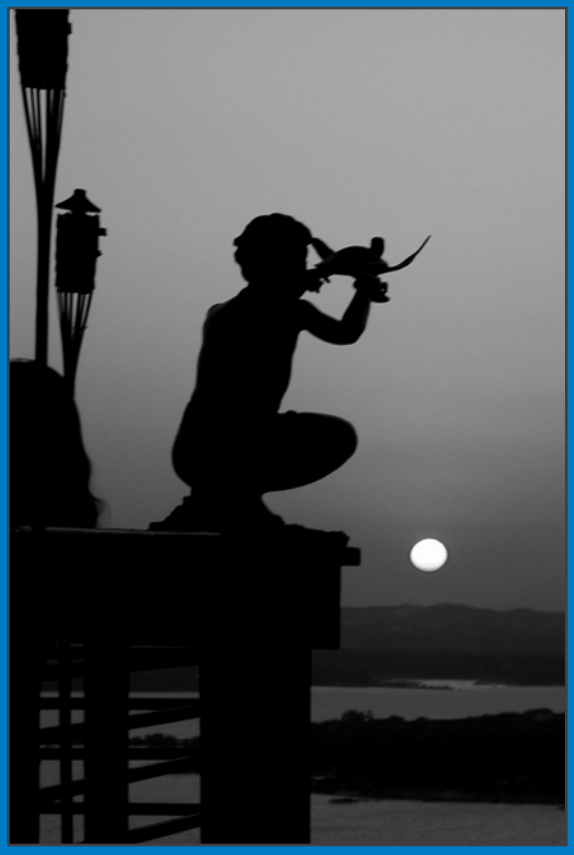

Figure 1-13
Silhouette can be sweet

backing up from your subject a bit to reduce the flash intensity and using the optical zoom to ensure that the subject is the size you want. Figures 1-14 and 1-15 show the differences between shooting a portrait without fill flash (1-14) and filling in the shadows with the flash (1-15).

Figure 1-14
Without fill flash, the setting sun puts the foreground all in shadow

Figure 1-15
Use fill flash to fill in the shadows and bring out the details of the image

COMPENSATE FOR A SLOW CAMERA

One big advantage old-school film cameras have over digital cameras is the quick draw. My camera takes a full 5 seconds to "boot up" when you turn it on. Those 5 seconds have cost me more hot shots than I care to admit. There's not really much I can do about it short of buying bigger and better equipment, but it is something to keep in mind when you like to *catch* shots instead of set up shots. A point-and-shoot camera would catch those shots but, hey, I've turned into an LCD junkie now. I can't imagine shooting photos without it. I'll stick with the occasional miss. I have gotten in the habit of flipping the power switch as soon as I touch the camera instead of after I get it up to my face. That shaves a little time off, but I could still use more.

On a related note, digital cameras usually go to sleep to save battery life. On mine, hitting any button will wake up the camera. Again, waking up takes time. In my case, 3 seconds. That's better, but I could still use more.

The place many people notice digital cameras lagging is when they actually take the picture. Mine has nearly a 2-second delay between the press of the button and the actual shutter click. Believe me, compared to the early consumer digital cameras, that is pretty darned good. But, this can drive you nuts on a moving target. That's a lesson you learn the hard way when you're trying to capture the cliff divers in Acapulco. Why are digital cameras so much slower than film cameras? There are two reasons. The first is that the camera has to focus on the subject and calculate the exposure. Most film cameras have to do that too, but many inexpensive film cameras can skip the focus step (which is what takes the longest) because they are fixed-focus cameras — anything farther away than about 6 feet is in focus. With a digital camera, by the time you get your subject in focus, the picture is gone. Using manual focus can cut your lag time in half, but manual focusing on a pocket camera is a pain and may not even be an option.

On the highest quality setting on my camera, it takes 6 seconds to save a picture to the card. It will let me fire off a second shot after about 3 seconds, but shooting off shots as fast as you can pull the trigger isn't an option. There are some cameras today that do have that ability, but they're up over the $1,000 mark, which is a bit out of reach of most consumers. Those cameras have a fast buffer that stores the pictures in memory so you don't have to wait for the buffer to finish dumping to the card. The buffer saves the shots to the card in the background and eventually catches up when you stop rapid firing, but that saving can take a while if you're shooting uncompressed TIFFs on a 5-megapixel camera. Those can be up around 14MB each. With most consumer digital cameras, while the camera is saving to the card, you're stuck watching a little flashing light and you can't do anything else.

If you use your noggin, you can beat all these lagging issues. Take that cliff diver, for example. You know he's coming, so you have your camera on and ready. Next, you have to deal with the autofocus. Most cameras will autofocus when you press the trigger button down halfway, so aim at the cliff wall and half press the trigger. Now the camera is on and focused off in the distance. After that it's a matter of getting the diver in the sweet spot when the camera takes the picture. This one was a bit of trial and error with an assistant spotter saying "He's juuuumpiiiiiiing NOW!" every time a diver took the plunge. Zooming out a tad so the frame covered more space helped increase the sweet spot (see Figure 1-16).

By contrast, in Figure 1-17 my buddies and I showed up when nobody was diving at all so we had to fake it. It's not much of an action shot, but the view was nice. On the bright side, my buddies were moving much slower than those free-falling divers, so I got that shot in one take.

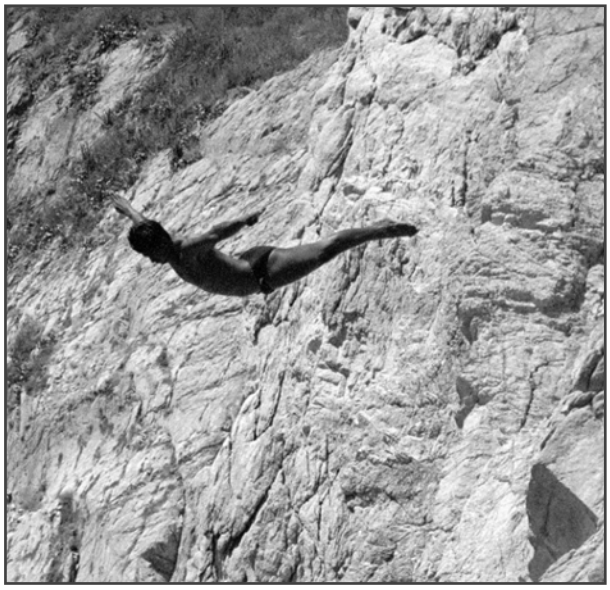

Figure 1-16
Even the fast-moving cliff divers of Acapulco can be caught with a digital camera... just not on the first shot

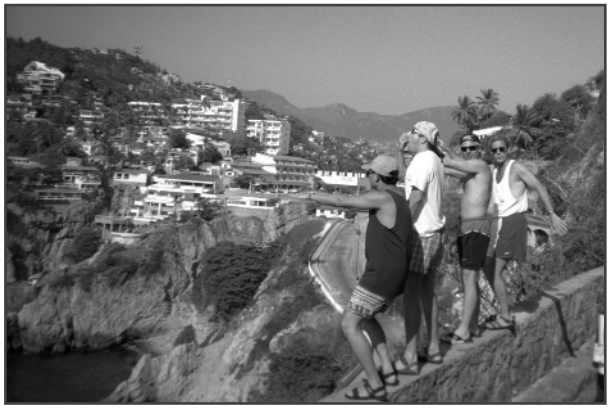

Figure 1-17
The cliff divers weren't diving at this point, so we just had to do it ourselves

Lag time varies pretty wildly from camera to camera. When reviewing the specifications for a camera, this information is often provided. For example, the camera literature may mention the ability to take up to six pictures at two frames per second. If you tend to take a lot of action shots, you are going to want to give this specification more weight than someone who is mostly interested in shooting landscapes.

Tip

Another way to capture a fast-moving subject is to tilt or pan the camera with the action. In the cliff divers example, tracking the camera down would keep the diver in the frame for a longer time. Provided you are using a fast shutter speed (which you should be for action shots), you should be able to freeze the action. Depending on how fast you're moving the camera, the background will tend to blur; but hey, nothing says fast-paced action and adventure like a bit of motion blur!

So there you go! All there is to know about photography in one little chapter! Yeah, I didn't think you'd buy that one. Photography is all about freezing the moving world around us. *Professional* photography is all about taking lots and lots and lots of pictures and never showing anybody the bad ones. I'm only half way joking there. To take a single picture you see in a magazine, the photographer might take two dozen pictures that look almost exactly the same just so he can get the eyes just right or the wind blowing the hair a certain way. Take lots of pictures. Even a bad picture will teach you what not to do. Digital cameras are very liberating. You don't have to worry about wasting film any more, so take lots and lots and lots of pictures. You don't have to show anybody the bad ones.