

All those vacation photos need a home

How to organize and protect your memories

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Capturing vacation memories can be a joy, but dealing with all your travel photos can be overwhelming. I know because I have just spent two years organizing 696,000 digital photos from a decade of my travels. I learned a lot along the way, including the importance of deleting the duds and organizing the keepers before trips become faint memories.

Maybe you have experienced this, too: You return home from a vacation with hundreds of photos scattered

across multiple devices — your smartphone, tablet, action camera, and DSLR. You post a few photos online and forget to sort through the others. Trips come and go, and suddenly you have thousands of unorganized photos filling up your SD cards and devices or stored on multiple hard drives and computers.

“I think digital photography grew faster than anyone expected,” says Cathi Nelson, CEO and founder of the West Hartford-based Association of Personal Photo Organizers, a group of individual business owners who organize people’s print and digital photo collections. “Then phones

became cameras — no one anticipated that.”

It is widely believed that “the most photographed generation is the most threatened in losing their photo heritage,” adds Nelson, whose company started in 2009 and now has nearly 1,000 members worldwide, including more than 50 in New England. “That’s why

our profession is growing so rapidly. People once thought, ‘Oh, I don’t have that many photos,’ but now they do.”

Keeping travel photos organized as you go can prevent an overwhelming backlog of precious images, make it easier to manage photo projects later

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(think photo books and calendars), and help you preserve visual memories for the future. Here are a few tips.

PRE-TRIP PLANNING

How many times have you been on a trip and seen the heart-sinking word “full” appear on your device’s screen? Before you hit the road or head for the airport, transfer old images from your Secure Digital cards to free up space and make sure you have enough available storage on your smartphone and other mobile devices.

“If your phone keeps telling you you’re running out of space, don’t just think, ‘For 99 cents, I’ll just add another gig,’” says Nelson. “That’s like me coming to your house and saying, ‘Your closets are full, let me just build you another closet.’”

Decide how you’re going to back up images while traveling, in case your phone or camera gets lost or stolen. Choose a file storage program, such as Dropbox, Google Photos, or iCloud, for instance, and download the corresponding app onto your smartphone. Then set up auto-synch so photos automatically transfer from your phone to the storage program whenever you have Wi-Fi access. Some cameras let you upload selected photos to your phone using Bluetooth; you can then back these up to your cloud service or photo storage program when you get online. Give everything a test run before you leave home, just in case.

“One of my clients was doing a tour of national parks and couldn’t get Wi-Fi access to back up her photos to the cloud,” says Heidi Clarke, who runs a photo-organizing service called Resolutions Photo Management in Walpole. “Then she lost her phone and all of her vacation photos were gone.”

If you won’t have Wi-Fi access, or simply want another backup method, consider bringing a USB photo storage device. Picture Keeper, SanDisk, and other companies make thumbdrive devices that plug into your phone and back up all your images. I typically bring a laptop and an external hard drive for backing up photos while on the go (Lacie and Samsung make good portable drives). That way, I’m not dependent on Wi-Fi access and there’s no question where my photos are stored.

Finally, “make sure the date and time settings for your DSLR (or point and shoot) are correct for each time zone that you’re traveling in, so that



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A Digital Photo Hub is the mothership for your photos before they are posted, printed, turned into books, or archived.

when you bring all your pictures together from all your different devices, the dates match up,” says Rita Norton, a professional photographer and owner of Photovation in Winchester, another photo-organizing business.

ON THE ROAD

Whether you’re doing a summer-long road trip or exploring New York City for a day, snap photos of signs along the way to help you frame your trip. Take shots of street signs, restaurants, trail heads, train stations, and other markers along your route so you can accurately tag photos later.

Consider turning on your phone’s GPS setting, if you want to store the location where each photo was captured — handy if you forget to photograph signs or set the correct date. If possible, spend a little time each night weeding through photos and deleting the obvious bloopers. That will make your job so much easier when you return home.

“The first thing we tell people is to eliminate all the blurry photos and get rid of 90 percent of your landscapes, unless landscapes are your focus,” says Nelson. “Once you’ve seen one sunset, you’ve seen them all.”

I take it one step farther and organize each day’s images into folders by location. Even though I’ve backed up my images to a thumb drive, the cloud, or a hard drive, however, I never delete images off my SD cards until I transfer the photos to my home storage device.

“SD cards and hard drives are so cheap these days,” says Chad Case, a professional photographer and videographer in Boise. “If you have a camera that takes an SD card, just bring extras. I make several backups of my cards when I travel. You can turn the switch on the side (of the card) once you’re done with it and then you can’t overwrite it.”

POST TRIP

Once home, “you want to take all your photos from all your devices and funnel them into one spot,” says Case. “Many people get overwhelmed, thinking they have to go through everything and delete images. Often, you get back into the thick of things and you don’t have time to edit everything. If you can

just manage one thing — to funnel all your photos into one central spot — it makes it a lot easier.”

This central spot becomes your Digital Photo Hub, or photo library, which is the mothership for all your photos before they are posted, printed, or turned into books, for instance, or where they remain archived.

Decide if you want to organize your overall photo collection thematically or chronologically (there is no right or wrong way — it just depends on how your brain works, says Nelson). Some people prefer to organize photos purely by destination, whereas other photographers prefer organizing photos by year or by the date shot, and then including subfolders that are organized by theme (“River trips”) or destination (“Utah” and then “Colorado River”). Pick a system that works for you and stick with it (you can go back and reorganize old photos later).

Use a photo management program, such as ADCSee Photo Studio, Photo Mechanic, or Adobe Lightroom — to help you manage photos. Many programs let you rename files, add keywords, eliminate duplicates, and rate photos; some even offer face recognition for faster sorting and tagging. SmugMug works great for sharing

photos, making it easier for everyone on a group tour, for instance, to share high-resolution photos in one spot.

It’s worth taking the time to add descriptive words to your photos, called metadata, which can help you sort through and locate images later.

“Metadata is just the fancy thing riding on the back of the photo,” explains Nelson. “It’s like your grandmother who took the time to write on the back of her photos — you’re adding keywords. The more details you give about the photo, the better the story you can tell.”

Finally, make sure you back up your photos in several places in case of future file corruption, disc failure, theft, loss of a device, or natural disaster. Save your photo library to an external drive that you can give to someone in a different household or store in a safety deposit box. It’s also worth signing up for a backup cloud service such as CrashPlan or Backblaze, which will restore your photos and data if lost.

If, like me, you have thousands upon thousands of old photos from previous trips to organize, take it one step at a time and stay focused.

“Start with the most recent photos and work backward,” recommends Norton. “Otherwise, it’s too easy to get distracted. If you go back seven or 10 years, you’re like, ‘Ohhhh, look at this one.’”

APPO offers two new online consumer courses to help you get a handle on the process, whether you’re organizing digital or printed photos. Or check out the free podcasts at Photoswithsherita.com for tips on working with and sharing images.

If the idea of archiving old photos still stresses you out, you can hire someone to do it for you. APPO trains and certifies professional organizers, such as Norton and Clarke, who can do anything from creating a photo book of your child’s year in France to completely reorganizing and digitizing your entire photo collection.

“No one ever complains that someone organized their collection for them,” says Nelson. “It’s a priceless job.” After all, she adds, “when the fire sweeps through, what’s the one thing people care about: Their photos.”

Whether you hire someone or do it on your own, make sure you preserve your travel photos so you and others can enjoy all your keepers.

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