

How can I get 'good' photographs of my boat and other boats sailing on the water?

Steve Parke

The recent announcement about a DCA photograph/video/artwork annual competition is a great idea. Perpetually frustrated at not being able to get any decent photos of my boat (or any other boat for that matter) anchored, sailing or sitting on a beach or driveway, this competition now provides the impetus to me getting out there and do something about the situation.

Many of us carry a camera of some form on our dinghies and a quick trawl of social media shows there are many dinghy cruisers posting pictures to Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube. Some of those photos are truly stunning.....

"A cruising dinghy under full sail, the skipper leaning on his coaming, gazing up intently at his well-set sails, whilst the small boat's bow lifts across the wave tops, splashed water frozen in minute detail against a sharply defined background of boat hull, blue skies, tan sail and verdant green creekside reed beds."

I long for some similar pictures of 'Arwen' and any ability/skill to take such pictures for other dinghy cruisers. This new annual DCA award for the best photograph (and video/artwork) has thus set me thinking:

- **What makes for a 'good' dinghy cruising photo'?**
- **How can I judge how 'good' my dinghy cruising related photos are?**
- **What kind of subjects might I consider photographing that are dinghy cruising related and how could I plan to successfully achieve such photos?**

I have two other questions beyond the scope of this article and I've attempted to explore these on my blog if you are interested – website address is at the end of this article.

- ***What equipment can I use to get a 'pleasing' dinghy cruising related photograph?***
- ***What basic photographic skills would I need to develop in order to obtain this photo?***

So, without further ado, lets jump straight in by exploring

Why the DCA should have a competition at all?

On a recent 'beginners' digital photography course, the tutor impressed upon us all that *"getting a good photograph is all about the interplay of subject matter, timing, composition and light"* and that with a little knowledge and planning, this can be achieved by beginners on a variety of cameras - smartphone, compact camera, DSLR, Bridge camera and yes, even an action cam. He also stressed the other ingredient is some thinking! *'Why do we want photographs of our boats and other aspects of dinghy cruising?'*

An interesting question – a competition will give more great source material for the DCA journal and website. But it's obviously more than just that. Great dinghy cruising adventures are often made by the people sailing with us, the stunning scenery and variable conditions we sail through, the skills we develop and how we grow individually and collectively as a result of the voyage. ***A well composed photograph tells the viewer a story – people, places, events, weather, dinghy design and craftsmanship*** – a collection of images with a variety of subject matter, lighting and composition building up a great visual travelogue and cruise record of our adventures which we can then share with family, friends and the wider dinghy cruising community. We can also glean lots from good photos (a picture paints a thousand words and all that); I defy anyone not to learn something from a photo or video – either appreciation of a new skill, a sudden idea, or just as importantly, how not to do something! Most importantly, ***good photos provide an opportunity to celebrate and promote the benefits and joys of dinghy cruising to the wider world.***

The DCA competition has been set up with three main categories:

1. Photography
2. Video
3. Artwork

The photography competition has the following three sub-categories:

- Cruising - The things which mark a boat out as a dinghy that cruises
- Amusing - Make us smile
- Inspiring - The wow factor

The video competition has two sub-categories:

- General - Anything from an inspiring beauty shot of dolphins at the bow to technical 'how to' and narrative cruising logs. Max 30 minutes.
- Videos of DCA rallies, made intentionally for the DCA YouTube channel, Max 15 minutes

Artwork is a wide ranging category and might range from pen/pencil sketches and watercolours to graphic art on your dinghy.

There are a number of rules governing entry which you can read in full on the DCA Photo Competition web page: www.dinghycruising.org.uk/photo-competition

So let's begin by exploring the first main question:

What makes for a 'good' dinghy cruising photo?

Aspiring to take better dinghy cruising photographs, I've been thinking about what getting a 'good' photograph might entail. My definition of 'good' is simple – a photo that has qualities above that of my 'average' boat photo. It's one I'd happily use in social media, publications or printed off for the wall; or one that provides lots of pleasure to me when viewing it; or even just one that survives my immediate 'keep or cull' review after taking it.

Here are some points which help me to judge whether a photograph relating to any aspect of my dinghy cruising is 'good' enough to keep and/or print/publish:

'Good' for me is an above average boat photo which *achieves just a few* of the following:

- **'Emotional impact'** – provokes an immediate emotion for me/ a viewer – 'wow', joy, incredulity, pride, curiosity, fun, excitement, intrigue, inspiration, sense of adventure, comradeship, awe, terror etc. Pick your emotion.
- **'Some photographic 'technical' skill'** – my photo is sharp, correctly focussed, generally well exposed. It tries to make good use of light and displays sharp depth of field or bokeh blurred backgrounds. I've achieved basic framing and horizon setting. *My photo shows some compositional understanding* – helped by my use of the 'rule of thirds' to position key elements; or it has a good balance between foreground, midground and background. My photo draws in the viewers eye to a key point and encourages it wander elsewhere.
- **'Some originality/creativity'** – It's taken from an unusual viewpoint or perspective; may have an unusual choice of subject matter or focal points within the scene or even an interesting use of light and/or colour and shapes, textures and patterns.
- **'Tells a story' – *for me this is the important one*** - my photo evokes a viewer's imagination, tells a story about dinghy cruising (the boat, the crew, the locations sailed, equipment used/made, craftsmanship etc). Composition conveys a message e.g. emotional impact or it might capture a unique moment in time like some special lighting on the boat/location/people. An atmosphere or buzz, an expression of your crew, a seasonal landscape focus e.g. a beached dinghy on a winter beach with a snowy background.
- **'How successfully it promotes and celebrates all aspects of dinghy cruising'**

What criteria should the DCA use to judge how 'good' dinghy cruising related photos are?

This is an '*elephant in the room*' question which may or may not generate some discussion!

I feel that any competition needs some clear, simple, transparent, regularly published 'judging' criteria for potential competition entrants and judges. The criteria illustrate what the competition is trying to achieve. In this particular competition context, it will help me reflect on how I take photos before submitting them. This competition is, after all, about '*celebrating excellence and promoting dinghy cruising to a wider world through the journal and website*'.

The list above is, I think, a start towards these criteria. Simplified to 'headings' - photos/videos/artwork could be judged on '*emotional impact*', '*technical skill*', '*originality/creativity*', '*storytelling*' and '*promotion and celebration of all aspects of dinghy cruising*'. All we have to say to ourselves is '*does my photo fulfil some of these criteria?*' If the answer is yes – we enter it. If the answer is no, we can, if we want to, still enter it or we can work out why it didn't answer this initial question and correct this. *The DCA competitions are for fun - to celebrate* what we do when dinghy cruising – but they are also an opportunity for us all to learn more from doing the photos and from the submitted entries. The more visually appealing and interesting the photos, the more we may learn from them.

If you are sitting there now spitting out your coffee in indignation 'RULES? CATEGORIES? JUDGING CRITERIA? - how dare he doesn't he appreciate the 'non-conformist' philosophy of this association - outrageous suggestions' – I sincerely apologise and hopefully I can redeem myself in this last section:

What kind of subjects might I consider photographing that are dinghy cruising related and how could I plan to successfully achieve such photos?

I'll start by returning to the topic of 'composition'. Many people do fantastic photographs on the spur of the moment. Lucky souls! I am so envious of you if you are one of these people. How do you manage it? Some do the 'spray and pray' method – taking hundreds, chancing that some will turn out brilliant. My approach! It works! Sometimes! The trawl through the hundred I took to find just the two outstanding ones, is however frustrating and time consuming.

People who consistently deliver 'good' photos do so because *they think about the shot they are about to take and they practice*. I have complete admiration for these individuals. *They understand the importance of 'composition', how it is fundamentally the most important aspect in photographing bodies of water, boats and seascapes*. They see, select and order what is compelling and purposeful; they visualise how the elements in a picture fit together - what is important to the scene and what isn't; what makes a good 'lead-in' foreground into the rest of the picture.

Now admittedly, thinking about composition is far easier to do when onshore where the ground is fairly stable! Its trickier, when on a boat with one hand on the tiller and the horizon rising and falling a metre or more every few seconds! However, I have been learning some simple 'composition' tricks recently and now consciously think about at least one of them before I push the shutter button, even when in the boat. Here are some thoughts about composition which I hope might help you:

A well composed photo positions its key elements and lighting to tell a story about the boat, it's crew or the sailing scenery.

Your eye is drawn from an interesting foreground to a main focal point. To achieve this, try these tips:

- **Switch on the 3 x 3 rectangles 'rule of third's' grid** on your rear screen and viewfinder. It is an easy way of creating a balanced and visually interesting picture. The grid breaks the image into thirds - vertically and horizontally - with imaginary gridlines. Horizons are placed close to either the top or lower horizontal line, masts aligned on one of the two vertical lines and objects of interest located on one of the four intersection points between vertical and horizontal lines. This makes for visually more interesting pictures. A boat on the water would be best placed 1/3rd of the way across the frame – sailing into the rest of the frame space. Or you can just go for simplicity in composition – choose just three elements to put into your photo – a minimalist approach e.g. boat hull, watery reflection, bow line.
- **Find an interesting foreground** as a visual stepping stone into the rest of your picture e.g. a rock pool with a reflection and your boat dried out on the beach behind. The foreground draws the viewer's eye in and then the eye explores the rest of the scene beyond. Obviously, the foreground should be relevant to dinghy cruising in some way.
- **Direct the viewer's eye** by using lead in lines – a strong linear element such as a fence, a rock, a wall, a road, the curve of a quayside wall – place it so it begins in the bottom third of your photo in the left or right corner and position it so it leads towards the middle where the main object of your photo is – your boat!
- **Use natural objects on a beach** to act as a frame within a frame e.g. your boat is framed between the branches of a driftwood branch on the strand line; or between two upright rocks – you get the idea. If doing this – shoot from low down – stabilise your camera on your rucksack or bag.
- **Isolate your main focus point** from the background by using a long zoom lens or compact zoom and apertures of F/2.8 to F/4. On most DSLR's and compact cameras you can select 'aperture priority mode', set this aperture and the camera will work out all the other settings for you. Want the **background in sharp focus** as well? Then choose apertures around F/8 – 11.
- **Assess whether you have balanced the amount of water, boat and sky in the image** before pressing the shutter - try to include lots of 'air space' around the boat for later post edit cropping. 'Tight cropping' on the boat will lead to distortion of hull shape.
- **Check you haven't cut off** - part of the bowsprit; hidden the helmsperson behind the boom; got something dangling over someone's head etc.
- **Getting all of the mast in shot** is notoriously difficult so chill - aim to get just enough in the image so that a viewer can work out what the sail rig is.
- **Wonky horizons distract** a viewer, drawing their gaze away from the boat, so check it is straight.
- In the main, **shoot in landscape mode**. However, if shooting for a magazine cover, contact the editor beforehand to see if they would prefer photos in portrait mode – which might better suit a magazine cover.
- **Go for a different perspective** – shooting low allows your dinghy to look larger, more imposing and more majestic – seriously – try it!
- (Make sure any landscape shots are in focus from foreground to background – focus on a point about a 1/3rd of the distance to the horizon and you should have most of the scene from foreground to background in focus.)

I'm at the point where I can almost hear some people saying 'if I wanted to learn photography, I'd buy a photography magazine!' but I'm hoping that those of you, interested in taking better photographs of seascapes, boats and all things dinghy cruising, are beginning to feel inspired to have a go at the DCA competition. This next bit will hopefully, provide you with some further ideas, tips and inspiration.

Tip one - *pre-plan your photographs* - it will significantly increase your chances of obtaining high quality, compositionally stunning images commensurate with your skill level. *What is the essential essence/aspect of my boat I want to capture? What other situation/subject do I want conveyed in images? Am I going for 'mood' or 'action'? What is my audience and purpose for the photo – wall print, magazine, social media account?*

Tip two - *seek inspiration for 'good' dinghy/boat photos* by exploring Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest and various sailing journalism websites.

Tip three - *Photography is about light* and the best time to photograph is 'golden hour' - the couple of hours after sunrise or before sunset - when winds are less, watery boat reflections more sharply defined and nature's colour balance warmer and softer. Golden hour lighting illuminates the deeper recesses of a dinghy's hull. If shooting people during these hours, shoot them facing to the sun to get the light on their faces. If they are backlit, make sure you expose the picture for the sky not their faces. On a smartphone and some compact cameras, switch on HDR mode (High dynamic range) as it will take three identical images but with different exposure settings and then blend them together so that highlights, midtones and shadows are all correctly exposed. As the sun climbs towards midday, its overhead position gives harsher, colder light and contrasty shadows in my images that hide the finer details of Arwen's cockpit interior i.e. all the scratches, dings, scrapes etc. At such times, I should switch on 'flash infill' to better illuminate the shadowy areas. (Embarrassment at Arwen's interior state prevents me from doing so by the way!) Obviously, if I'm seeking 'spray over deck' shots taken from the rear of Arwen's cockpit, then I go when tide, wind and wave conditions are best for this; and this may be during the day and not in 'golden hour'. So be it!

Tip four – if you are photographing your boat, under way, dried out on a beach or tied to a pontoon, *clear away loose lines, stow fenders and loose gear, trim lines, fill sails* (says the man whose has a permanent throat to clew crease whenever he sails). *Neatness and seamanship counts*. Untidy details distract the viewer's eye.

Tip five – *it's all about the shooting angles!* Shooting another boat on the water? Photograph it from astern – over the transom stern quarter area as the boat rises up on a wave and you get the whole boat length in your photo. On a collision course with an approaching bow is dramatic! A photo taken whilst the focal point boat is on a beam reach can give great views of decks, crew, helmsperson, sails and rigging. A boat shot from its windward side shows more hull but less cockpit interior. Shooting from the leeward side shows more of the boat's lines and interior cockpit action. Vertical portrait shots show more of the mast and rigging but try to do it when there are interesting cloud formations in the sky as a backdrop.

Tip six – *go for the sense of 'dramatic'!* Bow splashes, spray over foredeck or the helmsperson peering from under a sail. For splashes (and dolphins for that matter), use a shutter speed between 1/250th and 1/500th of a second to sharply 'freeze' the spray. 'Sports' or 'burst' mode on your camera, if you have it, will do this for you. Afterwards quickly review the image sequence and delete those that don't look good – it's a good housekeeping habit which pays off at editing time. If you are shooting a dinghy sailing close past really dramatic coastal scenery then use a telephoto lens or zoom with a compact camera to emphasis the scale of the boat against that background.

Tip seven - *make a close-up 'details story-telling' list* – and over a period of dinghy cruising trips shoot the photos you want e.g. water droplets on a finely varnished piece of woodwork (not that there is any of that in Arwen, poor thing); seaweed wrapped around a moused shackle between muddy anchor and chain; the folds of sail draped over your boom; the curve of your bow as it meets its reflection in calm waters whilst at anchor; driftwood on the beach, beads of condensation on that ice cold beer you saved for after you've rigged the boom tent; the mooring ring or cleat you tie up to; a jib block on your side deck; the fall of a well coiled mooring rope. I try to think 'BIG picture- little picture' for a shot's list. GoPro's by the way are great for close ups – be 30 cm away from the object.

Tip eight – *go for uncluttered backgrounds* if you want to show your dinghy at its best. Marinas, tall shoreline buildings, other background sailing boats - visually confuse a viewer and distract their eye away from the main subject, your cruising dinghy. If shooting whilst onshore, crop out clutter by using a tripod (or resting the camera on your rucksack) and a longer telephoto lens to zoom closer to your dinghy. The tripod/bag stability also gives better, longer exposures in lower light conditions.

Tip nine – if you have it on your camera, *switch on image stabilisation*, especially if taking photos whilst in your boat on the sea and if you can, use your body as a shock absorber to reduce the ‘bobbing’ motion transferring to your camera.

Tip ten - *taking photos of other people’s dinghies from your anchored boat* in a safe, calm area increases the chances of getting a really good photo no end. The other skipper can helm his/her dinghy closely around your boat and between you, you can work out the best approach angles and distances from your anchored dinghy to ensure the shots you get are best.

Tip eleven – *get plenty of photographs of people* enjoying dinghy cruising activities whether it be launching, actively sailing, erecting boat tents, scratching their heads whilst poring over charts, cooking on stoves or washing up the pots and pans afterwards. Aim for faces rather than the backs of heads. Try to capture the emotion – joy, puzzlement, intense concentration, laughter! No halyards, no shrouds, no masts growing out of their heads! If sailing crews are ‘busy’ and ‘active’ in the dinghy, then use high shutter speeds of 1/200th plus to ‘freeze the action (or use that ‘sports/burst’ mode to take a rapid sequence of shots.) People under a boom tent at night or sat out on a beach as dusk descends requires a higher ISO or ‘dawn/dusk/night’ setting to avoid the need for flash and ‘red eye’ syndrome. Wide angle lens settings, 18 – 35mm lenses or zooms, are great for group shots and remember people don’t have to be looking at you. However, if they are doing anything active, make sure you include their hands within the shot so that a viewer can see what is being done.

Tip twelve – *during golden hour* (sunrise and sunset) winds tend to die down giving still, flat water, perfect for those watery reflections of hulls and scenery.

Tip thirteen – *go for colour!* White hulled dinghy, blue skies and grey seas look great but, add a splash of colour, and the scene really comes alive. Look for those tan sails, the yellow foulies, the bright red PFD. Any colour that jars the viewer’s eye can be a good thing.

Tip fourteen – *own a GoPro?* Go for an early evening swim around your anchored dinghy and use the GoPro to take images of the boat from the water level. Try for a low-level shot with the coastline in the background during golden hour if it isn’t too chilly by then. (You can buy a dome for your GoPro which allows you to take one of those overwater/underwater split shots where you get to see above the waterline and the keel and hull below the water. Impossible to do this shot without the dome by the way! Go on, ask me how I know!)

Tip fifteen – *‘look into the light’* – backlit silhouette shadows of the crew through the white sails and rippled clear reflections of the boat in mirror calm seas – stunning images. And remember, the angle your light comes from can really play a part in creating a great photo. The more acute the angle of the sunlight hitting an object, the better the emphasis on the object’s texture and shape.

Tip sixteen – *all those construction projects* – that pile of shavings alongside a shapely oval profile boom; the clamps holding three sides of a materialising ‘galley box’; the intense concentration on the face of your 8-year-old as she/he handles a drill for the first time whilst working on the hull of your new dinghy; the empty mug alongside a dinghy construction blueprint, a pad of scribbled notes and the pencil? The pile of ‘frames’ cut out and ready to erect. Those photos? They are all to do with dinghy cruising! They all tell a great story! They all promote and celebrate dinghy cruising.

Tip seventeen – *those dinghy drying out locations* - dried out in a big sandy bay? Try to get a little height to ‘shoot’ down onto the boat, setting it within the context of the enormity of the beach/bay. More dramatic! In any drying out location, shoot from the side, trying to get foreground interest such as a tidal pool with sky reflections or ripple textured patterns on the sand in front of the boat hull. Is there a leading line opportunity like along the anchor rode and chain to the boat, taken of course, from a low-down perspective? Go for 1/3rd sky, 2/3rds foreground and boat. What’s the view like out the back of your boom tent – can you get the stove, your hand stirring the pot and a great view of your drying out location out back all in one shot? Or how about your cockpit interior under the boom tent with sleeping platforms sorted? Finally, I’d argue there is a story to each of your drying out locations – a close up of the rocks, the cliff geology (keep safe though!) – geology texture, colour patterns, strata. In shots like this exclude the sky, focus on the rocks. Sometimes it pays to stand back and use a zoom lens to close in on the rocks. Beach patterns and features are equally interesting – the meandering stream, the ripple sand marks, footprints towards your dinghy, reflections in a patch of wet sand. Rockpools provide great foreground interest because they reflect the sky patterns; or they are fringed by brilliantly coloured seaweeds. Sand dunes with marram grass give great foreground interest with your dried out boat behind. Cliff tops give a good overview of the coastline you have sailed.

I hope you have gained some 'food for thought', some inspiration and a desire to enter the DCA annual photograph / video / artwork competition this year. Remember, irrespective of whatever your subject content / elements are, ask yourself "***Does my photo tell a story and show any of the following?***":

- emotional impact,
- some illustration of technical skills,
- some originality/creativity,
- great storytelling,
- the promotion and celebration of any aspect of dinghy cruising,
- and, finally last but no means least, an interesting composition.

For more inspiration go to:

www.arwensmeanderings.blogspot.co.uk – in search bar type 'taking good dinghy cruising photos'

<http://logofspartina.blogspot.com/>