

Mysteries of Photography #16: Exif

Every digital image file contains information about that image. This is part of the **Exchangeable image file format** (Exif). This was originally formulated for TIFF image files but has been extended JPG, PNG, WEBP, DCF (RAW) and even WAV (sound files).

This is called metadata. The following is a direct quote from the Wikipedia entry:

The metadata tags defined in the Exif standard cover a broad spectrum:

- **Camera settings:** This includes static information such as the camera model and make, and information that varies with each image such as orientation (rotation), aperture, shutter speed, focal length, metering mode, and ISO speed information
- **Image metrics:** Pixel dimensions, resolution, colorspace, and file size
- **Date and time information,** digital cameras will record the current date and time and save this in the metadata
- **Location information**
- **A thumbnail for previewing the picture on the camera's LCD screen, in file managers, or in photo manipulation software**
- **Descriptions**
- **Copyright information**

Also, if the camera or smartphone has GPS, this would also be included, showing the exact location of the image.

When you process your image, you can set in the software how much of this information is included in the processed (exported) file. Obviously you will always want to include your copyright information. But what about the rest?

GPS information may be problematic. You may not want your home address available in any images that you captured at home. However with wildlife photography, it can be used to validate that that lion was in the wilds of Kenya, not Werribee.

There is also what, in my opinion, is a totally misguided tendency to remove all camera metadata from images entered into club competitions. The judge is there to help improve your work. If they can look up the full camera metadata (shutter speed, ISO, aperture, etc.), they may be able to make specific suggestions as to how an image capture might have been improved.

The advent of AI generated images is also raising a major red flag. I have just become aware that organisers of international photographic competition are not just warning that anyone entering AI generated images will be banned for life but also examining Exif data in at least the top ranked images in their competitions.

I know of one highly ranked image that at the last moment was excluded from an international competition as being a suspect AI generated image due to the absence of Exif information. From its appearance, it could also have just been a highly processed composite where the maker had set Photoshop to strip any Exif from the final exported JPG. We will never know.

Please be warned. If you like to make composite images, for your own sake, leave some Exif data in your JPG competition entry if you can. AI is really poisoning the well, so to speak, for anyone who like to experiment with their images.

Also, in club competitions, don't worry about revealing your photo secrets by leaving in your camera metadata. Any experienced judge will be able to make at least a highly educated guess as to how you achieved that technically brilliant image.

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