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Photo Equipment Buying Guide

Tripods & Monopods

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What to Look for in a [Tripod](#)

Most people tend to think of tripods as being a "unit". In reality, most full-sized tripods can be purchased as two parts: [the legs](#) and [the head](#). These parts may come in various configurations so that you can customize the tripod that best suits your style of shooting, your budget and even your height!

You'll want a much smaller, lighter weight tripod for hiking than for studio work. You'll need a sturdier tripod for star trails or time-lapse images than for simple landscapes. You may need a more flexible tripod in confined spaces than if you always shoot in wide open areas.

As a very broad generalization, expect to spend no less than \$100 on a new, full-sized tripod. Some may go into the multiple hundreds of dollars. Bear in mind also the old adage that *the best tripod is the one you have with you*. This means that even the best tripod ever made does you no good if you don't carry it with you and even a flimsy lightweight tripod is usually better than handholding your camera. So get one that suits your needs, your budget and that you will actually use.

[Legs](#)

Height – Legs may be purchased in various sizes and strengths (how much weight they can support. Very compact models may not even go up to waist height, versus super stretch models that can [extend tall enough for a basketball player](#) to use without having to bend over. For any

tripod you plan to use on a regular basis, the ability to raise the camera slightly above your head is a must-have feature, in case you are standing uphill or on some elevated surface.

Low – If you shoot small subjects (such as flowers, mushrooms and the like) then it's also important that the tripod be able to get your camera low to the ground and hold it steadily in place. This may be different from simply collapsing the legs. Some tripods offer reversible center posts for mounting the camera upside-down between the legs. Others have clever designs where the center post can be mounted horizontally or locked in an infinite number of positions.

Collapsed – For carrying around, you probably want the smallest collapsed length possible. Bear in mind that there's a direct correlation between amount of collapsibility and cost. More collapsible generally also means less stable when extended, though this isn't always true. A good rule of thumb is that a collapsed tripod should be just over 1/3 or 1/4 its maximum height, depending how many leg segments it has.

Flexibility – As noted, some tripods have clever adaptations for moving the center post. Some also have legs that can be splayed independently of one another. A few have secondary camera mounts on the legs themselves. Some very small models even have [flexible legs which can wrap around things](#). The more flexible a tripod is, the less weight capacity it's likely to have but the more ways you can use it in unusual settings.

Locking Mechanism – Tripod legs have various different locking mechanisms when the segments are extended. Most popular are:

- **Flip levers.** Simply flip the lever to the open position, extend the segment as far as you want it to go, then flip it back to the locked position. Flip levers are popular and handy because they are reliable and can be operated with one hand.
- **Twist-locks.** In essence, you twist two leg segments against one another. One direction releases the segments so they can be extended or collapsed, the other direction locks the segments from moving. Twist locks have a low profile and won't catch on loose clothing or camera straps but require two hands to operate. Lower quality ones are very prone to sticking, freezing up or even breaking.
- **Thumb screws.** Far less common than the other two options, thumb screws are literally screws with oversized heads that can be loosened and tightened without tools. They are low-tech and very reliable.

Capacity – All tripods include, as part of their specifications, maximum recommended weight capacity. Think of the combined weight of: your camera, the largest lens you are likely to use, whatever additional "weight" you place on it by holding onto the camera. (Most people press down a bit when operating a tripod mounted camera.) It's good to go for the most capacity possible. This will also be the strongest, most secure setup but remember that there's a direct correlation between capacity and carry-around weight. There is also a rough correlation between capacity and cost.

Heads

Pan-Tilt – A pan-tilt head adjusts on each of three axes separately. These are often the default heads found on the most inexpensive tripods. There is nothing "wrong" with a pan-tilt head (despite often being billed as just for video, they perform fine for still photography too) but most professional and advanced amateur photographers prefer a [ball head](#).

Ball – A ball head has just a single thumb screw. The head is literally mounted on a ball. Loosen the screw and you can adjust the camera orientation infinitely in just about any direction. The biggest problem with ball heads is getting one that is strong enough to hold the weight of your camera-lens combination.

Other Types of Tripod Heads – There are several other types of tripod heads, though most are considered somewhat specialized.

- [Panoramic heads](#) rotate but do not tilt. They are used for getting straight alignment in panoramas.
- [Geared heads](#) do not turn and rotate freely. They ride on a geared mechanism and are often adjusted by a crank.
- [Gimbal heads](#) turn a camera on end. They are most often used by portrait studios and fashion photographers.

- [Pistol Grip heads](#), as their name implies, are basically [ball heads](#) with a pistol grip type mechanism for quickly making adjustments.
- [Leveling heads](#) are a specialized form of [ball head](#) that enables slight offsets for leveling the camera on uneven surfaces.

Capacity – Like legs, tripod heads always include capacity in their specifications. In this case, the capacity refers to the maximum weight the head can hold at an angle without slipping. More is always better but capacity also correlates to price. Buy the best you can comfortably afford.

Other Features

Level – Some tripods come with a built-in level. This is fine except that it's entirely possible to stand the tripod on a hillside (where it will not be level) then adjust the head so that the camera is level. A tripod-mounted level does nothing to help you in such a case.

Quick Release Plates – Quick release plates can be a very convenient and useful feature if you have more than one camera, lens or other piece of equipment. Or if you frequently mount and unmount your camera to the tripod. There are several configurations of quick release plates and they are not all mutually compatible. If you already have a tripod or other support that takes quick release plates, try to match your new tripod so that it uses the same type.

Spikes – Some tripod legs may have spikes on the tips. Usually either the spikes can be extended out beyond the standard rubber tips or the rubber tips can be retracted to reveal the spikes. These are for "digging" into dirt to help hold the tripod from moving. Spikes vary in their usefulness with most being not all that useful at all.

Rotation Measurement – Some tripods will include a kind of circular "ruler" around the top. This can be theoretically useful in taking a series of shots to later stitch together as a panorama. (In practice, most people are more likely to look through the viewfinder when determining the amount of overlap between shots.)

Monopod Leg – Some tripod legs are configured in such a way that two of them can be removed and the whole assembly converted into a monopod.

What to Look for in a Monopod

Unless you are primarily a sports photographer, it probably makes no sense for you to get a monopod before getting a tripod. Most people will get much more use from a tripod.

A monopod is essentially a tripod with only one leg. It will not stand on its own but will provide relatively stable support when used properly. Monopods also provide a good deal more flexibility in certain shooting situations than tripods.

Tripods are prohibited at many sporting venues because their legs pose a trip hazard when splayed. (Conversely, amateurs are often prohibited from bringing monopods into more professional venues because they can so easily double as weapons.)

As might be expected, monopods have fewer features than tripods and nearly all of the features they do have are the same. Listed below are the notable exceptions.

Grip – Because they must be held to maintain stability, monopods usually have grips just below the camera mount. Many of these are rubber or foam rubber. The foam has better insulating qualities for cold weather use.

Forked Head – Some monopods have no screw mount. The camera doesn't permanently attach but rests in a groove or "fork" at the top.

Flat Head – Many monopods have a completely non-adjustable flat head. They are little more than an adjustable height stick with a bolt sticking up from the top. This is a very solid configuration but is best suited to larger lenses with tripod collars that allow for rotation. Alternately, the flat head could be used as a basis for attaching certain types of tripod heads. This might be especially useful if you wanted to use the same head on both your tripod and your monopod.

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