

How to choose the best tripod: 10 things photographers should look for

If you thought all tripods were essentially the same, then think again! What looks like a small difference in design can have a big impact on usability.

So how do you choose the best tripod? If you want your tripod to be a trusty lifelong companion and not just an overpriced, overweight millstone, you need to read these top 10 tips for choosing the right one!



How to choose the best tripod: 1. Balls of fire

Tripod heads come in two types: ball heads and three-way heads. Ball heads have a single locking screw – when you loosen it you can move the camera in any direction.

Ball heads are (usually) cheaper, lighter and more compact. This makes them perfect for travel and most other types of photography, but they're less effective for precise framing and small adjustments.

How to choose the best tripod: 2. Three way precision

Three-way heads have separate pan, tilt and swivel movements.

They take a little longer to set up, but they allow you to make small accurate adjustments, and to move the camera along one axis without disturbing the others.

They're ideal for studio work or more demanding landscape photography.

But they're bigger and heavier than ball heads, and the handles stick out so they're less convenient to carry around

How to choose the best tripod: 3. Legs akimbo



Most tripods let you select more than one leg angle, so you can splay the legs further apart to get the camera lower to the ground.

Ideally, you should be able to adjust the angle for each leg individually, to allow for rough ground or shooting in awkward and confined spaces.

The more you splay the legs, the stronger the legs need to be – spindly, multi-section legs soon reveal their limitations.

How to choose the best tripod: 4. Clip or twist?

When you extend the legs, the sections will be locked into position with either a clip or a twisting collar.

Clips can feel more secure, but they are affected by grip and sand and in cold weather they can be painful to use.

Twisting collars are neater (they don't stick out) and simple to use, though they need to be good quality to avoid wear and slippage over time.

How to choose the best tripod: 5. Columns or booms?



Any tripod will let you shoot horizontally, but what if you need to get over your subject to shoot it, or the tripod legs stop you getting close enough?

Some tripods have a centre column which can be rotated to act as an angled ‘boom’.

This is a really useful feature if you do a lot of table-top or close-up photography.

How to choose the best tripod: 6. How low can you get?

For ultra-low-level shooting, some tripods let you split the centre column and insert it upside down to get the camera right down to ground level.

It’s a little more awkward to work with but it lets you shoot from angles which would normally be impossible.

How to choose the best tripod: 7. Quick release



Basic ball heads screw straight into the tripod socket on the base of the camera, but if you want to use the camera handheld for a couple of shots, you have to unscrew it again.

More advanced heads and ‘quick-release’ plates – you can detach the camera by flicking a lever, then snap it back onto the tripod head to re-attach it. But it can be a fiddle attaching the plate to the camera.

Some use screws with coin slots, but it’s better to have a butterfly nut you can tighten with your bare hands.

How to choose the best tripod: 8. Too many sections?

Legs with four or five sections fold down very small, which makes the tripod easier to carry, but they come with two major disadvantages.

The first is that the legs end up quite thin and spindly, which affects the overall stability and rigidity.

The second, less obvious problem is that they take longer to set up. Does this really make a difference? Yes, it does.

How to choose the best tripod: 9. Carbon fibre or alloy?



Carbon fibre is light and strong and ideal for travel or long-distance hiking, but it's also more expensive.

If weight isn't a serious issue, a regular aluminium tripod is just as good – as long as you choose a good brand.

How to choose the best tripod: 10. Are gears good?

Some tripods come with geared centre columns, which might seem like a good idea until you try it.

It's fine in the studio, where you want to make fine adjustments to the framing and you've got all day to do it, but out in the field a geared centre column will just get in the way and slow you down.