



Safari Camera Support Systems Recommendations

Description

Our safari guests often ask me for a recommendation on how to support long lens in safari vehicles. The options out there range from simple to complicated and from cheap to outrageously expensive. Over the years I have tested many methods, some worked and other didn't. I like multitasking products that are simple, effective, and easy to travel with -inexpensive doesn't hurt either. A few basic support items in my travel bag can be used singly or in combination to support my camera while allowing for necessary tracking.

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Safari vehicles are usually custom made and no two are likely to be constructed the same. On the typical safari you will be in many different vehicles and one system may not work for all of them: the more complicated the system the more likely it will not work in all vehicles. Most support systems are bean bag supports, tripod or monopod with heads allowing pivot and movement, or a combination of tripod/monopod rigs and various clamps to secure it to a spot in the vehicle.



Bean bags – These come in many shapes and sizes with some made for specific lenses and vehicle situations. When empty, they are easy to travel with. Upon arrival at your destination, stop by a local grocery store buy a bag of rice or beans, put the fill into a zipper plastic bag then into the bean bag, and you are ready to go. In a pinch you can use sand. When you are finished shooting, donate the beans or rice to a local family. Also Birdseed works quite well and the birds get a happy meal after your travels.

I like bean bags because they provide a significant amount of vibration isolation compared to a hard mount and can be used in multiple situations not just safari vehicles. Beanbags work best in pop-top vans (the photographer is standing in this type) or open-roof vehicles that would be found in Kenya and Tanzania. For the standard open safari vehicle they do not work so well due to the lack of doors, window frames, or other resting point. Usually you will get just a pipe-type arm rest or seatback to attach to; nothing to obscure the view of the animal, but not enough surface for a beanbag to function.



most vehicles do not have places to put beanbags where they would be comfortable

Tripods – Usually a photographer’s best friend, they unfortunately do not work so well in safari vehicles. They are difficult to set up and keep secure among the vehicle seats and passengers. Tripods are not recommended in vehicles because they take up precious space.

Monopods – A good monopod will be lightweight, compact, and easy to travel with. I have found them indispensable when shooting wildlife from a safari vehicle. They carry the majority of the weight of long lens to save your arms and provide stabilization. Combined with a ball head the monopod can be very versatile in capturing images on safari allowing you to swivel and adjust. The single leg pivot point makes it easy to turn and shoot out the opposite side of the vehicle with minimal body shifting and rearrangement of equipment. It is comfortable and safe to hold the camera on the monopod while the vehicle is in motion. I found that monopods work very well in the game drive vehicles in Botswana and South Africa.

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If there is a down side to monopods it is that they are not secured to the vehicle. Some tripod companies including Really Right Stuff (www.reallyrightstuff.com) have designed a clamp system specifically to clamp the monopods to a support in the vehicle.



not all vehicles have places to attach clamps

Not all vehicles we encounter on my safaris have a rail to attach a clamp and some that do have them at really inconvenient heights. I am not sure about losing all the mobility advantages of a monopod by clamping it to the vehicle.

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Several years ago I was able to source 3 components which together would equal the functionality of the clamp and gimbal systems offered by Really Right Stuff for a much more affordable price. The pieces I purchased are no longer manufactured, but there are still good clamp systems out there to find at a good price.



I still like to have the freedom of the camera on the monopod but the clamp rig will give me a more stable option. With this system I can have the clamp set up on the safari vehicle ready to go then quickly switch from a monopod rig to the full support clamped rig for a longer distance and stationary subject such as a lion on a kill. So far I have had good success with the Frankenstein clamp rig and it works in most safari vehicles. Unless you know your safari vehicles well it is best to choose support systems that are simple and offer options. My best advice is still a nice ball mount attached to a good monopod.

[What is the Best Season to go on Safari in South Africa?](#)

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[Photoshop: Using the Shadows/Highlights Command to Improve and Image](#)

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Date Created

2012/12/04