Pictures have a strange magic about them because they show actual “cuts” of something real. We are under the illusion that they are objective and truthful. But for every photograph there is a photographer, who chose some images and left out others, who sought out events that interested him/her and confirmed his/her biases, who for some reason clicked the camera at a particular moment. We need to be conscious of this—the picture is not created by the camera, but by the one who holds the camera. How can we be more sensitive photographers in our cross-cultural experience? (Excerpts from a publication by Deborah Barndt, NEWSTATEments, Pointe Claire, Quebec)

1. We must first realize that when we carry a camera, it becomes a part of our appearance….The tourist with a camera image has become a popular symbol of insensitivity and obnoxiousness.

2. Remember what it feels like “to be photographed”? Few of us actually enjoy having our own pictures taken, even when we are forewarned. Ask permission to take pictures, interact with people before “shooting” them, and involve people when possible in determining how best to capture an idea or image.

3. Taking someone’s picture is an intrusion upon his privacy….Who has the right? Do you just because you are rich enough to own a camera?

4. He who holds the camera has a certain power…to use it sensitively or abuse it. We can distort the way of life of a people by the pictures we take. We can spread distorted images far and wide. Our pictures provide impressions that may or may not be accurate. Some of our “native subjects” are not only aware that they’re being exploited on film, but have learned to use this fact to their advantage, by asking for “baskish” or money afterwards! Should we support this?

5. We are drawn with our cameras to the exotic, and it may not be a fair representation of a culture. It is natural to take pictures of things that stand out in our mind, that look different. But it is easy to insult or distort. Many travelers do not make the effort to know the people and the places they photograph, to go beyond the exotic image phase. But in creating a record of our experiences and to present another people and their way of life, we need to be careful to take pictures that give a balanced view.

6. There are both formal and informal taboos against taking pictures in some cultures. In our own culture we don’t take cameras to funerals, yet we might do so when traveling! Among Muslims there is a strong religious taboo against taking pictures, which are seen as “graven images”. In some cultures it is not proper to take pictures of women, especially women’s faces. Learn the rules of the culture you are visiting and respect their rules.

7. Ask permission before taking a photo. This does not mean that they have to pose, but it shows a genuine interest in the people and their feelings. Most people will be willing, if asked, and even help you get a good picture!
8. Make a gift of a picture you have taken. In many settings, the people you are photographing do not themselves own cameras. Therefore the picture taken might be highly regarded. Giving a gift of a picture is a very kind gesture, and also a kind of exchange—an image of themselves for a print in return. If you promise to send a picture, be sure that you get a proper address and actually follow-through. But also be aware that the resulting picture may not be flattering and thus not appreciated upon receipt! So be careful in offering such a gift.

Learning about ourselves and others through our photos.

Often our pictures say more about us than they do about what we’ve photographed. Taking pictures is a selective and subjective experience. What do you choose to photograph? From what angle? Many of our biases are revealed by our pictures. We often take pictures to confirm our prejudices-- racially, sexually, occupationally. Think of the things that you haven’t taken pictures of ????

Photos can serve as a type of diary. In examining them over time you can find changes in your own attitudes and familiarity with the setting. Early pictures might show first impressions—landscapes and large or impersonal groups of people, later pictures might reveal greater personal contact with people and greater understanding of deeper facets of the culture and more intimate portraits of individuals and individual events. Keeping a diary and recording facts and reasons for various photos can be a rich record of your experiences.

Ask your hosts and friends about what pictures they would suggest you take. This often illustrates cultural differences, but also reveals what they value and want recorded about them. You might learn from their choices. They might also seek out interesting cultural events that you might not otherwise have experienced.

Sharing or viewing your photos with your new friends can offer an opportunity to get them to talk about what they see in the pictures and thus might enlarge your understanding. They may be able to explain more details or underlying traditions. Ask them questions about the pictures to clarify your impressions. Pictures can intensify your sharing and learning and create empathy.

Showing photos of your home, family and lifestyle can open lines of communication as well as create a feeling of camaraderie. Such interactions might lead to recognizing similarities and differences or underlying ways of life that help you learn about cultures.

Lastly, one of the most exciting ways to learn about others is to give a camera to your host national friends and have them take pictures that are important to them! You will learn quickly about cultural differences. They may articulate on film things that they cannot verbalize. You might also ask them to photograph you or your group. They will show you how you look to them…and how your culture seems strange!
Some subjects for your photographic record:

1. To fully represent the “culture”, list ahead of time key images that you want to take and check them off of your cultural inventory.
2. An overview of a hillside, city street, harbor, etc. can provide geographic perspective.
3. Capture how people make a living.
4. Take photos of exterior and interiors of buildings, homes and monuments.
5. Capture “change” by contrasting two or more settings or objects.
6. Try to capture “everyday” events that represent typical lifestyles.
7. Celebrations, weddings, feasts, etc are important but learn about the underlying traditions that you are capturing.
8. A step-by-step sequence of a process can be interesting…i.e. stages of growing and processing coffee.
9. Objects that are important symbolically in the culture…i.e. Spirit Houses in Thailand.
10. Photos that express deep feelings and respect—that illustrate an understanding and appreciation for the uniqueness of a person or setting, as well as the basic humanity that is evident…this is where seeing and feeling are one.

Other:

HAVE FUN with your camera and your photos upon return!