



## Gitzo Tele Studex Tripod



A Report by Nicholas Hellmuth,  
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Based on twelve years using a Gitzo Tele Studex Tripod

## Introduction

If you intend to produce professional quality results with your digital camera, especially medium format or large format, you need a sturdy tripod even more than with traditional film.

Why? Because the ISO of most medium format digital backs is 25. Their specs list higher ISO but in reality that is like pushing film: you get undesirable digital noise, a grungy digital equivalent of film grain. The preferred ISO is 25 on the really high end 22 megapixel models. Models that start at ISO of 100 need to be kept there; anything over 200 is asking for serious noise.

At an ASA of 25 you can't afford camera shake. Of course if you have strobes or tungsten lights you have enough lighting. But if you use outdoor light (other than in full sun) you won't get your shot without wobble. Your image will be blurred, which is worse than out of focus.

Even if you have full sun, use of a polarizing filter will create a need for a long exposure: another reason for having a sturdy tripod that does not blow in the wind.

If you are using a 4x5 camera, its bellows will act as a sail. If you don't want your costly camera and lens to sail away, better anchor it to a strong tripod and equally good tripod head. We cover tripod heads in a separate report.

FLAAR has two Gitzo Tele Studex tripods; the first we bought for a two-year project to photograph pre-Columbian art and architecture throughout Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras for a Japanese publisher of coffee-table art books. This tripod we keep stationed at our photo studio at Universidad Francisco Marroquin, in Guatemala, Central America. When we decided to set up a photography training center at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, we realized that we should start with the best equipment based on our previous 30 years of photography around the world, from Australia to Zurich, Japan to Canada. During these decades of photography both in museums and out on location we had learned that Gitzo and Manfrotto were the most robust products. So to outfit the teaching studio at BGSU in Ohio, we turned to Bogen Imaging, which now imports the Gitzos from France and the Manfrotto from Italy. Since one of our other photo studios is in Germany, we tend to use European equipment, such as Elinchrome strobes (from Switzerland).



### Tripods to stay away from

Most reviews inform you primarily of the good tripods. But to the photographer who needs to equip themselves, it is also a nice gesture to politely mention the kinds of products to avoid.

My first tripod was a super portable model, precisely the kind that amateur's buy. These fold up to about 12 inches, and unfold to about 3 feet high. This means the legs are spindles. The whole tripod wobbles and ends up being as much shake as a monopod. I don't know many pros that use cheapo tripods of this design. A cheap wobbly tripod is about as bad as no tripod at all.

My second tripod was a Tiltall, in the years before Leica bought the company. I acquired this and much of my college-student era equipment in the 1960's from E. Philip Levine, whose store was at that point conveniently located in Harvard Square. This tripod served me for many years. Leica bought, and then sold, Tiltall brand. Today I am not sure it is the same precision as earlier, or perhaps I have simply become accustomed to Gitzo tripods.

At some point in my career I moved up to Gitzo. Frankly none of the so-so tripod brands interested me. Like many aspiring pro-sumers I wanted what studio pros used. Since I worked primarily on location a studio stand was out of the question.

My first Gitzo tripod lasted many years in the 1970's and into the 1980's but had considerable wobble in the center column. The distributor in those years (was not yet Bogen) did not seem to recognize that weak point in the construction. More recent models tend to be better constructed.

When a lucrative contract from a Japanese publisher in 1994 allowed me to buy literally any equipment my heart desired I immediately went for the largest, heaviest, sturdiest Gitzo. When you are perched on top of a Mayan pyramid, with your 4x5 camera bellows acting like a sail, most lighter or lesser tripods would blow over. The Gitzo is so heavy it won't move. This is one situation where you don't want a carbon fiber tripod.

But what appealed to me more than the weight was the height, seems like 12 feet high (at least that was the height that impressed me). Naturally this required a ladder. Yes, we did indeed use a ladder. I traveled around with one of corresponding height. In countless instances I never would have gotten my shot without the perspective from on high. No amount of tilt and swing movement can match what a 12 foot tripod can offer.

What was remarkable was that even fully extended, due to the substance of the tripod, there was no appreciable wobble from the legs. I have used an 8x10 camera on this Gitzo, fully extended to 12 foot height.

More than half of my picture taking is from a normal height. Nonetheless, I still prefer the heavy Gitzo over any normal tripod.

No one has ever knocked it over even in direct collisions (such as when working at night out in the jungles of Central America).



One good reason for liking the full height of this Gitzo I can show from the need one day (before I had this model), to put a regular-height Gitzo on top of the roof of my GMC Suburban. I had to stand on a chair (also on the roof of my car). The object of my desire was a giant stone relief sculpture of the Bilbao Cotzumalhuapa civilization of 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century Guatemala. The sculpture was at an angle, and to have my Hasselblad parallel to it, had to get the Blad about 12 feet into the air. Since this was before I had the Tele Studex model and was before I had tilt and swing movements in any camera, I had to shoot precariously from the roof of my car, not something I advise, and not something I ever dared to do again.



It looks from this distance that I am levitating on top of the car; actually I am standing on a chair. I would not advise you to do this, for your own safety and that of your camera. But it was the only way to get the camera parallel to the slope of the 11th century carved sculpture.

But when you see the perfect shot, you need to do whatever possible to capture the situation. When you try to skimp and use lesser equipment, you may miss the opportunity.

Needing to be on top of my car was before I had the Gitzo Tele Studex; now I don't need to stand on a chair on the roof. I can raise the Tele Studex up to over 12 feet in height.

### Features to look for

Gitzo tripods have a click-stop block that insures its legs will never splay out unless you pull up the safety release. But most wooden tripods have a potential splay problem. Indeed some require an awkward table or chains to hold the legs from turning out and falling down flat. If you ever work on location, any tripod with a center table to hold the legs from splaying is not something you want to even think about. You will surely lose the attachment bolts and it's a royal pain to have to attach, and detach, such an accessory every time you change positions.

Gitzo tripods have sturdy mechanism for tightening the supports. If you need to travel around a lot I recommend forgoing the hand-crank model, since the hand-crank would potentially be something that could be bent or smashed off in transportation. So far however, all over the island of Malta, the tripod survived and held up from the long flight back and forth as well.



Here in Ohio the land is flat but in the volcanic mountains of Guatemala it sure helps to have tripod legs that can be set out horizontally or up diagonally. For years I have photographed half-collapsed 8<sup>th</sup> century Maya temples and palaces. The collapsed area makes the surroundings very uneven. No simple tripod would be usable out here, much less survive.

Another benefit of the Gitzo design is that if you use a short centerpost you can use the tripod (with the legs splayed out almost flat) to shoot from near ground level. The wing nut handles are especially useful to control the legs at any position.

### Extra features

The Gitzo G065 monitor platform is actually a good platform to hold a laptop computer. Just be sure to tape the computer down with gaffer tape. In the era of digital photography, you need a laptop nearby your camera. We always bring one or two tables but when the ground is uneven you need a tripod with variable length legs to provide a support for your laptop.

A tripod bag looks like a good investment. I have never had one, with the results that after a decade or so my tripods look as though they have been through hell and back. But since I don't intend to sell my tripods, the condition of their external finish is not an issue. I just want the tripod to function: Gitzo's always do, decade after decade.

### Model Designations

I would recommend you inspect the full range of tripods at either a PMA trade show, PhotoPlus trade show (first week in November each year, in New York); or Photokina (every two years, late September, Cologne, Germany). But if that is not possible, then what you want is the Tele Studex. Mine is so many decades of hard use that the model number designation has long ago worn off, but the tripod works like a charm. I am guessing I have the G508 or G509 (1504 Mk II in more recent designation).



Nicholas with one of his other Gitzo tripods, on the side of the Acropolis at a Mayan ruin in Mexico. This is why you need tripod legs that can be moved out at a controlled angle, and locked in place.





FLAAR uses one Tele Studex at BGSU; you can tell, this is the new clean one without the scars of being used on location for over three decades. The other Gitzo Tele Studex is stationed in Central America. You can tell this tripod has seen serious usage over many many years. We also have several other sizes and models of Gitzo tripod, and look forward to trying out a carbon fiber model and some of the Gitzo ball heads soon.





This is not where you want compact anything; you want the biggest, heaviest heavy iron you can find.

I also have several other Gitzo tripods since I maintain equipment in Germany, in Guatemala, and at the university in Ohio. That way I don't have to carry everything back and forth and pay excess baggage charges each time. The several other Gitzos that I have are probably various Studex and Pro Studex models. I recommend them all.

Accessories are crucial: I always am sure I carry a very short center column, for when I need the entire tripod to splay out along the ground.

### **Cautionary Notes**

Having your tripod legs collapse (telescope) is a constant danger even with the best metal tripods. The fittings either wear out or some overeager novice assistant tightens them to the point they burst or are otherwise damaged. Or worse, a novice assistant does not tighten one of the legs enough. By the time you put a full sized large format camera on the tripod that weight alone is enough to cause any untightened leg to sag, slowly, until the entire tripod falls over.

So far both the Gitzo Tele Studex tripods have each survived student assistants for years, with no malfunction.

### **Alternatives**

The Manfrotto 3058 would be a possible alternative if 8'7" is enough height. The advantage of the Manfrotto is its legs spread continuously and variably. The Gitzo legs spread only in 3 click stops (though that has been fine for over 30 years of outdoor photography in terrain all over the world). I prefer to be able to lock the leg spread with click stops; besides, I need the full height of the Gitzo Tele Studex.

### **Situations when the full height and weight are indispensable**

When photographing panorama views with a large format camera the bellows, even the limited amount of bellows with a wide angle lens, acts as a sail. The wind was so strong we had to tie the tripod head to a building with rope. There was a 20 foot drop a few inches from the base of the tripod, but even falling over onto the grass would have broken the camera, not to mention the expensive Schneider lens and the Pano/WideView motorized tripod head.



While photographing in remote areas of Campeche, Mexico for a Japanese publisher, there was one shot where the only position to set the camera was on a downward slope. The Mayan temple was very tall, so the perspective distortion was extreme. Normal camera movements were not enough to overcome the distortion from ground height. So we raised the tripod up to about 12 feet, used a ladder, and got a correct perspective. This never would have been possible with a lesser tripod.

And, the camera we used was a full sized 8x10 Linhof Kardan, their largest studio model: this was not a field camera! No cheap spindly tripod could have held the weight steady, especially not at 12 feet up in the air.

A third instance when only the Gitzo Tele Studex could have done the job was while teaching photography at the University of Malta's Centre for Restoration. They needed to photograph a rare 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century tapestry. The weaving was too weak to be oriented vertically on a wall; it had to lay flat. This meant we had to photograph it from above. The tapestry was too large for any normal reprographic table situation. Fortunately I had flown the Gitzo Tele Studex from the USA.

We raised the tripod to its full height, and shot straight down on the tapestry both with a Nikon D100 and a Sigma SD9. All the shots came out just fine.





A fourth and comparable example was while photographing in the National Palace and in the cathedral of Malta. I am guessing they were 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century in date. Here the need was to photograph the impressive inlaid marble tomb stones. But these were flush flat on the floor, not raised vertically. Again, we had to raise the legs to their max, and photograph from up high above.



All these instances, no matter how good a photographer, or how creative your eye is, these shots would not have been possible if you follow the minimalist posture. Indeed I am the opposite, I feel a photographer should have a complete arsenal of literally every accessory, gadget, and special model that is available from the manufacturers. After all, that's why they make all these various and sundry models. There is no one-size-fits-all in the real world of photography. That's why we presently have about nine tripods: five of them are Gitzo (the others are decorative wooden tripods, nice looking, they always elicit favorable comment from on-lookers, but they can't raise your camera 12 feet in the air).

### **Carbon Fiber tripods**

I have stressed the hefty weight of the Gitzo as a notable asset. What if you are out on an expedition in a remote area, and have to carry everything long distances? I still recommend the model G508 or G509 and also carbon fiber tripods as well. When you are on a serious expedition you will probably either need or desire several tripods anyway.

I usually have at least three tripods out on location. One for the large format camera, one for medium format camera, and one for 35mm.

Carbon fiber is my tripod of choice for 35mm and especially for digital cameras. Now I find that I need a fourth tripod, to hold the point-and-shoot digital camera that is the most convenient to use to take photos of the real digital cameras that we use. It makes little sense to employ a \$35,000 medium format camera to take snapshots of our equipment set-up for our web sites and success stories. A Nikon CoolPix or Sony F828 is easier.

In the next installment I will speak about carbon fiber tripods. Will also explain why you absolutely need a tripod when doing digital photography even more with point-and-shoot and 35mm SLR than with medium or wide format cameras.

**For additional information**

If you wish additional information on the equipment described on this report, you might wish to contact [scott.price@calumetphoto.com](mailto:scott.price@calumetphoto.com), tel 312 944 2777 ext 2202, fax 312 944 4035.

Bogen Imaging is the importer; they do not sell equipment directly, which is why we recommend Calumet Photographic. However if you prefer to contact Bogen Imaging Corp directly, here is their information: 565 East Crescent Avenue, P.O. Box 506, Ramsey, N.J. 07446-0506, e-mail [info@bogenphoto.com](mailto:info@bogenphoto.com), tel (201) 818-9500, fax (201) 818-9177.

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Obviously if you have d□ handle a basic PDF file.



Nicholas out on location in Central America testing camera equipment as he photographs Lake Atitlan, Guatemala







Nicholas doing panoramic photography in 17th century ruins of Spanish colonial church in Antigua Guatemala. The equipment consists of Gitzo Tele Studex tripod, Manfrotto tripod head, BetterLight Pano/WideView motor, Cambo Ultima 4x5 camera, Schneider lens, and BetterLight Super 6K tri-linear scanning back.



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