

Most people will buy a tripod based solely on what it costs without any regard to what they will be putting on it. For many, the thought process goes something like “why would I spend \$300 plus dollars on a tripod when I can get this one for \$39.95” or “A tripod is a tripod. They’re all the same, right?” Nothing could be further from the truth. The most consistent thing I have seen my workshop students struggle with is inadequate tripods. Of all the “stuff” that you can purchase for your camera, a tripod is the number one accessory that will improve your photography. How? Using the appropriate tripod will gain you sharper images, better compositions, more effective use of depth of field and more. A cheap, lightweight tripod can be worse than no tripod at all. Shop for a tripod like you would any good lens or other camera accessory and you won’t go wrong. Give some thought to what you will be putting on it in terms of weight. Give some thought to what you will be putting on it in the future as well. There’s no sense in purchasing a good tripod only to outgrow it in a couple of months with a newer, heavier lens. The height of the tripod is also important. I want the tripod and head to place the camera’s viewfinder at my eye level while I’m standing up without the use of the center column. That’s not to say that I always shoot with the camera at my eye level, I don’t, but when I need or want to shoot that high I can do so comfortably. Some tripods have a center column that can be removed or folded out of the way when not in use. Others have no center column at all.

The tripods I have recommended below are in three different weight classes. Make an honest assessment of the weight of your camera gear and go from there. It might be best to go up a weight class just to have some growing room. All of the heads that I have recommended are ball heads. I think they give you the most versatility when capturing nature subjects. All of the heads have a quick release system as well. Make a note of how many extra quick release plates you will need so you can order them at the same time. Ideally you will have one on each camera body and one for each lens that has a tripod ring or mount. These are usually the larger, heavier lenses like the Canon or Nikon 70-200mm f2.8, the Canon 100-400 F4.5-5.6 the Nikon 80-400 f4.5-5.6 and all of the so called “Super Telephotos.” All of these tripods have the advantage of being able to go completely flat to the ground for low shooting angles or subjects that are on the ground. If you have the budget for it, consider a carbon fiber tripod. They are much lighter than their aluminum cousins and so are easier to carry for longer distances. If you have the budget for it, consider a Really Right Stuff BH-40 (mid-weight) or BH-55 (heavyweight) ball head in place of any of those mentioned below for mid-weight or heavyweight gear.

Lightweight gear (camera and lenses)

- Manfrotto MT190XPRO3 with Manfrotto MH494–BHUS ball head
- *Induro CLT103 Classic with Induro BHD-0 ball head
- *Feisol CT-3301 with Feisol CB-30D ball head

Mid-weight Gear

- Manfrotto 055XPRO3 with Manfrotto MHXPRO-BHQ2 ball head
- *Induro CLT-203 with Induro BHD-1 ball head
- *Feisol Classic CT-3371 with Feisol CB-40D ball head

Heavyweight Gear

- *Feisol CT-3372 with Feisol CB-50D ball head
- *Induro CLT-403 with Induro BHD3
- *Really Right Stuff TVC-33 With RRS BH-55 ball head (no center column)

*Denotes Carbon Fiber