How to Organize and Back Up a Lifetime of Digital Photos

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Bring scattered digital photographs into a searchable, resilient archive. These 28 steps cover source inventories, safe copying, scanning, folders, filenames, metadata, duplicates, master files, 3-2-1 backups, restore tests, sharing, and long-term migration.

Things you will need

- A reliable master-library computer or storage device with spare capacity
- Card readers, cables, and access to the original devices and accounts
- At least one external backup drive plus an independent remote backup option
- A suitable scanner for prints and albums where needed
- Photo-catalog or metadata software with a tested export method
- A secure recovery record and a plain-language archive readme

Gathering Photos and Protecting Originals

1. **Decide what the archive is for**
   Define the scope and purpose of your photo archive.
2. **List every device, service, and account**
   Inventory every source before deleting or consolidating anything.
3. **Create one master library with room**
   Create one master library with enough working space.
4. **Copy sources into a labelled intake folder**
   Copy each source into a labelled intake area before editing it.
5. **Keep originals and their data intact**
   Preserve original image files and their embedded information.
6. **Scan prints as a master plus copies**
   Digitize prints and albums with a preservation master and a working copy.

Selecting, Naming, and Describing the Collection

7. **Fix camera clocks before sorting by date**
   Review camera clocks and time zones before sorting by date.
8. **Build broad folders you can maintain**
   Build broad folders around the way you expect to browse.
9. **Cull duplicates without losing the only frame**
   Review duplicates and bursts without deleting the only meaningful version.
10. **Flag photos that came from other people**
    Separate screenshots, downloads, and photos received from other people.
11. **Name files consistently and readably**
    Apply a consistent, human-readable filename pattern.

12. Write captions that answer who and why

Add captions that preserve who, what, where, and why.

Managing Metadata, Edits, and Catalog Information

13. Split preservation masters from working copies

Separate preservation masters from everyday working copies.

14. Pilot metadata tools on a small batch

Test metadata tools on a small batch before changing thousands of files.

15. Use a controlled keyword list, not sprawl

Use a small controlled set of keywords instead of improvised tag sprawl.

16. Export the catalog out of the app

Keep catalog information available outside one proprietary application.

17. Save edits as versions, never over originals

Save edited versions without overwriting raw files or original exports.

18. Write a readme for the whole system

Write a short readme that explains the entire system.

Building Independent and Recoverable Backups

19. Follow the 3-2-1 rule for masters

Follow a 3-2-1 backup plan for the master library.

20. Automate backups that keep version history

Automate local and remote backup jobs with version history.

21. Secure the accounts holding your archive

Protect backup accounts, devices, and recovery information.

22. Keep one copy offline and isolated

Keep an offline or otherwise isolated copy for serious failure scenarios.

23. Test a real restore before you need it

Test restoration before an emergency makes it urgent.

Maintaining, Sharing, and Passing On the Archive

24. Book a monthly intake session

Schedule a recurring intake session for new photographs.

25. Run an annual integrity and coverage check

Perform an annual integrity and coverage review.

26. Migrate formats before they stop opening

Migrate storage and formats before they become difficult to read.

27. Share copies with consent limits stated

Share purpose-made copies with privacy and consent in mind.

28. Document who inherits the archive

Document a handover plan and keep the workflow useful for new photos.

Sources

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