

Travel tips

Nevada Wier is something of a specialist when it comes to photographing indigenous people in remote parts of the world. She talks to Angela August about keeping travel photography creative.





WE PROBABLY all do a bit of travel photography in our own way – a few holiday snaps here and there, or even a dedicated photographic holiday, but Nevada Wier's approach is altogether different. Think more Eve Arnold than Martin Parr. Travelling to remote parts of Asia and away from her Santa Fe home for weeks – if not months – at a time, for Nevada, shooting a satisfying image is as much about good communication as it is about good photographic technique.

"I am a student of culture and non-verbal communication," she explains. "I have to think of a way to synchronise myself with the culture. Each culture is different – its body language and rhythm, and how it responds to visitors – so I do it in different ways. Often I will talk to people in English even when I know they can't understand me, just so they can hear what I sound like, because the tone of voice is just as important as the gestures."

Starting out in the late 70s as a trekking guide in Nepal, Nevada has spent nearly 25 years travelling extensively through remote and inaccessible parts of the world, particularly Asia. In the early days, accompanied by foreign affairs officers, Nevada was forced to adhere to strict itineraries and specific routes, and even today she has just returned from a restricted region of Myanmar that required special



Seeing the image

The early morning or early evening are the times when the light is at its best for photography. I took this photograph of the village headman (previous page) early in the morning shortly before we descended into the valley below. I carefully positioned myself to capture the light shining through his clothing.

I have visited the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar many times, and I am always trying to find different ways of photographing it. The landscape version (top left) was shot without flash while for the vertical image I used fill-flash, which really picks out the pigeon. Because I was using film, I didn't know I'd got the image until I'd got home. You might think that I would benefit enormously by using digital with this sort of technique, but even when I shoot digital I don't look at the back of the camera that much – you can't get an accurate idea from the small LCD anyway. I tend to trust my instinct instead.

I don't often set up a shot, but I did ask the young monk to sit still for this shot in a monastery (top right). A tripod can be a pain to carry, so I've got good at hand-holding at slow speeds and working with the equipment to hand.

I always try to have a good scout around when I arrive at a new location. I had never been to this part of Myanmar before, and I arrived late at night so I had no idea of what to expect the next morning. I climbed to the high ground and this vista opened up beneath me. I stood on a pile of bricks to get a better view. The combination of fog and smoke adds to the atmosphere.

Previous page Headmand, Blue Nile River, Ethiopia. EOS 1V with an EF 17-35mm f2.8L USM lens.

This page; clockwise from top left

Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar. EOS 1V with an EF 17-35mm f2.8L USM lens, Kodak E100SW, no flash.

Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar. EOS 1V with an EF 17-35mm f2.8L USM lens, Speedlite 550EZ at -2/3 EV, Kodak E100SW.

Young monks praying to Buddha, Thambuddhe monastery, Monywa, Myanmar. EOS 1Ds with an EF 28mm f1.8 USM lens, Speedlite 580EX -2EV, 1/5 second at f5.6, ISO 400, hand-held.

Fog and pagodas, Myanmar. EOS 1V, EF 24-70mm f2.8L USM lens, Kodak E100SW.

permission from the country's authorities.

Nevada makes lengthy trips to remote parts of Mongolia, Myanmar and China time and again. On her return visits she takes with her prints from previous trips, using them as tickets to gain the trust of her hosts. The advent of digital and its instant image review has undoubtedly accelerated the 'getting to know you' process, but nothing makes up for time spent among the villagers, learning about their ways, customs and values.

"With a lot of indigenous tribes, it's not that they're unfriendly or that they don't want to be photographed – it's just that it doesn't happen quickly.

"I try not to project onto people what they might be feeling, which is what I think some photographers do – like they are worried that they are intruding by taking a picture. I give people plenty of opportunity to say no to being photographed so therefore I don't usually get into awkward situations, but sometimes it takes a bit longer to build a rapport. Sometimes you can metaphorically parachute into a situation; other times you have to sit down for a few days, if not months."

A common pitfall for travel photographers is the lure of the most obvious shots – seduced by exotic sights and colours at every turn, it can be difficult to remain creative. When Nevada visits a place for the first time she goes through a mental checklist; experience has taught her that her first impulsive approach is probably not the most creative. Returning to a place she has photographed before, she has to work harder, perhaps shooting from an unusual viewpoint or using flash, often resulting in images that may not have occurred to her on her first visit.

Nevada's work is divided into personal projects, which may or may not lead to books and editorial articles, photographic workshops and stock photography for Getty and Corbis photo libraries. In an increasingly litigious society, Nevada is careful to obtain model releases for her images – perhaps not for an image of a dozen people working in a field, but in instances where her subjects are recognisable and certainly for any close-up portrait. Nevada does not know where her images might be used and being strict about model releases means her images are more saleable for advertising and other commercial uses.

Unintimidated by the digital age, Nevada has kept abreast of technological developments, first going digital with an EOS 10D. Concerned about image quality,



Planning ahead

I had a definite picture in mind when photographed this reelection (top left). I prefer not to set up my shots, so I had to wait for about an hour for the perfect foot, in the perfect position.

I wanted to highlight some of the falling grains of wheat (top right), to both retain movement and freeze it at the same time. Without flash, it would have been just a blur. A gold Omnibounce enhanced the warm colour, while the girl's face is lit with natural light.

I went to the Galapagos specifically to photograph sea lions. I was in the water, very close to them. I felt I could be creative and use a bit of flash because the animals were so accustomed to people. It's fabulous for non-wildlife photographers like me.

top left Reflection of monk on tiled floor, Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar. EOS 1V with an EF 28-70mm f2.8L lens, Kodak E100VS.

top right Taungyo girl winnowing wheat, Myanmar. EOS 1N with an EF 24-70mm f2.8 USM, Speedlite 540EZ -1EV with gold reflector, Kodak Lumiere 100.

right Espanola Island, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, Galapagos sealions, EOS 1V with an EF 17-35mm f2.8L USM lens, Speedlite, Kodak E100SW.



she worked with both film and digital for a while until the EOS 1Ds was launched in 2002, later upgrading to the Mark II.

“I also work in pretty rough conditions and I needed a camera that was rugged enough to cope. The 1Ds Mark II really clinched it for me. I also wanted to make sure I understood the workflow and had a way to catalogue, edit and store my digital images. It took me a while to figure out exactly how I wanted to do it. So until I had the camera and the workflow I wasn’t willing to go 100% digital. That all happened when the 1Ds Mark II camera out. It is a phenomenal camera. I’m not wedded to either film or digital – to me it’s just media, and right now there is no question of the best media around for what I’m doing.”

For the best possible quality, Nevada always shoots RAW. Although this gives her huge flexibility for manipulating her images, she doesn’t even crop a telephone wire, never mind altering exposure or colour saturation. It is her personal philosophy and one that she does not impose upon other photographers.

“I think it’s because I started out shooting slides and basically if you didn’t get it exactly right, then an editor wasn’t interested. And so it remains a personal challenge. It keeps me sharp.”

Nevada travels with a laptop computer and two external hard drives which she backs up onto, but when you have no access to an electrical source for a week or more, the issue of battery consumption is critical. Until recently Nevada relied on three or four spare batteries to see her through a week’s shooting, but on her last trip she took a portable solar panel to recharge the batteries.

“It’s not a perfect beast, but it solved the problem and they’re only going to get better. Also, the camera batteries are so much better. One of the reasons I

immediately switched from the EOS 1Ds to the 1Ds Mark II was the battery life. It’s unbelievable, and I’m praying that the next generation will be even better.”

It’s quite likely that Nevada will be queuing up for the EOS 1Ds Mark III then.

For more of Nevada’s images, visit www.nevadawier.com



MICK DAVIES



Action shots

Whenever I’m shooting action I really go for it and take a lot of pictures. Often I combine a slow shutter speed with flash – it is an imperfect technique and there are too many possibilities where things can go wrong.

Don’t be too ready to give up, even if it appears too dark to photograph. I took a light reading off the fire (bottom right), and this was the only image that worked out of two or three rolls of film. Going digital has not really changed the amount I shoot, because even with film I always shot plenty.

top Long Skirt Hmong Spirit Festival, Guizhou Province, China. EOS 1Ds Mk II with an EF 16-35mm f2.8L USM lens, Speedlite 580EX -1.5EV, 1/8 sec at f16, ISO 400.

bottom left Buzkashi (horse polo) game, Xinjiang Province, China. EOS 1N with an EF 70-200mm f2.8L USM lens, Kodak E100S.

bottom right Threshing rice, Myanmar. EOS 1V with an EF 24-105mm f4 IS USM lens, hand-held, 1/2 second, Kodak E100SW pushed one stop.