

The Road to *Devotion*

Photographer Christopher Roche travels to some of the remotest places in the world to capture the people most devoted to their faiths. *ELIZABETH FINNEY* reports



RAISED ON WANDERLUST, photographer Christopher Roche spent his childhood in Canada, Nigeria and Wales, before graduating university and leaving a trail of footprints around the world. He has spent a year working on boats in the Caribbean, and a few months travelling through India, London, Rome, Dublin, and London again; needless to say, his passport is well-stamped.

I catch him amongst the hustle and bustle of Paddington station, before he shoots off again from his home in Notting Hill. Speaking over the rumble of trains and coffee machines, he says, "I'm curious about people. I'm not a religious person, but I find people's thirst for God interesting. It's a universal journey and it always has been."

His photography allows his audience to immerse themselves in his trek to the unknown. Part of this journey has been bound into a book, entitled *The Priests and Pilgrims of Ethiopia*. "Ethiopia is very different from the rest of Africa." Chris says, thoughtfully, "They are proud, so they like to be photographed because they know they're beautiful, they know they have something to share. But they're quite reserved."

On Christmas Eve, whilst lost in the hills of Lalibela in Ethiopia, a child showed him the way to a tunnelled out passageway, leading to Bet Maryam, one of the

ancient churches that have been carved out of the earth. "I could hear chanting, and we came out of the tunnel and into a church. Hundreds of priests and pilgrims were singing and swaying. It was quite amazing."

The population of Lalibela is almost completely Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and the event Chris witnessed, named Genna, is their ancient Christmas celebration. It involves thousands of pilgrims travelling for weeks, often with only the clothes they are wearing. "They sleep on whatever bare patch of rock they can find, with dignity," Chris says. "There's something I find inspiring about that."

Chris then travelled on to explore the ancient Christian churches embedded high up in the cliff faces of Tigray. The churches are still active places of worship, purposefully built in inaccessible places for protection, peace and contemplation, away from the masses.

One such structure is a 6th century monastery that sits 3,000 metres high atop a mountain. "The Debre Damo

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was built on top of a towering vertical cliff face, and I got hauled up there on the end of a leather rope by a very mischievous monk. On the way down he asks you for a tip, and if ever there's a guy you're going to tip, it's the monk who's got you on the end of a rope above a massive drop!"

Before his photographic expedition to Ethiopia, Chris ventured through the Spiti Valley in 2008, an area of India close to the Tibetan border. Sitting amongst mini-breakers drinking coffee with their meticulously packed suitcases, his anecdotes of weeks trekking in the wilderness sound extraordinary, though he regales them with a humble casualness. "I was staying with a local





community, getting dragged into weddings and parties, and they'd all want you to drink their local brew." Smiling, he adds, "I find the more remote you go, the more friendly people become."

Whilst in India in 2014, Chris stayed in the city of Varanasi for the second time, having visited in 1989. Also known as Kashi, the City of Life, Varanasi has been a hub of culture for over 3,000 years. "It's one of the oldest and holiest cities on earth," he says, visibly thinking back. "Hindus believe if you die there you're liberated from the cycle of life, Samsara. So a lot of people go there to die. It's an industry; bodies are being burnt on these ghats 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It's extraordinary."

Earlier this year, Chris made his way to Eastern Tibet. "I've wanted to go since reading *Tintin in Tibet* when I was 11," he says. He travelled around the region documenting the Monlam festival, which goes on for almost two weeks. He tells me about their rituals, namely the gruelling act of prostration. "They do that for hundreds of miles through the snow. And maybe it's a bit barmy, but it's moving. There's a sense of relief and a purpose in carrying out these acts."

The tales of Chris' travels are completely intoxicating, and are made ever more enticing by his photographs. "In Tibet the culture has been absolutely destroyed. In Ethiopia they're struggling against tourism. So many of our traditions are under siege, I do feel I'm photographing something that's disappearing."

He explains his work to me with upbeat conviction, "The real aim is to photograph people, humanity and tradition. What I hope, in a very small and humble way with these photos, is to show the common humanity. Even if the beliefs are fundamentally quite different, there are common behaviours, factors and traditions."

Chris' stunning photographs portray his fascination with the human race and lack of philosophical overthought in a very raw and evocative way, something I can't help but tell him. Grinning, he replies, "I'm capturing what inspires me. It's personal and emotional rather than a statement; it's to see somebody's face and to see the human behind." ■

Devotion is at Book & Kitchen until 25 September (closed 17-31 August)
 Book & Kitchen, 31 All Saints Road, W11 1HE
bookandkitchen.com
chrisrochephotographer.co.uk

