



Landscapes of devotion

As part of a global project on photographing devotion and the human desire for spiritual fulfilment, Christopher Roche has travelled through many extraordinary landscapes. He has come to realise the important role they play in faith around the planet



Early in 2014 I began work on a new photographic project exploring different faith traditions around the world. I set off for the northern Highlands of Ethiopia to revisit the ancient ceremonies of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that I had witnessed on a previous trip. Arriving at Lalibela was like stepping into a scene from the bible, as around 100,000 white-robed pilgrims descended upon the village for Christmas.

This journey was the first of several I would complete over the next few years. I spent months in Varanasi, the holiest city in India and a place of great pilgrimage for Hindus, where many come to die and escape the endless cycle of rebirth. There I photographed the sadhus, the great shrines to Shiva and the endless colourful religious ceremonies. I travelled to the Amdo region of eastern Tibet to photograph the great Monlam prayer festival during a frosty February, where tens of thousands came to join in the 'Sunning of the Buddha' and watch the Cham dances. I trekked through the remote Spiti Valley and Ladakh in the Indian Himalaya, visiting monks in their monasteries. In January this year I made it to the mountains of Iranian Kurdistan to join in a pre-Islamic festival that celebrated the wedding of an ancient mystic. In May I flew to the Peruvian Andes, where I camped below a glacier alongside 80,000 pilgrims for the great festival of Qoyllur Rit'i, an animist/Catholic concoction that continues non-stop for three days and nights at an altitude of 5,000m.

My focus throughout this project has been on the people. I love making that connection, trying to capture a moment, an emotion or a character. The desire to portray different

cultures, hopefully with empathy, has been the driving force.

As I look back through my images, however, I'm surprised to discover how many landscape photographs I have taken. These were unconscious acts to some degree, moments of respite from the claustrophobia of the crowded festivals.

Too often photographers are divided between those who take pictures of people and those who take pictures of places. This can be a convenient but often artificial categorisation. A sense of place is intrinsic to my work. Many of the regions I have travelled to contain dramatic, beautiful and challenging landscapes that inform the local traditions and people. Often the landscapes themselves are held as divine and worshipped.

In Tibet and the Indian Himalaya there are many mountains and lakes that are sacred. Pangong Tso, cutting through the disputed Indian-Chinese border is surrounded by Lung ta ('Wind Horse') prayer flags, as are innumerable mountain passes. In the Peruvian Andes the great holy mountains are named Apus or gods. Exploring the Sinakara glacier during the festival of Qoyllur Rit'i, I was ceremoniously whipped by an Ukuku chief as part of an initiation ceremony for stepping on such holy ground. The river Ganges, on which Varanasi is built, is a goddess herself and every stone in the city is the earthly abode of Shiva. In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, churches are hidden away in mountaintop caves or carved out of the cliff faces. In Kurdistan, the dervishes chant and dance in order that their land may produce a bountiful harvest. Next year I am heading to Mount Kailash in Tibet, a mountain held holy by four different religions and considered the centre of the universe. Since the beginning of time, men and women have

Previous spread
Namgyal Tsemo Gompa, a 15th-century Buddhist monastery, looks down on Leh, the capital of Ladakh – the Land of High Passes.

Above Stakna Gompa, a Buddhist monastery, lies along the banks of the great Indus, a river that inspired wonder and myth within ancient Iranian, Assyrian and Hindu texts.

Above (right)
Tigray. This part of northern Ethiopia is perhaps most famous for being on the front line of the country's war with Eritrea. It is, however, the home to innumerable mountaintop monasteries and hidden cave churches.



held mother earth and father sky to be sacred, and many of today's rituals in the great religions of the world were born out of these earlier, pagan beliefs.

One of the central themes of my project has been pilgrimage, which I witnessed in every faith tradition. Pilgrimage often takes place across challenging landscapes in hostile weather. I've photographed Tibetan women prostrating their way from Labrang to Lhasa, during the heart of the Tibetan winter, a journey that would take them several months on their hands and knees. I witnessed thousands of subsistence farmers and shepherds traversing the Ethiopian highlands for weeks if not months, barefoot and white-robed. The devout of the Peruvian Andes trekking through a rain-swept night at high altitude, burdened with heavy loads. The actual act of pilgrimage, the traversing – usually on foot – across a landscape is at least as important as arrival at the destination. The journeying itself brings merit to those who endure it and better karma for their future lives.

As I discover the obvious – the traditions and practices of the faiths I photograph are shaped by the land surrounding them, and so are the faces of the peoples who populate them – I've come to realise that my images of landscapes are essential to my project on devotion. Moreover, I've found that I love taking photographs of landscapes. Unlike people, they don't ask for money, they don't get angry, they don't cover their faces, they don't whip me and they're not moving targets hurrying in and out of focus.

To leave a crowded, noisy, dirty place of pilgrimage and head off into the deserted valleys or mountains offers me the time

and space to connect not with another human being but with myself and with nature on a grand scale. Escaping the rush of the crowds, the race to capture a certain moment before it disappears is replaced by stillness and calm. I wait for the moment to arrive, for the light to be just right, patient and in the moment. I hear the mountain and the clouds breathe. This is surely another manifestation of the spiritual and divine.

This theme has quite a history in landscape painting, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries, when British artists such as John Martin and Joseph Turner painted

Below Sinakara glacier, Peru. A band of Ukukus head up to the glacier at an altitude of over 5,000m to celebrate the Star Snow festival. Sadly, the glacier has been retreating in recent years due to global warming.





dramatic scenes of nature that evoked feelings of awe and wonder and that sought to express the unknowable. Since 2006, Tate Britain has been running a project titled the Art of the Sublime, curating a collection that explores these works on nature's glory: terrific cloudscapes, tumultuous seas, celestial light and exploding volcanoes. Many of these paintings, although considered landscapes, depict biblical themes such as the Last Judgement and Milton's Paradise Lost.

My landscape photographs of course do not share such grand ambition or talent but perhaps in their own small way follow in the tradition of the Art of the Sublime in trying to capture a sense of our spirituality within nature.

I've discovered that photographing landscapes is for me a great antidote to photographing people and the cacophony of religious festivals. I can take my time and wait for the right light or hike up to find the best composition. I can slow the shutter down, I have time to review the image captured and adjust if necessary. I can experiment and explore. These landscapes are also a great complement to my work photographing pilgrims, holy men and their rituals. It allows a quietness to surround those busy images and offers them space to breathe. It gives them a sense of place and context. As I wander across these often remote and challenging

landscapes, unhurried and reflective, I consider that these mountains and valleys have witnessed thousands or millions of pilgrims pass along them over the centuries. They are testament to ancient traditions, men and women's search for god – whatever that may mean to them – and have perhaps been shaped by such journeys themselves.

To read about Christopher Roche's new book Banaras: Holy City, about his journeys to Varanasi in India, turn to page 12.



Above A llama watches over a landscape that it usually shares with only a few potato farmers. For a few days every year, though, nearly 80,000 pilgrims cross the area to the Sinakara valley for the Star Snow festival.

Left The view from Dankhar Gompa, located in the Spiti Valley at an altitude of just under 4,000m. This remote valley lies along the border between Himachal Pradesh in India and Tibet.