

Devotion

BY CHRISTOPHER ROCHE

*"I realised that through photography
I could combine my love of travel with
that of telling stories."*



Christopher Roche's

PHOTOGRAPHS HAVE WON MANY AWARDS INTERNATIONALLY AND BEEN PUBLISHED IN THE NATIONAL PRESS & PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNALS. HIS LIMITED EDITION PRINTS HAVE BEEN EXHIBITED AT THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY AND AT THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE IN GENEVA AS WELL AS IN PRIVATE COLLECTIONS. HE HAS PUBLISHED TWO PHOTOGRAPHIC BOOKS: *THE PRIESTS AND PILGRIMS OF ETHIOPIA* AND *BANARAS, HOLY CITY*. HE TELLS *NIKON OWNER* MAGAZINE WHAT INSPIRED AND MOTIVATED HIM TO EMBARK ON HIS RECENT, QUITE EXTRAORDINARY, PROJECT.

I've always been enamoured by storytelling, particularly visual stories. Reading *Tintin* as a child, I found myself transported to exotic lands such as the Tibetan Himalayas and the Peruvian Andes. I even drew my own weekly comics, my first encounter with the art of composition and narrative. Many years later this translated into a career directing TV commercials. However, my wanderlust never left me and when a friend asked if I wanted to join him on a trek through Spiti Valley – a place *The Lonely Planet Guide* describes as the most remote inhabited place on the planet – I jumped at the opportunity.

Spiti Valley is a Buddhist enclave in Northern India just over the border from Tibet. Having escaped the destruction of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, it is an important place of culture and learning. The landscape is breathtaking – both figuratively and literally, with the altitude leaving one gasping for air.

Inspired by this journey and the images I captured, I realised that through photography I could combine my love of travel with that of telling stories. I just needed a great story.





I believed that in Spiti Valley I had found that story, that of devotion. Devotion is the story of differing faith traditions, men and women's thirst for spiritual fulfilment and the hunger to connect with something greater than ourselves.

I felt a story that explored ancient faith traditions would be pertinent in this globalised world with its frequent clash of civilisations, and what I hoped to do, inspired by the great documentary photographers such as Salgado, McCullin and Capa, was to capture the common humanity behind such traditions, rather than the dogma and politics.

The concept of devotion struck me as an important, pertinent theme and one that I was personally interested in exploring myself. Moreover it could offer me all the human drama, adventure and exotic locations I could wish for.

I made a couple of trips to the Northern Highlands of Ethiopia, where I felt I was walking into scenes from the Old Testament. I witnessed Genna in Lalibela and 100,000 pilgrims gathering to celebrate their Orthodox Christmas. I then trekked across Tigray, a region most famous for the

scenes of famine during the 1980s and for being on the front-line during the war with Eritrea, but perhaps not so well known for the innumerable mountaintop monasteries and hidden cave churches. I photographed Timket in Gondar, a great celebration that re-enacts the baptism of Jesus.

"The concept of devotion struck me as an important theme, a pertinent theme and one that I was personally interested in exploring myself."



My next journey was to Varanasi, the holiest city in India and one of the oldest in the world. Lying along the banks of the Ganges, it attracts millions of pilgrims every year. It is believed to be the home of Lord Shiva. To die in the city guarantees 'moksha' or the liberation from the endless cycle of death and rebirth. I made three trips to the city and photographed the great celebrations, the cremation grounds and the many Sadhus¹ that I got to know.

"I have also seen the beauty of the human spirit and a shared desire to connect to something greater than ourselves."

I then fulfilled a long-held dream by heading to Tibet. I travelled across the Amdo region, photographing the great Monlam prayer festival, a tradition now banned in Lhasa. I photographed such practices as the Sunning of the Buddha when a giant thangka (tapestry) is unravelled down a mountainside, revealing Buddha's image to the skies and to thousands of pilgrims below.

Continuing on my journey, I later made my way to Ladakh in Northern India. Known as the Land of High Passes, it is home to wonderful isolated Gompas² amidst spectacular landscapes.

For some time I was searching for an aspect of the Islamic faith to photograph and I found it in the mountains of Iranian Kurdistan where the villagers celebrate the wedding of an ancient mystic, Pir-e Shaliar. Lambs and goats are slaughtered for a holy feast, which is believed to date back to Zoroastrian times. The villagers watch on as Dervishes come from the surrounding mountains to dance and chant themselves into a trance and a closer connection to Allah.

Last year I made my way to the Peruvian Andes to join around 80,000 pilgrims for the festival of Coyllur Riti,

which is a curious mixture of Incan traditions and Catholic influences. Men head up to the holy glaciers at an altitude of over 5500m during the night to perform initiation ceremonies. They used to return back down to the valleys with blocks of ice but as the glaciers are retreating that is now forbidden. On the final morning a great sun greeting takes place at dawn.

A month ago I was in Chechnya and the other republics of the Northern Caucasus photographing Sufis and their Zikrs. Later this week I'm heading back to Tibet, this time to Mount Kailash, a mountain held holy by four religions and believed to be the centre of the universe.

I've had many adventures along the way – hauled up cliff faces on the end of a goat skin rope by a mischievous Ethiopian monk who demanded a hefty tip to let me down again, diving into the Ganges (probably the most polluted river in the world), to get a photograph of a Sadhu, dodging Chinese authorities in Tibet and being whipped by a group of men in bear costumes at 5600 metres in the Peruvian Andes.

Across borders and amidst scenes of pilgrimage and prayer I have come across poverty, superstition and repression. However, I have also seen the beauty of the human spirit and a shared desire to connect to something greater than ourselves. Perhaps this has been my journey too.

I feel lucky to have witnessed many ancient traditions that are now being lost to the forces of globalisation, mass tourism, political oppression and even global warming. I hope that this project is in some small way a testament to the importance of these traditions which reflect a shared and fundamental aspect of the human condition that dates back to the dawn of time. ■



¹Sadhu: a holy man, sage, or ascetic.

²Gompas: religious residences of Buddhist monks who stay there and adhere to the Buddhist way of life, meditate and pray. Most of these residences are situated in remote areas, usually at great heights.

www.chrisrochephotographer.com