

Faces of the world: Nat Geo photographer's amazing portraits

Photojournalist Alison Wright doesn't just travel the world -- she reveals its inner beauty with every image she publishes

By Frances Cha 5 February, 2013

As the child of a Pan Am flight attendant, award-winning photographer Alison Wright says that her passion for travel was acquired "in utero." Often on the job for publications such as National Geographic, Smithsonian and Islands, Wright, 50, has traveled to 125 countries. Her latest book is an unusual step for a travel photographer used to capturing landscapes and dramatic scenes. "Face to Face: Portraits of the Human Spirit (Schiffer Publications)," due out March 28, is a collection of 184 color portraits of people she's encountered on her travels, from geishas and cowboys to the Dalai Lama and Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi.



CNN Travel: *How often do you travel?*

Alison Wright: A lot. I like to be in motion. I'm from San Francisco, but I've been based in Europe, a few years in Australia, a few years in Nepal. I've now been in New York for four years but I'm always out the door. As soon as I moved here I had to shoot three books for National Geographic on London, Great Britain and China, so I wasn't here very much. Now I'm really in and out, I don't even count how many days, but I'd say at least 200-240 days of the year.

CNN Travel: *How do you decide where to travel next?*

Wright: Sometimes I get a specific assignment, or I'm asked to go somewhere and I'm not quite sure what the angle is until I get there. Other times it's my own personal project that I shoot and pitch later. I like photographing travel stories, but I love the meaty in-depth projects. Travel inspires me while socially conscious issues motivate me.

CNN Travel: *Why a book of portraits?*

Wright: I have spent a career traveling to the remotest regions of the globe, documenting the traditions and changes of indigenous cultures and people as well as issues concerning the human condition in all

its evolving compassion and chaos. The curiosities of humanity will never cease to engage me, but it's the emotive beauty and grace of the human face, in all its diversity, that will never cease to inspire me. One of the many things I have learned during my years of global travel is that no matter how unique we may look in appearance, from the exotic to the mundane, we basically have the same universal desires and concerns. This book is a celebration of the spirit within us all. It is what bonds us as mankind, a continued thread, as together we continue on this journey in the pilgrimage of life.

CNN Travel: *What travel destinations do you recommend?*

Wright: Personally, my heart is in Asia. I love the mellow Buddhist vibe and it's so visually stimulating. I always travel to shoot.

I'm a photographer that travels, not a traveler that happens to photograph.

CNN Travel: *Is there a particular country that you make a point of visiting regularly?*

Wright: I've been returning to Tibet and covering the Tibetan Diaspora for more than 25 years. My heart breaks for this culture as it continues trying to survive without a land. I feel a little like Edward Curtis, who documented the demise of America Indians, photographing these nomads who will probably not exist for another generation as we know them.

CNN Travel: *You also have an affinity for Laos.*

Wright: In the year 2000 I was in a devastating bus accident in Laos. If it weren't for the local villagers I would have died. It's a harrowing story, but after more than 30 surgeries and years of rehabilitation I'm back doing what I love. It brought a whole new empathy to my work and after I wrote my book about the experience, "Learning to Breathe," it prompted me to start my foundation, Faces of Hope Fund, which helps children in crisis around the world through medical care and education. We've been busy supporting a health clinic in Laos, sending girls to school in India and donating to a rehabilitation center for children in the Middle East. I'm now returning to Thailand to help fund a mobile medical unit for Burmese refugees in Thailand.

CNN Travel: *What kind of cameras do you use?*

Wright: An array of Nikons, mostly Nikon D3S and D3s now.

CNN Travel: *What are some tips for taking a good portrait?*

Wright: I think about my backgrounds, look to catch lights in the eyes and try to connect with the person that I'm photographing. I love the challenge of bringing a face to the place, and bringing that universal human connection home.