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Portrait of the photographer: Guangdong province residents are famed for eating anything that walks, swims, flies or crawls. At this particular seafood restaurant, crocodiles would be let loose, running along on the floor amidst the dining patrons. You could choose which one would end up on the plate. That was part of a story that I shot for *Travel + Leisure* called "Taste of Guangdong."

ROWAT'S ROUTE

An invitation to view slides from a friend's recent trip often means you have a tedious evening ahead of you. But if the invitation is from travel photographer Andrew Rowat, *BSc'00*, get there early for a front-row seat. We asked him to give us the inside scoop on some of the images he has captured during his career.

By **VANESSA CLARKE**

Photo captions by **ANDREW ROWAT**

A Reluctant Start

For most of us, the profession of travel photographer seems glamorous and elusive. It's the sort of thing that kids tell adults they want to be when they grow up, along with astronauts and prime ministers. Andrew Rowat turned into a bonafide travel photographer despite the fact that he wasn't even interested in being a photographer when he was a kid.

"I received my first camera on my 16th birthday, a Pentax K-1000, the quintessential starter SLR," he says. "But I thought I had made myself very clear, prior to my birthday, that I had no interest in receiving a camera." Rowat was the youngest of three children and his brother and sister had also received a camera on their 16th birthdays. He was an independent spirit and rebelled against the idea of being a cookie-cutter Rowat sibling.

In retrospect, he's probably very grateful to his parents. Now aged 33, Rowat has offices in Shanghai and New York and a glossy list of clientele including *GQ*, *Dwell*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*. He's lived and worked in three countries and travelled to dozens more. But it wasn't until he was a student at UBC that he realized his passion for photography.

"It was through PhotoSoc that I really got hooked," says Rowat. "Instead of losing weekends to parties and bzzr gardens it was the darkroom that consumed me. The very act of creation – from the time the film emerged from the dryer, to the print slowly revealing itself in the red-hued development bath – was what cemented photography's hold on me."



That's not to say there weren't other occupational contenders. Rowat originally enrolled at UBC in theatre, then changed to commerce before finally graduating with a degree in marine biology. He later accepted a job in marketing communications that had little to do with the ocean, apart from the fact that he had to cross one to get to his new office, which was located in a carpet factory in Shanghai.

A Little Bit of Luck, a Lot of Hard Work

The move would prove to be a happy accident. Shanghai is key to the rapid development of his photography career.

His chief task at the carpet factory was coming up with "English" names for the carpets for both domestic and foreign markets. Best sellers included Kalahari, Sandalwood and Ebola ("part of my infectious diseases line," he says). His other responsibilities were greeting international clients and taking pictures of carpets. You might think this would have dampened his enthusiasm for photography, but it didn't. For him it's all about context and novelty, and Shanghai was definitely different.

"China is the most capitalistic place I've ever lived. People are hustling. The energy in Shanghai is an energy of change. There's this sense of things getting done." The job in the carpet factory gave him an anchor (and a visa) as he absorbed his new surroundings, built his portfolio and tried to get himself noticed by magazine clients in London and New York. It didn't take long to crack the market.

"I was astonished by the number of magazine



Left: This shot was taken when I was living in New York City after my third year at UBC. The camera I was using at the time was a beat up old Mamiya RB67 (I have since graduated to using several beat up old Mamiya RZ67s) with the stock (90mm) lens.

A group of acrobats was performing in Washington Square Park. I initially held back, but then realized that the shot I wanted required me to be almost underneath the performers. And so I inserted myself into the mix, and took a photo that I really liked. It remains a favourite to this day.

Right: I had been backpacking across Europe one summer, and found myself in Venice in the pouring rain. The weather made me feel grumpy, until I decided to take advantage of it. Off I set to St. Marco's Square. I tried to find the perfect puddle reflecting both the square and the incredible cathedral there. I found one, complete with the ubiquitous pigeons. I took exactly one frame.

I remember the moment I saw that one frame spring to life. I took the roll out of the negative dryer at PhotoSOC in the basement of the SUB. There it was, clear as day. The one shot I had hoped to create had been created.

editors who would meet me from a cold call. I was living in a part of the world where things were happening and it was a hook. Being in Shanghai allowed me to leapfrog a lot of steps I'd have had to go through if I was based in New York or London, because those cities have football stadiums full of people who want to do this."

However, you need a lot more than luck and talent to make a living as a travel photographer. It's a competitive field with few quality outlets, and new technologies mean the media landscape is in flux. You have to deliver every time, or risk floundering. "I see it as being less a photographer and more a small business owner," says Rowat. "If you don't have any organizational acumen, you're toast. You need to be indefatigable, incredibly optimistic and also a realist."

The Results

Rowat lived in Shanghai for seven years before his recent relocation to New York. He does largely editorial work, which takes him to new places, and some commercial photography, including portraits of the famous and powerful, luxury hotels and plates of exquisite-looking food. "My ADD personality means I can't photograph just one thing," says Rowat. "The wonderful thing about travel photography is that it means you're photographing people, food, interiors, landscapes."

He's wandered abandoned villages in Namibia, travelled by reindeer, camped out in -50 degree temperatures, and once, in a remote and lawless region of Mongolia, was confronted by a gold miner who threatened to kill him for

his boots. It's safe to assume that if he had to describe his career, glamorous wouldn't be one of the adjectives.

His work is not usually life-threatening, yet is unpredictable enough to remain satisfying. "One minute you're shooting a CEO and the next you're shooting a noodle vendor on the street and everyone's got a story," says Rowat, who will have plenty of his own stories to tell his grandchildren, and with photographic evidence to accompany them.

"I want to be able to transport people from their cubicle or couch to wherever I am in the world. Photography has that incredibly transportive quality. The idea is to drag you into the slipstream of the experience."

Rowat's next destination is Colombia, maybe followed by a boat trip up the Amazon. The rest of us will just have to wait to see the pictures. ●

To explore more of Andrew Rowat's work, visit www.andrewrowat.com.



Namibia: All of these images were shot in the abandoned diamond mining town of Kolmanskop, south of the capital Windhoek.

One of the interesting things about Namibia and its diamond mining industry (mainly joint ventures between DeBeers and the government) is that most of the diamonds are blown by the wind into these vast desert-scapes. That means the smallest diamonds will actually be furthest from the diamond vein itself, and prospectors try to follow the bread crumbs to the source, with each subsequent find getting larger and larger.

Most of the active mining in Namibia happens in off-limits areas. You or I wouldn't be allowed to enter without extensive permits and vetting. But at Kolmanskop you can just pay a small entrance fee, and a small photo permit, and you are off to the races.



Turkmenistan: Halfway between the Uzbek border and Ashgabat (the capital) lies a peculiarity, even by Turkmen standards: the Darvaza gas crater in the Karakum desert. This giant burning gas crater is known as the Gates of Hell, and has different origin stories depending on who is telling the story. The version told to claims that in the 1960s the Soviets were exploring for natural gas and came across some in this region. It was not enough to be commercially viable, so wasn't exploited further. However, a sinkhole developed and local livestock would be drawn to the hole and overcome by the fumes. In order to protect their herds, the nomadic Turkmen people decided to simply throw a match into the hole; after all, animals don't like fire. It has been burning ever since.

We had the great pleasure of camping close to the crater, alone but for ourselves and the trackless desert.



I originally travelled to Turkmenistan with my girlfriend as part of a pan-Stans tour in 2007. We travelled overland from China to Iran, hitting almost all the former Soviet republics in between. By far our favourite 'Stan' was Turkmenistan, nestled between Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The country was still under the thrall of the recently deceased dictator, Turkmenbashi, the self-styled leader of the Turkmen people. Nothing spells great tourist destination better than an honest to goodness personality cult. At the time, Turkmenistan was known as the North Korea of Central Asia. The former president had even gone so far as to erect a several-times life-size golden statue of himself that rotated with the sun and was mounted on top of the bizarrely-named Arch of Neutrality. I shot this bust of him in a dingy roadside diner.

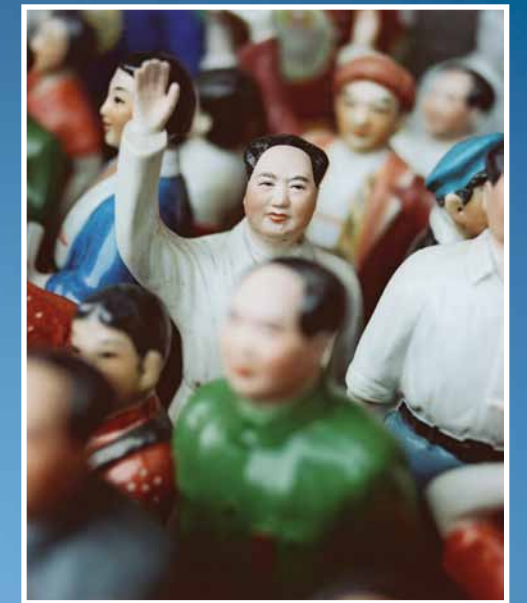
The mural (top) is in front of the Turkmen Land of Fairy Tales, aka 'Disneyland.'



Western China, Yunnan Province (left): The image of the grandfather with his grandson was taken near the town of Lijiang in China's Western province of Yunnan. My assistant and I were driving through the countryside when I spotted the wall of drying maize. In the end this image was used as the cover for *Town & Country Travel*.

(Below left): The early morning sun is just starting to cook the fields in the Tibetan area of Yunnan Province as hay dries in the background. For this particular shoot, for *Australian Gourmet Traveller*, I was bivouacked at the luxurious Banyan Tree resort in Ringha, near Shangri-La. Yes, that Shangri-La, though it is unclear where the mythical outpost actually is. At least three Chinese cities have changed their names to lure tourists to the area. That said, the scenery is breathtaking with a small Tibetan monastery close by, prayer flags dancing in the wind.

Shanghai (below): A table filled with antiques on Shanghai's infamous Dongtai Road. I say infamous because a recent report estimated that upwards of 90 per cent of antiques on the market in China are either fakes, or 'state-level relics' (think grave robbers).



Shanghai (top): One of the many trinkets and figurines for sale on Dongtai Road (the antique street). Bargaining is the most fun part of any shopping experience in China.

(Below): This view of the Shanghai skyline was shot from the smartly named Vue Bar at the Hyatt on the Bund hotel. The bar features a roof-top Jacuzzi with bathing suits on the menu (you can order up a swim costume if you happened to forget your own). Very few things top having a bottle of champagne in a hot tub, while watching the Shanghai sky turn a velvet blue.





India: It seems that everywhere you go in India people are playing cricket. It could be the smallest patch of grass (or dirt) and people will be out knocking the ball around. These young gentlemen were getting a jump on the day at about 6:30 am, outside of the Mysore Palace in Karnataka Province.



Syria: Krak des Chevaliers is one of the best-preserved Crusader castles in the world and is located several hours outside Damascus. Across the valley is a small hostel-cum-hotel that has absolutely breathtaking views of the castle. I set my camera up on the balcony and did a long exposure (this one was probably close to 20 minutes) to capture the movement of the stars and the moon.

Western China, Yunnan Province: This shot was taken in Lijiang city. One section of the city is quite charming, and more or less genuine to its original state. Then there is this particular strip that, although still charming, has flashes of modernity. This particular server is taking a time out to text someone, and has covered up against the chill October air with a fleece.