

# THE Digital Camera INTERVIEW

Tripureshwar Mahadev  
Mandir Temple,  
Kathmandu, 2010

"Built in 1818, this temple is a great cultural heritage site in Nepal. It's now abandoned, and homeless vagrants shelter there."



★ Larry Louie is an award-winning travel photographer who still works full time as an optometrist

★ He's won the 2010 Travel Photographer of the Year award, IPA Lucie Award, National Geographic Photo Essay Award, and Humanitarian Documentary Grant with the World Photography.

★ A deeply compassionate photographer, Larry is an avid supporter of charities in his native Canada and in the many countries where he shoots.

# Larry Louie

The current Travel Photographer of the Year talks to **Geoff Harris** about his humanitarian vision — and why he's not giving up his day job

**M**any gifted photographers are quick to ditch the day job once they've reached a pro standard and start winning major awards, but not Larry Louie. This Canadian travel photographer is at the top of his game, yet still works full time as an optometrist — a balancing act that makes his photographic achievements even more remarkable. These include

winning the Travel Photographer of the Year competition in 2010, a National Geographic Photo Essay Award and many other plaudits. So our first question was obvious — isn't Larry tempted to devote himself to photography full time?

"Of course. Who wouldn't want to give up their day job to do something they absolutely love? I have many friends who have done just that, but there's the harsh reality of having to shoot subjects that really don't interest

you, or projects that you don't believe in, just to make a living. Right now, I have the best of both worlds. Being an optometrist gives me the freedom to take on photo projects that mean something to me personally. Being realistic, it would be hard to make money from my projects anyway."

Whatever cash Larry does make from his photography, either from sales of prints and calendars or prize

All images: Larry Louie

# THE Digital Camera INTERVIEW

## Kilimanjaro, Tanzania 2008 (Right)

"At the Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology (KCCO) in Tanzania, a national centre of excellence for eye care. The kids here are using their braille typewriters."

## Dhaka, Bangladesh 2010 (Below right)

"A worker in a busy market takes a smoke break after carrying many sacks of vegetables."

## Tibetan Monastery, Ganzi, China 2009 (Below)

"Taken in the Tibetan grasslands, now part of the Sichuan province in China. This is the first week that morning services were allowed by the authorities after unrest in the area."



## New Guinea, Indonesia, 2006

"The chief of the Dani Tribe – note the boar's tusk through his nose and penis gourd. His status is indicated by the feathers around his head and shell necklace."



money, he donates to charity – notably Seva, a global initiative to eradicate preventable blindness, or local charities in the countries where he works.

"It's my way of giving back to the places I have received so much warmth and joy in my travels," he explains.

## IN THE BAG



"I use a Canon EOS 5D Mk II with the following lenses: Canon EF 24mm f/1.4L II USM, Canon EF 85mm f/1.2L II USM, and Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM. I use tripods sometimes, but for landscape only. Backing up images is really important in travel photography, so I use an Epson P-8000 portable media storage device."

## FRIENDSHIP AND PEACE

This is very laudable, but surely Larry finds it a squeeze to take pro-quality shots during his precious time off? "There are times that I do wish I had more time to shoot, but that's also what makes every project special – and every trip a treat."

Every successful travel photographer needs to specialise at some point, and for Larry it's about covering important (but little known) humanitarian crises or environmental issues. "Travel photography is much more than just a pretty face at a pretty place. I document cultures that are

threatened by modernisation and globalisation, cultures facing rapid change and maybe even extinction in our lifetime. But the underlying basis of my photography, as with most travel photography, is to foster inter-cultural understanding and tolerance in order to promote friendship and peace." And again, Larry's day job helps here. "Because I have another source of income, I'm not driven by the need to take images that will sensationalise an issue and be picked up by the media. I'm able to work on important stories and causes and tell things as they are,





and can fund my trips upfront.”

Larry’s first big break as a photographer was winning the Lucie Award at the New York Lincoln Center in 2007. More recently he won the Travel Photographer of the Year Award. Why does he think he prevailed against such stiff competition?

“My photographs stand out because they are not the typical travel photos. First of all, they are black and white and gritty, not your typical beautiful gloss-over travel shots. My two winning portfolios are from very different parts of the world — one is from

the Tibetan grasslands in China, the other one from Mali, West Africa. Also, I think my photos are screaming with stories to tell. They raise questions from the viewer like ‘how do those little monks fly down the ladders like that — are they learning kung fu?’ I want my viewers to feel as if I am there introducing the people in the photographs to them personally.”

### AVOIDING CLICHÉS

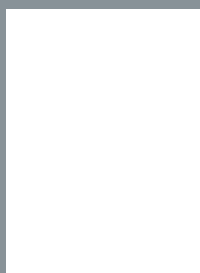
One of the biggest challenges for any serious travel photographer is avoiding clichéd and

predictable shots of well-photographed places. Larry avoids this by going off the beaten track — big style. “For example, many tourists now go to Tibet, but most don’t take a five-day hike out to the Tibetan grasslands in the middle of nowhere to live among the locals,” he explains. “No electricity, no flushing toilet, no running water. That’s the fun part!”

Furthermore, the key for Larry is to intermingle with the locals, not just to observe their everyday lives, but also to participate in them.



## BEHIND THE IMAGE



"IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW THEY LABEL ME — PRO, SEMI-PRO OR AMATEUR. I AM DOING THE WORK I LOVE TO DO."

**Composition**

"This is a portrait of a Tenger horseman on the Island of Java, Indonesia, taken in October 2006. The Tenger tribe now make their living by carrying tourists on their horses up the Mt Bromo volcano. This horseman was pretty short, about five foot tall, while I am over six foot, so I crouched down to shoot him from above — I wanted to convey a sense of grandeur (as I got closer to the man and his horse, the horse got irritated and started to whinny). I also wanted to show the man in his surroundings so I was careful to include a glimpse of the mountain behind him."

**Camera and settings**

"The image was taken on a Canon EOS 5D SLR. The shutter speed was 1/80 sec, the aperture was f/6.3, and the ISO setting was 100. I used a Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM lens. I use this lens a lot as it's very fast [it has a wide maximum aperture — Ed]. This comes in very handy as I often shoot in low light. I rarely use filters for my travel photography, except for UV filters. Very little was done to this image in Photoshop; I simply converted the raw file and did some dodging and burning — the same kind of adjustments you would make in a traditional film darkroom."

**Lighting**

"I took the shot entirely in ambient light. I just waited for the sun to break through the clouds before pressing the shutter button. You'll also notice that the guy's eyes are quite watery — it's smoky around the volcano, and it irritates your eyes. I don't use flash for my travel photography. I don't like the artificial look you get. But I will sometimes use a reflector when photographing people with very dark skin — when taking shots of people in Africa, for example."



❶ “I try to convey a sense of intimacy in my photographs, like peeking through a window into a moment in time in the lives of people. I’m able to do this because these are people that I have taken time to get to know. As for avoiding clichés, it’s about keeping your eyes open for unusual things or situations, or interesting lighting at these ‘cliché’ places. For example, at the Taj Mahal, I went around and around the building shooting all the normal things. Finally, I walked away from the Taj into the living areas of the city of Agra and found some kids playing cricket with the Taj in the background. Taj Mahal and kids playing cricket together in one photo – it’s India personified!”

Many of Larry’s photo projects are based around people at work, part of his long-term goal to provide a record of some of the

world’s most remote and distinct societies – people whose cultures are threatened by the encroachment of technology and industry. “Increasingly, indigenous people are leaving their homelands for the city, either forced out by rapid development or lured by the promise of a better life. Many, especially young children, end up in these factories working for pennies. If we photographers don’t bring attention to their plight, these people will end up in the vicious cycle of poverty and injustice...”

### TIMELESS FEEL

Larry has mainly shot black and white since 2006. Why the decision to eschew colour when he visits such colourful places? “I was always intrigued by texture and light and shadows, and also, black and white gives the images a more timeless feel,” he explains. He’s also taken some fantastic candid portraits, and getting people to relax and be themselves is clearly a major factor in his success. “I get people to relax through laughter and mutual respect. I’m not afraid

### PRO INSIGHT

Larry Louie’s top five tips for travel photography

- 1 Easy on the equipment – the less the better.
- 2 Be open-minded and look for unusual situations.
- 3 Concentrate on background as well as the foreground.
- 4 Be patient with your subject matter. Take your time with the shot.
- 5 Research the location ahead of time and focus on a topic.

“It’s about keeping your eyes open for unusual things or situations, or interesting lighting”



Prayer flags, Tagong, Tibetan Grassland, China, 2009

“Locals write blessings on these flags, in the hope that the wind will carry the prayers to their loved ones.”

Hmong grandmother, Sapa, Vietnam, 2005

(Below left)

“These ladies are market traders and were initially reluctant to smile. But they both started laughing once I began to goof around a bit!”

Mother and daughter, Blue City of Jodhpur, India, 2004

(Below middle)

“I spent several days exploring the Blue City of Jodhpur and came across an elderly lady sitting in the shade in front of her home. When her daughter came out too the scene was complete.”

Henna hands, Jaisalmer, India, 2004

(Below right)

“A young girl gets ready to attend a wedding after having her hands hennaed in the traditional way.”





**Brickyard, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2010**  
(Above)

"Many slum dwellers work in this brick-making factory in Kathmandu. I was there shooting when a whole wall of brick came crashing down. I braved the dust to get the shot, but I had to clean my camera for ages afterwards."

**The Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 2007**  
(Upper right)

"One of the largest mud buildings in the world, and a traditional centre for Islamic learning. The first mosque on this site was built in the 13th century."

**Mt Bromo, Java, Indonesia, 2006**  
(Lower right)

"This was the volcano that caused so much devastation in Indonesia last year..."

to make a fool of myself. We also take along gifts that the locals might find useful. Eventually, they forget about the camera."

Digital cameras have been a huge help to Larry, freeing him from the anxiety of airport X-ray machines and bureaucrats accidentally exposing his film. "I also love the immediate feedback, so you can correct your mistakes."

Photoshop usage, meanwhile, is kept to the minimum. "All I do is convert my raw files to black and white and the basic dodge and burn techniques. I am a traditionalist — I like to keep the image the way it is as I see it in the viewfinder. My images are not cropped, either. I crop as I shoot."

If push comes to shove, what images is Larry the most proud of, and why?

"That's a hard question. But I'm really pleased with my latest series from Bangladesh. I met up with a local photojournalist friend, and we went out shooting everyday at the crack of dawn on the streets of Dhaka. My senses were absolutely overwhelmed by the smell, the heat and humidity, the noise, the dirt ... It was absolutely exhausting and exhilarating at the same time." 📷

See more of Larry's work at [www.larrylouie.com](http://www.larrylouie.com)

