

# ART OF AFRICA

## Sharing the Journey



By Nick Melidonis

Shooting in an environment as diverse as Africa is a travel photographer's dream come true. Many *Better Photography* readers may already have had the pleasure of a shoot in Africa and I'm sure all would agree that photographers will always bring their own 'eye' and experience in choosing, capturing and finishing their images. This article is not about 'war stories' on shooting African wildlife, people and landscapes, but rather a short outline of what worked well, some pitfalls to avoid and tips from my first hand experience during the shoot.

I was on assignment for a large travel and resort group called 'The Mantis Collection' and 'Giltedge Travel'. The owner of the Mantis Collection, Adrian Gardiner, has received top honours in the World Travel Awards in London for one of his properties, Shamwari Lodge, for the tenth consecutive year for its "Extraordinary Conservation and Preservation Programs and Commitment to Responsible Tourism". The shoot covered Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Zambia.

### Capturing Wildlife

Before embarking on a new adventure, I usually try to benchmark books and images from recognised exponents on the content matter or destination.



This is not to copy their work but to see what some of the best have already captured in this field, and to read advice and tips they can pass on. Some books I came across included: *The Nature Photographer's Complete Guide to Professional Field Techniques* by John Shaw; *Photography of Natural Things* by Freeman Patterson; *The Sierra Club Guide to Close-Up Photography in Nature* by Tim Fitzharris; *The Art of Bird Photography: The Complete Guide to Professional Field Techniques* by Arthur Morris; and *Wildlife Photography: Getting Started in the Field* by B. Moose Peterson.

Apart from the occasional shots from the roadway or game park lodges, the majority of photographs are taken from a rental or game viewing vehicle. I found that using a beanbag over the car window or game vehicle side supports, greatly increased the chances of getting a sharp shot. Empty bags can be taken with you in your luggage and filled with sand or dried peas from a supermarket on arrival. If you are using pop-top vehicles or car windows, a window mounted tripod can be an alternative to bean bags. If you have them, also use image stabilising lenses.

The hot African sun means many birds and animals seek shade or trees to escape the heat. The dark shadows and high contrast can be a problem. An interesting, lightweight and cost effective fill light device is the Better Beamer which attaches to

**A hot air balloon is one of the best ways of experiencing the majesty of the Namib desert at dawn near the Sossuvlei dunes in Namibia.** *Canon 5D, 400mm lens, 1/115 second.*



**The 'Better Beamer' flash gun accessory is lightweight and easy to use to provide much needed fill light when birds or animals are in shadow. The device also provides an attractive catch light to the subject's eyes. This parrot was hiding in dark foliage and the device produced a well lit image.** *Canon 5D, 45mm lens, f9 @ 1/160 second.*



an external flashgun with Velcro and has a Fresnel screen to focus the flash onto a small area. This is ideal for fill light shooting birds in a dark forest or providing catchlights in animals' eyes. If the game is in shadow, it also helps to focus the light to where you want it. Go to [www.birdsasart.com](http://www.birdsasart.com) website to see this and other aids for capturing birds and wildlife. It will increase your flash output by about 2 2/3 stops, takes only seconds to set up and is best used with lenses 300mm and longer.

## Anticipation

Have a look at wildlife photographs that are powerful and catch your eye and invariably they also capture the animal at the peak of action. This can often mean long waiting periods with camera at the ready, observing the animal and anticipating the action (a yawn, a kill, in full flight etc). If you are in a game park and have your own vehicle (for example, in Etosha in Northern Namibia where you are free to drive your own vehicle while spotting game), it also means getting your car in a position to take advantage of the best angle when peak action occurs.

When going on a game drive with a ranger/driver, try to pick the rangers who have photography experience as they know how to position their vehicles for the best angles. When a lion or cheetah is spotted, this is a skill that should be encouraged and rewarded as trying to position the vehicle when numerous other vehicles are all rushing to do the same thing is not easy. I was fortunate to have drivers assigned to me during the shoot that were keen photo enthusiasts and it made a huge difference to the quality of shots captured.

One of the things I value about good game wardens is their knowledge of animal behaviour. Try to listen and learn from them, or read informed guides on animal behaviour since the most interesting animal pictures are the ones where they exhibit some kind of behaviour other than sleeping or walking around. To capture that takes knowledge,

time, patience and perseverance. There's a slide I show during my seminars relating to perseverance featuring Edward Weston's famous shot of a pepper (capsicum). *"The most amazing thing about Weston's 'pepper #30' is not that he made a great photograph of a pepper, but that he saw it as photographic subject material. The second most amazing thing is that he endured 29 'failures' to make the one that satisfied him. Few people remember his 'Banana #18', but he made it."*

## Lens Choice

If you are using a full size sensor SLR, then a useful zoom range to have is something like a 100-400 mm telephoto. I found this was sufficient for most of my wildlife shots although there were times I wished I had something longer, but decent 600mm plus lenses weigh a ton and are frightfully expensive. I did take an extender with me, but found that the time it took to attach it and the light loss resulting from its use meant it stayed in the bag a lot of the time.

If you are using an APS-C size sensor (the type found on a Canon 400D for example), with a multiplication factor of about 1.6X, then a 100-400mm lens becomes something like 160-640mm and that is good news for wildlife shooting. I also found that using lenses with image stabilisation was a huge advantage for the mostly hand held shooting one does from vehicles, or for shooting in low light around sunrise and sunset. Invariably they will give

**These distant mountains in the Namib Desert provided an excellent example of 'layering'. Layering is achieved when you get low, direct light from a sunrise or sunset behind distant objects, such as mountains, providing a wide range of hues as they disappear in the distance.**

**Chobe National Park in Botswana has one of Africa's greatest concentration of elephants. I asked my driver to position the game vehicle so I could shoot a silhouette of an approaching herd against the setting sun. The dust the elephants threw up made an interesting addition to the composition with the river flats in the background.**

*Canon 5D, 400mm lens, f5.6 @ 1/320 second.*





The female cheetah was stalking a group of impala and we knew she had to cross the road we were on to get to them. The fading light and slow shutter speed produced a pleasing blur as I panned the camera to keep her in shot.



Humour is always an element I seek in photographing animals or people. Some animals seem more prone to humorous poses and these zebras provided such a moment. *Canon 5D, 200mm lens, f8 @ 1/160 second using a tripod.*

you the advantage of an extra three stops of speed for hand held shots.

Unless you are lucky enough to shoot in game reserves that have mostly clean, open backgrounds (like the Etosha Pan in Namibia), you will probably find the game is moving in and out of trees, bushes, rocks and backgrounds that are roughly the same colour as the animal (after all, that's why they have camouflage). This will produce cluttered, distracting backgrounds that will take the viewers' eyes away from the main subject matter. This also makes focusing critical and you must ensure your autofocus is on the animal and doesn't stray onto the background.

One of the worst 'sins' is having mergers. A merger is any line, shape or colour that cuts across and confuses the outline of your main subject, e.g. branches of trees in front of or 'growing out' of your subject. Again, have a look at successful wildlife images and see how the author has kept a clean profile to focus the attention of the viewer on the subject. There are several things you can do to achieve this. One of the main ones is to anticipate the movement of the subject and to scan the image in the viewfinder to ensure no mergers are visible before pressing the shutter. Another successful technique is to use a large aperture for shallow depth-of-field to blur any distractions behind and in front of your subject. Telephoto lenses will inherently give you shallow depth-of-field and for



The dunes at Sossuvlei in Namibia are the world's tallest, in fact taller than Victoria Falls. This shot was taken from the side of the road towards one of these monsters. A long lens on a tripod was used to compress the image and emphasise the size of the dunes compared to the trees at the base. *Canon 5D, 400mm lens, f7.1 @ 1/500 second.*

small sized sensors are probably the best way of achieving shallow depth-of-field.

Another tip is to try to avoid shooting where there are contrasts in light of greater than six stops as you will blow out the highlights. Worse still, if your subjects are avoiding the hot African sun and gather under a shady tree, your chances of a good shot are minimal. The contrast of the bright, outside scene with the dark, deep shadows where your subjects are will produce a scene beyond the capability of your sensor. In this situation, you could try to zoom into the animal if it's all in the shade, and avoid any bright background. If there are patches of bright sunlight on the animal, your image will be too contrasty to be effective. The use of the "Better Beamer" mentioned earlier could help.

To make your subject stand out where possible, try and pick a background that is plain and different in tonal value to your subject. For example, if your subject is in daylight, try to choose a rock in shadow or dark foliage which has been blurred by a large aperture as a background. Finally, always ensure the animals eyes are pin sharp.

Just like people, animals can do the strangest things and viewers always enjoy seeing a well anticipated, humorous, 'decisive moment' that catches the animals



An iconic shot of the Sossuvlei dune area is a hard pan called 'Dead Vlei' containing 500 year old dead Thorn trees. This shot was taken in the early morning light using a wide-angle lens to give a feeling of perspective to the shot.

*Canon 5D, 250mm lens, f8 @ 1/50 second.*


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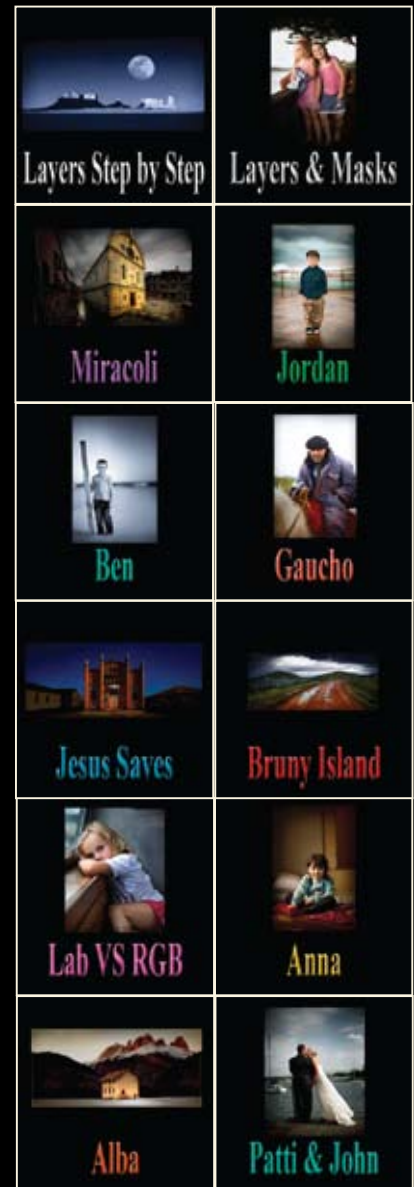
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**Catching animals at the peak of action is, unfortunately, a blend of patience and luck. After this pride lolled about for over an hour with little going on, I was finally rewarded with a gigantic yawn from the large male in the group.**

**My guide convinced me it was safe to get out of the vehicle and approach a female and her three cubs, a thrill I never forgot. With the guide behind me with a rifle, I found the cats were quite cool about the whole thing. It was after I got back in the car that the guide told me he put the rifle down to take this shot. He continued, "It wouldn't have made any difference; they could cover that distance in two seconds". South Africans have an unusual sense of humour.**



at their funniest best. Watching a pride of lions at play or monkeys and zebras doing their thing will produce such moments if you are quick enough.

### Blur and Light

The warm colours around sunrise and sundown are always magical in Africa, plus if you're near a waterhole, this is when the animals are at their most active. Although I had the choice of staying in some amazing lodges during my trip, where possible, I opted for the camps inside the parks so I could avoid the huge queues and paperwork to get through the gates. If I didn't, I found myself arriving at the waterhole well and truly after the best light had gone. It also follows that to get through the gates before they close, you again have to miss the best light as the sun is setting.

Where dust rises on the plains from animal movement, such as elephant herds, shooting backlit scenes at dawn or dusk will produce some amazing

images. Try and position your vehicle to take advantage of this with the animals against the light.

Don't be afraid to experiment with slow shutter speeds to blur the animals as they are moving. Some of the best shots I've seen of action in Africa use this technique. The amount of blur obviously depends on the amount of light at the time and the speed of the animal.

### Landscapes

African landscapes are some of the best in the world, but to produce impact in a landscape image, pare it down to its simplest elements so the viewer can go straight to the centre of interest. Look for strong lines or shapes to take you to where you can rest the eyes and savour the image. Use your viewfinder to compose your image; watch the corners and edges for light areas that could lead your eye out of the picture. Give the subject room to breathe and place your elements well using guides such as the rule of thirds. Simplify, simplify, simplify.

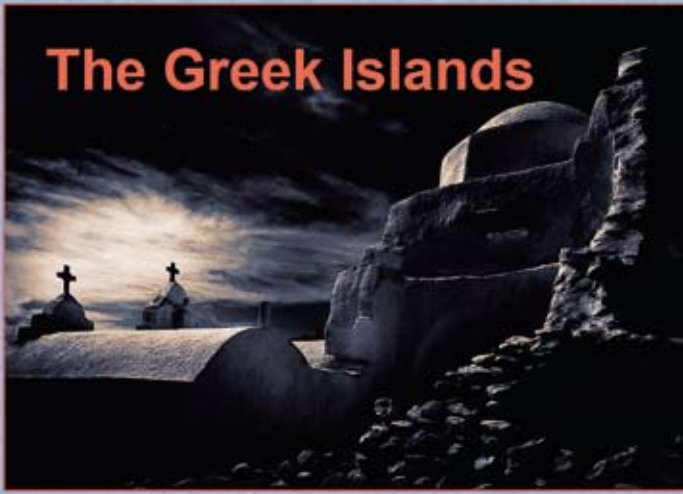
Nature, especially the African landscape, will present you with endless combinations of patterns and textures, be they dunes, mud cracks, mountains, water (and lack of it) or man-made objects reacting with or in contrast to the environment. Take your time and explore your options in seeing grand landscapes or patterns in micro photography. If you can afford it, treat yourself to a balloon ride or light aircraft over the landscape and enjoy the patterns and textures this will present.

If your environment has mountains in the distance, then shooting against the light at dawn or dusk will produce amazing subtle hues of light called layering. The distant mountains against the Namib desert were outstanding and I found this to be even more amazing from a balloon looking at the mountainous horizon at dawn.

Free your paradigms of thinking from your own environment and allow the muses to speak to you while observing the African landscape in new and wonderful ways. I also learnt a long time ago that you need to escape from the noise and clutter of the world every now and again. Take time out from your travelling companions and be at one with the landscape to be at your creative best. Remember, muses speak in quiet whispers and you need the silence to hear them.

*Nick Melidonis is a triple Master of Photography and has recently won the 2008 AIPP Australian Professional Landscape Photographer of the Year. He won this award twice before in 2000 and 2001. He is also the 2005 WA Landscape Photographer of the Year. Nick leads photo tours to the Greek Islands and two new tours have been added: Andalucía in Spain, and Egypt, Jordan and Dubai (2009) (see his website for details). He conducts seminars and workshops and is available as a speaker. You can contact Nick at [nickphoto@iinet.net.au](mailto:nickphoto@iinet.net.au) or visit his website at [www.nickmelidonis.com](http://www.nickmelidonis.com).*

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