

# nzphotographer

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# Interview with Peter Laurenson

OUR MOUNTAIN



2 year posting as Regional Manager South East Asia in Singapore. After 6 years with NZTB I decided that I'd had enough corporate politics and set up a small marketing consultancy – MPWR. That went well for quite a while, but after 12 years and the advent of the GFC (global financial crisis) I joined Zealandia on a 3 year stint as the marketing, sales and fundraising manager.

After Zealandia I went back into part time marketing consultancy with Aspire, plus started to devote more time to tramping, climbing, photography, writing and volunteer work. In regards to climbing, I was a late starter, only joining a NZ Alpine Club alpine instruction course when I was 40 but since then, I've made up for lost time.

In recent years I've been editor of NZ Alpine Club Wellington's monthly Vertigo bulletin and I have written over 30 articles for Wilderness Magazine. At the beginning of 2019, I took on the role of editor for Federated Mountain Club's Backcountry. This has drawn all my skills, experience and interests together in one really stimulating role.

## WHERE DOES PHOTOGRAPHY FIT INTO YOUR STORY?

Apart from terrible snaps on a horrible cheap instamatic as a teenager, I began what has become a never waning and constantly enriching interest in still photography in 1987, in the year before I headed off on my O.E.

I figured I should get some skills to be able to capture my adventures on film. So I bought a Chinon CP 7m SLR (couldn't afford anything better) and attended a basic photography night course at Wellington High School. That was the single best thing I could have done because it introduced me to manual shooting – F stop, shutter speed and exposure setting long before digital came on the scene.

## HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY?

The genre I identify most closely with is National Geographic – vivid, candid, lifelike, enquiring, dynamic. I don't just take photos, I create images.

The purpose behind my 'creations' is to convey visually what it was that made me FEEL impressed, amazed, happy, shocked. I'm not hung up on simply representing faithfully what the eye could see. Sure, over manipulation can turn an image into a freak show and I certainly don't seek to do that. But if it was the colours on an ice face at dawn that drew me in, then I'm not ashamed to use considered post-processing to bring that to the fore. It's about capturing what my heart FELT.



A lot of my photography occurs on mountain slopes in places where a big heavy DSLR tends to stay in the pack. While I love using my Nikon D750, I frequently use a mirrorless compact camera (currently a Lumix TZ220) in the hills. I still shoot Camera RAW files using spot meter and manual settings, but some still may deem my gear as amateurish. I also use a tripod much less than many 'respected' photographers but as a consequence, I am able to capture a lot more action than some do.

I take a lot of panoramic series that I stitch in Photoshop later – I've often found that a standard landscape or portrait format is too limiting when trying to capture the vast magnificence of our natural world. There is certainly an art to getting the most from a stitch series, I love it!

## DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE PHOTO?

A favourite photo? That's tough – I've probably taken over 250,000; and how do you define 'favourite' – technically, artistically, emotionally, circumstantially, symbolically? Here are 2 candidates.

'Our Mountain' is a favourite because it symbolises my ideal situation. Although I grew up in the shadow of Mount Taranaki, it wasn't until age 33 that I eventually climbed it. So to share the summit with all three of my sons – at the time aged 7, 9 and 15 – was a moment I'll always treasure. The photo is not technically or artistically

great and its symbolism and circumstance are really only significant to those in the picture, but it makes me smile every time I walk past it on our living room wall to see us at 2,450m on the crater rim of Mount Taranaki, taking a breather before going up another 100 metres to the summit.

'Red Divide' (next page) is my second favourite because it is my most peer-recognised image – it was the winner of the alpine landscape category and overall winner (John Harrison Memorial Trophy) in the national photo competition of the NZ Alpine Club in 2014.

## HOW ABOUT PICKING A FAVOURITE DESTINATION?

That one's easy, it's Khumbu in Nepal which is one of the most beautiful places on earth. Its mountains are the tallest, its people as fascinating as they are friendly, and it's surprisingly accessible whilst photographically it's unsurpassed. But mass tourism, and in the case of Khumbu, guided climbs on Mount Everest, are changing the Khumbu experience for the worse.

I've been going there since 1988 and my seventh visit will happen this December. It's the place where I've taken each of my three boys when they turned 15. I still need to take Cathy and will do so in 2020 or 2021.

## PETER, WHAT'S YOUR BACKGROUND?

I grew up in New Plymouth, in the shadow of Mount Taranaki/Egmont until, in 1980, I went to Massey University in Palmerston North to study marketing for 4 years. After graduating I went to Wellington and worked at Unilever for 3 years before heading off on 5 years of O.E. in 1988. It took 9 months backpacking up through SE Asia, India, Nepal, a bit of Europe en-route to Turkey, Israel and Egypt, before reaching London in time to qualify for a 2 year working permit.

I scored a really good marketing role there and ended up working in London for 3 years, with a lot of travel in the UK and around Europe while there. Then in 1992 my wife at the time and I decided that England wasn't the place to have kids, so we set off on a 10 month return leg – first 3 months in east Africa, then 2 months covering places in Europe we hadn't visited yet, then overland from Karachi, up the Karakoram Highway and in to China. 3 months backpacking in China rounded off the return journey.

Back in Wellington, I gained a spot on the senior management team at the New Zealand Tourism Board. This resulted in a lot more international travel (but no longer overland with a backpack), including a





## RED DIVIDE

3 Stitched Landscape Shots

The main divide of New Zealand's Southern Alps, viewed from near Pioneer Hut (2,200m) on the west, most weather exposed side, at dawn. Mount Tasman, New Zealand's second highest peak, is far right. Both weather and snow conditions weren't much good for climbing on this trip, but this sunrise was a nice consolation - a bluebird morning would not have been as spectacular.





## GOKYO

*A stitch of 2 landscape shots*

A dusk view from Gokyo Ri (5,357m) back down to Gokyo and the third lake 600 metres below, Khumbu, Nepal. On this evening Mt Everest was obscured by clouds, but other closer giants such as Cholatse and Tawoche still loomed large. The sunset coloured clouds also balanced the prayer flags nicely.





### MIRROR ON THE MASSIVE

*A stitch of 5 portrait shots*

The view across Kongde Lake (4,600m) to the Everest Group and other peaks of Khumbu, Nepal. This view is not seen by many visitors to Khumbu. It's off the beaten track and really can only be visited on the way out when you're properly acclimatised. But if you're after a round trip rather than entry/exit via Namche Bazaar, then this is a good option. And you really do get a 'big view' of the heart of Khumbu from this point.



## DEVOTION



### TELL US ABOUT CAPTURING CULTURES AND PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD...

In the pursuit of great landscapes, I've often encountered fascinating cultures and people. As you'll see on the following pages, sometimes people are the 'main event', such as at a Buddhist reincarnation festival at Tsurphu Gumpa in Tibet. Other times people make up part of a bigger picture, such as in Hushe village at 3,050m in Northern Pakistan where I took the 'Top Gun' photo. In places like the Himalaya it's sometimes hard to separate people from the landscapes they inhabit and, actually, combining the two can produce the most memorable images of all. Each person has their own character. But people can also embody the character of the places where they live.

My photos 'Devotion' and 'Intrigued' show Tibetan pilgrims, many in their 'Sunday best', gathering at Tsurphu Gumpa to witness the ordination of their young reincarnate. Traditions run deep in the hearts, minds and everyday behaviours of Tibetans.

You can see the veneration in the eyes of this crowd.

When I stop to think about travel portrait photography I like to think that my purpose is to capture the character of the person or people and their environmental and/or cultural context. Take images that are story openers. In truth though, quite often portraiture in a travel setting is more about being lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. I usually know generally what I'm after, but sometimes when a specific image appears in my viewfinder it is simply opportunistic.

If you have time, it's possible to make personal contact with a subject and build rapport before taking any photos. This is ideal and often essential if you want really candid, 'look into the lens' images. But if you want 'spur of the moment' shots, it is often more authentic to be a silent observer – a big zoom can be very useful. In any given situation sensitivity, ethics and culture should be considered when deciding if it's appropriate or not to take people shots without their express permission.

## INTRIGUED







#### TOP GUN

'What's going on... let me see!' This inquisitive, bright-eyed, little Muslim 'Top-gun' symbolises the future of his mountain people. Although he lives in an almost medieval village, he wears a cap advertising a high-tech jet fighter movie! As such, he is being exposed to two entirely different worlds.





#### OF THE LAND

Travelling as an independent backpacker in 1992, leaving the Friendship Highway that carries on to Nepal at Xegar, I visited Everest Base camp on foot, passing through and staying at extremely basic villages along the route. Here is an old Tibetan lady that I stayed with one night. Behind her is a view back across the Tingri plains towards the trail leading to Khumbu La and Khumbu in Nepal. Her weathered features manifest the harsh environment she and her people live in.





#### GLANCE

A young Nepali girl at the Saturday market, Namche Bazaar, Khumbu, Nepal.

#### FURTIVE?

At the Saturday morning market, Namche Bazaar, Khumbu, Nepal.



#### HOW DID YOU DISCOVER EXCIO & NZP?

I actually fell in to Excio by accident, by mistaken identity, when I thought Excio's NZ Photographer magazine and associated competitions were part of NZ Photography Workshops, a company I had become involved with.

At this point I wasn't aware of Excio but when the penny did drop, I was attracted by Excio's 'mission statement' that identified the importance of the stories behind images and the need to go beyond superficial social media popularity to do real good. When I made contact with Excio my questions were quickly and comprehensively answered by not just a real person, but the CEO and Co-founder of Excio, Ana.

Compare this to my experience with ViewBug and you'll understand why I'm excited to join the community! I signed up as a 'free member' to ViewBug over 3 years ago—I was intrigued to see what an online photographic community might lead to. ViewBug has been good for me in that it's encouraged me to rekindle my interest in photography beyond the mountains and I've also picked up some very helpful post processing ideas. But I've always resisted becoming a 'paid up member' on ViewBug because it's become obvious that this is how you buy profile and (perceived) popularity, which is mostly superficial or even plain delusional.

I'm looking forward to exploring how Excio can work for me and how I can return the favour. I enjoy

entering photo competitions, sharing my images and receiving constructive feedback about them, especially if those people know about photography. I enjoy seeing other photographers' work too, as a source of technical and creative inspiration.

#### WHAT PLANS DO YOU HAVE FOR THE REST OF THE YEAR?

I'll be writing for the Excio blog as well as here on NZ Photographer in the coming months. Beyond Excio I have a book to complete. It will be my second, this time hopefully supported by a strong publisher. My first book—*Occasional Climber: A journey to Mount Clarity*, was a self published effort (2014) that achieved very minor success but gave me many insights and much satisfaction. Of the 150 copies printed, I have 22 copies remaining (you can find out more on my website, but no pressure).

And of course, I will continue to get into the hills and climb as long as my body lets me. Each trip will be added to my website, *OccasionalClimber* as a resource for others.

#### WHERE CAN WE FIND YOU ONLINE?



[www.occasionalclimber.co.nz](http://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz)



[albums.excio.io/profile/Occasionalclimber](http://albums.excio.io/profile/Occasionalclimber)