

STRANGER

IN A STRANGE LAND

PHOTO PHILOSOPHIES
FOR MAKING
MEANINGFUL PEOPLE
PICTURES ON LOCATION

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY RICK SAMMON

When we travel, either to the other side of the world or to the other side of the country, making good people pictures can be a rewarding experience. Yes, that experience comes with some challenges, but it's pictures of people that make slideshows and web galleries come alive. Strong portraits, pictures with impact, can also be showstoppers on websites and, of course, in photo galleries. What's more, these photographs can give a personality to a location by capturing the local customs.

In this article, I'll share some of my favorite photo philosophies for making meaningful pictures of people you meet on your travels. To illustrate these photo philosophies, I'll share some favorite pictures from my December 2013 trip to Myanmar—which, by the way, was one of my favorite travel experiences of all time, mostly due to the people who I met and photographed.

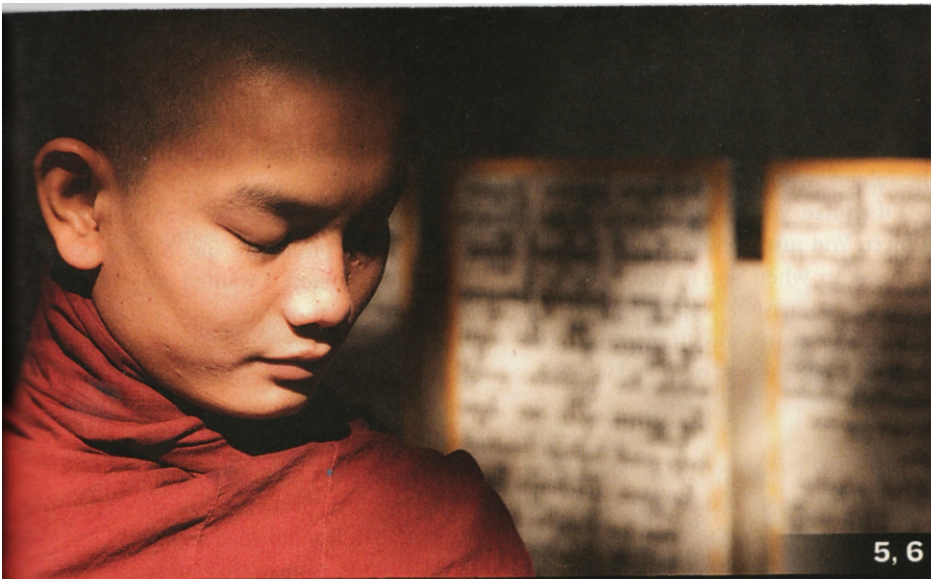
Yes, these pictures were taken in an



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exotic location. Yes, you can use these photo philosophies wherever you shoot, even if it's in your neighborhood.

I | Respect The Subject. No matter where you go, respecting the subject is important if you want the subject to re-



5, 6

on the eyes. I feel, in most cases, if the eyes aren't in focus and well lit, I've missed the shot.

4 | See Eye To Eye. At 6' 2", I'm taller than most of the local people in Myanmar. For this portrait, I crouched down and shot eye to eye. When you shoot eye to eye, the person viewing your photograph can more easily relate to the subject than if you shoot above or below eye level.

5 | Make "Sense Of Place" Pictures. I took this picture of a novice monk in



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spect and accept you. We need to keep that in mind at all times.

This young woman, wearing sunscreen and makeup made from the bark of a tree, was selling bamboo products on the side of a road that led to about 1,000 ancient stupas near Inle Lake. As soon as I saw her face, I knew I had to make a portrait. Like you, and like all of us, I'm drawn to certain faces, some more than others.

After asking her, through my guide, if I could photograph her, and after she accepted, I asked her to move just a bit so that she was positioned against a relatively plain background and in soft light.

2 | The Camera Looks Both Ways.

While I was photographing her, I kept an old photo adage in mind: The camera looks both ways. In picturing the subject, we're also picturing a part of ourselves. In other words, we're mirrors: the mood, the feeling and the emotion that we project are all reflected in the subject's face and eyes. I was acting rather seriously, which generated a rather serious expression.

I shot with my Canon 25-105mm IS lens set at 105mm and chose an aperture of *f*/7 to blur the background.

3 | Get The Eyes In Focus. When we make portraits, it's important to focus

a Buddhist monastery in Mandalay. I wanted what's called a "sense of place" photograph, so I framed my photograph to include the novice monk and the background, prayers written in Burmese on tablets.

I shot with my Canon 24-105mm lens set at the 90mm setting and chose an aperture of *f*/9 to put the prayers out of focus—still recognizable (at least to the trained eye) as Burmese writing, yet soft enough so as not to detract from the main subject.

6 | Shadows Are The Soul Of The Picture. It's the shadows that make this photograph interesting. When photo-

graphing, keep the following thoughts in mind:

- Shadows are the soul of the picture
- Light illuminates, shadows define
- If you want an interesting photo, don't light the entire subject
- Shadows are your friend

7 | Make Portraits And Environmental Portraits. I photographed this Kayan Lahwi ("long-neck") woman while visiting a silk shop in Inle Lake. As always, I took a portrait and an environmental portrait, that is, a picture of the subject in his or her environment.

When you're on location, take both types of photographs. You'll like your portrait because you can see the details in the subject's face, and you'll like the environmental portrait because it tells a story of the subject.

I took this photograph with my Canon 24-105mm lens, which is a good zoom range for both portraits and environmental portraits.

8 | When You Think You're Close, Get Closer. The closer you are to the subject, the more intimate the picture becomes. I took this picture in a nunnery in

Mandalay with my Canon 17-40mm lens set at 17mm. I was only a few feet from the subject, who was deep in meditation.

Of course, you can get too close to a subject. You just need to use your judgment as to when you're too close and invading someone's space. Again, this nun was deep in a meditative state and to my knowledge had no idea I was even in the room.

9 | Don't Worry About ISO. My dad had a great expression: If a picture is so boring that you notice the noise, it's a boring picture. I took this picture at ISO 2500. There was a bit of noise in the image because the room was fairly dark, but I greatly reduced it by using Topaz DeNoise. I say greatly reduced because all digital files have noise, even those taken at ISO 100 in bright light.

10 | Draw Attention To The Main Subject. The nun in the foreground stands out in this image. To draw the viewer's attention to the nun, I used the Dodge tool to lighten her. I also used a vignette to darken the edges of the frame. Use these software effects (common in most photo applications) to draw attention to the

main subject, but don't overuse them or your picture will look unnatural.

11 | Use Your Camera Like A Spaceship.

I took this photo at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. I wanted a picture of this Buddhist monk washing a statue of Buddha. It was his dedication I wanted to capture in an image. To reduce the busy background, I held my camera as high as I could above my head and took a few shots with the camera facing downward. This one was properly framed. I have more than a few lopsided shots.

Use your camera like a spaceship, holding it at different heights and angles, and you'll get more creative pictures than you would if your camera is locked on a tripod and positioned at eye level.

I shot with my Canon 14mm lens, which offers tremendous depth of field. For pictures like this one, my goal is to capture the scene looking as it looked to my eyes—everything in focus.

Keep shooting and keep learning. As the Buddhists say, "Learning is health." DP

Rick Sammon is a longtime friend of this magazine. See more of his work on his website at ricksammon.com.

