



In conversation with
Paul Harris

A professional travel and documentary photographer of four decades' standing, Paul Harris has seen plenty of changes in the world of photography on the creative, commercial and technological fronts. Not all of them bad, he admits...

Setting moon, Goreme,
Cappadocia, Turkey



Opposite Tribal Rabari, Kochi, Rajasthan, India | Above Pilgrim at Buddhist Shrine, Hundar, Ladakh, India

If you're lucky enough ever to go behind the scenes of the Royal Geographical Society and venture up a seldom-used stone staircase located close to the old front door on Kensington Gore, you'll find a remarkable sight. Lining the walls, floor after floor, is a series of absolutely stunning photographic portraits of 20th-century explorers. This largely forgotten, unseen treasure trove is by Paul Harris, better known as one of the best British travel photographers of his generation.

The experience of seeing these portraits is revealing in that it is confirmation of something that Paul is keen to stress: even if there is generically something as definable as a travel photographer, he's more than that. His travels are more often than not expeditions. His photographs of these expeditions have more in common with documentary photography. His pictures – portraits or not – always seem to include the people he meets along the way. They also tell stories. The idea of images containing a narrative is a theme he keeps returning to. Before our interview starts, he tells me he's been looking at a recent monograph about a

river. 'The pictures are fine,' he says. 'But there's no story.' Which means that for Paul, the photographer's missed something essential.

Based in rural Powys in the Welsh Borders, Paul has spent his lockdown year thinking a lot about the profession he's devoted his adult life to. He's a man of strong opinions and doesn't mince his words when reflecting on what he considers to be the shortcomings of 21st-century photography. He thinks the digital revolution, for all its benefits, has dragged in with it a dependency on quick fixes, while much of the old-school learning – the basics of film technique and process – has been thrown out with the bath water. He laments the ubiquity of digital eroding the modern photographer's potential to make a decent living, as commissions become increasingly a thing of the past. There are creative fads he's studiously steered clear of, preferring to rely on his orthodox approach to the craft, which is based on such old-fashioned concepts as getting compositions right in the camera and not just sorting out glitches in post-production. He's also keen to point out that his aren't the views

of some old-timer carping on about things not being what they used to be.

Although as a youngster he did all the usual part-time jobs that people fresh out of college inevitably do – such as stacking shelves in supermarkets – in terms of his professional career, Paul's been in the photographic industry right from the beginning, despite it taking 'a little bit of time to actually become a freelancer'. The route to becoming a photographer will be familiar enough to professionals of a certain age: first he took his HND in documentary photography led by Magnum luminary David Hurn at Newport College of Art and Design. 'It couldn't be given degree status,' says the 62-year-old, 'because there wasn't enough writing involved in the course, which was sort of the point given the image-heavy coursework.' Then he cut his teeth in the pre-digital world of printing and processing, getting to grips with how things worked in the darkroom, a sanctum he found a magical place – a space where he discovered his affinity with the photograph as a physical entity.

If you go back to why, rather than how, he became a photographer, Paul traces the creative instinct to his grandmother, an artist and a walker who would take the young Paul out into the countryside. 'At the time I probably complained bitterly that my feet hurt, but there's no doubt in my mind that the concept of observation came up a lot. She would talk a lot about the landscape, and you can see it in her painting. I'm sure that this stuck in my brain somehow, although I wasn't conscious of it.'

Meanwhile at school, Paul was enthusiastic for geography field trips to places such as Snowdonia. 'Again, I think this was partially subliminal in that it carried on this thing about observation,' he says. 'But what really kicked it all off was while I was waiting for my A-level results I went on a camping trip to Dartmoor. I had a little cartridge Kodak camera.'

Of course, says Paul, the pictures that came out of that particular instrument were best characterised as 'expletive deleted', leading him

to the realisation that, 'I'd had enough of this. I wanted better pictures than this. I wanted better documentary out of this'. He adds: 'I must have dropped a few hints to some family members, because my uncle gave me his old Voigtländer rangefinder on my 18th birthday,' he recalls. 'At the time I had no idea what a brilliant camera it was. Precision engineering – it was fantastic. That was the start of it.'

In fact, it was only half of the start of it, because Paul's real passion was rock climbing. 'I was going on expeditions, and when you go away with friends climbing you take pictures. But I wasn't thinking seriously about photography. I didn't really know what I wanted to do.' But after spending some time climbing in Peru, Paul had his first photographs published, 'and there was this real excitement of seeing this picture in print. So, I had to make the choice between becoming a professional climber or a professional photographer. That was the decision. I remember thinking that I'd

never be good enough to become a professional climber – I actually looked into it – and I think it would have taken away too much of the pleasure of climbing to do it for a living. This was when I thought photography was for me.'

Looking back from today's digital stronghold to the type of analogue technology professionals were using when Paul got his start, it's tempting to think there were no advantages to film. But this isn't necessarily the case. 'There was a permanency to film,' he says. 'Permanency is a good word, because with digital there is that feeling that it could all disappear in a puff of smoke. There's a physical element to film.'

'Don't get me wrong, there are many advantages to digital,' he says. But on the other hand, these days, there are apparently limitless opportunities to give your work away on digital platforms and increasingly, fewer lucrative commissions available to the professional photographer. 'This is a massive change,' says



Left Street Parade, Havana, Cuba | Right Milking Goats, Korzok, Ladakh, India | Opposite Birdcage, Highlands, Bali, Indonesia



Paul. 'It's a bit like looking at A-list actors, where one percent of them are earning the big bucks, while the others are working in Starbucks. The fact is that today everybody has a camera in one form or another. When I was first shooting there was still a value to photographs that there doesn't seem to be now. And I'm not just talking about monetary value. It's also to do with the perception of photography.' Paul conducts a thought experiment involving a scenario where you give someone £500 with which they must either buy a painting or a photograph presented to them side by side. 'Now most people will buy the painting because they're pretty sure that they couldn't have painted it, while they're pretty sure that they could have taken the photo.'

At this point Paul reflects on one of his earliest expeditions to Mongolia, which he regards as a critical moment in his career. 'I was fresh out of college and had all these ideas about storytelling. I shot 380 rolls of film and worked with some of the greatest explorers and travellers. And that all stemmed from the portrait project that's in the Royal Geographical Society. I was broke and wanted to find a way of meeting expedition leaders like Robin Hanbury-Tenison, Wilfred Thesiger, Tim Severin... all these people. And out of that came two trips with Tim, four trips with Robin. It was almost by accident. I didn't have a business plan.' And yet, by chance on the back of the Mongolia project came commercial client work in the form of corporate shoots for Cable and Wireless. 'That was timing really. I met a bunch of engineers in the only hotel in Ulan Bator. They wanted to use documentary photographers rather than technical or industrial photographers, and I ended up taking pictures of PBX telephone units.'

One of the reasons for viewing the late 20th century as a golden age is because there was simply more paid work for professional freelance photographers. 'I'm not complaining. Of course, I'd like to do more work for magazines that I like, but it simply doesn't work that way anymore.' Which means that today's jobbing photographer, 'needs to look for other avenues', which in Paul's case has been to shift his attention to shooting projects in the environmental conservation space. This more recent phase in his photographic journey has included working with UK-based clients such as the National Trust, developing projects that call on every ounce of his experience to meet the creative

Sled dogs, Oqaatsut,
West Greenland



Above Fisherman, Majuli Island, Assam, India | *Below* Drying Squid, Banggai Islands, Indonesia

demands of the task. The challenge here isn't so much the photography itself, but the fact that opportunities to get out in the field have been severely hampered – 'to put it mildly' – by the restrictions imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Which means that for the past year he's been revisiting his old stock, reacquainting himself with a back catalogue of images that for the most part have been filed away and forgotten as he's moved on to more pressing jobs. This in itself could be good news, because the one thing that seems to be missing from Paul's career so far is the retrospective coffee table monograph. So, when can we expect to see the definitive book of Paul's photography? It's not as easy as all that, he says, before explaining that before he could take on such an enterprise, he'd have to work out what the book would be about. 'It's easy to fill a book with photos,' he says. 'But I want to know what the story will be.'

To see more of Paul's photography, visit paulharrisphotography.com

