

August 2017

## Taking Time Out



Hasan was a gold merchant in the humming bazaars of Tehran. I had met his father in London whilst photographing a story about Iranian exiles for the Evening Standard. Hasan was under strict orders to look after us as Iran opened its doors for the first time in many years. His indifference and silence soon gave way to politeness and an open house which started in his opium den and continued onto the back streets of Tehran as he warmed to the task of finding Hubble Bubble. Inhaling fruit flavoured tobacco, through rubber tubes would be the equivalent of afternoon tea on the lawns of Chatsworth House or a double mocha latte on leather sofas in any high street.

In teahouses across Iran, it was a chance to relax and discuss current events, politics, the local soap opera and frequently, to recite passages from the texts of the great Sufi Poet, Hafez. Given the Western perception of strictures in Islam, I found it astonishing that a lot of the passages revolved around wine, women & song. The tea house was at the centre of Iranian hospitality, the likes of which I have found nowhere else, with its simmering murmurs, clinking cups and bubbling hookahs. Part of me wanted to record the scenes but like many other encounters, there was always a danger of not being able to enjoy the experience for itself alone. These shaded enclaves were a literal and mindful step off the planet's merry-go-round, and spaces I have sought out many times since.



Is it me or do all photographers find it hard to 'switch off' ?

I have contemplated this question often enough; fellow travellers sympathise and castigate in equal measure, but I am no nearer to solving the issue. Doing nothing, at least in the visual sense, appears not to be an option. DJ Andy Kershaw refers to this many times in his absorbing autobiography, No Off Switch. Artists from Hockney to Prince and Dali to Bailey optimise that whirlwind of activity none of them have a hope of being able to control. It's just what they do very effectively. Over the last couple of years as I have been developing my skills as a documentary film maker, this affliction seems to be getting worse, particularly when watching films. I normally get completely lost in the storyline and the visuals but since working on my own films, I now find myself losing the plot when questions pop into my head - why did the cameraman choose that angle ? What did it take to create that brilliant sequence ?

In the middle of all this came the BBC's 'Hand made' TV series about three processes of craft making. No background music, no voice overs, just a wonderful mix of pure imagery and ambient sound. They were a breath of fresh air. It was total immersion in the visuals at a time when we have no respite from the noise of the world around us. The playwright, Harold Pinter created that same feeling of immersion with sparse dialogue amid tense social interaction not dissimilar to mesmerising soundtracks by Arvo Pärt or Vangelis.

The clamouring in my head as a photographer; thinking about stories - and occasionally assessing whether or not I have the right kit - seems to be getting louder. I have sympathy with city birdlife now known to have raised their own voices to compete with the cacophony below them.

So how do we switch off ?

There was a time when you heard the constant refrain, 'oh, I take my camera everywhere with me', 'my camera never leaves my side'. Personally I never adhered to this mantra. Being forever draped in optics never really gives you the chance to zone out. So from time to time the camera bag remains resolutely closed and locked away.

Now of course, by proxy, the camera is always with you in the shape of the smartphone although amazingly I still use it for making phone calls ...

I did a quick and unverified straw poll of a few colleagues to see what took them away from the lens; Lizzie Shepherd extols the virtues of Tennis, 'it's not the most relaxing 'get away' option, particularly given the level of my play, but it does provide a complete contrast and gives me no options even to consider getting the camera out. I did try golf - that didn't work! Music plays a key role for Paul Gallagher, 'I have played guitar as long as I have been making photographs and this is the single most powerful way of me shutting down and entering another realm of creativity and emotional escape.'



There is a case to argue that in fact we don't need to put the camera down at all to find peace and quiet or clarity of thought. Tom Ang suggests that a good night's sleep is all you need 'Photographically, I've spent my life learning never to switch off!

It's only a guess, but I suspect that photographers continue to spend many hours, days and months developing their own curiosity with the world and for them, just being in that space amounts to time off, time away from the rigours of a life in flux.

© Paul Harris 2017

