

With a Smile and a Camera

Capturing Meaningful People Shots

Waves of 120-degree heat rolled off the barren, dusty alley I took as a shortcut, heading towards a mosque whose white minaret rose above all the other buildings. The alley was eerily empty—no cars, no people, not even a chicken. Suddenly three women totally covered in black appeared from a side street, and turned toward me, framed by the white mosque behind them. Wow! My photographer's heart thumped.

But upon seeing me lift my camera, the women quickly pulled their head scarves across their faces and lowered their eyes. Inwardly sighing, I pushed my large camera around behind my back and held it there so the women understood I would not take their picture. As we crossed paths, the woman closest to me surprised me by making eye contact. She let her scarf drop slightly, giving me a shy smile and the barest hint of a nod. I'm not sure her friends even knew it happened, but her gestures meant a lot to me. For one thing, it meant I could not photograph them walking away. Darn!

Although more difficult in certain cultures like Islamic Egypt, it is possible to capture excellent, meaningful people shots anywhere in the world. The key is to first focus on making a personal connection with the subject. It is surprising, the resulting quality of the photographs once you move the primary focus from the shot to the person,

relating to them not as a *subject* but as a unique, interesting human being. Meaningful portraits reflect that connection, and become more than just an exotic addition to the photographer's photo collection.

How does one develop that critical personal relationship? Several factors are key, the most important being making the initial contact, especially when language barriers are involved. Be friendly, smiling, and open to encounters. It helps to be a naturally extroverted *people person*, but if not, fake it. No one will know or really care if some of your friendly overtures are rebuffed.

Offer small kindnesses. Once I started to sit on a chair in the ticket room of Myanmar's famous Shwedagon Pagoda just as a tiny nun did. We took turns gesturing for each other to sit, until the other nuns starting laughing and invited me to join them

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Barbados child



Lady wearing hat





Friendly

for a group photo and then, pictures of nuns with pink robes and shaved heads plus cell phones, cameras and backpacks.

Learn basic phrases in the local language.

Reactions are often strong to something as simple as *Hello* when the Westerner is speaking an unusual language such as Burmese or Maasai

Think outside the box. This author had a T-shirt painted with her name, Donna, in large Chinese characters before the first trip to China in 1980. Frequently, people stopped, stared and said, “Doo...na.” I smiled, and pointed to myself and said, “Donna,” then pointed to them. Often a smile, their name and an eventual photo would follow. In Myanmar in 2008, a shirt with *hello* in circular Burmese script worked equally well.

Take advantage of spur-of-the-moment opportunities. In Mingum, Myanmar, the guide suggested that the group relax at a tourist cafe while she went across the street to a Buddhist home for the aged. Instead, we tagged along and found out she was

Photos © Donna Judd

Pensive in San Miguel



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donating money toward food for the residents. When the half-dozen women crowding around a huge pan of stir-fried noodles heard we had also donated, they rushed to thank us, smiling and chatting in Burmese. One proudly announced, “82. I, 82.” in clear English. As we left, another woman tottered in front of us, bowing and chanting. The guide whispered, “She is praying for your good health and long life.” To make things even better, once they’d eaten, the women were eager to be photographed.

Make arrangements ahead of time for in-depth contacts. Many opportunities for service trips are available online, or through churches and service organizations. Visit the orphanage where you sponsor a child, as this author has done in Myanmar, Mexico and Kenya. When first volunteering as a photographer for a mobile medical/mission team in Kenya, no pictures were taken the first hour when setting up in remote Maasai country. Instead, with camera dangling plainly in sight, I helped organize patients in lines, brought people water, patted babies and so on. When eventually I started photographing, except for one quite elderly gentleman, the often camera-shy Maasai were comfortable with the photography.

Use the Travel Aide Service offered by the Photographic Society of America (PSA). I did for Mumbai, where the volunteer travel aide, **Shantosh Sharma**, went far beyond just recommending good photo locations. He spent hours in traffic to meet me at the cruise dock and brought a driver, whom he had hired to help me experience non-touristy India. Taken by the hand, I was lead through narrow passageways of a *Slum Dog Millionaire*-like



Gypsy child



Fellow teacher

shantytown. As I peeked through one open door, a man sitting on the floor, with rice bowl in hand, asked me to join him for lunch. His home was the size of my kitchen island in California, with no bed, chair, or table, only a small refrigerator. Some homes had electricity, but none had running water or sanitation. When we exited, I photographed two dozen residents jostling to fill up their water



Myanmar smoker



Nap time

jugs, excited because water was not often available that late in the morning. Everywhere people were friendly, seemingly not resentful of my presence or my camera. Because I had planned ahead and used PSA's Travel Aide Service, I was able to photograph a side of Mumbai most tourists never experience.

Break away from your tour. I once slipped out of a museum in Shanghai ahead of my tour group and spotted an employee on break, fanning herself with a half-broken fan. She was the only pregnant woman I could remember seeing since arriving in China. As I approached, she quickly dropped the tattered fan behind her back. We conversed with smiles, gestures, numbers (it was to be her first child) and pictures (of my children.) When our tour guide and group arrived, I asked him to please tell her that I wanted to give her my sandalwood fan from Japan. He looked worried and said she was not supposed to accept gifts. "Perhaps it could be for her child," I suggested. Perfect solution. She accepted with tears in her eyes. The guide translated, "She says all her life she will tell her child of the kindness of the lady from America." Fond memories and good pictures.

Don't ignore the obvious. Guides, vendors, maids, etc. can be excellent subjects. I was once idly chatting with a vendor at a viewpoint in Barbados when a cute little girl sat down behind her. "She's darling," I said. "Is that your granddaughter?" It was, and she let me take a photo. The shot wasn't particularly good, but when I showed it to the little girl, she broke into a beautiful smile, which I was able to capture. I would not have gotten the photo had I not first visited, with no agenda, with the grandmother.

Meaningful people shots are well worth the time and effort required to get them. Whatever approach you take, do it with enthusiasm and sincerity and you'll be rewarded with some great travel memories—and wonderful photographs to reignite those memories. ■



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