



Andrea Bruce Profile

- Andrea Bruce is a co-owner and member of the Amsterdam-based Noor photo agency and specializes on the lives of people living in the aftermath of war.
- Previously, she was a staff photographer at the *Washington Post*, covering the Iraq war from 2003 and other major conflicts in Afghanistan, India, Egypt and Iran.
- Andrea has been named Photographer of the Year four times by the White House News Photographers Association, and is a recipient of the prestigious John Faber Award from the Overseas Press Club in New York.
- A regular contributor to *National Geographic* and the *New York Times*, Andrea is a Nikon European Ambassador and the recipient of the Chris Hondros Fund Award for the "commitment, willingness and sacrifice shown in her work".

www.andreabruce.com

Andrea Bruce

She is one of the most decorated war and conflict photographers today, but even Andrea Bruce has been forced to focus on the day-to-day realities of home. She tells Keith Wilson how to survive in a war zone, why she loves the Z 6 and how to find stories others miss...



It's no secret that many freelance photographers have found themselves without work for much of this year due to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Even some of the most celebrated photographers have seen the commissions dry up, the calls, emails and tweets fall silent. Life has changed, perhaps irrevocably for some, but for award-winning documentary photographer Andrea Bruce, that major life change happened two years earlier, when she moved back to America, after 10 years working overseas, to have a baby. After a career photographing war and conflict from Afghanistan to Iraq, she has adapted to home life and social distancing in rural North Carolina, bringing up her daughter while wondering where her next assignment will take her.

"I'd just finished a shoot for *National Geographic* as everything was happening in Wuhan, so I was flying back from New Zealand when everybody was starting to close their borders," Andrea recalls. "Most of my assignments are in different

countries, so I'm basically unemployed for now, which is a blessing and a curse, because I have a daughter who is a year and a half and I get to spend this time with her, which normally I wouldn't have."

Having this time at home means Andrea is thinking of new ways to be productive, as well as to reflect on her career as a renowned photographer of overseas conflict and the aftermath of war...

Was there a turning point or event that helped you find your direction as a documentary photographer?

I love very intimate and investigative journalism, so I'm used to digging in deep and almost living with people. I did that at a small newspaper in New Hampshire and I did it at the *Washington Post*. Then 9/11 happened and then the war started, so I was sent overseas and that was something I had never anticipated

“**I could never be the director of a movie because I feel what people do naturally is much more interesting**

Previous page: Reena Bihari, a factory girl in Bangalore, India, looks down from the roof of the dormitory block where she lives with other female workers. Like her, they have been brought at government expense from remote villages to the city for their labour.

Below: In Latakia Province, Syria, a couple mourn the loss of their son, who was the first soldier from their small village of 125 people to be killed in the Syrian civil war in 2013.



doing and never wanted to do. Once I got there I realized that the kind of work that I do, this intimate, almost community journalism, was more needed overseas and in a war zone than in Washington DC.

How did you respond to such a situation so early in your career?

I really loved it, I loved trying to tell the war story in a different way – in a more personal way – because I realized quickly that people won't care about the people they're reading about if they don't connect to them in some way. If they don't see them as similar, then they're never going to care about what they're going through, so I ended up covering community events both in

Iraq and Afghanistan, along with a lot of other war photography. I did a photo column as well, it was called Unseen Iraq, about small everyday moments there.

Where else have you been posted?

I loved living in places in different locations, mostly Baghdad, Kabul and then Mexico City. I also lived in Jerusalem for a couple of years and tried to get to know the conflict better – all its confusions and complications that makes war not black and white. That's the work I've been doing for over 15 years now.

You seem equally comfortable working both with colour and black and white. How do you make →

Above: Noorzia, a widow, talks about her dead husband while sharing tea with a neighbour at her home in Kabul, Afghanistan.

* THE IMPORTANCE OF FIXERS

IN UNFAMILIAR PLACES, ESPECIALLY WAR ZONES, WORKING WITH SOMEONE THAT HAS LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IS VITAL FOR PERSONAL SAFETY AND UNCOVERING THE TRUTH...

How important is a good fixer in the field?

Fixers are a crucial part of the team. Not only do they know the language and the safety concerns better than you do, they also know whether or not what you're doing is a cliché. Those are extremely important things to know when you're not in your own community. That can mean being in a different country, or in a different city or even in a different part of the city. I need to meet someone local and talk to them and see if they wouldn't mind introducing me to other people and telling me what is really happening in that area. Sometimes they're paid fixers and sometimes they're just someone you talk to, because on occasion the pre-conceptions you may have are not valid and you need to avoid clichés as much as possible.

that decision to choose one medium over the other?

There are two things really. One example is the story I did, *Widows of Varanasi*, in India. Photographically, whenever anyone thinks of India they think of these vivid colours – it's overwhelmingly beautiful. But the story that I was doing was something deeper and I felt that the colours distracted you from the people in the pictures. I really wanted you to be hit by what these people were going through and their situations, so I purposely made them black and white, and everyone was appalled that I would do such a thing, because the colours were beautiful!

I understand that dilemma. What other factors might you consider?

In other cases, it depends upon how the project is being displayed. If I'm doing just one picture, or six pictures, or if it's a small story in a newspaper, it doesn't matter as much, but if I have a large body of work it's really hard to make the story consistent, colour-wise, if you're shooting in different types of light and situations.

If you're trying to draw a longer narrative, like the Iraq War in one body of work, it's easier to make it black and white in order to keep that consistency. That way, people aren't distracted by colours that don't match and you can focus on the narrative instead.

Do you have a preference?

Most of my work, especially in the past five to 10 years, has been in colour. Also, the cameras get better and better, which means it's now easier to correct for a different lighting situation and keep that consistency in the longer story.

Did you start your photography journey with film?

I'm an old-school film beginner. I still shoot film. I like to experiment with older cameras, and medium- and large-format cameras. That's fun. I started shooting in college with film and in the darkroom. My first job in New Hampshire, we shot slide film, so I have a lot of practice with lights and how to light things, even gymnasiums for sports, and that helped me to also realize that I love the latitude that digital cameras give us now. I do miss the darkroom, though, that's for sure.



It could be argued that the lighting and exposure discipline needed for film makes you a stronger photographer in the digital age?

I hope so. You know, even at the *Washington Post* we shot film until right up to when I covered the Iraq War. In fact, on the airplane to Israel and then onto Iraq at the very beginning of the war, I was given a new laptop, a satnav phone and a digital camera for the first time, and I was reading the owner manual for all of them! It was like learning digital photography while covering a war.

The essence of documentary photography is stories, so had you ever thought about being a writer?

I started as a writer! That's what I always wanted to do. I grew up reading *National Geographic*, always wanting to write for them, never thinking that I would actually become a photographer. It's exciting that I work mostly for *National Geographic* now, but as a photographer.

You need to hone your skills on something that you care about, and that will shine in your pictures

Above: A US marine from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, takes shelter from the sub-zero winter temperatures in Marjah, Helmand Province, February 2010.

Above right: A livestock market sets up in the dry river bed running through Maymana, Afghanistan, August 2010. At the time a proportion of market income was being taken by the Taliban as they set to regain control of the area.

Below right: Ibrahim shows his youngest son the snow as it falls outside a mud hut where he lives with his wife and 11 children near Kabul, 2013.

So, when was the moment that it became clear that your future was in photography, or was it a gradual burn?

No, it was immediate. My last semester in senior year at college, I took a photography class just because I thought it would be an easy class to take. Then, the first time I developed film I completely fell in love with it, my very first roll of film. I thought I knew where I was going, but I dropped everything and stayed on for another year to have some type of portfolio to get internships. I just started again from scratch and I knew immediately that's what I wanted to do. I double majored with art history, so journalism and art history combined is perfect for photography.

Where do you derive your biggest inspirations from?

This is going to sound cheesy, but my biggest inspiration comes from people themselves. I think they're quirky and weird and interesting and beautiful and ugly, all at the same time, and I love that. I feel I'm much better at documentary photography than I am at portraits. I could never be the director of a movie because I feel what people do naturally is much more interesting than anything I could think of to tell people to do.

When it comes to heart and bravery, one of my biggest →





heroes is Carol Guzy, who was a photographer for the *Washington Post*. She's won four Pulitzers, no other journalist has done that, and her work is always to the heart of everything she covers, so it's about emotion and feeling.

You're a Nikon European Ambassador, have you used Nikon your entire photographic career?

No. I have switched around, I was with Canon when I first started and then I switched to Nikon probably about 15 years ago. What I love about Nikon is that you can use the same lenses on the old film cameras up to the newer cameras.

What do you pack now when you go out into the field?

I'm in transition and collecting the Z lenses, because they're bespoke lenses. I use the Z 6 because it's so quiet – it's almost soundless – and

it's small, so for the sensitive, intimate work that I do it's ideal. I love it. But on some assignments I do for *National Geographic* I use a long lens once in a while and I need my workhorse, the D850. That's another camera I use often. I have some of the bigger lenses for that, but it's mostly the Z 6 that I use.

Which lenses?

My go-to has always been the 35mm f/1.8. I have a 50mm f/1.8, that is also Z-series, which is probably my

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Above: Guests fire pistols into the air at a wedding celebration in Ingushetia, Russia.

second favourite. Then I have the Z 24-70mm zoom, because I'm still waiting for some other Z-series prime lenses to come out, but it's also good because sometimes I like to shoot video and, of course, the zoom is really good for that.

When you're working overseas, how do you keep up with editing and workflow?

That depends on what the days are like. If you're in a war zone, you're working from before the sun comes up and you keep going until after the sun has gone down. I have to edit as I go. I take too many pictures to do it all at once and it also helps me to stay focused on what I need.

In my head or on a piece of paper, I always have a shot list, so if I edit while I go, I can see where I have the holes in the story, where I need to concentrate. So, I usually spend bad-light hours, like around noon,

especially in places like India or Iraq, editing in the middle of the day.

With assignments such as the Iraq War and the Arab Spring, how do you cover such conflicts without taking too great a risk to yourself?

Luckily, I have worked for really good publications who have my back. They know the risks, they are prepared, they require training in different situations; they work as a team and they brainstorm how things should be covered before they're covered, unless it's something that erupts out of nowhere. When I'm living in Afghanistan for the *New York Times* or living in Iraq for the *Washington Post*, they had security people hired who look at the overall situation and are staying informed. But aside from that, the decision to go to a war zone doesn't scare me as much; it's all the smaller decisions that you make once you get there that really determine whether you stay safe.

What sort of decisions?

People think, 'Oh my god, you're going to Afghanistan, that's crazy! You have a child!' No, there's a way to go to Afghanistan and cover the story without putting yourself on the frontline. That's a different decision, and even when you're in the car driving and it's a dangerous place, you stop the car every mile, you look around, everyone in the car talks about how far should we go: 'Should we go forward? Should we go back?' We all agree. If anyone disagrees, we

go with that person if someone feels it's not safe. You go a little bit further and you stop. You don't rush into something, because then suddenly you'll be faced with like an ISIS flag and a wrong checkpoint... then you're in trouble.

Planning and preparation is key...

Making sure that you're prepared: you have food, you have a place to stay, you always have a way out, you always have a backup plan, an escape route of how to get out of there. Those are the main things I think about. It's the smaller steps along the way that are important and that I think through carefully.

What about the unknown, hidden stories? How do you find those?

That varies from story to story. Each one is different, but usually I love to read. I read newspapers and magazines and books, and I'll sometimes read just one sentence, say from the *New Yorker*, and that will kick my curiosity as a starting point to learn more about it, or about an area I've never been. More than anything, I think the story is within another story.

What is the best piece of advice you'd give to a student who has that moment of epiphany like you did and wants to become a documentary photographer?

It's changed a lot in the last 20 years – the way I made it is not the way people make it today. The younger



Left: Taking a break from an offensive against the Taliban in Helmand Province, a US marine unwinds in his living quarters before the next engagement, May 2010.

*** GOING FREELANCE**

THE WASHINGTON POST IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST RESPECTED NEWSPAPERS, BUT ANDREA DECIDED TO LEAVE THE PAPER FOR THE GREAT UNKNOWN OF A FREELANCE CAREER...

You are a member of the Noor photo agency in Amsterdam. How did that come about?

I was a full-time staff photographer at the *Washington Post*, which I loved. I lived in Iraq but they hit hard times and started closing down a lot of their bureau – this would have been 2009 or 2010 – and moving everyone back to Washington DC, and I saw my future of taking pictures of politicians on podiums for the rest of my life. I decided I wanted to go to Afghanistan and they couldn't support that, so it was a hard decision, but I thought if I'm going to make a career change by going freelance, then I better do it now while I'm still young. So I quit and went freelance, and I loved the photographers at Noor and I joined them.

When was this?

Seven years ago. It was a very good decision. They're a great group of photographers and we have a great staff and we all push each other in different ways. We have similar motivations but different expertise, and that really helps when learning from each other.

people I've seen who have made their way today have become an expert at something. They either specialize in one country, or one topic, and they do one in-depth, amazing story on that subject. That's their stepping stone to getting more stories and more work that could be paid for. Sometimes, that takes doing your first story and first bit of research unpaid until you can actually get it together and sell it. Create a body of work that you feel is important to cover. It could be something you see that might be lacking coverage in the media in general, and sometimes that's in your own backyard.

Good point. You don't have to go abroad to find the best stories...

I think of all the work that I did in small towns and locally, and cementing my skills there helped me to then cover things overseas. I don't think you have to jump into war. You need to hone your skills on something that you have access to and something that you care about, and that will shine in your pictures. And don't give up. It's tough, you've got to really love it to stay in it. **M**