Nadia Meli
Profile

- Italian-born Nadia Meli began her life as a professional photographer in Germany, where she also grew up, before moving to the UK in 2016.
- After 10 years as a destination wedding photographer, she decided last year to photograph her last bride and groom and focus on portrait photography instead.
- Now based on England's south coast, clients include local and international charities, independent businesses and start-ups, as well as magazines.
- Nadia is a Nikon Europe Ambassador and conducts online photo courses and workshops at www.thesignaturestylesystem.com
- In 2021, she will be a speaker at the Nine Dots photography conference in London www.nine-dots.co/gathering and the Thrive wedding photography workshops in Brighton and Glasgow www.photographyfarm.co.uk/thrive-20

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Nadia Meli

With everything that COVID-19 has thrown us this year, Nadia Meli could be forgiven for postponing the relaunch of her career as a portrait photographer. On the contrary, she tells Keith Wilson how she has embraced new ideas and opportunities out of the crisis…

All images: Nadia Meli

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icking the right time to make a critical, life-changing decision requires a mix of instinct and experience, but sometimes events out of our control supersede even the most astute judgement. Last year, Nadia Meli decided to photograph her last wedding, and concentrate instead on her portrait photography business.

After a decade of travelling all over Europe as a successful destination wedding photographer, she thought 2020 would be the year she could make headway in her new-found direction. This was to be the first full year that Nadia could wholly devote to portraiture, her first love, and fulfil the creative freedom that had been inhibited by the formalities and routines of a wedding shoot.

However, like the rest of us, she was not prepared for the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. But this vivacious daughter of Sicily is not one to retreat into a corner and bemoan her ill-fortune. Nor does she regret her decisions to give up weddings when she did. Instead, Nadia has embraced the new opportunities borne out of these hard times to relaunch her career as a portrait photographer…

You decided last year to stop photographing weddings. Why?
I did weddings for 10 years. Last year was my last full season and out of those 10 years I did nine as destination weddings, so I was travelling nine or 10 months out of the year. Weddings are exhausting – all the travel, organizing and logistics. When I started finding myself in an anxious state before travelling, panicking and not knowing how to calm myself down, when I found that creeping in, I realized this needed to stop, 'I can't keep going like this.' I never had that with weddings before, I was never scared or nervous. I was always excited to do a wedding, but the last three years it was very much like it was going downhill.

So, you made a drastic change to your lifestyle to feel more settled and assured?
Definitely. I had to listen to my body and make a choice. I needed to be

" It's crazy because photography is an in-person job, so that went out window, but it was fun finding new avenues of business

healthy mentally and physically. At the same time, after doing it for so long, I was starting to question a lot.

How do you mean?
When you see weddings all the time and everyone is doing the same thing, you start questioning, 'why are people doing this and why is nobody questioning what they're doing? Why is everyone – with a few exceptions – following the same rules?' I'm a very big 'why' person and I started questioning and challenging the whole thing, and I thought if I can't shoot a wedding wholeheartedly, maybe it's time to step back. I don't want to be untruthful with what I do.

With COVID-19 it wasn't the best timing and photographers are

having a tough time – what've you done to survive professionally?
I was lucky to have savings and I had clients who, even though we had to cancel our shoot, they still paid – the ones that could, the ones that still had their jobs, they still paid me anyway, which was nice of them. I also started a print shop a few weeks into lockdown and started selling prints online.

An extreme situation like this makes you think differently…
It's crazy because photography is a job you do in-person, so that went out the window, but it was fun finding new avenues of business.

How did you become interested in photography originally? →

✳ STAYING CONNECTED

THE PANDEMIC MEANS WE ARE MORE TIED TO OUR SCREENS THAN EVER. NADIA DECIDED TO MAKE A SERIES OF ONLINE PORTRAITS OF PEOPLE FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD…

If it hadn't been for lockdown, you wouldn't have done your *Connected* **project of online screen portraits?**
That was fun! Online portraits of strangers! I did the whole thing as a personal project, but I also was raising money for Choose Love, who help refugees in Europe. It kept me busy; almost every day for three months I was doing these portraits of people from Australia to Argentina and the States, and all over Europe and some African countries. It was so interesting to open Zoom and say, 'Hi stranger!' and to find out what they're doing in lockdown. Everyone was in a different situation but there was this understanding of what was going on. That didn't help me survive as a pro, because it wasn't paid, but it helped me survive *creatively*. Later, Nikon hired me to do a video about my online portraits – that's up on their YouTube (https://bit.ly/30zfOQD).

I didn't even own a camera until I was 19 and had never taken photographs until then. I was always creative and always an artist, but I had never used a camera to express myself. When I was 19 and had finished school in Germany I decided that I would move to London for a gap year and my parents gave me a little point-and-shoot camera as a gift, it was one of the first digital point-and-shoot cameras, big and clunky with a tiny screen! That was 2005. I used that camera to document what I was doing with my days. I was working in a homeless shelter in London and taking photos of everything, of work and all over the city, which was so inspiring for a 19-year-old from a tiny village in Germany.

You have an interesting back story: Italian-born, raised in Germany and now living in the UK, so why did you move to Germany?
I was born in Sicily and I moved when I was one. My parents emigrated for work and I grew up in Germany and lived in Germany for the biggest part of my life. But I never felt at home there and I think that's the case for a lot of immigrant children. With my parents at home I had this Italian view of the world and they were trying to keep it traditional, and outside the house I was observing my German friends and how their families were set up and how they were raised – it was a completely different reality to my home. Like a lot of immigrant kids, I didn't fit in to either of those worlds, so from very early on I had that desire to go away.

And that brought you to London…
Yeah, I wanted to find people who were more like me, because I don't feel a strong allegiance to a particular country. I found that here, where there are so many people from different places. My background didn't matter as much. During that year in London I discovered my love for photography. It was so important for me to capture everything during my time in London, because I knew that eventually I would have to go back, and I dreaded that, and I needed to hold onto this, to make it feel real, so I took photos of everything. That's how it started.

You now describe yourself as a photographer of people. How
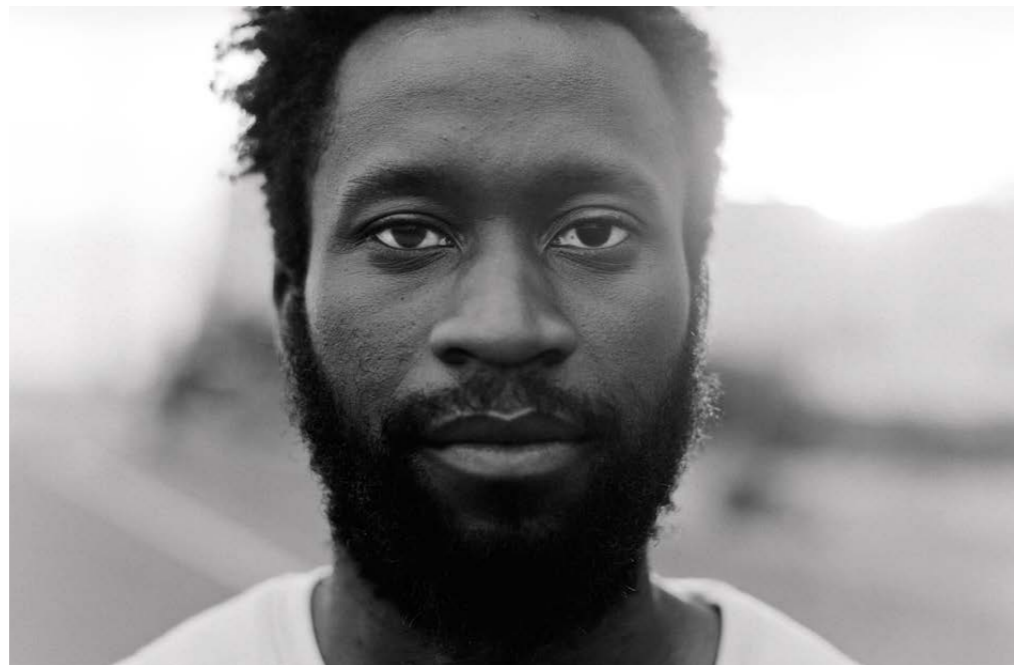
quickly did you arrive at people as your primary subject to focus on?
Quickly. When I started shooting around London, I was new to it, I was shy. I was doing some street photography and photographing my friends and my roommates. When I moved back to Germany to study I was still using my little camera, but after two and half years it broke. Then, one of my closest friends, one day she stood in front of my door with this box in her hands, and in the box was a brand-new DSLR! She said, 'Here, I think you need this for your creative soul.' I was in shock. I was a student and I couldn't afford a DSLR and she just gave it to me. That was when I started photographing people and taking portraits.

Did the new camera make it easier for you to start taking portraits?
People assume that when you have a big black camera you can take photos! So, everyone around me, my roommates, were going, 'oh you have a camera, can you take some photos of me?' That turned into me asking people if I could take their photos.

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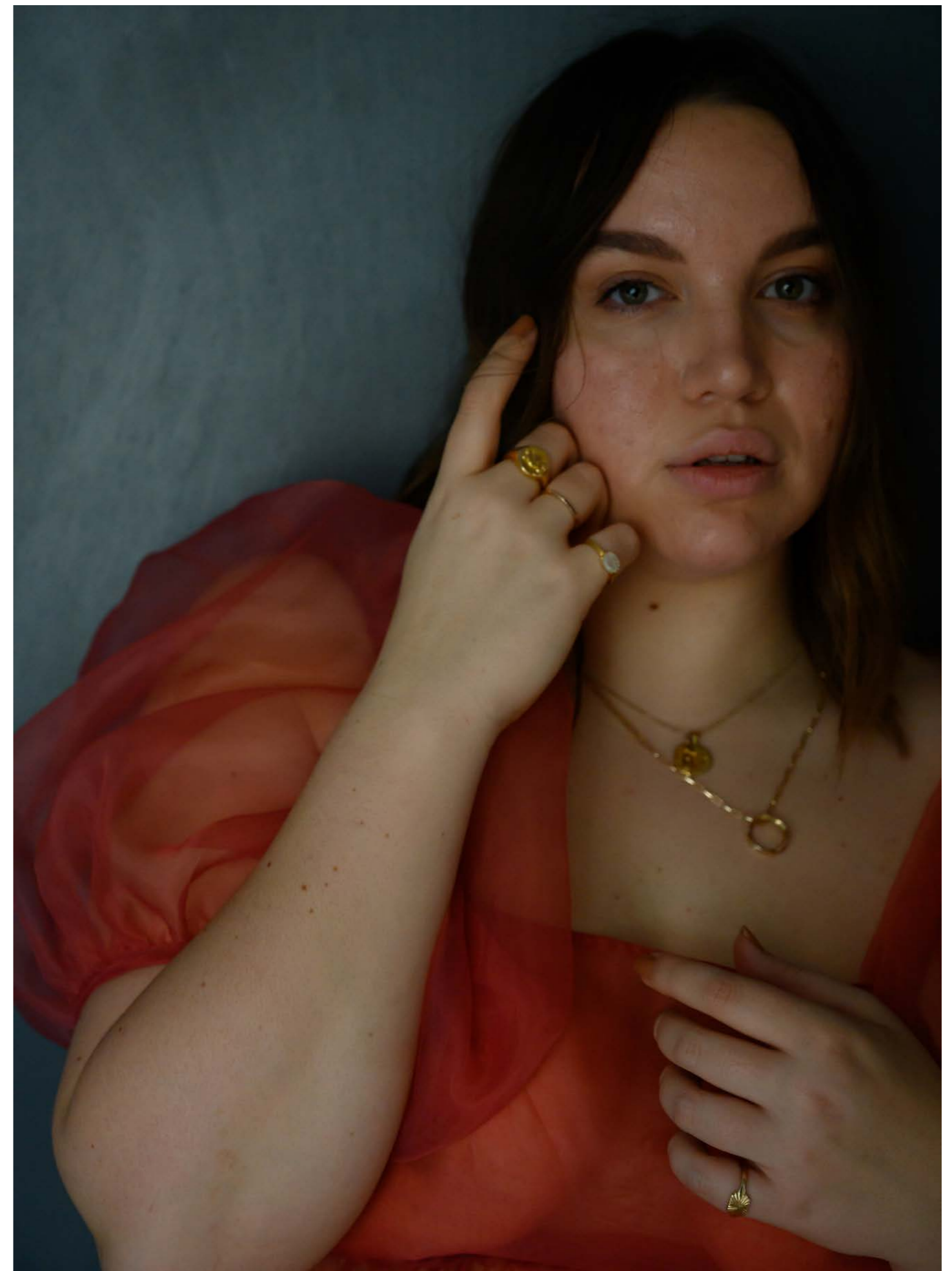Since getting the Z 7, it's only the Live View I use, I never look through the viewfinder

I got really into it and started blogging those early images and putting them on Facebook. They looked terrible, but I was learning and using everyone who said 'yes' as a model. That's when I started understanding the power of a photograph and falling in love with that connection that happens when you are photographing someone: they need to trust you. I loved it. I stopped photographing flowers or streets or buildings, and I just photographed people.

What about lighting? Do you prefer natural light to artifcial lighting?
I like to go for a natural look but 'natural' doesn't always mean natural light, of course – it can be artificial or studio lights as well. I love window light, I mean who doesn't? Soft, even window light is my favourite. When I started out in photography I started with weddings and it was very trendy to do backlit, sunset photos, to always shoot in soft, even light and not have any harshness in the pictures. Now, I'm having a lot more fun with light, I'm experimenting much more with light.

In what sort of ways?
I still love shooting with natural light but that can mean shooting at 1pm on a sunny day with harsh contrast and interesting light shadows, so it doesn't mean just soft light. I also love shooting indoors if there's some interesting artificial light. I also ⟶

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Above: **Wedding of Maria and Simon in Italy. Nadia took the couple away from the guests for 20 minutes to get some portraits of them together, without any distraction from family and friends.**

Camera: Nikon D850
Lens: 24mm f/1.8
Exposure: 1/200 sec, f/4, ISO100

use reflectors outdoors, but I try to keep it low key. I don't want it to look like a big production if I'm shooting. I like it to be easy and simple.

What camera and lens combinations do you work with?
That has also changed over the years, with moving from weddings and now doing portraits. For the last two years, I've been shooting mostly with the Nikon Z 7, and my favourite combination is the Z 7 and 35mm lens. The 35mm has been my favourite lens for years, but now I love it for portraits. I love the 58mm as well. It's beautiful. Sometimes, I'll use the 24-70mm if I don't have time to change lenses. When I do shoots, I pack lightly. I take two or three lenses with me and I usually use one! I guess that's the case for a lot of photographers, we all have our favourite lenses.

How do you work with the camera while engaging with your subject?
I use the camera with Live View, so I don't look through the viewfinder. Instead, I look at the back of my screen and while I'm shooting I can look at people's faces and talk to them, which has changed the look a little bit of my images because people are less intimidated.

Yes, they can see you properly...
Yeah, they're a bit distracted by the

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You have a better chance of having your own style if you stay away from other people's work

conversation, so they don't think about the camera. Also, it's on silent mode, so they don't know when I'm taking a picture. They feel much more at ease and the results are completely different now.

Is that technique one that you've only adopted since getting the Z 7, or did you work that way with your D850 as well?
No. I only started doing that with the Z 7 and I have no idea why! I quickly realized, 'man, this is awesome!' People look at me, they're more relaxed and if I need them to look directly into the camera, I can always tell them, or hold the camera up to my face a little bit. I'm still looking at the screen, but I hold the camera up towards my face so they are looking to the lens while they're chatting to me, and the results are amazing. I used the D850 before, mostly for

weddings, and I always used the viewfinder. Now, since getting the Z 7, it's only the Live View I use, I never look through the viewfinder.

The *Safehaven* series of portraits is another personal project. How did that come about?
That was phenomenal. I was volunteering at Safehaven, a drop-in centre for women in Brighton, where I live. Once a week, women can come into this church hall where there are different setups in every corner where you can do things. I had a little corner set in the hall, it was just a black background in front of the window. That was it, to keep it simple and not intimidating. The women who came in that day were told they could go and have their picture taken. There was a stylist so they could have makeup and hair done as well. Most were like, 'No, no, no, I've never had my photo taken, I'm really shy,' they retreated into themselves.

They were naturally hesitant...
Then I did the shoot, it was five to 10 minutes with everyone, and I showed them the pictures. Afterwards, they were saying, 'I feel like a model. The picture looks amazing. I can't believe this is me.' It was fascinating to see how photos allow you to see yourself – most of them were saying things like, 'I'm ugly. I'm not beautiful.' This helped their self-respect.

What you did was to change their view of themselves...
A portrait photo forces you to look at

yourself. These people are not really looking at themselves. If you think you're ugly, you don't really look at yourself. You don't look at yourself in the mirror, you don't take photos of yourself. With a photo, you allow someone else to look at you, so you have to allow me, as the photographer, to look at you. That takes strength, and then afterwards you have to look at yourself (again). There's so much power in that. That day made it really clear to me how photography can change someone.

What about post-production and workflow, how do you work in that respect?

Above: **Rebecca photographed by the light of a window at sunset in her apartment.**

Camera: Nikon Z 7
Lens: 58mm f/1.4
Exposure: 1/1250 sec, f/2.8, ISO100

I love to edit in Lightroom, that's what I use for 90 per cent of editing. I only use Photoshop if I have to get rid of a bin in the background, or something. If you look at the Raw file and my edited images, the edited image has a bit more pop to it, a bit more light and contrast. Obviously, the Raw file is flat, but I keep it natural, I don't want to change colours into something that they're not, or airbrush skin into something that doesn't look normal. I keep it very simple and very natural.

What's the best advice you would give to someone wanting to take inspiration from you?
My best advice is a very controversial one – it is not to look at the work of other photographers. By following too many photographers on social media and constantly looking at photography, especially if it's photography in the field that you're working in, you will just repeat what you're consuming. Allow yourself to develop your own voice and your style, without too much influence.
    I'm not under any illusion however; we're living in a visual world and it's impossible to live completely without any visual influence, so whatever we produce is never completely new, right? Still, I think it's worse when you look at too much of the same. You have a better chance of having your own style if you stay away from other people's work. **N**

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✱ A LESSON FROM LINDBERGH

NADIA DELIBERATELY AVOIDS FOLLOWING OTHER PHOTOGRAPHERS, BUT A FEW WORDS BY THE LATE PETER LINDBERGH LEFT A LASTING IMPRESSION UPON HER...

Is there a photographer who has inspired you in any way?
I don't follow a lot of photographers, but Peter Lindbergh was one. He did a wonderful post once when he was judging students' portfolios. He was telling people don't look at other photographers, don't look at their work, just do your own view. He said one thing which I love so much: "Give yourself permission to exist in your photographs." I've never forgotten that. We are trying so much to emulate someone that we see as successful and we think that if we do that formula it will give us exactly the same success. Ultimately, it's because we're afraid of existing in our own art, we're afraid of putting ourselves in, it's like a personal rejection. I've never forgotten that. This is what I shoot and live by.

Next Month
Wildlife photographer Gurcharan Roopra