

JOHN QUINTERO

Since leaving the BBC in 2010, John Quintero has forged a successful career as a travel photographer. He tells Keith Wilson about his favourite Nikon lens, why he loves the rain, and where he goes on holiday...



Profile

JOHN'S CAREER TOOK HIM AROUND THE WORLD – BEFORE HE BECAME A TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER!

- Now based in London, John was born and raised in Colombia.
- He worked as a picture editor for Viasat Broadcasting, and then for the BBC as part of the team that launched BBC iPlayer.
- John's images have been published in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *National Geographic Travel UK* and also by UNESCO.
- His many awards include a gold medal in the 2012 Prix de la Photographie de Paris.

All images: John Quintero

As befits his occupation, John Quintero is on the road when we track him down for an interview, a six-hour time difference away. All we know is that he's somewhere in South America and within range of Wi-Fi for just a few days...

Where are you now?

Right now I'm in Colombia, in the city of Cali. It's quite hot for me – it's 9am and it's 32 degrees already. I'm here for a few days, and then I'm flying to Bogota, and then from Bogota on to the Amazon for my next travel photography workshop.

So has a specific assignment taken you to Colombia?

Well, all my family are from Colombia, so this is home for me, but I travel a lot and every time I have the opportunity I come to Colombia. This year I have been here for a few months working for the government tourist board, creating an image bank.

Were you born with the travel bug?

Ah, absolutely, ever since I was a kid, because my father was always travelling between the north and the south of Colombia. We had a coffee farm in the north and then he decided to buy a huge amount of land in the south to keep cattle, so I was always travelling between north and south, three times a year. I can never be in a place for too long. Even if I'm with my family, after two or three weeks I feel I have to be somewhere else.

What first triggered your interest in photography?

I feel like I have been a photographer forever. You know those slides that you put through a small box with a light and you see an enlargement of that photo – do you know what I'm talking about?

Yes, I do: a slide viewer.

A slide viewer, yes, exactly! My mum had a lot of those, and when I was a kid I discovered that if I removed the slider from the viewer it became like a blank screen. Then, if I put that up to a small hole, like a hole in the wall of a wooden house, then I could see the landscape around me, but reproduced upside down.



When I was about seven, my brother bought a camera, and I remember for me it was like discovering magic

So like a mini camera obscura?

Yeah, it was something like that, and that was how I discovered how a camera works. When I was about seven, my brother bought a camera, and I remember for me it was like discovering magic. I would do anything he asked, just so he'd let me use that camera. My own first camera was a Kodak, a really small camera. I have been a photographer since then.

What was your first Nikon camera? A film model?

My first Nikon camera was the F2. A friend of mine was selling it and I paid for it in instalments. That was actually my first SLR. Since then I have always used Nikon. One of the things I always say about Nikon is that the quality of the lens optics is absolutely stunning. Nikon doesn't pay me anything to say it's my favourite brand – it's my choice because it's incredibly good.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Orthodox Priest in Lalibela, Ethiopia
Lalibela is known for its churches hewn into the rocky hills



Bagan at Dawn
Over 2000 temples dot the plains of Bagan in Myanmar



U Bein Bridge, Myanmar
Buddhist monks cross the world's longest, oldest teakwood bridge



Quilotoa, Ecuador
A local woman at Quilotoa Crater Lake in Ecuador

And which Nikon cameras do you use now?

The D3s and the D810. I bought the D810 about a year ago, and I decided to keep my D3s as a backup camera. Back then I was working for the tourist board, and I was using the D810 for video and the D3s for stills. I was using the D810 from time to time for stills as well, and when I had the time to edit and compare all of the images I fell in love with my D3s again. I think the D3s is one of those benchmark cameras from Nikon.

Are you interested in getting the new Nikon D5?

I would love to get one! Definitely. Who wouldn't? I've been reading a lot about it and I would love to try it.

Do you travel light?

I try to pack light, but that is not the reality! Along with my two bodies, I have to take my sharpest lenses.





I think the sharpest lens I've got is the Nikon 105mm f/2.8 macro. I don't shoot macro much, to be honest, but for portraits that lens is amazing. I love it, I really love it.

Would that be your desert island lens, then?

That would be my choice for portraits, but when you're travelling you need something more versatile, so the lens I always have attached to one of my cameras is the 24-70mm f/2.8. It's a fantastic lens. It's good for landscapes, portraits and anything in



Kusti Wrestler Working Out
A Kusti wrestler exercises at a gym in Varanasi, India



Guambiano Women Frying Bread
Indigenous women cooking at their family home in Cauca, Colombia

between. My second choice is the 70-200mm f/2.8, and the version I've got is the VR II. I love the sharpness of that lens. The quality is amazing. That's good for when you can't get close to the subject. For example, I've been in so many situations where you are not allowed to take photographs. I don't like to steal photos if people don't like to have their picture taken, but sometimes you just want to get a good photograph of the situation, the good light that is going through a narrow street, things like that. I can do that with a 70-200mm lens without being too intrusive.

What else do you pack?

The 14-24mm f/2.8. That's the lens I bought with the D810 last year. I'm using it for night photography, things like star trails. It's an amazing lens, and also really sharp, with beautiful optics. I always have to carry that with

me. The other lens I have – which I'm about to sell – is the 20mm f/2.8. It's excellent for video, because you can shoot handheld, and it's perfect if you are in a situation where you can't use a tripod, but I'm covering that focal length now with the 14-24mm. I always pack my Manfrotto tripod and a monopod as well.

Any flashguns?

Yes, I have an SB-910 and an SB-800. They are the only two flashguns I have. I normally use only one, and I trigger them with PocketWizard remote triggers.

What's the hardest place you've worked as a photographer?

It can be quite difficult in places like Egypt, for example. In Muslim countries it's very difficult to shoot people, and even more difficult with women. You can get into trouble if you



TRAVEL ESSENTIAL

TRAVELLING OFF THE MAIN TOURIST TRACK IN ALL SORTS OF WEATHER MEANS JOHN QUINTERO NEVER LEAVES HOME WITHOUT PACKING ONE PARTICULAR AND VERSATILE ACCESSORY...

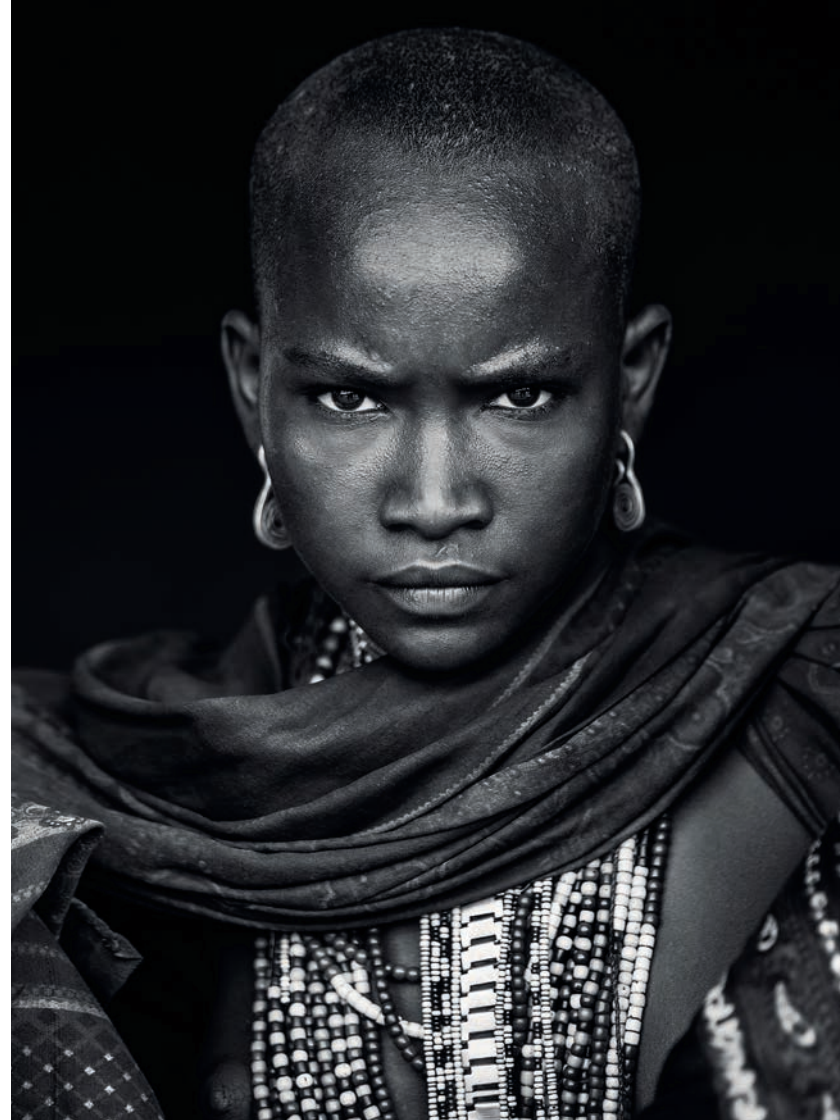
What's the most unusual thing you pack in your camera bag?

I normally carry a pashmina. I like pure cotton ones best. When I'm travelling I like to travel by motorbike because it is easier for me to jump off and start taking photos if there's a sudden situation that calls for it, so one of the things I use my pashmina for is to cover my camera and lenses. On a motorbike doing 30 or 40km per hour on a

dusty highway, all the dust and really small particles get onto the lens, but I don't want to keep the camera inside my bag because I can lose the moment. I wrap the camera in the pashmina, and it's really easy to unwrap it quickly and then I'm ready to shoot.

I also use it as a towel, a blanket, a pillow, to cover my head if the sun is really strong and to cover my camera when it's raining. It's really useful!





are shooting women in the street. I love to capture candid moments in the street, but that's one of the hardest places I've been, even though I've never been alone. I don't speak Arabic, so I always try to have local people with me who can get you out of trouble – who can at least say something and save your life!

How do you approach people without speaking their language?

I believe smiling is a language. When you smile at people and they can see you are genuine and really interested in what they do, then you can get better photos. I always say that if you spend time with people and don't get your camera out in the first minute; when you talk to people, eat what they are eating; then you will get more natural-looking photos.

What makes a good portrait?

I think you need to get that feeling behind the eyes that are in front of you. If I want a nice portrait, a really intimate portrait, I have to get closer, because it's when you get closer that you really get that feeling. That's why I use the 70-200mm VR II if I want to get candid photos. A good portrait is a moment when the subject forgets that a camera is between you and them and they start behaving naturally. I don't take one photo, I take several photos, because you don't know when that moment you're looking for is going to happen.

What, in particular, makes a good travel photograph?

I think you need to get that sense of the place where you are. The viewer needs to be able to engage in that moment, or in that space. Obviously, you have to mix that sense of place with good lighting. It's a good moment basically. I think if you



A good portrait is a moment when the subject forgets that a camera is between you and them and they start behaving naturally

can capture that sense of place then that makes a good travel photo.

You are equally at home with colour and black-and-white. How do you choose between the two?

I normally shoot in colour because you can convert to black and white, but I try to get both together. I love black and white, but if the moment, the subject, the light, offer a really good mix of colours then you know that it will work better in colour. So it's not something I decide in the moment I'm shooting – it's something I decide when I'm going through my files and I say, 'Okay, this photo will be amazing in black and white.'

As you're on the road so much, how do you manage your workflow?

Normally I try to shoot very early in the morning, then go back to my base, my hotel, when the light is getting really harsh. I download what I've shot, then go out again. If I am to make the most of my time in a place, I have to know how to work with the light I've got. For example, when the light is really harsh, I'll shoot indoors, and that's the time when I shoot portraits, indoor scenes, inside buildings and covered markets. I save the best light of the day, early in the morning and late in the afternoon, for outdoor photos like landscapes and street photography. At night I review, tag, and download all of my photos to two or three external hard drives, and check that everything is working, that I don't have corrupted files, just in case I have to repeat it. If something has happened, I would prefer to know when I'm still on location, not when I've got back to London.

So by next morning there's nothing you haven't looked at?

That's right. It's a religion for me! I can't really relax if I haven't looked at my files, or my camera isn't charging for the next day, and all the photos have been backed up.

How many days of the year are you away on average?

It could be anything between two and six months.

Do you ever get sick of travelling?

I have to stop sometimes and recharge myself. If I've been travelling



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Ladakhi Woman
A woman wearing a traditional dress in Ladakh, North India

Arbore Girl
Young girl from the Arbore Tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia

Flute Player in Cotacachi
This city in Ecuador is renowned for its music

Mursi Boy
Mursi boy with his body painted with chalk, Ethiopia

for two or three months there comes a point when I'm really tired. Travelling is tiring. You start very early in the morning and sometimes the food is not great, the sleeping conditions are not great, and all this starts to catch up with you after a few days. I don't like big cities, although I like Hanoi because I have so many friends there and I love the food. It's a city I use just to recharge myself, relax and download photos.

Maybe you have answered my next question: where does a travel photographer go on holiday?

[Laughs!] That's a great question.

Is Hanoi your answer then?

I can never be in holiday mode. Ever.



RAIN MAN

MOST OF US PACK THE CAMERA AWAY AND RUN FOR COVER WHEN IT STARTS RAINING, BUT NOT JOHN...

What's your favourite type of weather for photography?

I love to shoot when it's raining. You can really get photos like nobody else has, because when it's raining most people don't take their camera out!

So you like doing the opposite of what most people do?

Yeah. You can get really nice photos in the rain. I also love to shoot when it's foggy, especially at sunset or sunrise. Those kinds of conditions are really good for light. For example, I once went to Quilotoa volcano in Ecuador – a really beautiful place. I was there with another photographer and we went to the edge of the crater. Suddenly it stopped raining and the light was really crisp and golden, with a beautiful sunset and a lot of fog around [see above]. I also like going to the rainforest when there's a lot of mist around, and then suddenly a shaft of light comes through the canopy – conditions like this are perfect for photography.





Because I can't put my camera down! When you really want a good photo, you never know when it's going to happen, so I can't relax on a beach and just forget about my camera. Hanoi and Mumbai are places I use mostly to have a good sleep, to really indulge myself with a nice hotel and good food that I've been craving, to recharge and be ready to go again.

Who are the photographers that you admire or who inspire you?

I definitely admire the work of Cartier-Bresson. I love Steve McCurry, who I think is the guru for every travel photographer. I love his work from Afghanistan in the 1980s. Sebastião Salgado as well, he's a great photographer, absolutely amazing. I really like the work of an Argentinian photographer called Pedro Luis Raota – he died a few years ago – and also that of an indigenous photographer from Peru, from the early 1900s, called Martín Chambi. He was a superb photographer.



Try not to copy the photos that everyone else is doing. Try to capture something different. To do that you really need to spend time with the local people. You are not a tourist; you are never a tourist

What has been your greatest moment as a photographer?

I think the greatest moments are when you make the people who see your photos feel the way you felt when you took those pictures. One of those moments in my own work, for example, is a portrait of a coal seller on the streets of a city in Myanmar. People can engage with that portrait in a way that I felt when I took the photo. You see in her eyes a kind of despair or sadness. When I get that situation and viewers can feel the same moment that I was witnessing, then that's a great moment for me.

Finally, what is the best piece of advice you can give to someone

who wants to start out as a travel photographer today?

Try always to go in the opposite direction to where everyone else is going! Try to engage more with local people, research more so you can understand more about the place where you are going. Try not to copy the photos that everyone else is doing. Try to capture something different. To do that you really need to spend time with the local people. You are not a tourist; you are never a tourist. You are someone who needs to show what is going on there with your visual language.

See more of John's stunning images at www.johnquintero.com



Young Hamer Warrior
The Hamer live in southwestern Ethiopia and are known for their bull jumping



Loy Krathong Festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand
Chiang Mai is known for its elaborate celebrations

NEXT MONTH: WE MEET THE SPORTS PRO WHO WROTE THE BOOK ON PHOTOGRAPHING THE OLYMPICS – QUITE LITERALLY