



EYE ON ASIA

Vietnam-based photographer Peter Stuckings charts the conflict between development and nostalgia on his sometimes intrepid assignments. By Gemma Price.

“When you do this kind of job, you have to have a sense of adventure. You have to be prepared for cock-ups, getting lost, missing connections... Anything could happen. That’s why I love it!”

Photographer Peter Stuckings left behind his suit-and-tie, nine-to-five routine in Melbourne and arrived in Southeast Asia in 2006, where he was quickly seduced by Vietnam’s energy and the constant thrill of new discoveries that country presented.

He relocated permanently to Ho Chi Minh City – formerly known as Saigon – and used this fast-paced frontier hub as a base for exploring the region, constantly travelling farther afield to shoot communities and hallowed cultural sites in the more remote corners of the Indochinese peninsula. He sought out the exotic, the unusual, the unknown, and while many editors and fans of

his work continue to be enthralled by his colourful mountain tribe tableaux or unique perspectives on gilded, awe-inspiring temples, he says that that isn’t the full story.

“Western people find traditional life charming – the hand-embroidered clothing, stilt houses, non-mechanised means of transportation – but for the locals these are the trappings of poverty. The reality is that rural life is harsh, and the people in these areas simply want to move forwards. As a travel photographer, I’m routinely expected to glamorise poverty.”

Dressed in faded blue jeans and wrinkled blue shirt, his sunglasses pushed up over his closely-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, Stuckings is the quintessential easy-going Aussie: he jokes around with the slightly baffled waitress as he tries to determine whether the dish he’s about to order is vegetarian as the menu suggests or contains meat,

Opposite page: *Farmer in Thailand* – a Thai farmer in the far north of the country still harvests his rice by hand, using a bamboo pole to flatten rows of rice stalks ready for cutting.

Shanghai skyline

Shanghai's modern skyline has come at the cost of its heritage. Here a condemned colonial-era warehouse awaits demolition in a surreal wasteland, hemmed in by the city's towering skyscrapers.



Below: *Monks with the moon* – Monks pray at an ancient Ankorian ruin by the Mekong River during a little-known annual Buddhist full-moon festival in the far south of Laos.

Opposite page from top: *Monk with waterfall* – a solitary Lao monk takes a meditative break by the Mekong River's largest falls, Khon Phapheng; *Tibetan prayer wheel* – a Tibetan monk, nun and pilgrim turn a huge prayer wheel during their rounds at the sacred Xiahe monastery in central-west China.

as Vietnamese dishes often do. With a chuckle he eventually opts for a safe goat's cheese salad. As he turns his attention back to me, his eyes are framed by laughter lines etched through a tan developed over many long hours on the road.

"You have to be prepared to spend days travelling to find something really special," he says. "I've always found it's best to travel by motorbike, off-road-style. You have the freedom to go everywhere. But you also have to be happy to be alone. You can spend weeks hopping from one town to the next and not ever having a proper conversation."

Some of his most enthralling images and personally memorable travel experiences are the result of solitary week-long forays into uncharted and often forbidden territory. On a recent trip to a Tibetan settlement, Stuckings spent time living among the monks, nuns and pilgrims in a little-known monastery, capturing candid and

ethereal images of their frugal way of life and reverent piety. In contrast to Thailand, a veteran of the tourism industry which has mastered the art of offering cheap, easily accessible and highly predictable travel experiences, this Tibetan retreat was completely uncharted, and somewhere the Chinese forbade foreigners – especially white people – from visiting.

"That was a great example of what travel can be, if you're prepared to go the distance. I asked around and although most of the local people were so freaked out they ignored me completely, I eventually found a Chinese couple at a nearby bus station who agreed to get me a bus ticket and then hid me through the checkpoints because they didn't agree with China's policies," he recalls.

"There was a constant background rumble of ethnic dissent, and because the Tibetans had been protesting, the army had shut the area





down completely. They'd block the main routes, but – like most destinations – if you're prepared to come the roundabout way, you could see and experience something spectacular.”

Many people would find the solitude and constant challenge of communicating with people who speak no English daunting, but Stuckings says that's the part of the job he enjoys the most.

“It's the people that make travel what it is – eating, chatting with the locals, participating in a local festival. You can experience buildings and landmarks in a photo. But, for me, travelling and travel photography is all about the people you meet.”

Stuckings is probably best known for his work for publications such as *Time* magazine, *The Financial Times*, *Condé Nast Traveller*, *Travel + Leisure* and about two dozen *Insight Guide* titles. Over the past few years, however, socially conscious Stuckings has also been working as an accredited photographer for Operation Smile, accumulating around 30 missions to places like

Rwanda, remote areas of India and China, the Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam. He says he finds the long hours spent in surgery and the dawn-to-midnight working schedule a rewarding complement to his more commercial work, but agrees that travelling will always be his passion and an enduring source of inspiration.

“All my life I've been in transition,” he muses. “I guess travel photography is by its very nature a transition to something else. Every year my scope of work changes – this year I've been doing everything from commercial and event photography to humanitarian work. I still shoot several missions with Operation Smile a year, but a large part of my time is still devoted to travel-related photography.”

Even his more aspirational travel briefs have impressed upon him the significance of his work and his social responsibility as a photographer. Whether it's the luridly coloured costumes of ethnic minority mountain tribes or fishing families on floating villages out to sea, their appeal, he

Opposite page: *U Bein bridge* – young novice monks head homewards at sunset across the ancient wooden U Bein Bridge, near Mandalay, Myanmar.

Above: *Indian woman* – a young woman selling flowers at the Calcutta Flower Market decides to overcome her shyness and instead pose for the passing photographer.

says, often lies in the fact they are untouched by the Western world. But the injection of the tourist dollar is frequently essential to alleviating poverty in these isolated communities and enabling them to sustain their way of life. And this is the irony of travel photography: the mandate to capture stunning images of untouched corners of the world spurs the photographer's continued professional challenge to find the next must-visit destination.

“As a travel journalist, you put places on the map. Guide books and magazines sell, and tourists begin to come. This means modern life is constantly encroaching and I have to keep going further and further to find off-the-radar places and photograph their most traditional aspects. But by doing this it speeds up the process. It's a paradox.”

But Stuckings welcomes all forms of development and says he feels compelled to inject his images with truth, rather than infuse the reality with the romance and nostalgia often expected by his employers and their readership. He wants to capture what is happening to countries and

cultures in the face of globalisation and modernisation; to examine and present images that challenge people's perceptions of these places and those that live there, rather than to seek out their more archaic traditions.

The ancient town of Kashgar has always been a big tourist draw for China, but in the wake of the ethnic riots in July 2009, Stuckings found the juxtaposition of cultural symbols much more intriguing than their charming architectural settings – images such as a statue of Mao looming over a Muslim cyclist against a backdrop of banners urging comrades to “destroy the separatists”.

“It's a clash of opposing forces. Typical travel photos are all about temples, people in costume, the Great Wall... But this image is what it's all about – the march of modernity and the conflict between development and nostalgia. These countries are generally progressive and forward thinking. By presenting sentimental images of these places, we're missing the reality of what's happening now to their culture, which is often much more interesting.”



Above right: *Mao statue* – a Uyghur man on a bicycle passes by a huge statue of China's Communist founder, Mao Zedong, during troubled times in Kashgar, Xinjiang province.

Below: *Fishermen* – two fishermen demonstrate the traditional twin arts of rowing with one leg while fishing with a large handheld net on Inle Lake, Myanmar.

