

“Film and cameras are visually
impaired. They cannot begin to imitate
the marvel that is the eye.”

—Nevada Wier



the Nomadic

By Paul Slaughter



ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © NEVADA WIER

Wanderings

of Nevada Wier



Like the great explorer Marco Polo, photographer Nevada Wier spends a great deal of her life traveling to remote regions of the world—photographing in Central Asia, Nepal, Mongolia, Ladakh and obscure areas of China. She also conducts photographic trips and workshops in Mexico, South America and New Zealand. Nevada is truly an expert in her field; with a keen eye for composition and color, she creates unique photographic images of people and landscapes that are invariably captivating and wholly significant.

Nevada was born in Dumas, TX, and remembers it as the flattest, most desolate place in the world. Her family moved to Washington, D.C. when she was 4 years old. In her senior year of high school, a close friend showed her a brochure for Prescott College in Arizona. The brochure featured photographs of students rock climbing and studying geology while rafting down the Colorado River. She was intrigued and immediately went for an interview: She was accepted.

“My life was never the same after that. My mother still laments, ‘I should never

have let you go to that college!’ None of my school friends would have predicted that I would become an itinerant photographer. Back then, I was more interested in politics, art, music and literature,” she says. Nevada graduated with what she calls “a very liberal arts degree.”

When it comes to photography, Nevada is completely self-taught. Since she could not afford workshops and there weren’t many good ones offered when her interest was peaking, she instead read every book she could find. Nevada quickly became enamored with the photographs of Imogen Cunningham, Paul Strand, Eliot Porter, Weegee and some of the very early photographers.

“I loved the alchemy of the darkroom. In college, I spent almost every penny on my photography. I had no aspirations for it to be a career at that point, though art was always a passion,” she says. “Growing up in Washington, D.C., I used to do my homework at The Phillips Collection, staring at the paintings. I liked Kandinsky, the Russian Expressionist painter, and the way he had people and animals floating in the air.

By the time I graduated, I was consumed by photography.”

After college, Nevada moved to Santa Fe, NM, with her newly purchased large format Deardorff camera, and got a job as a course director and instructor for the Southwest Outward Bound School, a non-profit organization offering experiential learning and growth through adventure-based wilderness programs.

She set up a darkroom in the school’s basement, developing film and printing black-and-white photographs. While guiding programs through mountains, deserts and rivers, she quickly discovered how difficult and inconvenient it was to carry around the Deardorff. Her brother eventually sent her a 35mm camera, which she carried everywhere.

“Photographing with black-and-white film requires one to immediately perceive the world differently,” says Nevada. “I needed to extract color from my mind in order to distinguish contrast, pattern and action and then decide which was the most important to emphasize. Unfortunately, I often photographed for the sheer

sake of recording a moment, a tendency of most amateurs. I did lean more toward journalism than fine art, but the best black-and-white photojournalists see more than just a compelling moment—they make the moment compelling in the image. It took me a long time to understand how to work with color. I love black-and-white, but I think color photography is harder. And, I am all about a challenge. My initial black-and-white images were much better than my initial color ones.”

Nevada was first published in Cathay Pacific’s in-flight magazine in an article about a China expedition she went on in 1987. The airline publication was fitting, given her affinity for traveling to remote parts of the world. From there, Nevada wrote article proposals to *Natural History*, *Outside* and *Smithsonian* magazines, and began writing articles on spec.

In 1992, Abbeville Press published her exquisite photographic book, *The Land of Nine Dragons: Vietnam Today*, which won a Lowell Thomas Award. The next year she wrote *Adventure and Travel Photography*, published by Amphoto. Nevada has been

featured in numerous television shows, including a 1999 *National Geographic Explorer* episode on her travels down the Blue Nile in Ethiopia on assignment for *National Geographic* magazine.

These days, Nevada is focusing less on magazines and more on her own work. “The day rate hasn’t gone up in 20 years and digital photographic work is more expensive. I prefer to work on my own projects,” she says.

Camera Equipment, Digital Workflow and Printing

Over the years Nevada has used numerous cameras, from Pentax to Olympus to Nikon. Today she uses a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II. I asked Nevada if she preferred digital photography to film. “Actually, I don’t like either,” she says. “I like photographing more than I like looking at my images. But I do think digital photography has fewer limitations than film. I am not loyal to either. Digital means I am working and sitting in front of a computer a lot of the time. Working with computers comes easily to me though. I am a wannabe

geek and have no problem with the technology of computers and software. In Photoshop, I don’t crop or change any content. I love the prints I am getting from digital images. When I print from transparencies, drum scans are the best. I shoot mainly in RAW and edit using Lightroom.”

Nevada prints in her studio on an Epson Stylus Pro 7800 inkjet printer and a Hewlett Packard HP Z3100 using Hahnemühle Photo Rag Bright White matte paper.

“Film and cameras are visually impaired,” Nevada says. “They cannot begin to imitate the marvel that is the eye. Most humans can perceive approximately 16 stops [photographically speaking] of contrast from light to dark. If I’m outside, I can see detail in sunlit areas and also in the shadows. Negative print film can only render a range of about six stops of contrast. Positive slide film is even more handicapped with four stops. As a result, if you expose in full daylight for the highlights, the shadows will go black; if you expose for the shadows, the highlights will be without detail. If you try to split the difference, then the whole thing will be washed out.





“Our eyes wander over a scene, casually observing it and mostly ignoring its particulars. Occasionally, we linger on patches of interest,” she continues, “but we rarely spend much time studying the subtle nuances of light and dark. Photographers are mavens of light, color, moment and pattern. The eye wanders with purpose and awareness—looking for something significant. That is when I click the shutter.”

I asked Nevada how she sees photography changing with the rapid development of digital cameras and inkjet printers. “Getting better all the time. Isn’t that a song? As for me, it is all about seeing, traveling and relating,” she says. “The tools have always been about stuff. And now there is more stuff, and the stuff changes all the time. The manufacturers are thrilled. But the technology is getting better, quicker than it ever did with celluloid. And people are inspired to begin photographing again. I’m all for the changes.”

When I asked, “What advice would you give a young person who is interested in becoming a photographer?” Nevada replied succinctly, “Go to law school, marry

a business person or have a trust fund. You get the drift.”

To pay her bills, Nevada has started doing lifestyle stock shoots. For example, if she’s in Thailand leading a photographic workshop, she’ll book a few days to do lifestyle shoots. She hires assistants, lights and models, and then photographs them in Bangkok in everyday modern lifestyle situations. Lifestyle work also helps support her travel photography. Nevada’s work is licensed through Getty Images and Corbis Photo Stock Agencies.

She is currently working on projects in Myanmar; Ladakh; the Hmong minority in Guizhou Province, China; and the Kirghiz Nomads in the Pamir Mountains of northwest China. In between her travels she is writing a book, *A Nomadic Vision*, which she may self-publish. In addition, Nevada printed a selection of her photographs for a retrospective of her work, displayed at Verve Fine Arts (www.vervefinearts.com) in Santa Fe.

Besides having her photographs published in numerous magazines, Nevada is a fellow of the Explorer’s Club and a

member of the Society of Women Geographers, and was featured in a Northwest Airlines’ international television and print campaign. She leads photographic workshops internationally as well as at the Santa Fe Workshops and the Sundance Photographic Workshops.

“I believe we are all born with the undeniable desire to look for significance—no matter where we live or what we do in our lives,” she says. “Each of us has our own private peak to climb and gem to find. As Shakespeare wrote, ‘Nothing is so commonplace as the wish to be remarkable.’ Travel is the ultimate speedway for me out of my normal frame of reference. I begin to experience the world anew.”

To learn more about Nevada and to view more of her photography, visit www.nevadawier.com.



Paul Slaughter is a world-traveled photographer and writer, and ASMP member residing in Santa Fe, NM. He specializes in location, stock and fine art photography. An avid jazz lover, he has an extensive photographic collection of numerous jazz legends. You can view portfolios of Paul’s work at www.slaughterphoto.com.