



PIPER MACKAY

AFRICAN DREAM

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“INTERVIEW”

How and when did you start photography?

My photography started quite by accident when I took my first safari to Tanzania in 2004. This was only a vacation safari and not one with photographers specifically for photography. Prior to this safari, I had never owned or used a professional camera. When I received a list of what to bring it listed a good camera with a min of a 300mm lens. I walked to my neighborhood camera store and purchased the Canon 10D and a 75-300mm lens and I hired the sales person to show me how to use it. From the moment I stepped foot on the rich red African soil I feel in love with Africa. Sitting in the heart of the Serengeti I instantly made the decision to change my path, exiting a successful career in the fashion career, and to use photography to inspire others to explore, respect, and preserve the beauty of our fragile planet.

What kind of images were you looking at when you started?

When I first started, I honestly new knew nothing about photography, the industry, or who the photographers were. The Internet was still fairly new. Smart phones were not out yet nor were social media platforms. In those early days the magazines I subscribed to were; Outdoor Photographer, Natures best, Nature Photographer, and Africa Geographic.

Who are your main influences, and why?

Brent Stirton, a documentary staff photographer for Getty images, was one my earliest influences inspiring me to learn about light and flash for my tribal work. Nick Brant's African wildlife work is just memorizing along with his deep passion for conservation, followed by Federico Veronesi. Their way of capturing the raw emotion of the African wildlife is powerful and inspiring.

What led you to travel and Wildlife photography?

I think of myself more as an African tribal and wildlife photographer because that is where my work has been centered for the past 16 years. It was on that first magical safari where I was introduced to the incredible wildlife, tribes, community projects, conservation, and

my love for photography. Although, I had done a lot of world travel in my fashion career, experiencing Africa was life changing. I knew almost instantly that I wanted to become a wildlife photographer and be involved in conservation. During that first safari, back in 2004, I committed to live at least one year of my live in Africa. It took several failed attempts, but finally back in 2014 I was able to live in Kenya for two years. I still have my Land Rover there and I spend about 6 months a year on the African continent.

What made you love Africa?

Everything! From the moment I stepped off the plane the sights, smells, and sounds of the safari vehicles were intoxicating; the people were warm, friendly, and beautiful. I had actually fallen in love with Africa back in my childhood. I grew up in Southern California and we had a place called, "Lion Country Safari." It was a real African wildlife park, with all the predators and animals roaming wild, and you drove your own car through the park like a real African safari. As a child I watched every episode of Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom and by the time I was an adult I think I had watched, read, and owned almost every book and movie on Africa. Even with having visuals of what to expect when I went on my first safari it was so completely beyond my expectations I returned 3 more times that first year and have been going multiple times each year ever since.

Can you tell us about your intent/vision when you go out shooting?

The intent in my photography is capturing what I am experiencing to connect the viewer emotionally with the photograph and subject. We live in such a beautiful world filled with exotic wildlife and cultures that are greatly under threat of climate change, poaching, bush meat trades, and modernization. It is my hope that my images will inspire others to explore, respect, and preserve the beauty of our fragile planet. I believe when an individual personally experiences something amazing and they become emotionally connected they will be inspired to take action to respect and preserve it.





How do you build your connection with the people you photograph, and was it difficult to be accepted in the tribes you visited?

My first visit, on that first safari, to a Maasai village was heartfelt and mind-blowing beyond words. Yes, I found them striking, which goes back to my love for design of textiles and garments, my career for more than 20 years, but it was their sense of community and spirit that went to my soul. Quite simply, beyond the photograph, was the honest desire and curiosity to learn more about these tribes and their ancient traditions. I did not just rush into a village, put up my camera, take a picture, and leave. I spent quality time drinking and eating with them, learning about their culture, and building relationships with them, usually before I ever brought out a camera.

My first connections with the tribes were through my wildlife guides. However, as I ventured out of East Africa or up into the more remote regions, it could literally take years of research to learn about a tribe in a remote location; logistics and finding an experienced guide/fixer. Remember in these early years we had to rely on books such as Lonely Planet and our personal network to try to find a fixer; no one in these remote locations

and in some cases the entire country, even had cell phones yet. Most of the roads were rough dirt tracks and it took a lot of research to even find a guide that knew the how to reach these tribes.

I would hire a car, driver, and guide. We would drive for two or three days, over some of the worst dirt tracks in Africa, bushwhacking our way to reach a remote tribal village. Once we reached a tribal area we would have to find a local person who knew the country's national language and the tribal language because at that time no one in the village knew English. I would speak English to my guide, he would interpret in the national language, and another local would translate from the national language to the tribal language. When we arrived at the village we requested to meet with the chief and ask if we can camp in the village for a several days. This gave me plenty of quality time to get to know the people in the village and learn about their culture before I even brought out my cameras; I did so after I had permission to photograph. I built trust with the village by spending meaningful time with them. Authentically I love these tribes and they feel that. I have also run many projects over the years to help the communities in a time of drought, to fix broken wells, donate school supplies, etc. These projects can be viewed on my website under the giving back tab - <https://www.pipermackayphotography.com/generosity-project-africa>. Whenever I bring guests with me to a village we also bring food and school supplies. Helping the communities that enrich our lives is part of my safari brand.



How do you work while in on location?

Over the past decade it has become very easy to work in wildlife reserves and remote locations. Most all the camps in wildlife locations have generators, electricity, and even WIFI. When I am in remote location my Landover is fitted with a refrigerator/freezer and I have a small power bunk size solar panel to charge my batteries, laptop, and phone. I can hot spot of my phone for internet. However, even the dirt roads have become much better and a town with supplies, fuel, and electricity (solar/Generator) is usually within a few hours reach. I always carry a power strip and when I have electricity I fully charge everything. When bringing clients with me, I have a team

Do you consider yourself a "Documentary photographer"?

Although, I document the lives of the tribes and wildlife, I do not consider myself a documentary photographer. I also love creating environmental portraiture of the tribes to capture their exotic beauty. More than just documenting their lives I want to connect people with their beauty and spirit. I would be considered more of a fine art photographer.

What were your worst and best photography experiences in Africa, and what did you learn from it?

Really, this is too tough of a question. After spending thousands and thousands of hours in the field across the African continent, over the past seventeen years, there have been many "worst and best" experiences. Outside of the usual equipment failures, broken gear, corrupt cards, when not driving my own Land Rover a guide doesn't get me in the right position, or a driver miscalculates distance for the right light, endless breakdowns, road closures, unexpected storms, etc, Africa is full of challenges culturally, logistically, and politically that also brings on many more "worst photographic experiences." However, these "worst experiences" usually end up being the greatest adventures that are followed by a big photographic success and become the stories that will be shared until my last breathe. Since I photograph wildlife and tribes (life as it happens) there is always something new and exciting each time I go out into the field. These exciting photographic experiences are what make it so addictive that I continue to return to the same locations for years and decades.

What kind of equipment do you use?

I shoot with a Nikon system and keep it simple. I have two D850 bodies; 14-24 2.8, 24-70 2.8, 70-200 2.8, 400 2.8 lenses and one flash SB-5000. I also have a Z7 body that is converted to infrared. I recently switched to Nikon after using another brand form 15 years. You may read all about it on my blog -

<https://www.pipermackayphotography.com/2018/11/my-recent-switch-to-nikon/>

On your contact page, we can see an image of you very close to elephants. How do you feel you can get as close?

This photograph was taken in west Tsavo many years ago. This is where the organization that rescues orphans brings them to be reintroduced to the wild. The keepers know all the young elephants behavior very well and allowed me special permission to get close to a few who were not aggressive. However, I do photograph in the field on foot, but only with an experienced qualified guide or research team and special permission to be on foot.

A wildlife photographer such as David Yarrow is using remote cameras to get very close to the action. Are you using similar techniques and equipment?

I do not use drones, camera traps, or similar equipment. I am not opposed to using this equipment as they can produce dramatic images that cannot be difficult to capture with camera in hand. However, I am an emotional shooter. Creating through the lens in my hands is what makes my heart race. I also think it takes a different level of skill to quickly capture unpredictable moments with the camera in hand; adding another level of talent.

Do you have any post-processing workflow, and what kind of software do you use?

I use Photoshop and bridge, occasionally using Nik filters as a plug into Photoshop. Again, I keep it simple. I do my best to get it right in camera using post-processing to correct the highlights and blacks, clone out dust spots, give contrast, add some sharpness, and remove noise. I prefer to spend my time in the field and not behind a computer.

Social media is probably the most important tool to promote your work. Which one is the best for you, and do you have a specific strategy to use it? I use both Face book and Instagram, which are very different platforms, but equal in their importance. Instagram is a way to showcase your best work, which is professionally important, but I find Facebook is more personally engaging. I don't have a specific daily strategy in the way I use them other than just being authentic. However, I occasionally choose to post images that will engage the audience with an upcoming announcement.

Do you have any upcoming project you want to mention?

After spending about 14 years photographing across the continent, many times in the same location over and over, I never lost my passion for Africa, but I was feeling stagnant in my creativity. It was about this time that I discovered infrared and converted my first digital camera. I loved the affect of photographing Africa in infrared; it gives the images a timeless feel of the authentic Africa prior to the Internet, digital, smart phones, modernization, and the changes that mass tourism has brought. I am excitedly now building an entire body of work of Africa in infrared.

Finally, do you have one great tip/advice for aspiring travel photographers?

Always follow and stay true to your passion, what emotionally speaks to you, and find your own voice. Do not race around the world trying to copy someone else's vision. It is your emotional connection to a place and subject that will show through in your work and it is your personal style that will get your work noticed!

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