

FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

with the Benvies

No. 3 • September 2018

MENU

Picture of the month

Peter Babbs, 1998

News from Niall and Charlotte

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Intention

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Mixing daylight with flash

Food

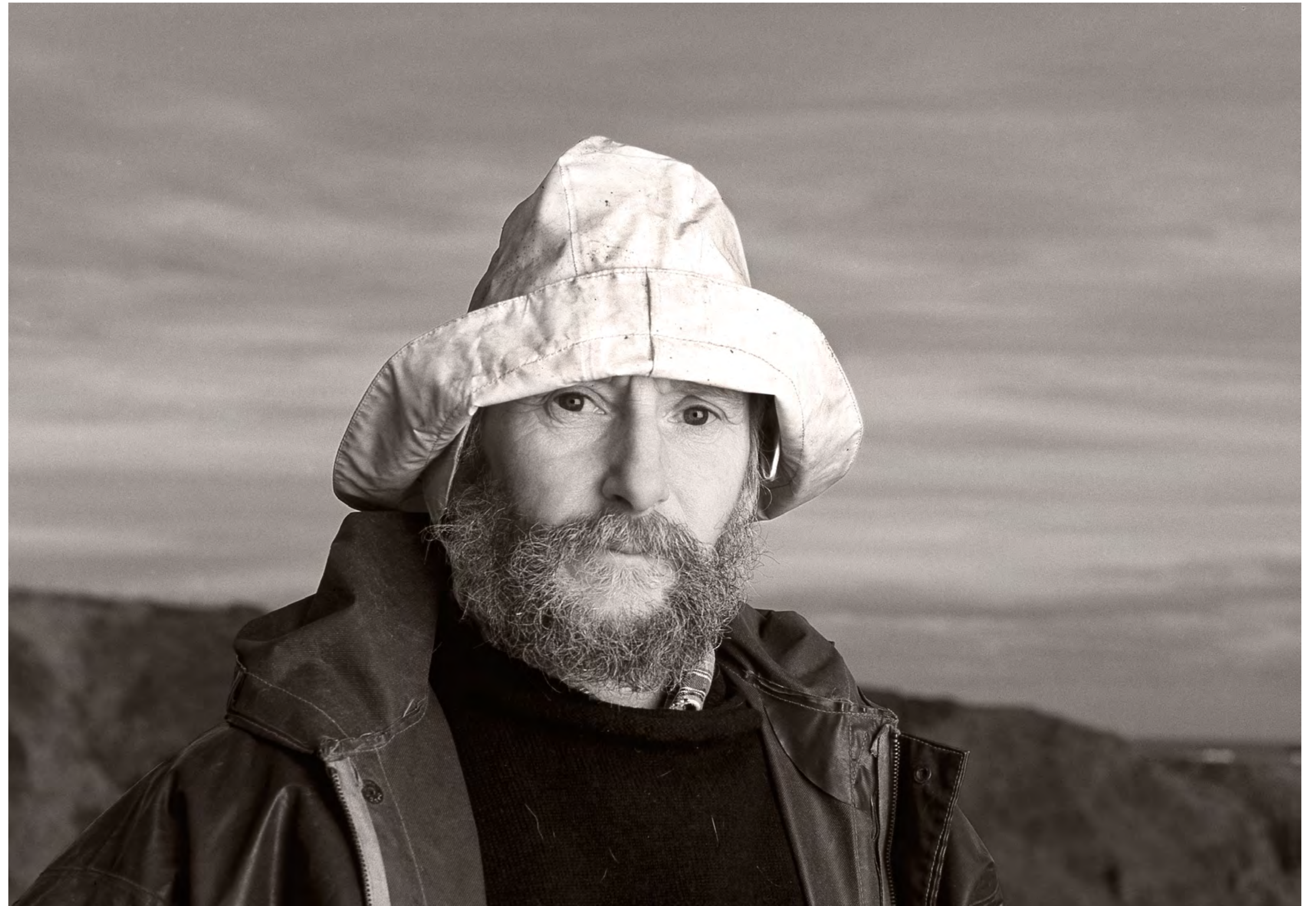
Leek and tarragon crumble

Featured Retreat

Harris, February 2019

Inspiration

Phil Borges



"I like photographing people. Animals are generally a bit inscrutable - their expressions don't change much, if at all. But people have lots of facial muscles which create expressions we can read effortlessly. You can never really take enough photographs in a sitting; it's a slightly different person in every picture. When I took this shot 20 years ago with a Hasselblad X-Pan, making hundreds of photographs to get the definitive picture wasn't an option. I decided to get it in three. Given that I also had to get the blend of daylight with flash just right too, there was a lot of calculation and light reading before we made the first exposure. Fortunately, Peter was a natural in front of the camera and relished the role of an old sea dog."- Niall

News from Niall and Charlotte

The expression, "award-winning" is bandied around so freely in photographic circles these days that it has rather lost its currency. Rarely is there any reference to the calibre of the competitors, the experience of the judges or the size of the entry. I touch on some of these themes in this month's essay.

It's a different story in the UK food industry where one award is respected above all others because of the systematic and consistent rigour that is applied by the large, expert judging panel: The Great Taste Awards, run by the Guild of Fine Food. Charlotte has just won her third award, this time for her salted caramel with sea salt and Icelandic thyme truffle. She's the *real* award winner in the family!

Fewer than 30% of the 12 000 products entered this year received an award. The producers ranged from major supermarkets to small-scale artisans like Charlotte. The care that she puts into the creation of her chocolates reflects that provided for guests on our Retreats, contributing to what we believe is our unique combination of hospitality and knowledge.



Those of you who have travelled with us in Iceland before will, we're afraid, not be able to do so again as we've completed the last of our 25 tours there. So, new challenges await - not least of all getting the word out about Food and Photography Retreats. It has been six am starts for the last month as we tell everyone we can think of about what we do now but it's a slow process.

In the last month we have launched two new Retreats, one of which is for photographers and their food-loving partner or spouse, so you can **both** go on holiday

together. This will be based at the Ballintean Highland Lodge in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park and runs from 7 - 11th December 2018. As usual, there is a lovely [PDF brochure](#) detailing everything you need to know about the Retreat and what's on offer.

Harris is a popular destination for photographers but pretty much every tour there is hotel-based. Our Retreat takes service to the next level in the large self-catering house we've rented where we provide a calibre of tuition that no-one else is offering. There are benefits of having been in this business for 25 years!

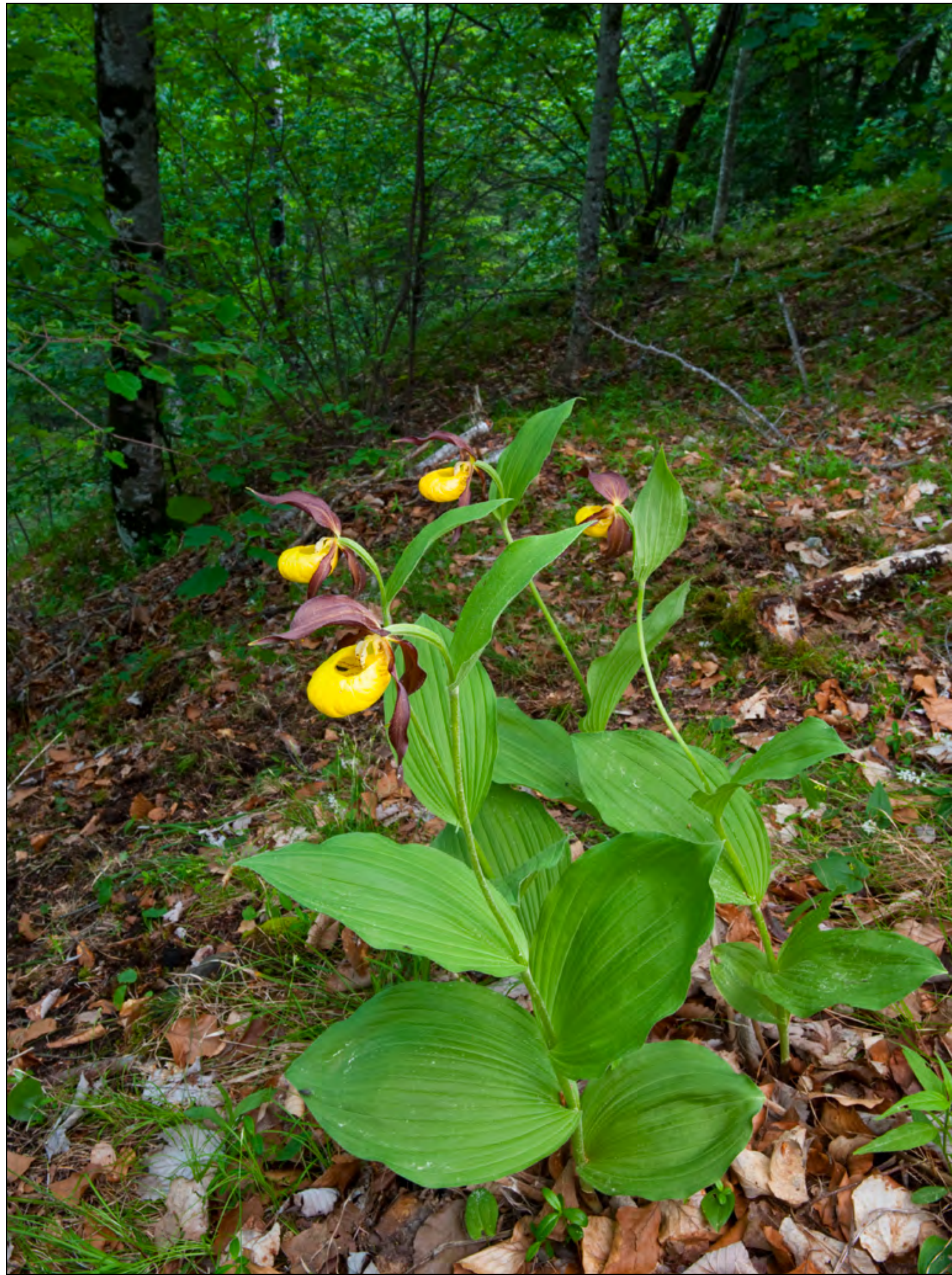
The Harris Retreat runs from 8 - 15th February 2019 and you can read the 16 page PDF [here](#). Hope to see you!

Our best wishes

Niall and Charlotte, Directors



Idea - Intention



This narrative image may not be especially attractive but it tells the viewer not only what the different parts of the plant look like, but what size it is, where it lives and other plants in its community.

A few years ago, a photo tour company Charlotte and I did work for ran a training week for its guides, old and new, in Iceland. This was not only good fun but gave the opportunity for an exchange of experience, knowledge and ideas. I was particularly interested to learn about learning since it's knowledge that informs how successful you can be as a teacher. I'd assumed that my detailed, analytical explanations of a range of ideas and techniques in photography, using simple language and analogies, was the best way because, as a learner, that method works best for me. I'm what the educational psychologists class as a Theorist but it turns out that there are also Pragmatists (let's work our way systematically through this); Reflectors (I'll just watch and think about it first); and Activists (let's give it a go and see what happens), each benefitting from a different approach to teaching. In truth, we're all to a greater or lesser extent a bit of a mixture of these things, depending on what we're learning. That aside, my own experience suggests that the time we are most receptive as learners is when we have a question we need answered so we can move on. When you're new to photography, I think it's a mistake to go and take a workshop straight away. Without questions you need answers to, you'll not

learn as "deeply"; knowledge becomes embedded by application. You just need to go and do it and find out what you don't know.

I had a similar experience when I started to learn Adobe Indesign® a few years go; my mentor encouraged me to use it and to come back to him only with specific questions when I got stuck. By doing it this way I remembered every one of those lessons.

I think though that each subject has something fundamental about it that we need to grasp before we can start to understand it. With Indesign, the breakthrough came when I "got" the concept of Objects. Now that I am learning about field audio recording, with all its parallels to photography, I am getting to grips with the unparalleled idea of an auditory corridor extending behind the subject of the recording. So, what is photography's core idea? I propose this: that pictures that are "of something" or they are "about something". Pictures that have an expressive intention as opposed to a narrative one. Some pictures are primarily about the appearance of things, others tell a story. It's not that one is right and the other wrong, one better or worse; simply that these

are fundamentally different types of photographs that demand different approaches by the photographer and can't be judged by the same parameters.

A concrete example: I'm standing at the edge of a large colony of lady's slipper orchids in a damp spruce forest in central Estonia. My first instinct is to reach for my longest lens, focus in closely on a backlit slipper and, with aperture wide open, render a largely blurry but rather beautiful impression of "lady's slipper". It's a personal statement about what I feel about the subject and how I view it. My principal intention is "expressive". But if I'd been commissioned to photograph a story about the orchid, I would want to show the whole plant so readers could see the shape of the leaves and the proportions of the flowers. I'd shoot it with a wide angle lens so that they could see the extent of the colony and the sort of place it grows. I'd certainly want even lighting so that no clues were hidden by shadows and I might even bring a trowel along to illustrate why the plant has become rare in much of its range. Here, my main intention is a "narrative" one, to tell the viewer things about the plant that they can't glean from the more personal, expressive approach. Neither is better than the other any more than a knife is better than a

fork; they each have their distinctive functions. You may argue that you've seen plenty of "narrative" images that are also beautiful, as have I. But that is as a result of serendipity rather than deliberate intent on the part of the photographer since, as we've seen in the example of the orchid, the active choices made to support a particular intention in respect of lens choice, lighting and perspective, profoundly alter the appearance of the final image.

This brings me then to the problem with photo competitions. I've helped to judge a number of national and international ones over the years and I can't recall, except where there was a dedicated "story" category, being expected to differentiate narrative from expressive images and to judge them separately. But of course you must! If it's ever niggled you that some of the wildlife images in National Geographic look a little ropery alongside those in glossy wildlife magazines, it's because their primary intention is to tell a story, not just to look pretty (although they are sometimes both - see Steve Winter's puma beneath the Hollywood sign).

In truth, narrative images may have dirt under their fingernails and smell a little funny but it's because they

have been doing work and I fear that too often they are overlooked in favour of the visible virtues of the expressive image.



Lady's slipper orchid, Queyras National Park, France. This is an expressive photograph: the intention is simply to represent the plant's beauty. If it were a person, we'd call this "objectification".

Skill - Mixing daylight with flash

One of the earliest skills I learned, which helped to distinguish my work, was how to blend daylight with flash. This was in the days of transparency film with a narrow dynamic range and more often than not, if I wanted to photograph a subject against the sky then I would need to light it with flash to even up the contrast. At the time, "smart strobes" had just been developed which made the job of balancing daylight and flash, automatically, quite easy. But it involved small, camera-mounted flash units and the quality of lighting was direct, unmodified and, truthfully, quite crude. But it was better than no flash.

I took a big step forward in 1998 with the purchase of an old Norman 400B battery pack with flash head and a one metre square Lastolite softbox to put it in. The softbox transformed the look of my pictures and led me down the route of routinely using flash out-of-doors for everything from plants to people. Today, I use an [Elinchrom ELB 400](#) with HS heads that allows me to synchronise daylight with flash up to 1/8000 second, often in conjunction with a [Rotalux 135 cm softbox](#).



Why this is worth learning and how to do it.

Fill-flash is falling by the wayside as cameras' dynamic ranges improve. But what this techniques allows you to do is to control the light on your subject very carefully and introduce a theatrical look in the process. You can mimic the look of more expensive lighting set ups by firing an off-camera flashgun through a diffuser, just out of shot, as I have done in this photo of henbane in France. The flash must be held far enough back to light most of the diffuser: the larger the light source, the softer the light on the subject.

Start off by putting the camera in manual exposure mode, selecting a shutter speed slower than the flash sync. speed, then adjusting the aperture so that the background is a little dark. Without adjusting any of your settings, plug in the flash, and adjust its power output until the exposure is perfect for the subject. You can lighten or darken the background now using the shutter speed without affecting the exposure on the subject. We teach this technique, and how to use light modifiers, on some of our Retreats.

Food - Leek and tarragon crumble



This vegetarian crumble has the potential to convert carnivores - we know, because we are teetering on the edge!

Photography note

Every food photographer needs to own an old table. It's a given. I bought mine at a brocante in Burgundy, much to the Dutch owner's disbelief. Seriously, who'd want to eat off that? Nevertheless the decrepit surface is ideal for setting off dishes, imbuing the scene with an old rural mood, and absorbing shadows. It's now in two parts so I can use it in both France and Scotland.

I increasingly prefer daylight, albeit with lots of modification, to flash for indoor food work. It's much quicker to work with and I can position flags (shades) and reflectors with much greater precision. The colour balance wobbles all over the place as the sun comes and goes but it helps if you have a reference neutral tone to sample from, such as the tea towel in this shot.

Here I used a Lite Panel over the window and generous amounts of top flagging to maintain shadows.



Ingredients (serves 4)

For the leek sauce:

- 4 leeks (cut into 2 cm rounds)
- A good slice of butter
- 1 tbsp plain flour
- 200 ml hot vegetable stock
- 200 ml semi-skimmed milk
- 1 tbsp wholegrain mustard
- salt and pepper to season

For the crumble mix:

- 150 g butter (cut into small pieces)
- 300 g plain flour
- 2 tbsp roughly chopped tarragon (fresh or dried)
- 1 tsp English mustard powder
- 80g Cheddar cheese
- 40g pine nuts

How-to

Pre-heat the oven to 180° c/160° c fan/Gas mark 4

1. Put the chopped leeks into a large pan with the butter, cover and gently sweat the leeks over a medium to low heat, until they are soft and cooked through (stir occasionally so they don't burn).

2. Add the tablespoon of flour, stir well and then gradually add the milk, stock and mustard, stirring well so all are fully absorbed, the sauce part is smooth and some of the leeks are still in their nice rounds. Season to taste and simmer for about 5 minutes.

3. Empty the leek mixture into an oven-proof dish and set aside to cool a little.

4. To make the crumble, rub the butter into the flour until it resembles breadcrumbs and then add the chopped tarragon, mustard powder, grated cheese and pine nuts. Stir it well. Use your hands to clump the mixture a little (use a few drops of water if necessary) and then sprinkle the crumble mixture onto the leeks and press it down gently.

5. Bake in the pre-heated oven for about 25 minutes until the crumble is a nice golden brown and the leeks are bubbling up from the blow through parts of the crumble.

This is a delicious rustic dish and best accompanied with some small "oven roasties", and a nice crunchy green salad with a few small vine ripened cherry tomatoes for colour.

To make the oven roasties take a small bag of baby potatoes, (skins on and washed then dried thoroughly) and put into a metal oven-proof tin. Drizzle with a good glug of olive oil and season with a generous pinch of sea salt and freshly ground pepper. Shake the tin well so that all the potatoes are evenly coated. Put these into the oven about 10 minutes before the crumble goes in and leave to roast.

Serve up your dish and enjoy with a lovely glass of chilled white wine, if it takes your fancy. You've earned it.

- Charlotte

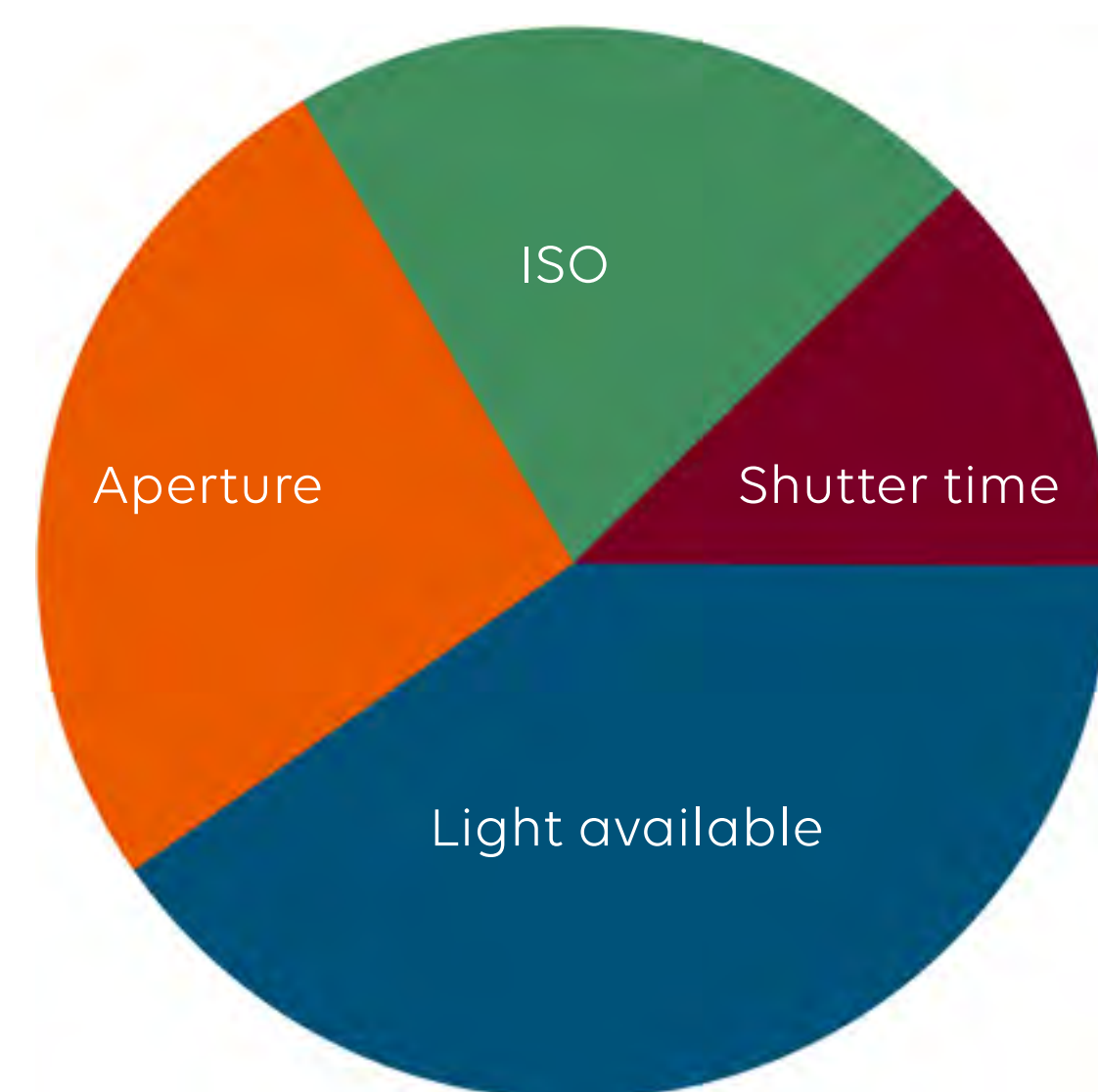
Featured Retreat

White sand and turquoise sea.

A WINTER RETREAT TO SCOTLAND'S OUTER HEBRIDES
BASED ON THE ISLE OF HARRIS, 8 - 15TH FEBRUARY 2019

The otherworldly gneiss landscapes and enchanting white beaches of Harris are a draw for photographers from around the world. But going there in winter adds another dimension of excitement - the promise of extended dawns and dusks, menacing skies and wild seas - with the reassurance of returning to a cosy house with plenty of lovely food and interesting conversation in the evening.

This Retreat is especially suitable for anyone who still struggles a little with knowing the best combination of settings to use and how to compose their images. For those who want this help, we have a comprehensive programme worked out to help you master these crucial aspects of photography for once and for all. We will also give in-depth guidance on post-production. There will be a maximum of five guests on this Retreat, based at the [Grimisdale House](#) near Leverburgh, about



At last: a simple way to understand exposure. The circle represents a well exposed photo. After Sæbø.

60 miles from the airport at Stornoway and 20 miles from the ferry terminal at Tarbert. The house sits alone on a peninsula overlooking a loch with views to the hills of South Harris. We are well positioned, not only for easy access to the white beaches of the west, but for nipping over to North Uist as well as exploring the wild rocky landscapes and lochs of south-east Harris. We have sole occupancy of the house during our stay and make it our own. All the bedrooms are ensuite and there are public areas for holding demonstrations and discussions. In this setting, we enjoy the sort of freedom to set our own timetable that is impossible in hotels.

The three-billion-year-old Lewisian gneiss that comprises South Harris is some of the most ancient rock in the world, resisting erosion as if its pacing itself for eternity. When it was formed, modern-day Harris and Lewis were part of the North American landmass, Laurentia, and the same rocks comprise the Canadian Shield and parts of Greenland today. It was only when Laurentia began to break up 65 million years ago that this area became isolated, eventually to join up with today's Scotland. This truly is a land apart - and it feels like it. You can read the full brochure [here](#).

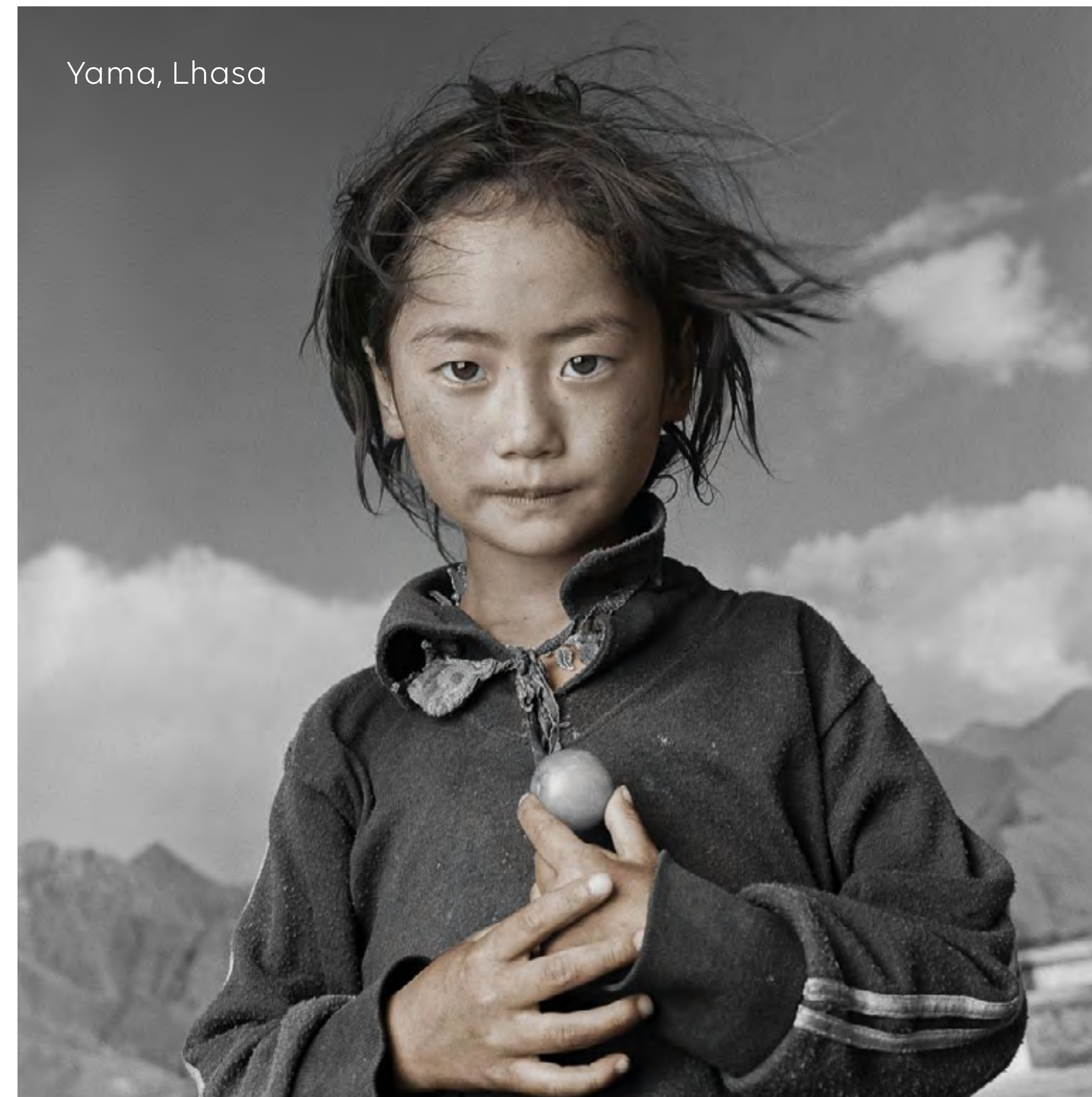


Inspiration - Phil Borges

I confess that I was first drawn to Phil Borges's photographs 20 years ago simply by their distinctive beauty. They were clearly made out-of-doors but there was a studio quality to the light on the sitters that I found beguiling. The subtle toning of their skin further separated the people from their surroundings without diminishing their importance in lending context, helping to tell their story.

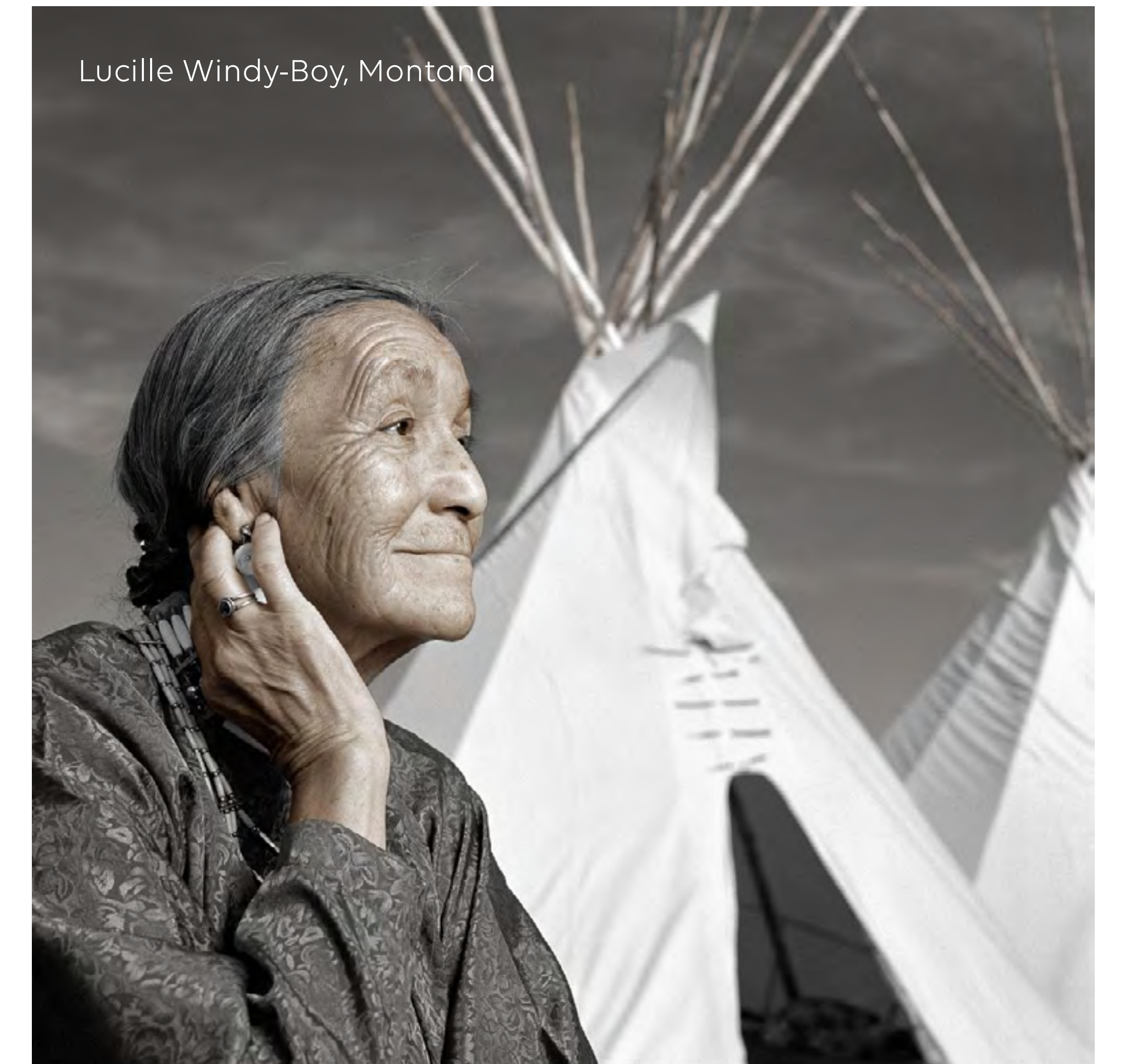
His method, it transpired, was no more complicated than placing the subject with the sun behind them, then lighting their shaded side with a Lumedyne flash head in a 1 metre softbox. But the "look" is there only to draw you in because Borges, above all, is a story teller, and a profoundly sympathetic one at that.

Leafing through his portfolio, it soon becomes clear that this work has nothing in common with "tribe photography", that condescending genre in which indigenous people are objectified for photographers who have shot all the charismatic mammals and birds and need something new for their portfolio. For one thing, every sitter's name is published with their image.



They aren't anonymous. Moreover, the image is there to support their story; it's not an end in itself, not just a piece of art. The pictures are campaign pieces.

Those stories range from: Tibetans who, in the face of Chinese occupation, have fled their homeland and become refugees in Dharamsala, northern India (*Tibetan Portrait*, Rizzoli, NY, 1999); to "ordinary" women in the developing world who, through their courage,



determination, wisdom and humanity have overcome many embedded obstacles to improve life in their communities (*Women Empowered*, Rizzoli NY, 2007); to the difficulties many people around the world have in maintaining traditions and traditional values when confronted by industrial civilisation (*Enduring Spirit*, 1998). You can see Phil talk about his work on endangered cultures in one of his [TED](#) talks.

Images © Phil Borges 2018

Bonus footage - the bottle oaks



Landscape photographers are a bit preoccupied with the light - we all know that. But it is usually a rather predictable preoccupation with the low-angle light of dawn or dusk. And while I too am fond of that light, emotionally it's a bit two-dimensional. It's like all your photos have a big grin on their face.

Folks are drawn to golden-hour light, I think, because they can see it is beautiful. But the trick is to be able to spot the potential when the beauty isn't obvious. And one of the least obvious situations is in a dark wood on a gloomy day in the middle of summer - just the sort of day when I photographed these sessile oaks in the Crinan Oak Wood in the west of Scotland.

Looking at the scene, the trees were very dark indeed: the relatively bright sky behind them rendered the oaks as little more than silhouettes. The trick in these circumstances is very simple: expose for the shaded side of the subject. This lends the picture a light, airy feel as areas out of the shadows gradually blow out to white, often lending the lighter parts of the image a ghostly appearance. I completed the "otherly" look here with one of my split toning pre-sets in [Alien Skin Exposure X](#). It's award-winning, by the way!

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