

FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

with the Benvies

No. 10 • September 2019

MENU

Picture of the month
Passport photos

News from Niall and Charlotte

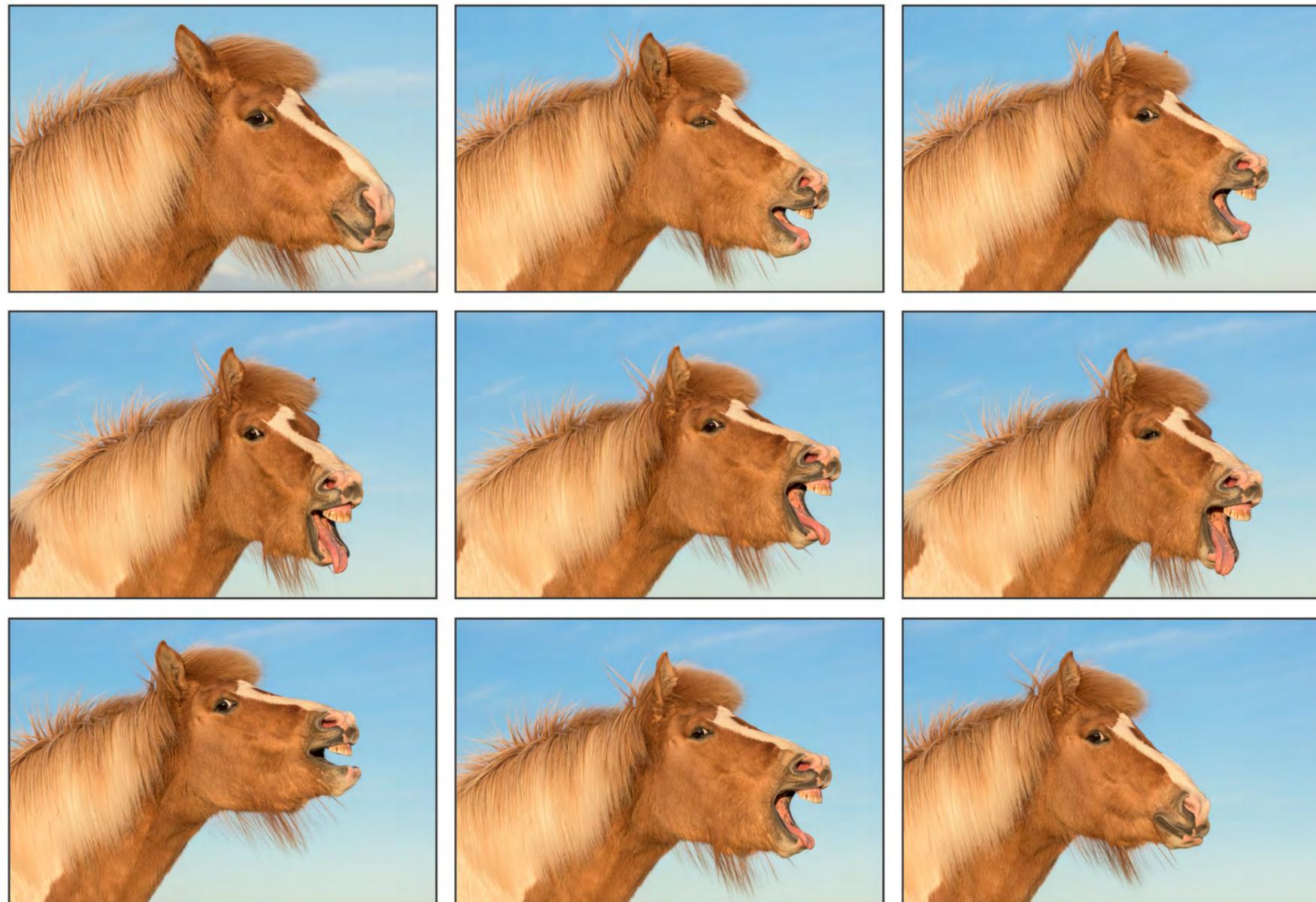
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Burgundy, spring 2020

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Those of you who have followed my work for a while will know how fond I am of presenting several images together as a single piece of work - what we call "Chocolate Bars". One of the nice aspects of this approach is that it reduces the competition between the different elements to be "the best". The strength of a piece like this lies in its diversity of content rather than in the superiority of one image over another: "The woods would be very silent if no birds sang except those that sang best," as Thoreau put it. Moreover, this way of shooting encourages exploration rather than the dispiriting pursuit of the perfect photograph. The photographer gathers elements to be conjured into something as yet unknown, later. When I tried to explain all this to my subject, this was the reaction I got. - Niall

News from Niall and Charlotte

This has been about the longest summer we've ever had - but it wasn't spent in Scotland. Summer in the east of Scotland - currently home - is characterised by the sun smiling on you while the wind holds a knife to your ribs. But we were away from all that for seven whole weeks - three working in Austria and four doing a different sort of work on our house in France. We experienced for the first time temperatures in excess of 40 ° C and found out how hard it is to carry on as normal, especially if you've cement to mix or foundations to dig. But whatever our tribulations, they were nothing to those of the livestock farmers round us, all of whose fields were parched to a Sahel white in the blistering sun. Many had had to start feed their cattle with hay cut just weeks before - stores set aside to see the beasts through the winter. Times like this make you wonder if relocation to the Mainland is a wise move - until you return home and feel that knife at your ribs again.

Since coming home, there has been a bit of a flurry of commissioned work with Niall's usual *Scottish Tree of*



the Year job (see one of the six trees, left, below) for the Woodland Trust and a sizeable new commission from the government agency, *Forestry and Land, Scotland*, to produce a range of identification images for a variety of tree species. In addition to keeping the office under control, Charlotte continues to create more dishes to roll out on our Retreats this autumn in Burgundy, Torridon and Islay as well as entertaining a delightful round of visiting family and friends.

This has been Niall's most productive summer for many years when it comes to producing field studio images (this mantid was in our garden in France). If you don't do so already, you can follow him on Instagram to see what you can do with a couple of Cactus flashguns and two pieces of plastic!

With best wishes

Niall and Charlotte
Directors.



Idea - The beauty of books

Sea eagle, Sør Trondelag, Norway
The publication of this image in my first book had some interesting consequences. Ask me sometime!

How our possessions mock us. Recently, I decided to address a long-standing domestic issue: closet-fill. More specifically, the time had come to empty cupboards of old laptops, drives, a scanner and CRT display, SCSI cables and other redundant technology. As I rendered each unusable, I reflected ruefully on the emotional investment I had had in these objects I was now destroying. In their day, any crash or unfathomable failure to respond caused despair and more

often than not, unwanted expenditure. About the same time in this clear out, I came across an extra copy of a book I produced in 2004 for Aurum Press and the NTS called Scotland's Wildlife. It was an illustrated series of essays about our relationship with the land in Scotland dressed as profiles of 70 or so species with a Scottish story. The photography was very pictorial and didn't reflect the routes my work has since taken but the book was nevertheless something concrete to show for my career up until then. I didn't throw it out.

Advertisers (who, you could say, are cynics who persuade the gullible to buy things they don't need with money they don't have) tell us that we can express ourselves through the things we buy. I believe that this is self-serving nonsense: owning something that someone else has designed and manufactured merely casts us as consumers, expresses only our access to cash. True self-expression originates internally, then finds its way out into the world; it is not something that can be assumed or appropriated. You and I are fortunate that we do something with great potential for self-expression; we create photographs reflecting what matters





to us. And I believe there is no better way of sending our photographs out there than between a pair of hard covers. This is how you put down your marker and say, "this is me." This is what defines us and what endures - not the things we buy.

While novels may work better on a tablet than as hard copy, when it comes to books of fine photography the electronic version can't compete with a well-produced print version (not least because of our ludicrous infatuation with looking at things on the tiny screens of our 'phones). E-books have been no more successful at killing off beautiful photography books than iTunes has been at killing off vinyl, although Amazon plays a large role these days in determining what is commissioned by the traditional publishing houses. Indeed, without a celebrity endorsement, a TV tie-in, massive social media interest or completely anodyne content, mainstream publishers are scarcely worth pitching to these days. Fortunately good alternative routes to publication exist.

Self-publishing used to be a by-word for an unusually expensive form of narcissism. But that has changed in two regards; funding, and a recognition of the need to use professional production expertise and designers.

Colleagues, Matt Maran (Hampstead Heath: London's Countryside) and Neil McIntyre (The Red Squirrel: a Future in the Forest) have run successful Kickstarter campaigns to fund the independent production of two fine books with high production values. The nice thing about the Kickstarter model is not only does it alleviate the cash flow shortfall that can drown a project at birth but that it also tests its viability. There's no market research quite as "real world" as putting a pitch online and seeing if people pre-order the book. If it doesn't work here, no amount of hoping and faith is going to make it work through "normal" publishing channels.

Funding aside, self-published books need the involvement of a professional project and production manager who sees to everything from appointing a designer, choosing and sourcing the best paper stock for the project, hiring the printer and a whole host of other skills few photographers new to publishing, possess. I put

Matt in touch with one of the best in the business, David Brimble who, amongst other projects, was production manager for five recent Wildlife Photographer of the Year books and who I'd commissioned to produce some costs for me the year before. David turned Matt's great idea and set of images into a book that is light years away from the vanity publishing of the past.

These sorts of projects really put your work out for all to see. Whatever else Matt and Neil do in their careers, they have each created something rather fine and specific to them; they have put down their markers. Even if your ambition doesn't involve putting your book into the hands of "the public", I believe that books produced for your own circle of family and friends - or even just for yourself - have immense value. If nothing else, the images are more readily accessible than on a hard drive (that you will be undoubtedly throwing away one day). When Iona and I made her first Blurb book in Lightroom I was more impressed at the quality of production than I'd dared to expect. While it may not have the same production values as these other examples, the project was realised. And that's always a good starting off point for the next, more ambitious one.

Skill - Colouring backgrounds

If you find the pure white background of a field studio image a little too stark, it's not so hard to change it, so long as none of the subject is blown out too. And it's the fact that you've gone to the trouble of ensuring that all the background, in each channel, is 255 that makes the job easy with the Color Range selection method in Photoshop.

There are a couple of caveats. You will always find highly out-of-focus edges hard to select convincingly. In the case of field studio pictures, a blending of the subject's colour with the pure white background tests the limits of the selection algorithm. So, I prefer to work with images in which all parts of the subject are in-focus, sometimes backing off to reduce magnification when I make the photograph to gain depth of field then cropping in later. Secondly, pale replacement backgrounds generally work better than dark ones as it is much easier to overlook any legacy white pixels around the edge of the subject.

In Photoshop, go to Select>Color Range>Select Sampled Colors and Fuzziness 0. Fuzziness defines how different a pixel can be from the one you selected (in this case, from the background) to be included in the selection. If your background is all pure white, a 0 setting should allow it all to be selected. If there are any areas that aren't (with the Selection preview button clicked, they show as black) simply click on them with the sampler tool, while holding down the Shift key, until they are all selected. Now only the subject should be showing as black - unselected. Hit OK then return to Select, only this time go to Modify>Expand and set to 1 pixel. This moves the selection very slightly toward the subject, getting rid of stray white pixels around its edge. With the selection live, go to Edit>Fill>Color and chose what you want for the background.

15th August
mmixx



Centauria cyanus L.
Preehin, Forfarshire

Food - Leek and stuffing plaited pie



Photography note: With my studio space currently full of the 40-odd boxes we take on Retreat, I retreated to a corner of Charlotte's kitchen to arrange my set. The ambient light there isn't great so out came the flash - but not my usual one. Encouraged by the look I've been achieving recently with my Cactus flashes, I set aside the Elinchrom, grids, flags and all the other paraphernalia in favour of a stripped-down approach. I fired a single radio-controlled Cactus flash, an inch above the floor, through an A3 piece of Flyweight diffuser for this mellow-yet-moody look.

This vegetarian recipe takes a while to prepare, so give yourself time so you can enjoy making all the different components. Put on your apron, select your playlist, get a drink, set out all your ingredients then create this delicious dish. I'd suggest you serve it with a crunchy green salad, some small sweet cherry tomatoes for a splash of colour and baby potatoes. You can roast these in their skins in olive oil with a seasoning of salt and pepper and a sprinkling of freshly chopped thyme.

Ingredients

serves six

3 long leeks, washed and cut into rings roughly 15mm wide
2 tbsp of olive oil and a small knob of butter
1 tbsp of Dijon mustard
4 tbsp of grated mature cheddar cheese
1 egg, beaten to glaze the pie before baking
Nigella seeds for the final garnish before baking (you can find them in the spices and dried herbs section in a supermarket).

Stuffing mix

1 large onion, finely chopped
1 tbsp of olive oil plus a small knob of butter
1 tbsp of fresh sage, finely chopped
80g of fresh brown bread crumbs
1 small apple, grated
100g of cooked peeled chestnuts, finely chopped
1 egg, beaten
2 tbsp creme fraiche
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Pastry

Use either a roll of bought puff pastry or make your own herb shortcrust pastry. Here's the recipe.

300g of plain flour

110g of cold, unsalted butter cut into small cubes

A pinch of salt

2 level tsp of fresh thyme, finely chopped

1 egg, beaten and mixed with 2 tbsp cold water.

Method

If you are making shortcrust pastry, do so first so that it can chill in the fridge.

[Put the flour, butter and salt into a food processor and pulse these ingredients until they resemble fine bread crumbs. Add the chopped thyme and briefly pulse so all is mixed together evenly. Add the egg mix a little at a time until the pastry is just starting to bind. Remove it from the mixer and briefly knead the mix together to form a ball of pastry. Be careful not to overwork it. Wrap it in baking paper and place in the fridge to chill for 20 - 30 minutes.]

1. The stuffing mix. Preheat the oven to 180° /160° fan / Gas Mark 4
Set a shallow, lightly greased baking dish/tin to one side.

2. Heat the oil and butter in a large frying pan over a gentle heat and add the chopped onions. Gently sauté them until soft and translucent. Add the grated apple, sage and chestnuts then season with a good pinch of sea salt and some ground black pepper. Stir well and continue to cook gently for a further five minutes. Remove from the heat and add the bread crumbs, stir well and then mix in the egg and creme fraiche.

3. Tip the stuffing mix into the greased dish/tin and spread it out evenly. Once the oven is up to temperature bake for about 20 minutes until it is slightly crispy on top. Remove from the oven and set aside to cool. You can leave the oven on for baking the pie at the same temperature.

4. Preparing the leeks. The pie cuts easier if the leek pieces are disc-shape, rather than sliced lengthwise. Take a large frying pan (it really is fine to use the pan you made the stuffing in without washing it first). Add the olive oil and butter and once the pan is heated, add the leeks and gently sauté for 15-20 minutes until they are soft but still retain their shape. Season with a little salt, pepper and thyme and set aside.

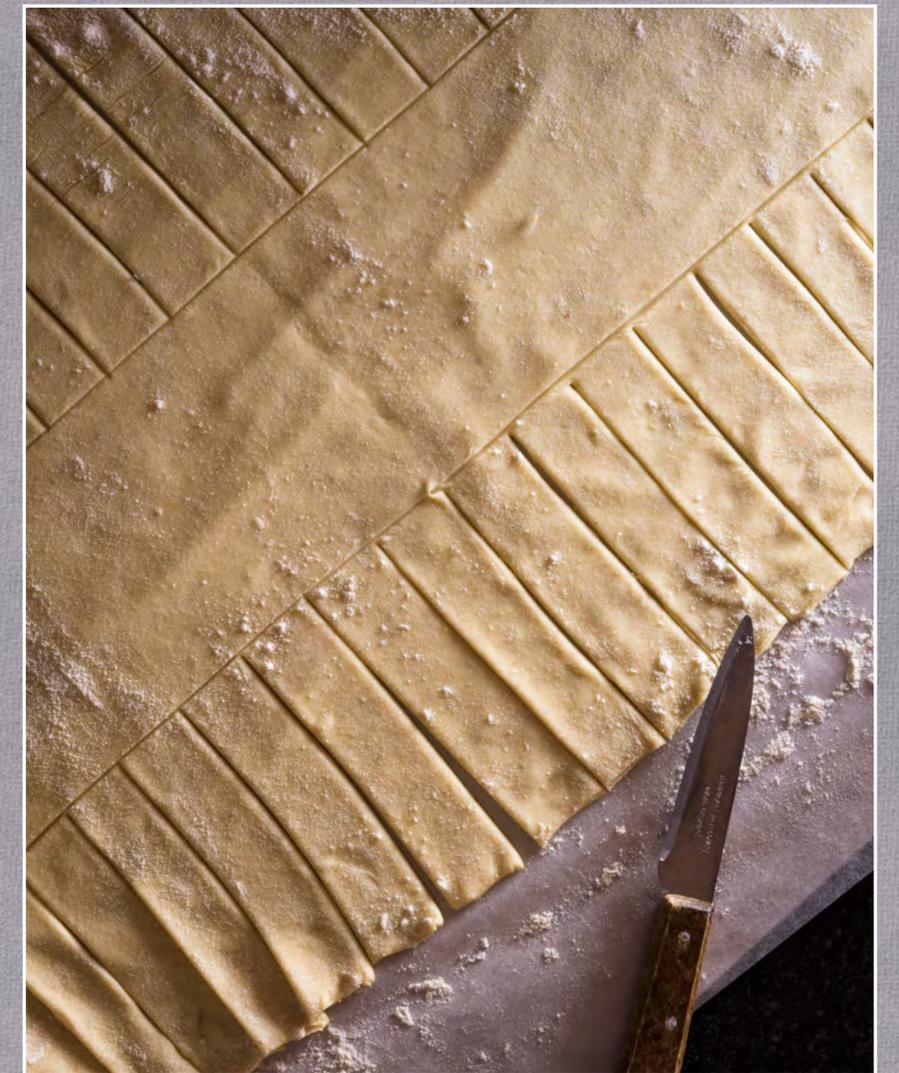
5. Now all the individual components are prepared, you can assemble the pie. Take the pastry from the fridge and roll it out on a floured work surface to create a rectangle roughly 300 x 400mm. Transfer it onto a sheet of baking paper. (A little tip: fold the pastry in half from the top, then loosely quarter fold, lift it onto the paper, then unfold.) Score (don't cut) the pastry to make three equal rectangles, the length of the pastry. Then, with a small sharp knife, cut the pastry horizontally at about 15mm intervals down either side to leave the central rectangle untouched. See the photo, right.

7. Place the stuffing mix down the central rectangle area and spread it evenly, then lay the leeks evenly on top. Freeze any extra. Next, dot the mustard evenly over the length of the mix using two teaspoons. Sprinkle the cheese over it and then start to make the plait. Begin at the top by folding over one of the top pastry lengths to the middle and then fold the corresponding one over to slightly overlap it. Keep

doing this until you get to the end of the pastry. Tuck the final two strips into the base of the plaited pie to seal it. Gently lift your creation onto a baking tray then brush it with the beaten egg and sprinkle it with the Nigella seeds. Bake in the pre-heated oven for about 30-35 minutes until golden brown. Remove from the oven and leave to cool a little before serving.

Now, what happened to that first drink?

- Charlotte



*Featured Retreat -
Rural Burgundy*

AN EARLY SUMMER CREATIVE OUTDOOR
PHOTOGRAPHY RETREAT IN RURAL FRANCE
25TH MAY - 1ST JUNE, 2020

We ran our first spring Burgundy Retreat in April this year in conjunction with our German friend and colleague, Willi Rolfes, welcoming nine guests from the US, UK, Austria, Germany and Switzerland. The feedback suggested it was a great success but being us, we came up with a number of refinements, including two-tier teaching, Photoshop templates and no before-breakfast tutorials (!) to make for an even better



46.883° N
colour transect #43

experience in 2020. Spring was late in 2019 so, just to be on the safe side, we are running this next one a month later to ensure that the forests are leafing out and there is more insect life. Once again we will use the lovely converted stable block adjacent to the Château de Magny en Morvan, near Millay, as our base from which to explore the woods and fields, ponds and hills of the surrounding countryside.

In addition to Charlotte providing great food and a nice ambiance for discussions, Niall will help you to get to grips with creating:

- Colour Transects;
- "Chocolate bar" collages;
- Field studio photography.

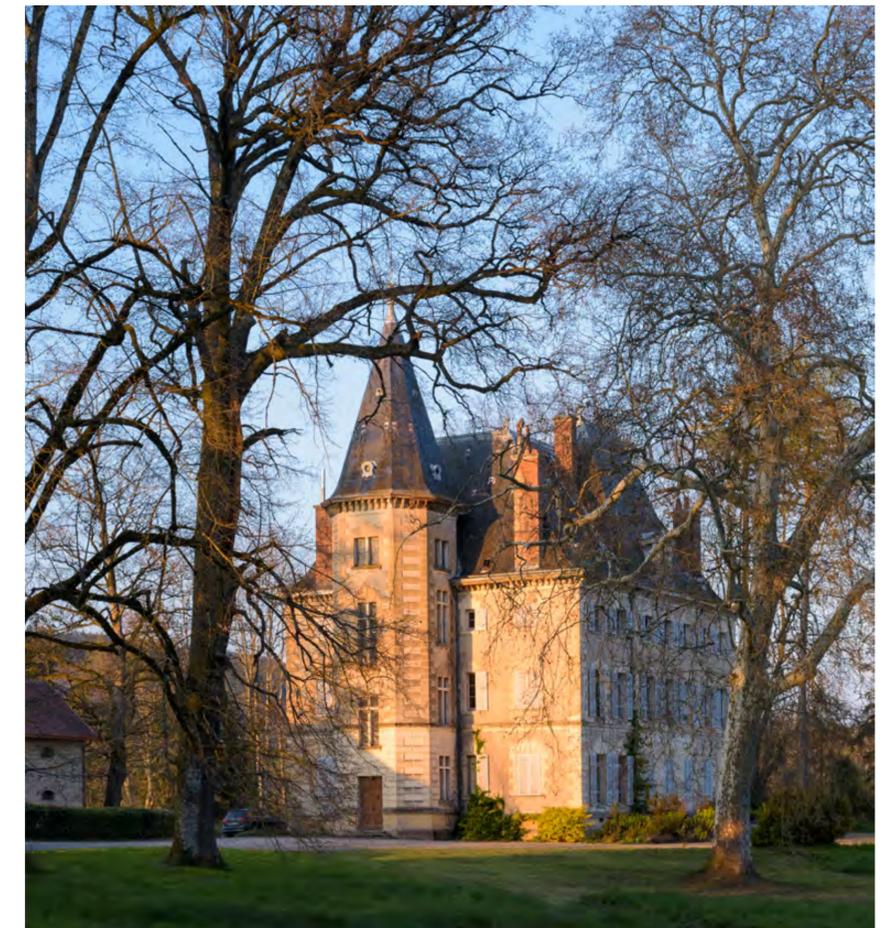
That makes for a pretty full programme! We have gone on to using the [Cactus flash system](#) for field studio work which has shown itself to be more than an equal of the much heavier and more expensive Elinchrom system I was using for this work before. We will help you to master it too - or which ever one you already own.

Guests have commented before about how this part of Burgundy feels "authentic", largely untouched by tourists and with a take-us-as-you-find-us attitude.

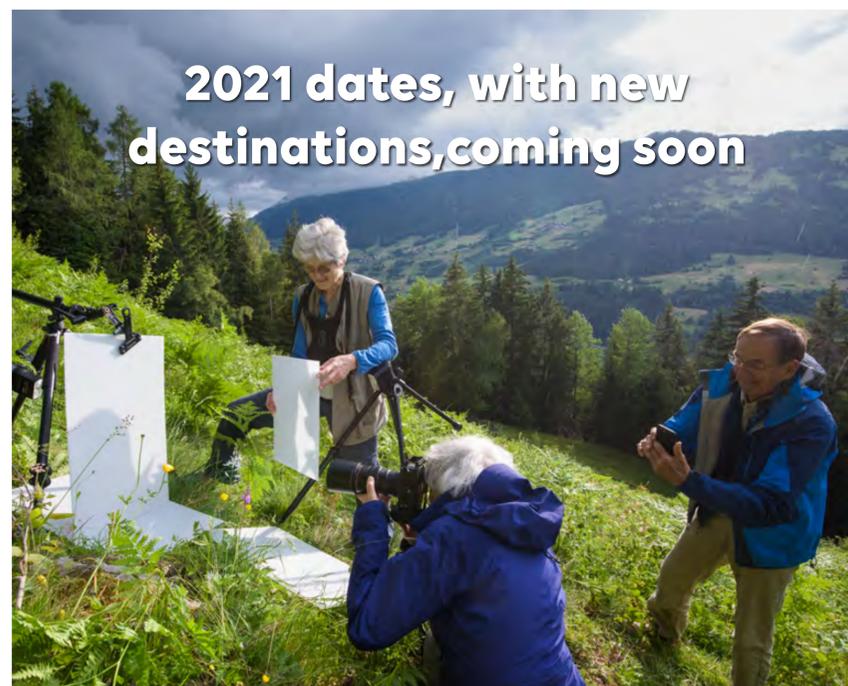
They have loved the feeling of being removed from everything that's happening in the outside world. It's perhaps something we all need at the moment.

Our house is just 25 minutes from the Château so we know the area well and can take you to favourite corners and give you the time you need to get beneath the skin of the place.

Read all about the Retreat in our brochure which you can download [here](#).



Dates - our Retreats in 2019 and 2020. Full details on our [website](#).



Inspiration - James Balog

Throughout his forty year career, Jim Balog has distinguished himself as an innovator with a deep curiosity about the nature/culture dynamic, expressed in a diverse body of work that ranges from experimental art photography to incisive documentary. The pictures shown here are from his "Changing Forests" collection created between 1998 and 2004 in which he sought out the United States' most distinguished - by their height, age, spread - trees. He deployed a number of techniques to help us understand their scale, from Hockney-esque montages to vast white backdrops suspended behind the subject. His portrait of the giant sequoia known as Stagg (right) - the largest known living tree on Earth - was the first to allow viewers to grasp the true height of giant trees like this, not from the ground looking up but in parallel with the trunk. Red jacketed climbers give the impression of scale. The techniques he pioneered on this project laid the ground for Michael Nicholl's celebrated [redwood portrait](#) almost a decade later.

Since 2007, Balog and his team's [Extreme Ice Survey](#) has provided irrefutable evidence of the loss of ice



in glaciers from Antarctica to Greenland, and Alaska to Austria using dozens of time lapse camera left to operate over months and years, recording the changes in calving and ice cover. This mammoth undertaking culminated in an Emmy Award-winning film, [Chasing Ice](#), which has since been seen around the world and has played an important role in the shift in public understanding around the issue of climate heating and why distant, melting glaciers will have consequences for us all.

Photographs © James Balog.

Bonus footage - Rhododendron leaves



There is, perhaps, an element of surprise in this piece - that *Rhododendron* leaves can be something other than sombre green. But even evergreens need to shed their leaves sometime and replace them with fresh ones. *Rhododendron ponticum* doesn't make a big fuss about this process but from August onwards you can find some beautifully coloured leaves in the depths of the shrubbery.

The idea for this image came directly from a very similar one of 28 *Eucalyptus* leaves created by [Meet Your Neighbours](#) photographer, [Lily Kumpe](#), a few years ago. Each element was shot separately in the field studio then scaled as a Smart Object and composited in Photoshop. With autumn just round the corner, maybe it's time to try this with some more obviously colourful autumn leaves such as oaks and maples. This is work we routinely do with guests on our autumn Retreats.

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