

COWBOYS FROM SPACE/

stories from all around the world.



2022 Edition

***COWBOYS FROM SPACE - STORIES FROM ALL AROUND THE
WORLD***

(2022 Edition)

By Matt and Lara

June 2022

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INTRODUCTION

“Cowboys from space - Stories from all around the world (2022 edition)” is the continuation of the booklet we published 2 years ago after reaching the 50 stories on the blog (<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/>). Since then, we have collected other ones from artists, photographers, writers, musicians and travelers. At this moment over 100 people have shared their stories there.

After focusing on the stories published between 2017 and 2019 in the previous booklet, here we have mainly included some collected between March 2020 and August 2021.

You can read about art. About Seona, that encourages people to look for a common ground through her realistic portraits. About Kashak, that expresses himself through street art and abstract art. About Julia, that started to make animated films almost by accident. About Susan and her favorite color that reminds her of childhood memories.

You can read about photography. About Johanna and the beauty that she sees through her camera. About Thomas, that finds calm and relaxation by taking photos. About Swan in Pink and how a walk in the forest can bring you some inspiration.

You can read about writing and reading. About Lada, putting you in a writer’s shoes for one day. About Petra, reflecting on the pleasure of reading and the effort it requires.

You can read about music. About Samantha, a clarinetist that shares her love for jazz by teaching to her pupils and writing about artists she loves. About Ginevra, that plays her guitar in the streets of Spain.

You can read about traveling. About Mikenzie, that visited Amantaní Island while locals were celebrating Pachamama and Pachatata. About Fotios and his trips to Italy and Paris. About Charlotte and her arctic expedition.

Besides these stories, we have also picked one published in 2018: Laia’s one, in which she has spoken about her relationship with traveling and photography, giving an update about how this has changed in the past 4 years.

Below each story, you can find the link and the QR code which will take you to the story on the website and how to get in touch with the person who wrote it.

If you want to discover more about the website or you are interested in writing your story, you can contact us directly on Facebook ([@cowboysfromspace](#)) and Instagram ([@cowboysfromspace](#)).

We hope you will enjoy this booklet. If you like it, don't hesitate to share it with your friends.

ABOUT US

About Matt

Matt is the person who created Cowboys from space in 2017. He likes pizza, listening to music all day long and taking pictures. He has been a volunteer in a radio station in Bulgaria, has lived a few kilometers from Bran Castle for a while and sometimes shares short stories and poems.

You can contact Matt directly on:

Facebook ([Matt Supertramp](#))

Instagram ([@matt_supertramp](#))

Medium ([@mattsupertramp](#))

About Lara

Lara is a graphic designer and community manager. She's the person behind the Cowboys from Space logo and who made possible creating the booklets. She loves whales, arctic landscapes and hot chocolate. Nowadays she works as a freelance designing corporate identities and managing social networks for different companies.

You can see more about her designing projects on:

Instagram ([@laragonzalez_design](#))

Facebook page ([@laragonzalezdesign](#))

her website (<https://www.laragonzalez.com>)

STORIES

ART

"I can't answer why I like art. It's like another language through which I can speak to people."

Kashak



Discover the emotions, feel the people

June 2021 - After teaching for a few years, Seona started her career as a full-time artist. An artistic journey strictly connected with her research of humanity, portraying people from different cultures and focusing on their emotions.

My name is Seona and I am a realist portrait artist from Cologne, Germany. For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by people of all kinds. I picked my major while studying at the university in a way that my degree would allow me to travel and explore the world. One year during summer break, I travelled to and through India as a backpacker. After graduating, I spent 3 years in the US teaching German as a foreign language and after that 1 year in Mexico doing the same. For various reasons, I returned to Germany after that and found a teaching job again. And then after a while, I felt as if my life had come to a hold.

Only in my mid-thirties, a major turning point happened. Out of the blue, I decided to get myself some brushes, a canvas, and colors. And I added a large book with photographs of people from all over the world to my shopping bag. I started painting and very soon became obsessed with it. From then on, I would try to squeeze in painting into my busy schedule whenever possible. Again, I began to explore the world on the canvases. Today, 18 years later, I still haven't stopped. If you ask me what I love most about my life, then it's being able to paint, paint, and paint.



“Schoolchildren from Tanzania 4”, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm (2020)

But I wouldn't be me if my personal journey had stopped with equipping my artist studio and becoming a full-time artist. I have also developed a strong desire to work in the name of humanity. Personally, I strive to tear down borders and overcome distances with my artwork as I write in my artist's statement. While I explore the great variety of different cultures and

individual characters, I also zoom in on an individual's emotions. By capturing everything I perceive, I endeavour to rise above differences, focusing instead on similarities. The essential objective in my work is to encourage one-on-one human encounters of all kinds and look for common ground. In this way, I wish to make a contribution to the world so that all people can live together in peace everywhere.

By now, I have established some amazing connections with like-minded people, both from my country and internationally. I work with professional international photographers who provide me with beautiful reference photos for my art (*one of them is Laia López Barnadas, whose story can be read in the last pages of the booklet*). And we have joined hands in drawing attention to people overlooked and/or in need. In order to break down my general mission to specific projects, I am dedicating my support to a small German charity that supports children's school education in Tanzania and a small and personal help project started by Anjan Gosh, photographer and storyteller in Kolkata, India.

I donate to these projects from each sale. But most important to me is that talking about my art offers reasons to talk about people in need as well. And I hope that my art inspires others to take action themselves too.



*“Girl From India with Blue Head Scarf”, oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm, reference photo by Anjan Gosh
(2020)*

Featured image: “Lost in Uncertainties”, oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm, reference photo by Laia López Barnadas (2021)

You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/06/08/discover-the-emotions-feel-the-people/>



You can discover more about Seona on:

Instagram ([@seona.sommer](#))

YouTube ([Seona Sommer](#))

her website (<https://ateliersommerkunst.de/en>)



Kashak, the facets of art

March 2020 - Art is discovering, finding new ways to free your creativity. Kashak is an artist that expresses his creativity by painting, writing graffiti, making murals and creating art objects. A language for speaking to people.

Hello everyone. My name is Arthur and my pseudonym is Kashak. For many years I have been doing graffiti, street art, as well as classical and abstract art. I paint both the facades of houses and small walls, write canvas and sometimes create art objects. I participate in exhibitions around Europe.



I started to express my creativity when I was a child. I asked my parents to send me to art school for a long time. Finally, when they let me go there, my friend infected me with his love for graffiti. Until 2009, I painted classic graffiti with different words. At that time, we had bad information: I did not know that usually writers add their names or the ones of

their crew and I used to write the words I liked. Graffiti was something new for me compared to classical art with its landscapes and plaster heads. I considered graffiti as a counterculture and a spit in the face of the public taste. A new form of art.

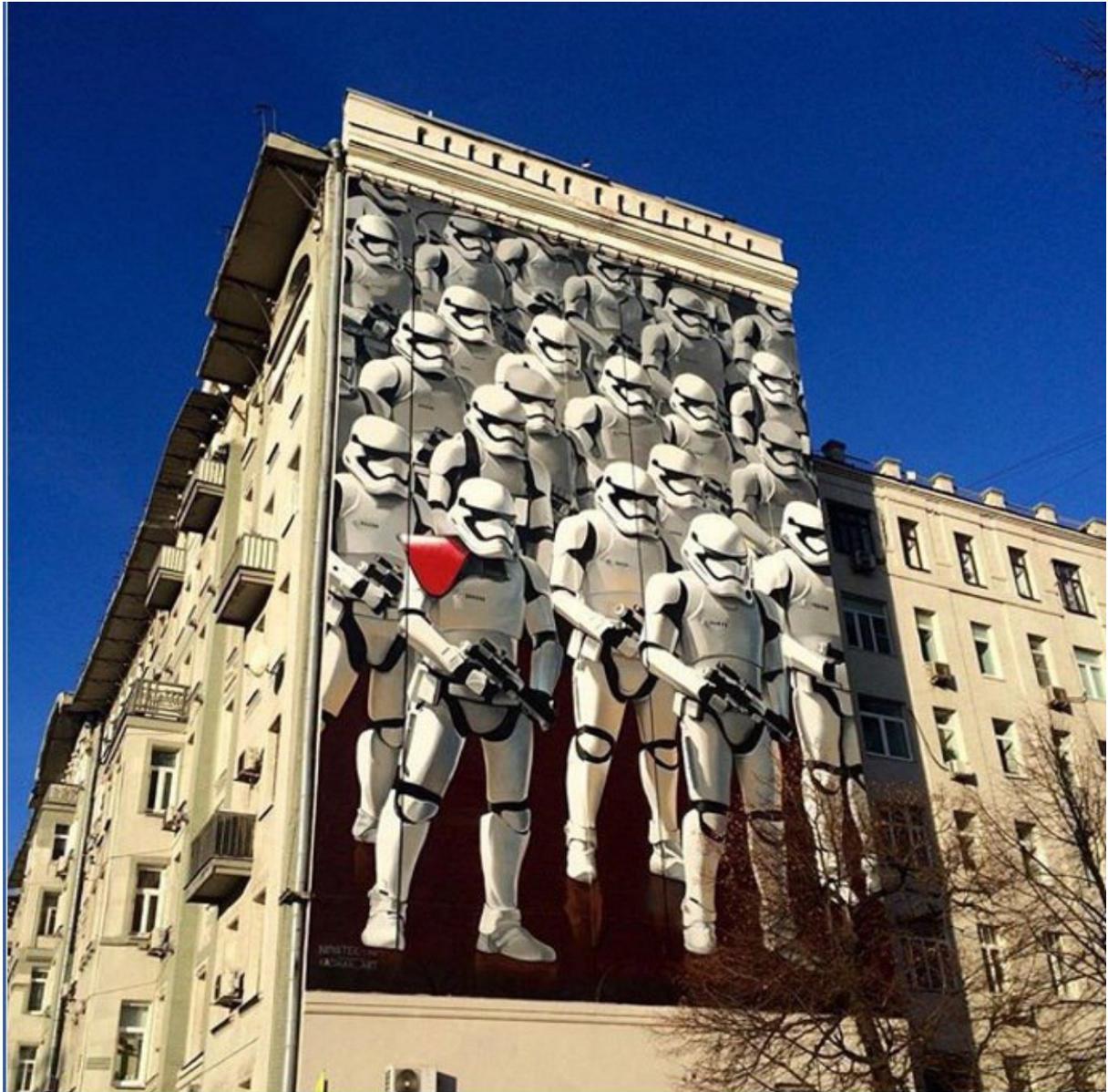
In 2007, on the Internet, I came across sphinx cats, and they fascinated me with their moonlight appearance. Therefore, I decided to take the pseudonym “kashak”: this word can be translated as cat, but it is mistakenly written for being read the same way in two directions. Such words are called palindromes. Since then, I often draw sphinx cats as a symbol of everything unusual and strange.



Then two years later, I gradually ceased to like graffiti, and I switched to drawings with a more meaningful semantic load. I thought that it would have been easier to say something to society. I started to be interested in street art. In 2009 - 2010, I painted my most famous works with a pistol and handcuffs.



I continued until 2015 when I was offered to draw on the facade of a building. It was the most interesting experience since I had never done anything like this before and had no idea how to do it. I chose to draw stormtroopers from “Star Wars”. It took me 2 weeks, painting in the winter. In the snow.



Recently, I have begun to paint and experiment with abstract art.



I can't answer why I like art. It's like another language through which I can speak to people.



You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2020/03/10/kashak-the-facets-of-art/>



You can discover more about Kashak on:

Instagram ([@kashak.official](https://www.instagram.com/kashak.official))

Twitter ([@Kashak69226365](https://twitter.com/Kashak69226365))



Julia, the color of the soul

August 2021 - The passion for colors. The admiration for the animation masters of her country. A dream that Julia Gromskaya had many years ago. Little by little, she got to know the animation better, meeting animators, experimenting with different techniques and moving to another country. Starting to make her own shorts, bringing that old dream to the paper.

I've been drawing since I was little, but my real passion has always been the colors: my room was full of illustrated books to color. Moreover, I grew up in the Soviet Union when the animation cinema was producing many artistic films, such as "Hedgehog in the Fog" by Yuriy Norštejn. As I got older, I kind of stopped drawing because I probably saw it as a childish game. I studied philology, even if I desired to draw from time to time. For a period, I also attended artistic high school. In 2005, I joined the KROK Animation Festival staff and had the opportunity to meet many animation masters who had marked my childhood, going to their master classes and listening to their stories. I think all these experiences brought me closer to the art and animation world.

I got to know animation better by meeting an Italian animator, Simone Massi, who later became my husband. It all started just for fun. One day Simone asked me to make a drawing for him and it turned out well. I began to try different techniques until I found "mine": tempera and acrylics on paper. So I came up with the idea to make a short movie, one minute long. I storyboarded, created the characters, developed the subject, and then started animating. When I lived in Ukraine, I never imagined that I would make an animated film.

After experimenting for several months, I showed my works to the Art School of Urbino teachers. I wanted to hear their opinion, their advice. It was doubly important for me because, besides teaching, they were themselves artists. Luckily it went well: after watching my drawings, they encouraged me to continue, saying that I had an excellent sense of color. I was very happy to hear that.



Many artists have inspired me, and I have tried to learn as much as possible from them. Especially Marc Chagall, whose I admire the mastery in using colors and the fantasy that allows him to make his characters fly. In my opinion, he is a kind of painter – animator

because many paintings seem to be a freeze-frame from an animation movie: they tell many stories and each character is always on the verge of taking flight or turning into something else. When I look at his paintings, I remember details of my life in Russia: the white of the snow, the churches of the villages, the streets with simple and poor houses. Besides Chagall, I feel very close to artists such as Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Marc, Gauguin, Cézanne, Degas, and Monet.

The inspiration sources for the stories are many: animals, memories related to my childhood, the atmosphere of Cesare Pavese's stories, and the cinema of Federico Fellini, a director I love. But sometimes the stories were born from minor events of everyday life. Small things that children are usually more attentive to, such as falling snow, the shape of clouds, the dreams we have...

I am tied to all my shorts, but the most important is "L'anima mavi" because it is the first that I realized. In fact, it's where I started my journey in the animation cinema world. When I was still living in Ukraine, in Kyiv, I had a beautiful dream that struck me very much in which so many red apples were slowly falling from the sky. In Italy I had the desire to bring it on paper. The result is a tale of people who dream and meet in dreams, of souls that become free and leave the body while they sleep. This is a fantasy.

In the ancient Italian language, mavi is the light blue color. It was a word used by Renaissance painters like Michelangelo, Lippi, and others, but then fell into disuse for some reason; a lost and forgotten word that seemed perfect to describe the soul.

You can watch "L'anima mavi" on Julia's Youtube channel:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hArG7ukz-uU&ab_channel=JuliaGromskaya

You can read the story both in English and Italian here:
<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/08/29/julia-the-color-of-the-soul-julia-il-colore-dell-anima/>



You can discover more on Julia on her YouTube channel ([Julia Gromskaya](#))



My favorite color pink

May 2021 - "My favorite color pink" is a small prose piece on pink, Susan Carr's favorite color. A color that brings her back in time, back to a kitchen...

The kitchen was pink and when the sun sat high it shined like a doll's blush

We were the only people in town with a pink kitchen, this was my Grams' idea

The room was painted in oil the color made to her specifications and
seemed wet during the day changing with the light from bright to dark

My father did not live with me, men gave no opinion of whether

Pink was an acceptable shade because of the four of us

Formed a family of females only

The kitchen seemed moody, and passion shifted with the weather

Even the cabinets and ceiling were painted pink both inside and out
when it rained the room would close womb like around me becoming a strange cave

The crush of pink was intimate obscuring all things

That kitchen knew just how to reach in and hold my small body tight and

I would feel a strange inertia lying on the floor as I searched for light spots on the linoleum with the
tips of my fingers lightly tapping

With bright afternoon sunlight pink cheered me on and in the walls, exotic flowers grew
that belonged somewhere wild, and I could almost taste their sweetness

this intense pink color
seemed to burn out our dirty corners, obliterating the mess, Xing out the despair

My heart would race as I drew pink flowers, pink paper dolls, pink horses on construction paper

For a while, my young life was perfect living inside the belly of our house

With nothing but crayons

Out of the small windows through white curtains that were ruffled on the bottom

The setting sun would reach through the folds to grab a hold of me

Setting the room on fire the light licking me in shades of fuchsia

I can smell the night

Darkness arrives on tip toes finally enveloping us

Pink is my lullaby my memory of home

Susan has written 3 stories for the website in 2021. You can find this and the other ones here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/category/art/susans-compositions/>



You can discover more about Susan on Instagram ([@susancarr88](#))

PHOTOGRAPHY

“When I publish my photos, I think of them as an invitation to others to share their bubble with me. It is a personal take on life and often a very simple one. The small details, the light, or the texture... That is what photography gives to me, a way to share my bubble.”

Johanna

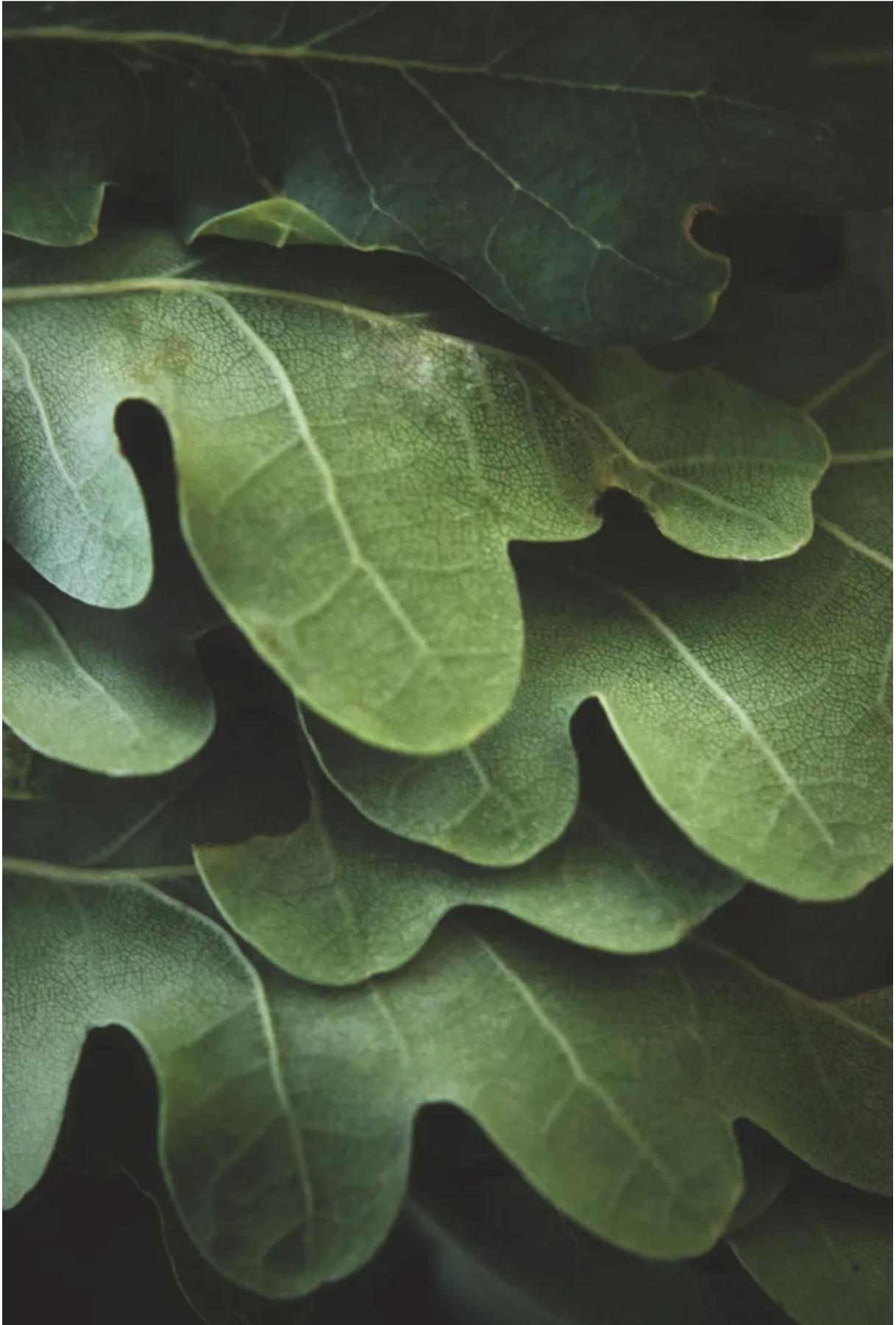


Johanna Liljestränd Rönn, my photography

November 2020 - Johanna creates a bubble of her own. Behind a digital camera that someone at work borrowed her or an analog one found in a storage. Taking photographs sneaking around in bushes or in front of people, with their eyes closed.

When I photograph, my world shrinks. I get completely absorbed by the moment. I create a bubble of my own and it is a precious moment of relaxation. If I didn't have photography, my life would feel poor because I see so much beauty through my camera. It really enriches me. When I publish my photos, I think of them as an invitation to others to share their bubble with me. It is a personal take on life and often a very simple one. The small details, the light, or the texture... That is what photography gives to me, a way to share my bubble. But now I will tell you how all it started.

When I was 7 years old, I got my first analog camera (yes, I am that old, digital cameras didn't exist at that time...). I lived in the countryside and I remember sneaking around in bushes trying to photograph birds. It was very exciting (unfortunately, the photos came out less exciting!). Then painting and drawing took over my time, and I didn't do much photography for a long time (I guess the disappointment over the blurry bird photos took me hard...). But in 2012 I borrowed a digital camera from a colleague and photography has been a big part of my life since that moment. I started a photo club at work with a friend. The aim was to learn how to use our cameras by taking photos on specific themes every fourth week. This was a great way to push ourselves to take photos out of our comfort zone and learn the settings on the camera.



The club grew in size and this has been my main way of developing my photography skills for six years. However, at some point, I felt I needed something more. So I joined the local photo club in Uppsala, Sweden, the town where I live. In the meantime, I had found my late father-in-law's old analog Nikon EL2 in our storage. I simply put in a new battery and a film and it worked like a charm! I brought the film down to my new photo club and got some help in developing it. Oh my!!! What an exciting moment to open that container, unroll the negative, and see your photos for the first time! It was instant love! Analog photography is such a marvelous technique, so much to learn and such a handcraft! At that point, my photography shifted more to analog, and I bought way too many analog cameras! Trying out new cameras and working in the darkroom gave me a much deeper understanding of photography. How you measure light and how that interacts with ISO, aperture, and speed. Basics of photography, but something I hadn't really learned properly when I was shooting digital. Now, when I work in the darkroom developing films or printing on paper, I truly appreciate all the different steps in which you can affect the outcome and the final photo! From when you choose your camera and film to how you expose it and then how you decide to develop and print it! It truly is a very rewarding and creative process!

I currently use mainly analog cameras for my portraits. I love how micro shadows show up on film, the vast range of grey tones, and the smoothness of these. When I shoot people, I prefer to take their portraits with their eyes closed. To me, it leaves me space to think about my settings, my light, and my composition, without having someone looking at me. I like that space. I also found that asking people to close their eyes creates a special atmosphere. It becomes intimate, raw in a certain way. You seldom spend time with someone that has their eyes closed unless you are sleeping next to that person. When you close your eyes, you become vulnerable. I love these moments and I am always thankful for the trust that the other person is showing me.

I tried to think about what inspires me. I cannot tell you a certain thing or person who gives me inspiration. I am driven and, I guess, inspired by the moment itself. The moment when I take my photos in which I search for relaxation and intimacy. It is very precious to me. I feel very humble and grateful when other people enjoy my shoots. There is a quote by Robert Frank about photography and how we look at photos that I truly love: "*When people look at my pictures, I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice*". I think that is beautiful. If I ever make anyone feel like that I would be thrilled and truly happy!



You can read the story on the website here:

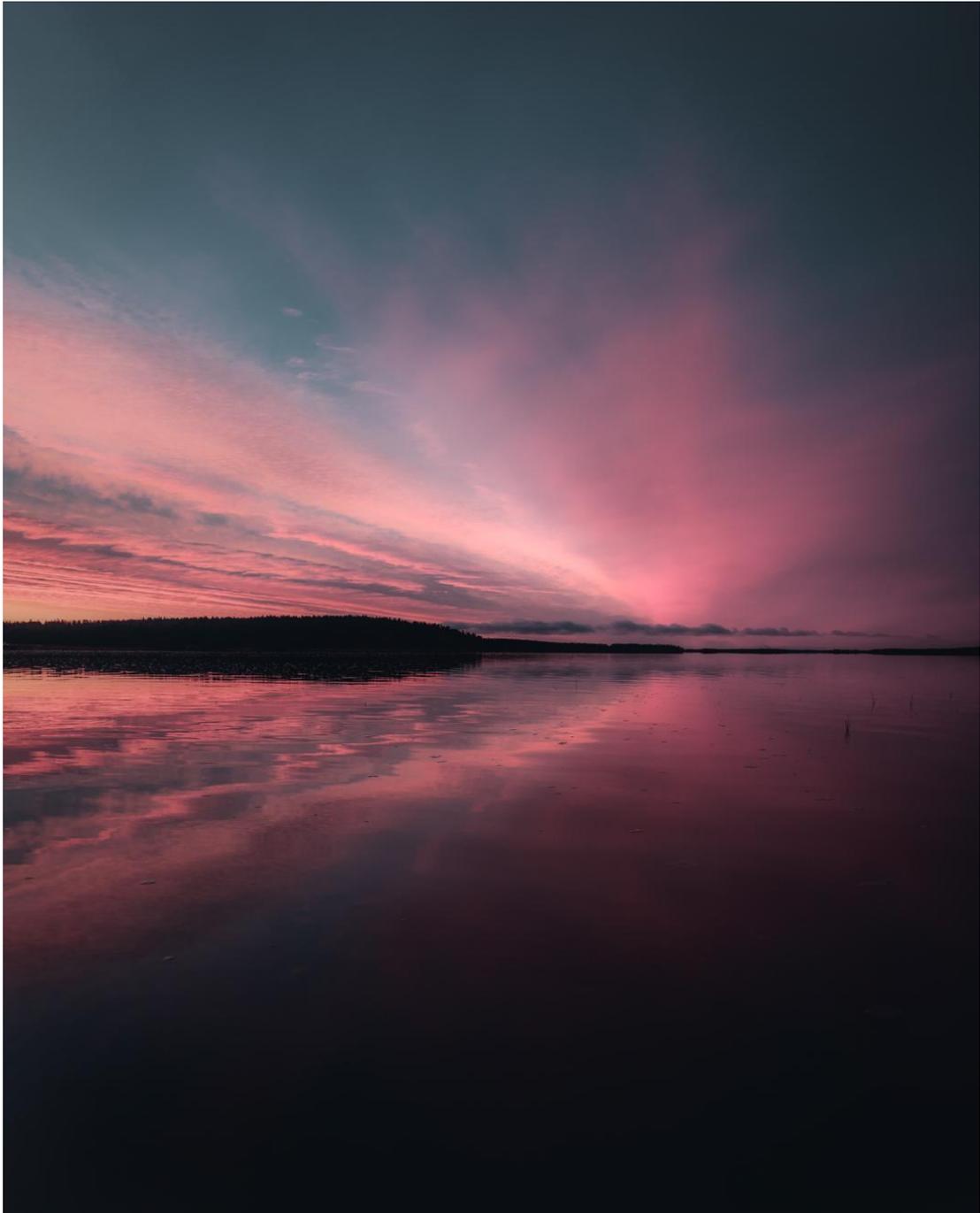
<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2020/11/19/johanna-liljestrand-ronn-my-photography/>



You can read more about Johanna on:

Instagram ([@mintcolibri](#))

her website (<https://www.johannalronn.photography>)



Thomas, calmness in the nature

February 2021 - Thomas left the countryside in the North of Sweden for the big cities in the South to pursue his music ambitions. But sometimes he feels the urge to come back to his hometown, surrounded by nature. Looking for a sense of serenity and quietness to capture in his pictures.

Photography and music are a form of meditation for me. They give me the chance to get totally absorbed in the moment and forget about all the other everyday things that keep the mind busy.

To give you a little background, I have grown up in the northernmost part of Sweden, with the great mountains and the forests basically right outside my door. I have spent a large part of my formative years in the countryside doing country things, like hiking and fishing. But I also have a musical background: I have played in bands since I was in my early teens and I got my first professional gigs at 16. Since then, I've been playing guitar professionally in lots of bands and as a recording artist under my own name as well. My music ambitions made me leave the north for the large cities in the south.

I have spent my adult life in Gothenburg and (now) in the Stockholm area. It's a busy, hectic life with lots of people around you and a schedule that is crammed with stuff to do. It's here that photography comes in.

A big part of my photographic journey really comes down to getting back to that feeling of being surrounded by the outdoors and just getting out to inhale fresh air. I always long to get out and I always look forward to visiting my family in the north, where I can go to all the places that mean so much to me. I find that all my pictures bear a sense of serenity, simplicity, and quietness, as a contrast to the life I'm having in the city. At least that's what I'm striving to communicate. Working with my images gives me calm and plays a big therapeutic role for me. Now, in these pandemic times, when I'm not able to perform music, photography has come to play an even bigger role in finding calm and relaxation. Hopefully, I can convey some of that feeling to those looking at my images as well.

I'm submitting two shots here.

Oak at the sunset



Shot on a Canon 6dII with a Canon 35mm 1.4, 1/250 sek, F16, ISO 800

It was the end of June. On this particular day, a roaring thunderstorm swept through my hometown in the evening. I love these dramatic weather conditions, so I kept an eye on the sky to see what was happening. When I noticed a huge gap of clear skies among the dark clouds, I knew there would be some great light in the next few minutes. I jumped into the car with my camera and started driving to some of my favorite locations right near my home, as there wasn't much time to catch the light. For a long time, I had a plan to shoot this lovely

oak, but it's right by a relatively trafficked road and the light was never good those times that I passed it. Now I headed straight for that tree. I reached it just in time for sunset. It was still raining a little, and the sun spread its warmest of light over the westmannian fields. This was really a magical moment, as there was no traffic either. Just a quiet sunset with the sound of raindrops on my lens hood. I kept shooting for a while before heading off to some other locations while the sun was setting. It was a truly beautiful evening with silky smooth sunrays covering the cornfields.

The frosty pond



Shot on a Canon 6dII with a Canon 70-200 f4, 1/640 sek, F4, ISO100

One of those rare mornings with hoarfrost. Immediately, when I looked out the window, I got some photo ideas. I knew I should have gone somewhere near the water. I live next to one of the largest lakes in the country, so my first obvious choice was to go there. Unfortunately, I noticed when arriving that the frost was gone. The lake was too warm. I had to return to my part of town and find some water there (I really wanted to have the water). I ended up in a spot about two kilometers from my home. A small pond where the kids go swimming in the summertime. That place looked like magic with the sun just rising over the hill, spreading the first rays over the frost covered trees and the fog gently caressing the still water. So I started shooting, and this wasn't the only magic moment this morning. As I was shooting, an older couple arrived at the pond. The guy started undressing; he was about to take a cooling bath. He jumped in, all nude, but he was fast... He was up again in seconds. I then realized I had missed an opportunity to take a hell of a shot. That scene with him in the water, swept in by the fog and the first blazing sun rays was a sight to remember. Now, afterwards, I'm very happy with the tree shots I got that morning, but I remember being frustrated over him being so in a hurry from the water. However, that's understood 😊

You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/02/14/thomas-calmness-in-the-nature/>



Thomas also wrote a story about his musical career. You can find it here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/03/14/thomas-sound-and-vision/>



You can discover more about him on Instagram ([@thomasgunillason](https://www.instagram.com/thomasgunillason))



The Walk

June 2021 - Photography brings Swan in Pink something magic. Something that turns the walks in nature into dreams.

I think I'm a walker more than a photographer. But photography brings me an unspeakable part of a dream. When I take a picture, I am in my lens and instantly I am transported on this cloud, in the heart of this flower, at the top of the mountain. This is a part of the magic I try to share here. My world is nature and all I feel about it.

I try to treat my photo as if it were a painting, through small touches of light or shadow here and there. Little by little, its tone rises. It's my favorite moment when I recreate a landscape.

So here is my forest. This little tree was spotted stealthily. In the setting sun, sweet air, sweet light. Lovely great walk alone with myself...

You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/06/22/swan-in-pink-the-walk/>

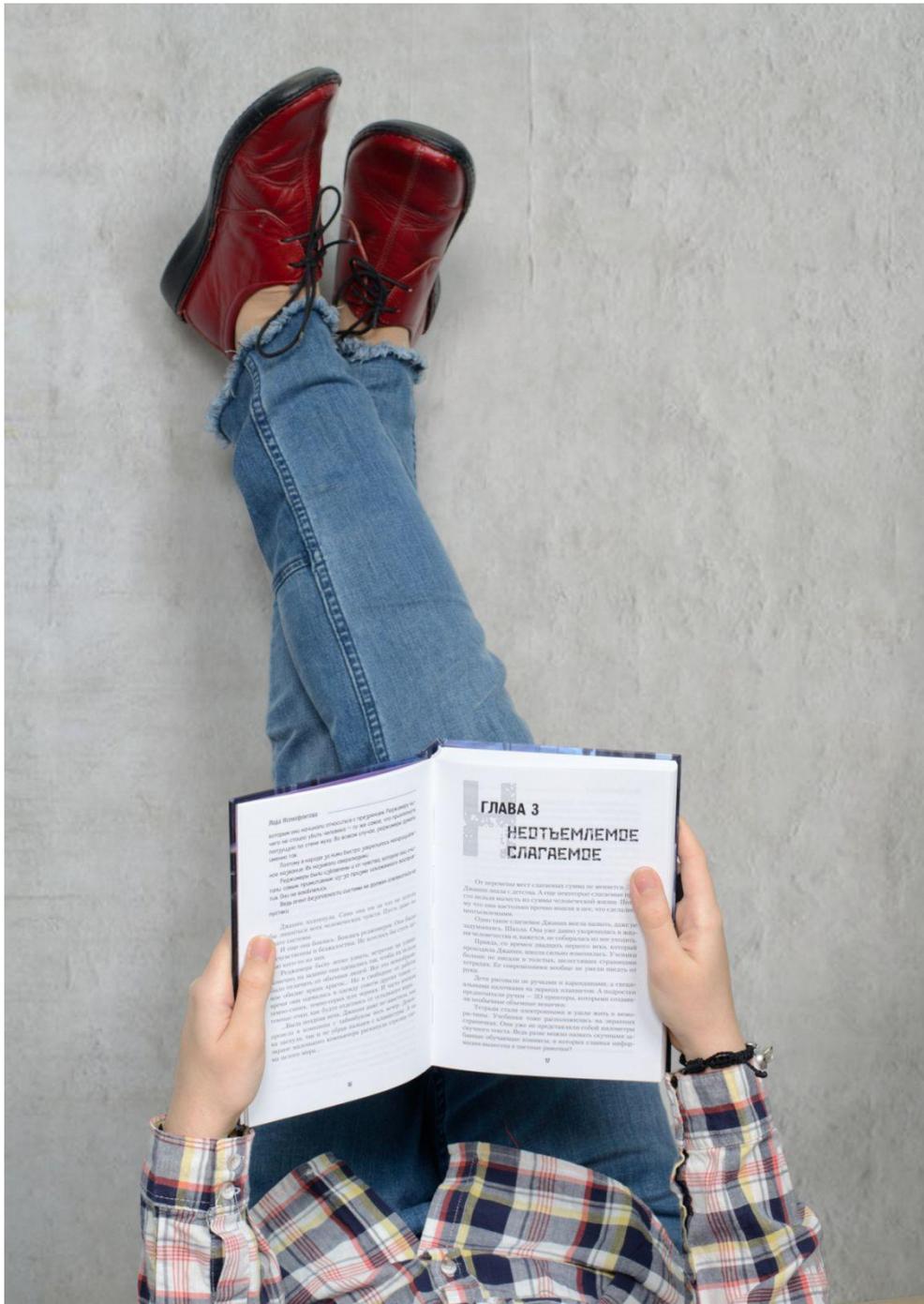


You can discover more about her on Instagram ([@swan_in_pink](#))

WRITING

“Much like music, the words we read enter our minds, where we process them through a unique frame of our language, cultural background, and life experiences. No two people will ever perceive and understand a text in the same way, which is exactly why reading is so special.”

Petra



A day with a writer

February 2021 - Who is a writer? Who is the person behind a book? Lada Ksenofontova shared her ideal day as a writer, starting with a coffee with cinnamon...

A writer is a walking scanner, which is constantly searching for new ideas, plots, details, and prototypes of new characters.

Hey, would you like to find out how these mysterious people spend their days?

Then follow me, because I'm a writer and I'm no exception!

My day starts with coffee. Not just with any coffee – with a very special one, with cinnamon. Because when there's no cinnamon, then inspiration is gone!

Now that the coffee cup is empty, it's time to go for a walk, and that's when scanner mode starts to function... or, I'd rather say, the writer's vision!

People are hurrying, cars are racing down the roads, birds are chirping.

And in this multitude of images and noises I spot a chocolate bar in a blue wrapping in a shop window. In front of the shop window a boy is standing. He is looking at the chocolate bar, shy and unsure about whether or not to buy it... that's when the writer's vision starts working!

I almost see the boy buy the chocolate bar and hide it in his backpack carefully, holding his breath. Because the chocolate bar is special... it is meant for the most wonderful girl ever, with sleek red hair, sparkling green eyes, and a beautiful smile.

The following day the boy enters the classroom and waits nervously for all his classmates to make a beeline for the cafeteria. And when he's finally alone, he takes the chocolate bar out of his backpack and...

The idea of a new book is born!

I should take hold of it and, as soon as I get back home, write it down...

On the way back home, I see a little girl playing happily with her puppy. I smile and stop to watch them. "Bark! Bark!", and a poor puppy dashes aside from a big dog. It scampers towards me and starts running around me and wrapping its leash around my ankles, scared to death by the terrible monster.

"Poor thing!" I say to the puppy. "There's nothing to be afraid of, you cute little one!"

The writer's vision works without any rest, saving sounds, images, and scenes, all to be found on the pages of a new book one day. Sometimes I go out, sometimes I go for a "walk" on social networks, but sooner or later I understand that it's time to get down to work!

I start a story. My heroine is on her way to school when she sees a little girl playing happily with her puppy. And at the same time, her classmate is hiding a special chocolate bar in his backpack...

But hey, it rings a bell, doesn't it?

Working on a new book is wonderful, but sometimes I feel it is not all sunshine and rainbows... When?

When my characters suddenly stop obeying me and refuse to do what I tell them to do! Believe me, it happens, but I don't really know how it is possible.

The only thing that I know in such moments is that I'm going to have a hard time...

"Hey! What are you doing? You should have befriended her, remember? Please, stop making fun of her cat..."

"Please... you should fall in love with him... darling... Don't you even like him? He is such a cool guy, he writes his own songs... no? Whatever..."

Nothing works. I try to put my characters in situations in which they will have no other choice than to do what I want them to do... in vain!

What do I feel in such moments?

I'm surprised, disappointed, frustrated, and even shocked and mad at them! And I haven't got the faintest idea why it happens!

Even my most timid character, a tween girl who can't say a word to her classmates and walks around school like a shadow, can be really stubborn sometimes... Why has she decided to stick to her guns all of a sudden? Why doesn't she like this boy?

Let alone a mischievous truant student or a cool and cruel super-agent from the distant future... at least it makes some sense! I mean, you wouldn't expect such characters to obey you, would you?

"Okay, you win!"

I give in and just hope that the characters from a book I've yet to write will be more manageable.

But the saddest moment comes when the last page of a book has been finished and a full stop in the last sentence has been put. No matter if my characters have listened to me or not. Saying goodbye to them is always heart-wrenching, just like saying goodbye to old friends...

That's how they all came crashing into this world, so different but all willing to share their stories with thousands and thousands of people...

A story set in a dystopian 27th century, in which people use their emotions to pay for luxury goods...

A story of a girl, trapped in a cobweb of insidious social networks...

A love story which started with... a mere chocolate bar!

A story of a kind and brave smartphone, who saved his friends and the whole humanity from the plans of a cunning evil genius...

A story about a challenge that turned the life of an entire school upside down...

A story of an unsuspecting girl who learnt about the existence of very special gods whose mission was to help university students...

And so many more of them!

But, as time passes, a completed manuscript becomes something much greater than a story! It evolves into an entire new world of my characters with so many things to discover!

On the shelf a pile of my characters' portraits is lying.

In the computer folder there's a sticker pack based on my sketches and done by a professional artist.

In another folder there are board games based on my books. They came in handy during the pandemic because playing them in Zoom was so fun!

Okay. The day is finally over, and it's time to check if there's any cinnamon left in the cupboard.

Because, as you have already understood, cinnamon is the very thing that attracts my muse!

#writing for you



Lada Ksenofontova

You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/02/17/a-day-with-a-writer/>



You can discover more about Lada on Instagram ([@lada_ksenofontova](#))



A love letter to reading

December 2020 - Petra writes. She collects her thoughts to create musings. She recalls memories to tell about her trips. She lets the words flow to compose poems. Petra reads, taking the time to discover stories and imagine new worlds...

There's something about reading. The other day after finishing a book I got to thinking about why reading is still such an irreplaceable act even in today's digital world and what it means to me.

Ever since I was a child, I have been a reader – it is both an obsession and a mindset. Proper reading requires you to sit down and focus on what you are reading, be it a book, a newspaper, or a blog. It is a deliberate act of carving a chunk of time out of your busy day and dedicating it to reading, precisely and on purpose. It is a conscious decision to stick with the words on the page, even though you are not sure if those words will be worth your time in the end. Because with reading, you never know what you are going to get – you might enjoy the story but hate the writing style, or you might love the author's carefully crafted word flow and find the message boring or irrelevant.

There is a certain art to arranging words on a page, and proper readers appreciate it. You cannot just word vomit on your literary product and expect it to gain traction, which is what many people fail to take into account. Reading requires time and we humans do not particularly enjoy wasting our time, because life is too short to read bad literature. Whatever we are reading needs to be either informative or make us feel something, evoke a smile, or force a tear.

When it comes to feelings, reading is probably the most intimate activity you can do with an inanimate object (go ahead and smirk at this one if you want to). Much like music, the words we read enter our minds, where we process them through a unique frame of our language, cultural background, and life experiences. No two people will ever perceive and understand a text in the same way, which is exactly why reading is so special.

While movies are explicitly designed to make us feel the right thing at the right time, it is always second hand emotion, elicited by the characters on the screen. They always feel limited somehow, created, and stuck in a box within the context of the movie. In contrast, the characters we read about are built inside our minds. The words we read are processed and interpreted into our own personal movie inside our heads, composed of our own experiences and all the depth we have unconsciously assigned to them. Even when there are no character descriptions, we like to imagine what they might look like, assign them attributes and a certain vibe, until we feel like we almost know them.

Proper reading takes unconscious effort and the presence of mind to analyse and absorb the meaning behind what we have read, so it is no wonder it is getting harder and harder to read in the busy modern world. We build a whole new world to accommodate what we have read

in the context it deserves, which takes a fair bit of mental capacity and focus, and our attention is often too divided for it nowadays. However, for me, there is no more profound experience than finishing a book, which has penetrated my mind, conquered it, and left it blank to the point where I need to sit still and just exist for a few minutes after I have turned the last page.

It is the ultimate high, otherwise attainable only through drugs or good music, but a more subtle one. It leaves you forever changed and expands your horizons – your vocabulary, your perspective, and your neural network. It rewires your beliefs and offers new avenues of thinking, as if you have lived a lifetime through those pages, and in a way, you have.

There is something about reading, and it cannot be replaced by anything else. So, to wrap it up, I leave you with this quote from one of my favourite books:

“Bea says that the art of reading is slowly dying, that it’s an intimate ritual, that a book is a mirror that offers us only what we already carry inside us, that when we read, we do it with all our heart and mind, and great readers are becoming more scarce by the day.”

Carlos Ruiz Zafón – The Shadow of the Wind



You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2020/12/15/a-love-letter-to-reading/>



You can discover more about Petra on:

her blog ([Erratic Engineeress](#))

Instagram ([@erratic.engineeress](#))

Facebook ([@erratic.engineeress](#))

Pinterest ([@erraticengineeress](#))

YouTube ([Erratic Engineeress](#))

Medium ([Petra @Erratic Engineeress](#))

MUSIC

“We moved back to Europe, in Spain, to be right. On a cold November morning in Madrid, something in me exploded and made me take my guitar and go to the place with people walking and always ready to listen to some chill music in the chaotic city. A few moments later I was in the streets of the city.”

Ginevra



Jazz clarinet and me

June 2020 - Researching, playing, improving, helping someone to discover jazz. Samantha is an English clarinetist that teaches music in Germany, sharing the world that she discovered when she was a teenager that still warms her heart.

Hi! My name is Samantha Wright and I'm a 25 year old jazz clarinetist living in Hamburg, Germany. I've been living here for around 2 and a half years, and originally come from Oldham, United Kingdom.

I'm really fortunate to be working as a freelance musician, alongside being a teacher at the music university here. It's a great mix of excitement and inspiration... What a gift to be able to do something I love everyday!

So where did it all begin? When I was around 10 years old my junior school offered pupils the opportunity to have music lessons in either the flute or clarinet. The latter seemed like a more appealing choice at the time, as my older sister had already been learning the clarinet for 2 years, so I was already a little bit familiar with it. Looking back, I'm so lucky to have such amazing parents who really encouraged me to explore music and the arts.

And like every other music student, I practiced (probably not enough!) and enjoyed being part of various groups and ensembles with my peers. By the time I was around 13 years old I had started receiving private music lessons from clarinetist Richard Armstrong, the most lovable and enthusiastic teacher any child could wish for! I had lessons with him for around 3 years until his very sudden death in February 2011. It wasn't easy to find, or even consider another teacher for the next year and a half, and this resulted in me teaching myself with the help of CDs and "YouTube". This was a really life changing period for me, as it slowly led me on the journey to discovering jazz on the clarinet for the first time. I had somehow come across the Benny Goodman trio playing the jazz standard "Body and Soul" on a YouTube playlist or something (we've all been there, searching for one thing and an hour or 2 later looking at something COMPLETELY different!..) and this moment changed everything for me. I didn't really understand what jazz was or even improvisation, but I can still remember the moment when Goodman's sound hit me and literally sparked something in my soul. The vibrato, and expression was almost comparable to a human voice... I knew I wanted to sound like him.

After this, I began to discover a few more musicians, mostly those from the big band era, such as Artie Shaw and Glen Miller.



Picture taken by Heike Blenk

When I eventually went on to study jazz clarinet seriously for my bachelor degree I was introduced to the whole incredible timeline of jazz, specifically focussing on bebop and music from the 60s and beyond. I was of course massively out of my depth, having been self taught and not knowing anything specifically about improvisation or harmony, and found the studies and environment challenging. One of the things that really confused me was the little focus on the clarinet post 1940, and I was beginning to feel rather out of place in this contemporary scene, almost like a mini instrumental identity crisis. During my final years of study, I think the curious self taught 15 year old in me jumped out again and encouraged me to make some serious research about the jazz clarinet family tree. To my delight, I came across some incredible musicians such as Rolf Kühn (who I then went on to have lessons with in 2017), Bill Smith, John LaPorta (who even recorded with Charlie Parker!!) Pute Wickmann and lots more... But why was it so difficult to find these role models?

Since this moment, I have felt very passionate about jazz clarinet education, and the accessibility of it.

Fast forward a few years, and somehow life brought me to the beautiful city of Hamburg, where I studied for my master's degree and now have the absolute honour of teaching at the same university (Hochschule für Musik und Theater). For me, it's really the dream job to be able to share my passion and research for jazz clarinet with open minded and dedicated students who are equally as inspired. In addition to this, I also work two days per week at another music school in the city, where I am mostly teaching school children and a handful of adults. A lot of these pupils are at a beginner/intermediate level, but I still try and squeeze in a bit of jazz repertoire into their curriculum ;). I'm definitely not the strictest teacher, especially with the younger pupils. I don't want them to have a negative experience with music, and I understand that they probably have so much on their plates anyway from the daily pressures of school life, etc. My main motivation is to inspire, encourage, and make the music lessons a positive experience, following in the footsteps of my former teacher.

Another project I like to work on when I have some free time is my jazz clarinet blog, where I share transcriptions and information about the clarinetists I have been studying. It fills me with so much happiness to know that this is used by many students across the world, classical and jazz alike.

...and the most beautiful part of it all? Whenever I go back to playing along with the recordings of Goodman or Artie Shaw, or introduce them to a student in a lesson, I can still feel in my heart the same longing for this incredible music.

“Creativity grows out of two things: curiosity & imagination” – Benny Goodman



Picture taken by Ursula Huntemann

You can watch Samantha playing in the Elbphilharmonie here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uX30umdZ1c>

You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2020/06/25/jazz-clarinet-and-me/>



You can discover more about Samantha on:

Instagram ([@samanthaclarinet](#))

Facebook ([@samanthaclarinet](#))

Twitter ([@samanthawrightt](#))

YouTube ([Samantha Wright](#))

her jazz blog ([Samantha Wright](#))



Ginevra, the small kid and the big guitar

January 2021 - When Ginevra was a kid, she decided to follow in the footsteps of her father, starting to play guitar. The passion for music seemed to fade away after moving to Turkey a few years later, but something helped her to recall how important it was in her life...

Everything started in September 2001 when, after listening to my dad playing guitar for all my childhood, I decided I wanted a guitar too.

The guitar was tiny, but my hands were still small. It was looking giant, but inside me I felt I was fitting perfectly with it.

Maybe I was too shy or maybe too stubborn to convince myself to take real guitar lessons. It took me some time to find the courage to finally get a teacher.

From being a kid with a big guitar, I became a teenager with an incalculable number of guitars and a crazy passion for music. But no matter the passion, my relationship with music has always been a mix between wanting to break the world with my notes and the fact of being so shy. Most of the time, the latter one was sadly hiding the first one, but I felt a crazy power when I played that kept the hype to make me better and better every day.



I was 16, and I started giving my first guitar lessons as a teacher to a few students when my life took a different and new way. I moved to Turkey, and music came with me. A mix of

feelings and facts kept it in the background, and slowly I saw it going in another direction than mine till the day I went to another city. I rented my own flat, and I found myself, my cat, and my guitar. The cat was a sweet monster, but he was lovely only when I was playing, and little by little I had time to take back everything I was feeling gone, months after meeting my fiancée. She became the first person after my father that actually pushed me not to give up and do what I really felt happy about doing. What else if not music, right? Exactly!

We moved back to Europe, in Spain, to be right. On a cold November morning in Madrid, something in me exploded and made me take my guitar and go to the place with people walking and always ready to listen to some chill music in the chaotic city. A few moments later I was in the streets of the city. If I think about it now, I felt like the smallest person there but, for the first time, I was proud of myself for finding the courage to do it!

The pandemic's time was hard. I tried to stay focused, study, and wait for the day in which I got my guitar on my back and started the show again.

And here I am now, busking in Valencia, meeting amazing people every day. They are always ready to give a smile, to chat, to sing, to clap, and to get emotional in the same way their emotions arrive at me.

I'm proud I broke that wall because the life behind it was waiting for me and I can not wait to see what more I will live.



You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/01/26/ginevra-the-small-kid-and-the-big-guitar/>



You can discover more about Ginevra on:

Instagram ([@ginnyrode](#))

YouTube ([ginny rode](#))

TRAVEL

“Travelling to polar regions is really putting into perspective how infinitesimal we are – infinite landscapes, untouched, uninterrupted, stretching in all directions. Also reminds you of how fragile earth is and the wonders we must protect.”

Charlotte



© Mikenzie Teela

Amantani Island

October 2020 - Once a year, on Amantani Island, locals celebrate Pachamata and Pachatata (Mother and Father Earth). Playing flutes and dancing, wearing traditional clothing. Colors and sounds that delighted Mikenzie and her husband.

I woke up to the murmuring of voices around me. In a dazed state of mind, I staggered off the bus at nearly four in the morning ready to start a new adventure. My husband and I had arrived in Puno, Peru, after travelling for six hours by bus from Cuzco. The most exciting part of travelling without a foreseen plan is the potential to discover new cultures in a way you would have never expected.

We arrived at a bus station full of busy people running from one place to the next, trying to find a tour of Lake Titicaca. My husband and I rolled the dice and took our chances with a company that offered us an exclusive adventure on the island of Amantaní. Little did we know, we arrived on the only day of the year that the Amantaní islanders would be throwing a celebration in honor of Pachamama and Pachatata.



Once our boat arrived on the other side of Lake Titicaca, we set off to summit the peak of the island at 3,800 meters. It was hard to breathe as we were unacclimated to the thin air, but we slowly wended up the path with hundreds of people who were dressed in traditional Andean clothing. Women were carrying baskets of food and men brought their instruments for the celebration. The top of the mountain was packed with people sitting on the ground, enjoying potatoes and all sorts of boiled grains.



© Mikenzie Teela

Music played on flutes and the banging of drums began to fill the air as the celebration began. I felt so out of place discovering this beautiful culture I had never even heard of before, but at the same time, extremely lucky to be a part of it. Nearly 800 families danced down the mountainside, hand in hand, laughing as the flutes played along to an unforgettable song. In the green valley that lays in the center of the island, the crowd gathered as each family took turns dancing in honor of Mother and Father Earth. I will never forget the amazing colors of the costumes or the sound of flutes floating into the sky. With the power and energy emitted by these islanders, it's no doubt that Pachamama and Pachatata supplied them with a bountiful harvest this year.



Amantani is an island on Lake Titicaca, which is the lake with the highest altitude in the world. It has very cold weather, but the warmth of the people makes up for the harsh climate. Since the island is so small in comparison with its population, the islanders are mostly vegetarian as there is not enough space to provide for much livestock. We stayed with a sweet couple who were kind enough to provide us with food and gave us a truly unique experience that I will always be grateful for.



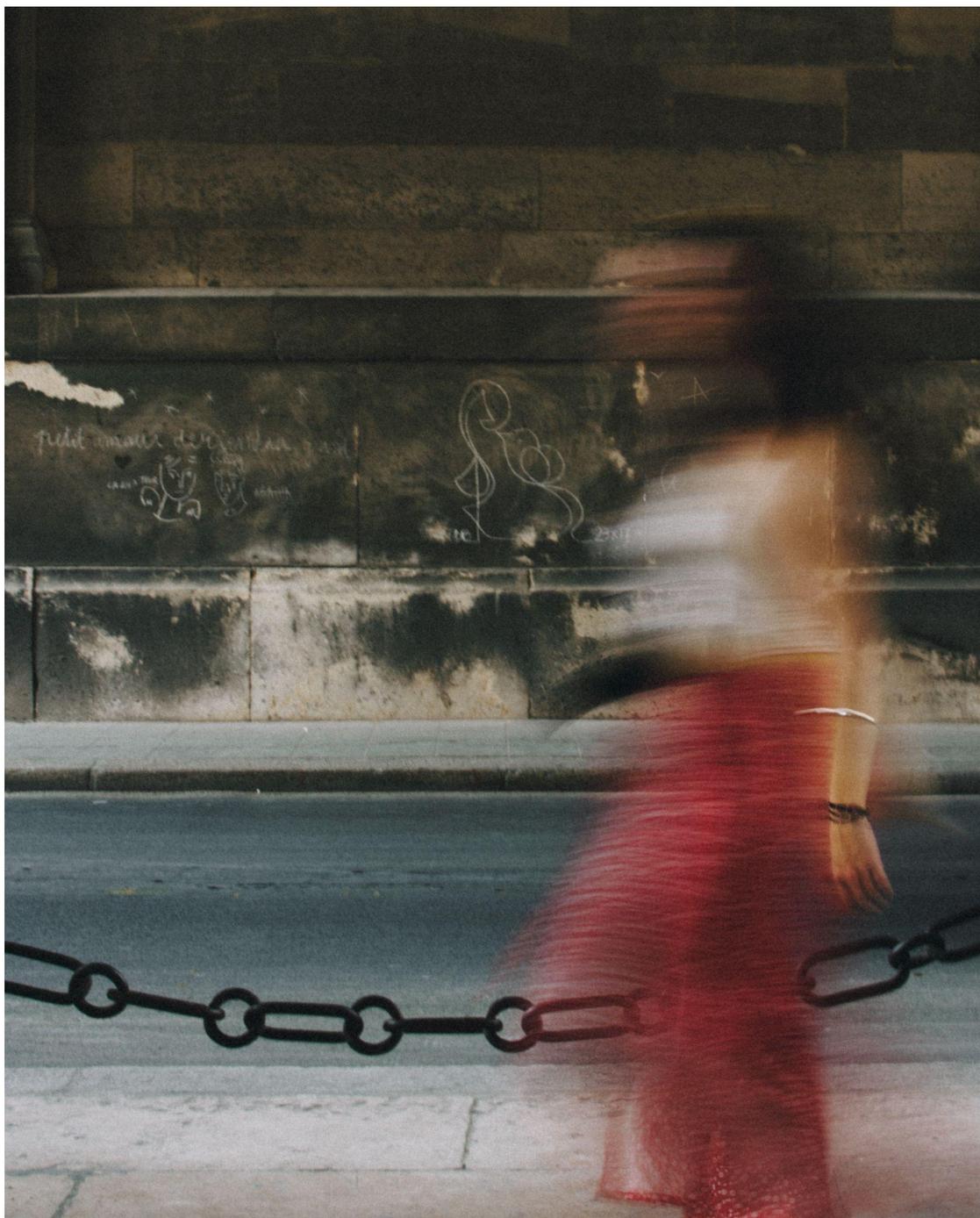
© Mikenzie Teela

You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2020/10/06/amantani-island/>



You can discover more on Mekenzie on Instagram ([@mikenzieteela](#))



Fotios, the waves and the streets

March 2021 - Two trips, crossing the big waves of the sea when he was a kid and walking with his girl in the streets of one of the most famous cities in the world a few years later. Fotios recalled his trips to Italy and Paris. Two adventures lived in different ways that remained in his heart.

I think the best way to start the article is to introduce myself. My name is Fotios (Foivos) Polyzos and I am from Greece. I grew up in Menidi, a small village in the west, and I left it for the city of Ioannina when I was 18 years old. I have been to eight countries so far, but today I would love to talk only about 2 trips: my first one abroad, in Italy with my parents in 2011, and one in Paris, France, in 2019.

I still remember the entire night of my first trip. Sadly, back then, I had no interest in the art of photography. We had an old Zenit analog camera with us, so I do not have many photos from this experience. My family and I were waiting for the ship to Bari at the port of Igoumenitsa. Our trip to Italy would last for 7 days and our last destination would be Venice. Some friends of mine had told me that the Adriatic Sea was not the scariest, but it wasn't even the most friendly either. I was informed that sometimes the waves and the wind could make the passenger afraid. Luckily, our ship cabin had a small classic round window. But I could not sleep. I was unreasonably frightened. After that the ship left, I was waiting for the open sea. My mind was ready for the big Hollywood waves. The reality differed from my thoughts. The sea was so calm that you almost could not realize that you were on a ship. Almost after 15 hours of travel, the Italian coast appeared on the horizon. My parents and I were gazing at the Adriatic Sea that a few minutes ago seemed endless. I was looking forward to getting to the port of Bari.

From there, the first stop was the ancient city of Pompeii. What you could see there is unbelievable. Even for a young teenager with a lack of love for history, the ruins of the city were magnificent.

Then, Rome...

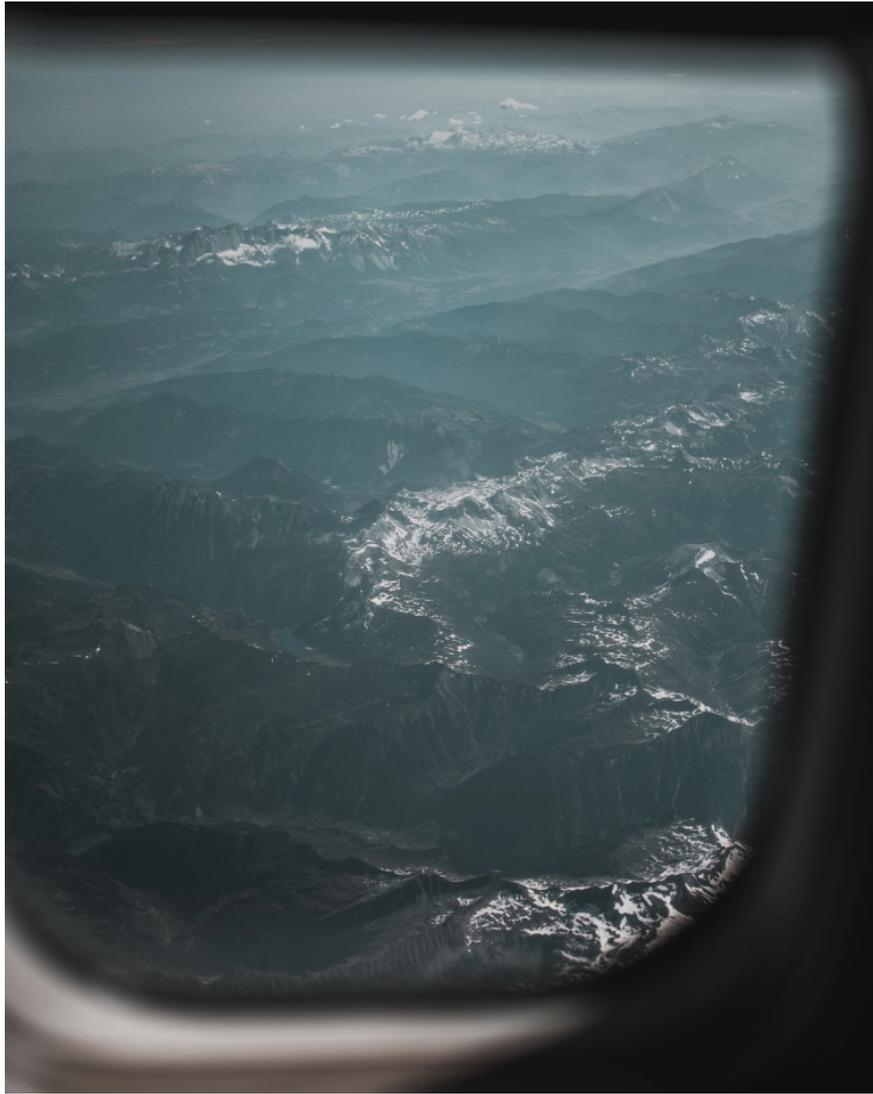
“Rome was a poem pressed into service as a city.” – Anatole Broyard

What can you say about Rome? The entire city is a monument. Wherever you look, the view is amazing. It is something that leaves you speechless. But for me, the most important thing about Rome was not the history, the Colosseum, the Fontana di Trevi, or even the beauty of the city. It was that I felt like I was home. I felt like that city wanted me to stay there. I was welcomed.



The last stops were the wonderful medieval city of Siena, then Firenze, and finally Venice. A trip that I will remember for my entire life with happiness and love.

The second destination that I would like to talk about is Paris. I am pretty sure that you do not wait to learn about that city from me. We all know where and what Paris is. My girl and I could not believe that we were flying there. In a few hours, we were aware (but we could not accept) that we were going to walk on its picturesque streets.



Our hotel was a relatively long distance from the city center, but this was not a problem for us. What we faced there was a cold shower and a dirty room, which smelled terrible. We knew France was not famous for the cleanliness of its cities in the old days, but we considered that such a thing was a distant memory of the past. The situation was so bad that we thought of coming immediately back to Greece. We planned the trip for 5 days and we knew we could not live like this for long. We decided that the best thing to do was to clean the room by ourselves and ban who was responsible for the cleanliness from entering. But something fascinated us in that hotel: the (distant) view of the Eiffel Tower. We could sit on our small balcony and gaze at this charming monument in the background.



The next day, we started to feel better. We were discovering the city, and many things amazed us. The beautiful architecture, the aromas of the city, and the charming famous monuments had begun to appear in our senses. We were looking forward to the next moment.

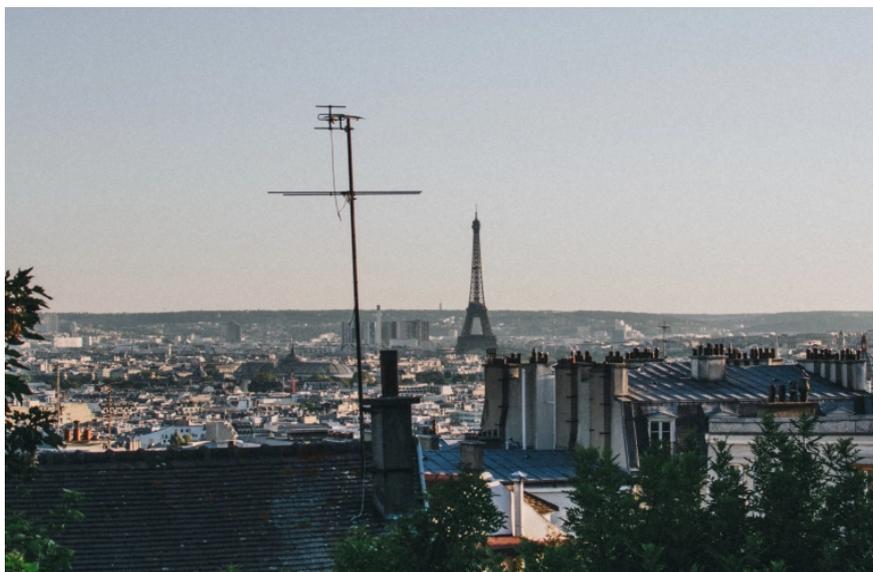
I will try to avoid the big talks about the famous sights (if this is possible when you talk about Paris) and I will hasten to highlight my personal photographic experience. This city is a photograph. Wherever you look, you can capture an amazing moment in the streets. If you are interested in this kind of photography, you have found your heaven. Now, if you are not,

you can mix your personal way of view with the city. Every small road makes you feel you are the protagonist of a movie.

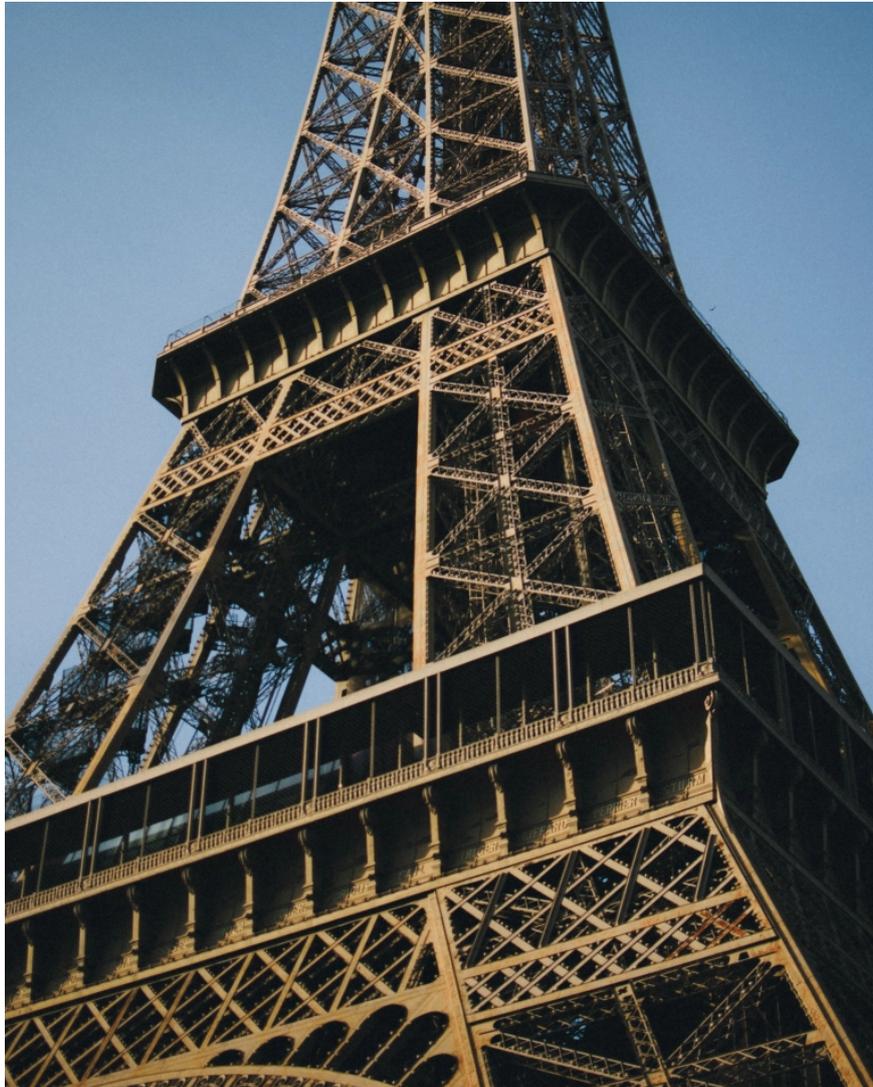


The truth, in my opinion, is that the region of Montmartre is the most charming area of the city. From any point of view. Whether you are interested in getting to know Paris, photographically or just for walking, it will win you over. It will make you feel like a visitor to another older era. Admiring the city from above, you realize its beauty.

Tip: if you get away a little from the major attraction of the area (i.e. the Sacré-Cœur), you will probably be able to enjoy a private view of the city.



A beautiful relaxed walk by the river Seine, having in your arms the girl you love, can make you forget about everything. You never know what you will encounter in the next strait. You may reach the most famous attraction of Paris, and perhaps of the entire world, the Eiffel Tower. We stole some time from exploring the city, and we preferred to lie down in the park located there, Parc du Champ de Mars.



To sum up, Paris is a city which knows how to sell itself. I would not change this trip with anything, and I hope that one day I will return.

Pro Tip: Do not miss the Pigalle Basketball Court in Montmartre.



You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2021/03/17/fotios-the-waves-and-the-streets/>



You can discover more about Fotios on Instagram ([@phoebus_p](#))



Arctic expedition

July 2020 - The appeal of the north, the dream of meeting a polar bear, and raising money for a charity made Charlotte sail in Svalbard. Surrounded by stunning beauty but also constant danger...

“Men go out into the void spaces of the world for various reasons. Some are actuated simply by a love of adventure, some have the keen thirst for scientific knowledge, and others again are drawn away from the trodden paths by the lure of little voices, the mysterious fascination of the unknown.” Sir E.H. Shackleton.

These are some of the many reasons a group of us decided to sail from London to the Arctic and back for 3 months, during which we would travel over 8,000 km with a near zero carbon footprint.

For me, it was the appeal of the north, the dream of meeting a polar bear, and raising money for a fantastic charity fighting hunger in the UK – the fundraising target would go towards providing 80,000 meals for vulnerable people. Making your dream come true while doing good in the world: it doesn't get better than this!

We split the trip in one to two weeks legs, with rotating crews. I would be joining at the end of June for a 2 weeks expedition around Svalbard and attempt to reach the ice cap above 81° Latitude North if weather and ice conditions permitted – and if we didn't get eaten by one of the 5,000 resident polar bears before then!

After months of preparation, the boat left London early June from St Katherine's dock. After the excitement of crossing Tower Bridge came some very rough days in the open seas with gale 9 storm and impressive waves, which caused significant damage to the boat (and made the crew quite sick!).

The Edinburgh channel was busy with oil tankers and cargo vessels, which the crew manoeuvred through before hitting the open sea. They reported, “You would be amazed how busy the Aberdeen coast guard is at 3 a.m. I could hear them on the radio helping another boat cope with fire, asking for assistance following a couple of red flares and even informing of a whale that had bumped into a ship” – glad the whale didn't bump into our boat, Le Boreal!

After the storm came the calm and the boat reached the Shetland coast. The crew managed to go ashore to explore the ancient Viking settlement of Mousa and check out the amazing wildlife. More feedback from the crew “I can't recommend a visit to Shetland strongly enough. It's got beautiful unspoiled scenery, more birds than you can count, and the most amazing cliffs you'll ever see. Not to mention the generous hospitality of the Shetlanders and their fresh fish and lamb dishes.”

Another 2 challenging weeks followed across the Norwegian sea: more storms, setting the stove on fire, and many unsuccessful attempts at fishing... until the boat finally arrived 30 miles from Svalbard, welcomed by whales playing hide and seek with us.



I joined the boat in Longyearbyen, the capital of Svalbard. Svalbard is an entirely visa-free zone and since 1925, anyone can settle on these islands – as long as you are up for freezing cold and three months of the polar night. About 2,500 people live there and represent 42 different nationalities! There are also 5,000 polar bears, so anyone travelling outside the settlements needs to have the means to scare off a polar bear – hence carrying a firearm is mandatory, and items like flare guns are also highly recommended.

We continued sailing north on the west coast of Svalbard. The goal was to reach 80 degrees north latitude and, ice conditions permitting, circumnavigate Svalbard.

The Arctic landscape was breathtaking and the 24h daylight allowed us to enjoy it irrespective of the time of the day, with countless photography opportunities. We got a drone to capture the infinite landscapes, but it got lost at sea after being knocked out by the spinnaker!



The weather was not as bad as expected – or maybe learning about proper layering helped! – but even in summer season temperatures and weather can change in a heartbeat: we had been sailing for a week under the midnight sun when everything turned pitch black – we were going through a terrible storm. On the other side of it was the most peaceful bay you could imagine. The transformation felt surreal. Mirror-like waters, ice floes scattered on the surface, and right in the middle of it was a lonely bearded seal, with long whiskers and big black eyes, looking as surprised as me. The whole scene was completely still, and it felt like time had stopped. I am so happy I captured this instant with my camera – which thankfully did not have the same ending as the drone!



We were on constant watch as the ice was not far, but also trying to spot polar bears from the boat as we definitely did not want a face to face on the shore! I was impressed by the variety and proximity of wildlife encountered – whales, seals, walruses, lots of polar bear tracks... – as well as small shelters scattered across the islands. One had a black board reading: “Leave this place in as good order as it was when we left it on 27 Aug 1966. P.S. There is more wood in the sauna house” and a box saying “May only be opened in desperate need of a beer” which must have been there for half a century – in hindsight the capital underlined “desperate” makes more sense.



We successfully crossed 80 degrees north and were ~900km from the North Pole, when we were lucky enough to meet two magnificent polar bears!

One night after dinner (around 3 a.m., one tends to lose track of time when the sun does not set!), a few of us got into the tender to go explore the coast. The sun was shining despite being in the middle of the night when I spotted something in the water: seals in squadron formation! We stopped the boat immediately. Looking around, it turned out we were at the entrance of a cove-turned-seal-nursery. The seals were now too close for us to backtrack, so we waited quietly, holding our breaths. They surrounded the tender – a small inflatable boat which would probably not have resisted seals’ sharp teeth – and checked us out. After a few seconds which felt like minutes, they decided we were not dangerous and started playing and jumping around the boat! Soon after, they were joined by the rest of the family, all playing and splashing around. It was the most incredible encounter.



Unfortunately, the ice pack found in the far northeast made circumnavigation impossible, so we had to backtrack our traces to Longyearbyen, but this was still an unforgettable experience – which also managed to raise enough to provide over 87,000 meals for vulnerable people in the UK that year.

Travelling to polar regions is really putting into perspective how infinitesimal we are – infinite landscapes, untouched, uninterrupted, stretching in all directions. Also reminds you of how fragile earth is and the wonders we must protect. Sailing in Svalbard is probably as wild as it gets, surrounded by incredible beauty but also constant danger (changing weather and ice conditions, and starving polar bears to name a few). A very different experience than Antarctica, where there are no terrestrial predators... but that's a story for another post!



You can read the story on the website here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2020/07/03/artic-expedition/>



You can read more about Charlotte on Instagram ([@photos by cf](#))

BONUS STORY

“I have an imperative need that comes from inside to look for beauty, whether in landscape or people. As a friend of mine tells me, I am a photographer of life and soul and there are so many stories behind the eyes that look at the camera...”

Laia



Laia, from the grandmother's camera to travel the world

July 2018 - Laia is a Spanish photographer that visited more than 60 countries. Everything started from a person very close to her: her grandmother, who traveled alone around the world during the dictatorship years and gave her the first camera. That was the beginning of a long adventure, visiting new places and improving her photographic skills day by day.

People ask me many times where my obsession with traveling comes from. My parents have barely gotten on a couple of airplanes in their lives compared to over 60 countries that I have visited... But what people do not expect is that answer: from my grandmother. She went through almost 70% of the world alone, in the decades of 60's, 70's and 80's... Where it was unthinkable that a woman in my country did such a thing, a dictatorship where the woman was no more than the housekeeper. I still remember her house full of junk from all over the world. It was like a museum. I had to go up on tiptoes on the chair to see those objects (jugs, masks, figures, paintings, rugs...), asking her where they were from. That is why I think I was very good at geography... I had an advantage over the rest of the class.

To all this, I can also add she loved photography, capturing every moment of her trips. Therefore, I grew up with a traveler and photographer grandmother... and I was so impressed that I said to myself that I wanted to do the same as her and travel around the world. Life has led me to it. The dreams of my childhood are real today. Very real.

I still remember my first camera, it was my grandmother that put it in my hands... She bought it in Tokyo; it was pure technology in the 80's. She taught me how to focus the subjects and press the shutter button, when to use the flash and how to put a reel. I have clear memories of that day...

I was growing and she was getting old until she could not travel anymore because of the aches and pains of her age. She felt good on getting on trains and planes until she was 80 years old. Then she stopped, but I took over. My first international trip was Greece, Athens, with the High School. The sirtaki that I danced in a Plaka tavernae of the neighborhood etched in my mind... as well the moment I told myself "dedicate yourself to travel" in front of the Parthenon.

I started working at the same time I was studying at the University; the money went to my studies and my trips. I did not have much money for high tech, so I went with a very basic analog camera; I still remember going to find the revealed pics super nervous to see the results... which obviously were very far from what could be considered a good photo. The composition was there, the soul of the people portrayed was there, embodied in those printed photos. They were photos with a message, but technically horrible.

I went to China when I was 26 as a backpacker for almost a month with one of my best friends, photographer and editor, and it was there where I tested her analog reflex... I experienced pure happiness every time I pressed the button. It was stuck in my mind. However, I still did not have money for one of those cameras... So my brother gave me a

digital compact. No longer developed photos, and this helped me to improve my skills to shoot since I could take all the pics that I wanted... No reel anymore, until I turned 30. I had saved enough to buy DSRL Canon, 1000 D for pure amateurs... OMG! What a horror of photos. I did not want to use the automatic option, because one does not buy a DSRL camera to use automatic, right? They are cameras for creating. Many many photos I had to do to learn to master the camera.

After a few years, life has taken me to one of the best hubs to travel: Dubai. I have been working and living there for almost three years. I have over 60 countries on my back; some have traveled with friends, others alone and others with special agencies for very specific trips and difficult access. Perhaps the countries that have most influenced me have been those where expectations were low, where the press has always disfavored like Colombia, Iran, Iraq or even Afghanistan (I was only in the Pamir). Nowadays I travel with a Canon 6D Mark II, a professional camera, relatively light to travel with three lenses... And although I still have a lot to learn, my photos have technically improved. Moreover, a good editing always helps to give them the last artistic touch.

Photography and traveling go hand in hand. I have an imperative need that comes from inside to look for beauty, whether in landscape or people. As a friend of mine tells me, I am a photographer of life and soul and there are so many stories behind the eyes that look at the camera... A tribe in the middle of the jungle, or a market lost in the Tajikistan mountains, or a Bedouin in the desert. Each of my portraits explains a story, and each of my photos explains mine.

My home, like my grandmother's, is full of travel junks. I also hope to one day be able to teach my grandchildren how a camera works and explain where each object that decorates my house comes from. It is the best I may do for them.



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About four years ago Cowboys from Space contacted me. They asked me for an article about the main reasons for my passion for traveling and photography and I shared the story about my grandmother and her passion for the world. Back then in 2018 I was based in Dubai... and I'm still here. But a lot of things have happened in the last four years, at all levels. On a personal level, I have had the great fortune of meeting a group of travelers in Dubai with whom we have been to many countries in all this time. Despite always having been a solo traveler, I started to move in a different way, giving a completely different approach.

As it is worth mentioning, the solo traveler has many advantages. Among them, you do what you want and when you want. The personal growth when traveling alone is massive; the connection with oneself is very healthy on many levels, both spiritual and mental. Whenever I come back from a solo trip, my self-confidence and self-love increases exponentially. It is a great way to break free from the routine and connect with our own being (most of the time we forget to do it in this fast life). But nevertheless, there are practical disadvantages in traveling alone such as security and cost. As a travel solo woman, I have to be very mindful of which destinations I choose to visit. Those with high levels of violence or in conflict are better to avoid if going alone. There are many countries (mostly in Africa) where traveling alone is very expensive because of the lack of infrastructure and transport. This is the main reason to always hire a driver and a guide, increasing the cost of the trip. So, the possibilities

of traveling to new destinations were greatly limited. Accidentally and after several pop-up ads on Facebook, I found this travel agency-community in Dubai. The way of traveling was a revelation for me: apart from meeting new people, the activities included in the trips are fun and very original. It is a way to know the country unconventionally, such as crossing Senegal and Gambia on a motorcycle, riding a horse in the snowy mountains of Kyrgyzstan, touring Sri Lanka by bike or having a picnic at Saddam Hussein's palace in Iraq. On top, the destinations are not touristic at all, the kind that only the hard travelers dare to go. All this has led to the fact that, in four years, I have traveled to more than 40 new countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Mali, Chad, Siberia, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Victoria Falls, Okavango...

Not only my way of traveling has changed. I upgraded my photographic equipment with one of the best lenses on the market (70-200mm, 2.8) mainly for safaris and portraits. The combination of the two things: more exotic, complicated destinations and a small equipment (I only carry two lenses in my backpack) but top quality have made the technical quality and content of my photos change dramatically. My camera became an extension of my hands while traveling. I also have to mention that I started shooting in Raw four years ago and turned lightroom into my main editing tool. It greatly improves the quality, the atmosphere of photography... and best of all, you create your own vision, you create art. The evolution of my photographs is notorious, whether in technique or the way to tell a story. The meaning is more captivating, it reaches the soul of the subject... For this, I have also learned to connect with unknown people, a huge challenge for me since I'm a very shy and introverted person. It's not easy for me to talk or engage with people I don't know. So, I also learned to be more communicative, breaking many of my own limitations. I'm a pretty lonely person in general, I don't like large avalanches of people. In order to recover the energy I need to be alone for a while every day. Even on group trips it's sometimes a bit difficult for me, photography helps me to be in my world, so one thing makes up for the other.

And I know that many of you will wonder, how have you done to travel in the pandemic? Well, I have to say that it has been two complicated years in that aspect, but the luck of living in a city whose airport is one of the main hubs in the world has made it much easier. Apart from the fact that most destinations have been closed for a long time. But there have been many other destinations that immediately opened in 2020. The destinations in these two years have been mainly in Africa: Namibia, Botswana, Chad, Malawi, and others such as Russia (Siberia), the island of Socotra in Yemen, Maldives or Armenia. I have lowered the pace of trips a lot: before the pandemic I made about 10-15 per year, now only 6-7 maximum per year since 2020. Traveling is not as easy as before, but little by little it is returning to normal and I hope that the pace of my travels too.

Something very interesting that has happened during this time thanks to the improvement of my photography is connecting and collaborating with other artists. Among them and the most notable, is the collaboration that began at the end of 2020 with the German artist Seona Sommer. She contacted me through my Instagram account. She is a realist genre painter who bases her paintings on original photographs. The detail of her paintings, as well as the expression embodied in a canvas, is something really moving. They are authentic pieces of art in 3D. The realistic level that her paintings reach is something almost surreal. Sometimes when I look at her paintings I see a real photo, my photo. This great collaboration has made Seona dare to go further and start a series of paintings with a specific theme. Her curiosity always pushes her to go further and go through increasingly complex photographs, with a high level of detail. So, I'll continue to travel, and I hope to continue to be an inspiration to Seona.

I don't know what the future holds for me, but I do know that I want to keep traveling, getting to know new destinations, cultures, landscapes... becoming my lifestyle even more. In four years, I have been able to see evolution in my photos. I only wish to continue improving, to feel more and more connected with myself and what I want to express. I want my photos to speak even more, to be deeper for the narrative, telling stories that touch hearts. Photography is nothing more than the reflection of oneself, what one feels seeing a photo is what their inner world treasures. As a photographer I only hope to be able to awaken those emotions.





You can read the story both in English and Spanish here:

<https://cowboysfromspace.wordpress.com/2018/07/01/laia-from-the-grandmothers-camera-to-travel-the-world-laia-desde-la-camara-de-su-abuela-hasta-viajar-por-el-mundo/>



You can discover more about Laia on Instagram ([@laialopez](#))

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"I want my photos to speak even more, to be deeper for the narrative, telling stories that touch hearts."

Laia.

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