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Premium

National Geographic photographer Michael Yamashita calls Singapore photogenic



Photographer Michael Yamashita (above) posted photos of a bus zooming past the greenery at Parkroyal hotel on Pickering Street and silhouettes of the supertrees at Gardens by the Bay as part of a Temasek project. PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR, MICHAEL YAMASHITA ON TEMASEK'S INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

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Having lived here in the 1970s, National Geographic's Michael Yamashita was recently in town on a project and says the landscape here is "so groomed"



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Veteran National Geographic photographer Michael Yamashita may have been a latecomer to digital photography, but he has taken to social media like a fish to water.

"The wonderful thing about Instagram is the immediacy of this medium," says the 69-year-old Japanese-American, who has 1.4 million followers there.

"I would do a story for the magazine and wait two months to get two letters to the editor. Now, I put up a picture and I get 3,573 comments... That is really direct communication."

Whipping out his iPhone at the Botanic Gardens last week, he marvels at the response to one photo he took last week: a green bus zooming past the rain-soaked greenery at Parkroyal hotel on Pickering Street.

He adds: "We had some interesting weather, not just the sun, but also lots of rain, which I enjoy shooting. The rain really saturates the colour green... I also shot here in the Botanic Gardens after the rain. It was magical."

He was in town to capture photos spotlighting sustainability in the Republic, as part of a project commissioned by Singapore investment company Temasek.

Taking over Temasek's Instagram page for several days, he posted photos ranging from silhouettes of the supertrees at Gardens by the Bay to greenery in Changi Airport's Terminal 3.

Twenty photos will be on display in June at Temasek's annual sustainability conference Ecosperity .

Aside from travelling the world to take photographs, Yamashita, who joined National Geographic in 1979, has also held numerous photo exhibitions and published more than 10 books.

About a fortnight ago, he gave a TEDx talk at his alma mater Wesleyan University, in Connecticut, in the United States, where he did a degree in Asian studies.

His long career as a photographer has seen him traipse through war zones, deserts and mountains, from the Great Wall of China to Taleban-controlled Afghanistan.

He started his career in Singapore, where he lived between 1976 and 1977. After knocking on the doors of marketing and advertising firms, he landed a job with Batey Ads, shooting Singapore Girl destinations around the world.

In Singapore in the 1970s, he recalls that "the harbour was filled with bumboats and Change Alley was where I used to change my money".

These days, he says, "everything is so groomed".

Does he feel it is too manicured?

"It's more photogenic than ever... The hard part is shooting the un-manicured," he says.

"In Japan, the wonderful thing is how they control nature. It's idealised nature," he adds, referring to traditional Japanese gardens.

After leaving Singapore, he returned to the US, where he joined the National Geographic magazine.

He is famous for his journeys retracing the footsteps of Marco Polo and Zheng He, which have also been made into documentaries.

"In the case of Marco Polo, I followed the land Silk Road starting from Venice and going through Turkey and Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, through China, then back via the sea Silk Road.

"Then I did the story of Zheng He and followed his travels through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, into the Arabian Peninsula and into Africa... I have amassed this collection of photographs on the Silk Road that no one else has."

The cover photo of his 2002 book, *Marco Polo: A Photographer's Journey*, shows camels crossing the desert against a backdrop of giant sand dunes.

The iconic picture was the result of luck and ingenuity. When he arrived at the Taklamakan Desert in north-west China, he was disappointed to find that the area was overrun with tourists and the camels all had numbers on them.

"Looking for a solution, I got back in the car, started driving around the mountain, a thousand-foot sand dune... and on the east side, I saw my picture.

"As the sun came over the top, it put those camels in shadow. So then underexposing the photograph, there's a silhouette and you can't see that it's tourists on hired camels with numbers. So I did my job: I created the illusion of travel in the 13th century."

He shoots thousands of photographs a day and always has a camera with him. "If it's not this camera" - he motions to his Sony camera - "it's a cellphone".

He uses an iPhone 7 - due for an upgrade to an iPhone X - and has also been hired by telecommunications companies such as Huawei, Oppo and Vivo which want to show customers that they can take photos "that sing" using their smartphones.

Yamashita is married to a freelance journalist, with whom he has a 22-year-old daughter they adopted from Vietnam. They live in rural New Jersey, where he maintains a studio. He has also been a volunteer fireman for about 30 years.

"It's a way to give back to your community, in a small town where there are no professional firefighters."

And it's not just "boys with big toys", he adds. "At a fire scene, I carry my camera and shoot... I'm allowed beyond the police line. I have pictures of fires second to none."

With the market becoming more saturated and magazines such as the National Geographic having declining sales figures, it has become tougher for photographers to make a living.

"The competition is huge for these (young) guys. I was there in the glory days, where you did two or three stories a year. Now, a lot of the photographers may do only one story every two or three years."

He adds: "There are many young photographers, especially Asian photographers, who look at me. It's a white man's world. It's something you have to be so passionate about that you have to be willing to do it no matter what."

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