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## Jason Florio

By Louisa J. Curtis



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I was first introduced to [Jason Florio](#) a few years ago by mutual friend and fellow photographer Gordon Watkinson. Apart from photography, we had a few other things in common, we are all British, we all have a similar and rather daft sense of humor and we all somehow ended up living in New York. In Jason's case, he told me that he originally came to the USA to skateboard and then he realized that if he really wanted to be a photographer, he needed to learn from the some of the best, and they were in New York. I liked Jason as soon as I met him and I also loved his work. In fact, he was one of the very first photographers on the original Chatterbox website when I started my business back in 2005.

I think it is safe to say that we have both come a long way since then and I am really excited to be writing this article about Jason and in particular, about his latest adventure to The Gambia in West Africa. Although Jason has traveled for many years now, and has visited this particular region of West Africa before, this time he decided to walk around the entire circumference of the country! I asked him how the idea for this particular trip came about, why The Gambia and why walking? *"Helen, my girlfriend and I had been playing with the idea of a long journey when we were told by a friend at a Brooklyn dinner party that he had walked 500 miles across Europe on the El Camino de Santiago pilgrimage. Helen said, "How far do you think it is to walk around the entire circumference of The Gambia?" I guesstimated around 700 miles. So it was at that dinner we decided to make the expedition. We have both been going to The Gambia independently for about 13 years. For Helen it has been a place of sanctuary from life in central London, and for me, I have been working on a long term project documenting the people that live and work around a sacred forest there called Makasutu. Helen would normally spend most of her time with friends who live on the coast, and I would be entrenched in the bush, so neither of us had seen much outside our areas of focus. We did not want to blaze around the country in an SUV, we wanted to really feel the country, immerse ourselves, observe the nuances of the changes of the flora, fauna, people, landscape, and we felt by walking we would have a much more honest interaction. Also, from my research no one in recorded history had made a circumnavigation of The Gambia by foot, so it was a challenge as well."*

With any photo shoot or an expedition of this magnitude, there is much, much more to be done than just the actual photography. Production and planning is key, whether you are shooting in a studio, on the streets of New York, or in a remote African village. So I asked Jason how they divided the duties? *"Helen was joint expedition leader and chief producer for the expedition. She made sure everything got ticked off the extensive lists we had especially during pre-production stage - which took 6 months. On the road we shared duties, but it was my job to map read and gaze at the GPS. Helen was our female voice of reason, blogger extraordinaire, and resident donkey whisperer. We had three Gambian friends with us - Janneh, who was negotiator and security, Samba Lee was our cultural liaison man, and Momadou Bah was our donkey handler, and maker of 'attire' - a sweet green tea, the Gambians' version of espresso. But we all mucked in to put up the camp, procure food and have a good time. Helen shot lots of great pics along the route. The whole team was rallied to help with the formal portraits. While Helen was typing furiously at night, I would make a traditional offering to the chief, called 'silafando,' which translates to - 'a gift to you on behalf of our journey.' This involves presenting the Alkalo (chief) with 5 kola nuts (bitter nuts from Guinea-Bissau, that are prized by Gambian elders). I would then give them a print of themselves and ask them to stamp my photo-journal with the official Alkalo stamp to prove we had passed through their village."*

Not only did this small group accomplish a major feat by walking around The Gambia, but Jason has also captured some truly beautiful and breath-taking portraits. I asked what else is planned for the project and so far they are working on some book ideas and a potential exhibition. During the trip Helen's Blog was hosted through a Adventure Travel Magazine in the UK and Jason recently had a feature piece in the travel section of the London Independent. I can't imagine someone not wanting to show this work somewhere? Much of Jason's portrait work in Africa was shot in B&W, so I asked him why color this time? *"I was planning to continue to shoot b/w medium format film as I have done for the Makasutu sacred forest portraits, but the plan was to give a print to each chief or elder whom we photographed along the way. We had a printer powered by a car battery from which I could print 4x6 photographs shot on my digital camera. But after the second chief I photographed became enamored with the color, digital became the de-facto way to go. Although I essentially shot the portraits the same way as I have with the same background in black and white, the color made this series it's own entity and not just a continuation of the previous body of black and white work."*

The portraits are truly charming, and you can see just how comfortable the chiefs are with Jason taking their photograph, even allowing for the fact that he gave them gifts as well! Just as Callie Lipkin (in last month's article) talked about how she is able to get more and more from her models by working with them over a period of time, here Jason has been traveling to this particular country for over 12 years now, so it is evident in the portraits that he is not intruding, they trust and accept him. Not everyone shares the same path however. For instance, some photographers may be called upon to capture a brilliant portrait with only a "few minutes" to spend with a "celebrity" or "corporate head." That requires another skill set but in the same way, it is still about connecting with your subject so that they trust you. We only have a few seconds to make that 1st impression, so find a way for your subject to feel comfortable with you.

Jason is the perfect blend of "serious" and "silly." On the one hand, you have a person who has spent much of his working photographic career overseas as a photojournalist, documenting various issues, topics and often-troubled nations. On the other hand, you have someone with a wicked sense of humor who never fails to crack me up! Having a sense of humor is extremely important so that we can find some balance and avoid taking ourselves too seriously! Humor gets us through crisis, so it is a good idea to keep things light and lively so that your clients enjoy working with you and will hopefully want to work with you again. I've heard Art Directors freely admit that they want to know that they are going to have a good time on a shoot! And just as Jason gave Kola nuts and prints as gifts for the chiefs, remember Art Directors like gifts too and generally like to be fed. Remember, production is "food and chairs!" I asked Jason what was the funniest moment from this trip and he said, *"Waking late one night to the sound of someone having an incredibly loud attack of wind and thinking it was Samba Lee, only to find the next morning it was Paddy, one of our donkeys."* Not surprisingly, this was the exact same answer he gave me for what was the scariest moment of the entire trip, closely followed by, *"Getting stung by a huge wasp called a dondillo. I swelled up everywhere, even my lips looked like they had a fight with a botox needle. I finally passed out in our tent thinking this is it, another Englishman lost to the Whiteman's Grave..."*

With his roots firmly entrenched in Photojournalism, Jason quite rightly sees himself as a "storyteller." I asked him if he keeps a journal when he travels and he said, *"Yes, the journal is an essential tool for me due to my bad memory. This time, because we were walking I used an audio recorder as my journal, as by the time we had set up camp for the night, made the portraits of the chiefs, I was too exhausted to put pen to paper!"* I asked Jason if he considers himself a photojournalist first, or a fine artist, or is there even a division, is it just all photography? And he replied, *"As Kabir the Indian poet once said 'we are all individually multiple.'" This is certainly something for us all to consider as artists, especially in today's world. It is okay, and sometimes necessary for many of us to wear multiple hats and make our living through different outlets. And it is okay for photographers to have their work seen in multiple arenas. If your passion is to make photographs, then they can be shown as editorial, fine art, commercial, consumer, it doesn't matter, as long as the message is clear and you are shooting from your soul, the images will find a home.*

I gave Jason my **ChatterDozen** quick-fire questions to mix it up a little:

- 1) Most essential piece of photographic gear? - *Dust off*
  - 2) Most essential piece of non-photographic gear? - *PG Tips tea bags*
  - 3) Was there anything that you wished you hadn't taken with you? - *My grumpy 4am wake-up call attitude. And we took way too many books. We sent the library back after the first 12 days. The donkeys were very happy about not having to haul that lot, especially as they are not big readers themselves.*
  - 4) What 3 words best describe your photography? - *Black, white and color!*
  - 5) Who is your favorite photographer? - *Don McCullin*
  - 6) What is your favorite TV show? - *I don't have a TV*
  - 7) What is your favorite food? - *Tea*
  - 8) Favorite color? - *Khaki (is that even a color?)*
  - 9) Favorite animal? - *Humans*
  - 10) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? - *Captain Sir Richard Burton (British explorer), Mungo Park (Scottish explorer), Eric Newby (English author) and Rumi (Persian poet and philosopher)*
  - 11) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? - *Pre K-Mart*
- And my final (and one of my favorite questions) for Jason was:
- 12) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? - *Thanks goes to the creator of light, without him/her I would be sat in the dark working at Goldman Sachs and making a ridiculous bonus.*

See more of Jason Florio's adventures at <http://www.floriophoto.com>

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