





The Thirst for Travel

Growing up in Nigeria, studying in America and photographing the polar regions, **Lola Akinmade Åkerström**'s journey has been an exhilarating one. With a degree and a career specialising in Geographic Information Systems, she is today one of the foremost travel photographers in the world. Her work has appeared in *National Geographic Traveler*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *The Guardian*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Slate*, *Lonely Planet*, *Fodor's*, *National Geographic Channel*, several in-flight magazines, *New York Times* online. She has also bagged a number of awards, including winning the 2018 Travel Photographer of the Year Bill Muster Award. She talks to us about her experiences over the years, battling institutionalised racism, and her undying love of capturing cultures through her lens.

Lola Akinmade Åkerström's is an adventurous story, from studying geography to becoming a traveller and going on to explore the world. But it all started back in her home country Nigeria. She had always been fascinated by geography and culture, ever since she was young. At the age of 15 she moved from Nigeria to the United States to start college. With a technical educational background, she worked as a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) programmer and system architect for many years. However, it was her love for travel that pushed her towards photography. Whenever she travelled, she would take pictures of scenes and situations that she would bring back and paint from as an oil painter. She soon realised that her photos were strong enough to stand on their own and she ditched oil painting and started exploring photography as a medium of expression.

Moving from oil painting to photography, she started off with a

Minolta film camera. From her early travels in Scandinavia to volunteering with the Eco-Challenge expedition race in Fiji, she found the feeling of creating art and trying different compositions was nothing short of invigorating. From National Geographic Traveller to BBC and more, once she started getting her work published, that was when she was ready to call herself a professional photographer. Today, shooting as a professional there is another set of feelings overwhelming her, ones of appreciation and gratitude that she is now being paid to bring her own vision and style to travel photography, she said.

It's her deep-seated love for travel and geography that naturally directed her into travel photography. She has the knack for exploring culture through food, tradition, and lifestyles and her work evidently encapsulates these interests. Her approach to travel photography is two-fold, she explains. "When shooting landscapes, I try to convey the feelings





of being there – was it moody? scary? awe-inspiring? – and this subconsciously manifests itself while editing too. When creating environmental portraits of people, I’m very cognizant and respectful of making sure how I present them to the world is how they want and choose to be presented to the world, not what I want.”

Having never gone to a photography school, Lola considers herself a self-taught photographer who is still learning. But as she started wading her way through her career, there were a couple photographers whose work she truly admired from the onset. “I love working with natural light and Mitchell Kanashkevich is a master when it comes to working with natural light during his travels. My fascination with National Geographic led me to some portraits by photographer Alison Wright. But when it comes to photographing complete strangers, my friend Joel Carillet has an uncanny gift of approaching even the most sensitive subjects and coming away with amazing portraits.”





Lola's African heritage plays a large role in inspiring her aesthetic style, and she is drawn to colours and vibrance. "I grew up surrounded by a lot of colour and contrast so that is what my eyes naturally see and gravitate towards. So, my editing style is rich in terms of dark colours, heavy contrast, and vibrance." She also loves isolation and focusing on specific subjects or elements and loves vignetting.

For Lola, preparing for a travel shoot entails a large amount of research from the get go. "Where I'm going, what types of images already exist, how I can create something different and unique. I make

sure I have some local contacts – not only as fixers (depending on the length of the assignment) but to also get their local expertise and knowledge as well. And then, I leave myself flexible and open for serendipity because some of the best images are made that way."

For Lola the main reward in this field is getting to do what she's truly passionate about while exploring the world. However, that does not come that easy. As an African female travel photographer, she tells us that one of the main challenges for her is still battling institutionalised racism and prejudice. "After all, the typical image of a travel

photographer that is still being flashed by media is of the rugged white male who looked like he just scaled Everest. So, that is what I have been actively battling against as well. To fight the single story of what a successful travel photographer looks like." Speaking of hindrances that she faces, she added, "Beyond constantly being aware of one's safety, also being granted access into male-only domains and not being taken as seriously within patriarchal structures as a male photographer would can be challenging—but not impossible."

She tries to get to Nigeria once every year if she can and her Nigerian roots



play a part in her life and her profession. “Mostly from the cultural aspect. I grew up with strong cultural values and so it is this I subconsciously seek when I explore other cultures and lands. What makes us similar, what makes us different, and why.”

Speaking about the importance of post-production in your photography, Lola said, “It is key because it helps communicate the emotion of being there based on how one edits their photos. As I already alluded to, I love isolating elements so I use vignetting to further draw the eyes to my subjects. Also, because I used to be an oil painter, my



use of colours and contrasts are deep and heavy because that is what I as an artist naturally gravitate towards.”

With an endless list of achievements, Lola says that she is humbled by every award or shortlist. The biggest achievement for her as a travel photographer, beyond seeing her work in the pages of *National Geographic Traveller*, was winning the 2018 Bill Muster Travel Photographer of the Year award from the Society of American Travel Writers (SATW). “The symbolism of an African woman being crowned the best of the lot in that particular year is significant and probably an historic moment for both me and the organisation itself.”

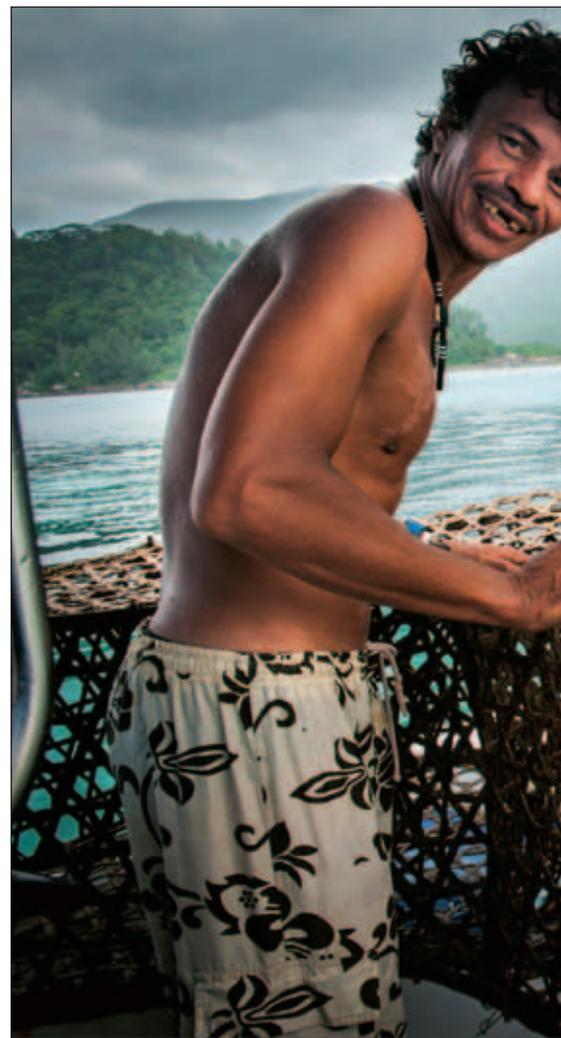
As a travel photographer who loves environmental portraits of people, Lola stresses on the need of having the skills of sensitivity and respect. “The minute you ask someone to invite you into their personal space, the interaction no longer becomes about what you want, but rather, what they are willing to share and give you. I think we need to reduce sneaking shots of people and instead, approach and acknowledge them.”

Lola has an affinity with colder countries, and she has explored them at great length, including Greenland,

the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and other Nordic countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, including the Lapland region. One of her dreams is to some day visit the North Pole. She has spent some time exploring indigenous Sami culture as well. Speaking about it, she said, “I am interested in culture and the more different the culture is from my own, the more it draws me to try to understand it. In terms of a wishlist – Antarctica, Svalbard, both the North & South Poles as well as the Kola peninsular of Russia remain on my dream list.”

With so many years of travel exploring 60+ countries, Lola has a number of memorable shots. But she narrated to us two that instantly came to her mind. The first image was shot when she was in the Seychelles on assignment for the Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts. Lola went out with fishermen Jerry and Leopold to go pull out fish traps, and captured them. Narrating the moment, she said, “The look on Jerry’s face when he found his trap full of fish showed me what true passion is. These fishermen go out every morning before dawn because they truly love what they do. What will you wake up before dawn to do because you’re passionate about it?”

Her second image was created when



she was husky-sledding in Jokkmokk, Swedish Lapland. During a short pause, one of the huskies turned to look at her, they locked eyes, and she captured that exact moment. “That photo has opened many doors for me – especially within the National Geographic brand,” she said.

Currently Lola has a couple photography assignments coming up, as well as travels to China, Tanzania, and more. She is now also a featured contributor at *Adventure* magazine. “I would love to lead travel photography workshops in the future but need to find the right partners. I have a couple personal projects and ideas in the works too. Overall, I am looking forward to pushing myself and growing as a photographer too.”

Lola’s words of wisdom to aspiring photographers is to specialise and find one’s niche. “The time to be a generalist



WEAPONS OF CHOICE



When Lola crossed over from exploring photography as a hobby to pursuing it as a profession, her first DSLR was a small Nikon D40. “It was a far cry from the gear top photographers were lugging. But some images I took with that small D40 netted me a couple awards and shortlists, and that was when I realised my craft and technique was more important than my gear. While I’ve certainly upgraded my gear today, I still have that little D40 that opened up this world to me.”

She has stuck with Nikon through the years, and owns Nikon bodies (D750 FX, D700 FX, D300 DX) as well as a ton of Nikkor lenses, including 24-70mm, 70-300mm, 24-300mm, 18-200mm, 50mm, 85mm and 14-24mm. She also has a backup Sony A7 mirrorless camera.

is long gone. The industry is so saturated and to be able to stand out, you need to be able to offer something different. Try to find your niche and develop that niche. Start building your online presence around your niche so people can start finding you. Plus, the main benefit is that you’ll be focused on what you’re actually passionate about, and that passion will sustain you during the highs and lows,” she concluded.

Find Lola at her blog – www.lolaakinmade.com – and on social media as @LolaAkinmade.

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