

Sojourn for a Photojournalist

When you're the only photojournalist on a cruise, with an end result due to publishers, how do you maximise your time to create fully fledged features?

Lynn Gail explores shooting techniques for photographers in a large group.

THE LESSER SUNDA Islands are part of a volcanic arc sitting in the Flores Sea in Indonesia. SeaTrek Sailing Adventures had invited me on board one of their majestic, hand-built phinisi schooners to write features, showcasing the stunning



archipelago they explore during a seven-day cruise. The idea was very appealing, but logistically I wondered how I could deliver images when shooting at the wrong time of day and interview villagers in a limited amount of time while surrounded by 20 passengers.

If it's Raining – Cover it

Being April and the tail-end of the wet season, the heavens poured down on us for two days. All I could see was a thick blanket of black rain clouds that delivered an onslaught of needling rain when I stepped on deck. When one of the crew mentioned snorkelling, I wondered if he'd spent too long at sea? They obviously knew something I didn't – so when in Rome!

As part of my kit, I always carry a lightweight underwater camera, the compact Ricoh WG-30W. It delivers good quality record images, large enough for editorial use, although you are at the whim of the camera's preprogrammed modes and cannot shoot in manual. If weight is not an issue, and you own underwater casings for your DSLR, you could end up with spectacular images as these waters offer some of the world's most pristine snorkelling arenas. Even when it's pouring with





rain, the aquatic playground below is a kaleidoscope of rich vibrant marine life.

If it's Still Raining – Cover it

Most camera bodies today can cope with a little wet, but not too many photographers like to risk drowning their digital electronics in heavy downpours. On our itinerary was the island of Satonda, a mystical volcanic island, home to a saltwater filled lake. As the weather was really throwing up some challenges, most passengers had stayed behind. Just getting in the inflatable dinghy to go ashore was proving a problem. Armed with an umbrella as a prop and the Ricoh, the able crew helped us safely ashore. If you have a willing subject who is happy to pose in the middle of a lake with your umbrella, you can then create conceptual type images that reflect your journey, whilst also sharing some amusing moments! The island also boasts a wishing tree – we wished for the end of the rainy season.

The Sun Comes Out

One of the features I covered for SeaTrek was the story of the Buginese boat-builders on Sumbawa Island for a feature in *Silkwinds* – SingAir's inflight magazine (Singapore Airline's regional airline). The Buginese people construct 40-metre, 300-tonne sea vessels along the hot black sandy beaches of Wera Village. Amazingly they build them without blue prints, not even an outline, just from memory and techniques passed down through the generations. My brief was to document the Bugis skills, their community and cultural lifestyle.



If you are part of a group when travelling, but want to capture the realness of a community, fall back and wait. Villages off the beaten track are generally very safe, so let the group go ahead, cover your needs and either catch up, or wait for their return. When all the initial excitement has calmed down, I often find villagers return to their work and accept your presence. A friendly hello and showing them the camera go a long way to being welcomed.

As the sun began to dry the sodden earth, it created a harsh light on the Bugis boat-builders (photographers are never happy). When capturing people outdoors, with a view to creating environmental portraiture, look for an angle that best showcases the entire scene. Moving the subjects is not usually an option, so walk around and analyse the setting.

The men were working under a thin shelter of palm fronds which created an ugly dappled light on their faces. Contrasty light across the face either causes blown-out highlights or deep dark shadows, depending where you meter. Metering for the highlights can result in deep shadow areas, metering for the shadows will result in blown-out skin. Look for areas at the location that are in full shade where the light is more even, lending a softer light to the face. Watch your backgrounds too,





a correctly exposed subject against a glary backdrop can get lost as the eye wanders to the bright space.

As the men moved around working with hand tools, I captured them using the Fujinon XF 16-55mm f2.8 (equivalent 28-70mm) on an X-Pro2 camera body. This 'workhorse' lens is perfect, enabling you to shoot wide to record the whole story, whilst also having the capability to zoom in for portraits and detail shots. At the f2.8 end, with the aperture wide open, it allows for shallow depth-of-field, ideal for showing off detail.

It's a good idea to make a shoot list beforehand of the images you have pre-visualised – you will be better prepared for when you arrive. To cover the feature, my shot list included a portrait of the main boat-builder, close-up of hand tools and the wood grain, wide-angle shots of the hull showing the boat-builders during construction, and any villagers who may show their culture and community. Our guide assisted in translating my interview questions to the main boat-builder. Be prepared to do your research and you'll deliver sound results.

Capturing the Caci fighters

The second story covered the Caci Attraction dancers who live at the tip of Flores Island in Melo Village, an hour's drive from Labuan Bajo, the port where our schooner had docked for the morning. I had a two-hour window to cover the feature I was writing. In contrast to the boat-builders' story, this event was held at the home of the Manggarai people in a confined area, which in turn created some shooting issues.

I wanted to create a culturally authentic feel to the narrative which meant constantly moving around to keep

In the Camera Bag

If you're considering a sailing photography trip, consider packing the following in your camera bag:

- Wide-angle lens for landscapes.
- Medium telephoto zoom lens to walk around the islands with.
- A portrait lens for capturing local villagers and their cultural activities.
- Long telephoto lens if you're keen on capturing wildlife and birdlife on the island.
- A dedicated macro lens for detail photography (it also doubles as a terrific portrait lens as many macro lenses can open up to f2.8).
- Circular polarising filter, especially if you're shooting near water or on blue sky days.
- Lens and camera cleaning kit.
- Underwater camera with a buoyancy strap for your wrist; if you let go it will float to the surface and is easily seen.
- Plenty of memory cards, portable hard drives and a lightweight laptop if you wish to edit whilst travelling.

guests out of the frame. A visitor's hand or leg at the edge of the frame will immediately distract the viewer and remove cultural authenticity.

To maximise my opportunities in the short time frame, I asked to photograph the fighters as they were getting ready in an open hut. In the shade, the ambient light created soft even tones on their faces and a catch light (small white circle) brightened their eyes. When shooting into the shade, re-metre the light or use exposure compensation to control the exposure on your subject. And always focus on the eyes because if they are not sharp, the image generally fails.

The Caci ritual, unique to Flores Island, was once only performed during Penti, a three-day festival held after harvest at the end of each agricultural year. Now it is performed for celebrations and funerals. Each piece of equipment they use has a symbolic meaning. The whip, made with rattan and a leather covered handle, is phallic in nature, depicting male sexuality. The bamboo shield, covered in buffalo hide, represents the female, its roundness symbolising the womb.





When the whip strikes the shield, it shows a sexual unity; the promise of future life. If you're contemplating covering an event for a feature, it helps to seek out stories with an interesting angle to entice editors.

During the welcome ceremony, which took place inside a long wooden hut, I positioned myself by a large bright window. On the other side of the room, I would have been photographing against the light, causing an exposure nightmare between subject and background. The use of flash would have been too distracting, so it was a matter of making the most of the available light. In fact, it turned out to be an ideal position to photograph the tuak (rice wine) and betel nuts that were served as offerings to the guests. Always think about where you place yourself to maximise your end result.

During the fighting ritual, performed on an open grassed area, the undercover seating area for guests faced directly into the sun. This would either have silhouetted the fighters against bright light or blown-out any background detail. The acts were too far away to use flash, so I positioned myself on the opposite side of the arena to capture the contestants from a preferred viewpoint.

I used two lenses during the performance, the Fujinon XF 50-140mm f2.8 (equivalent 70-200mm, full-frame) and the Fujinon XF 16-55mm f2.8. My aim was to capture the fighters' intense facial expressions, isolated details in their clothing and equipment, wide-angle images and environmental portraits that when collated would convey a strong narrative.

To enhance the effect of capturing the whip as it came down in full force against the opponent's shield, I crouched down to maximise the height the fighter jumped. To freeze action you will need a shutter speed of around 1/500 second, and to create motion blur around 1/30 – 1/60 second.

Once a cultural display is over, look for candid images when the participants are relaxing because they often tell a story in their own right. Especially when they keep refilling the coconut bowls with copious amounts of rice wine!



Life on board

Having scrumptious meals prepared, your cabin cleaned and fresh laundry delivered as you explore a new island each day in the Lesser Sunda Islands, leaves you to focus on your photography. It's an incredible journey, sailing in the professional hands of SeaTrek Sailing Adventures. If you're after an adventure that fills your memory cards and takes you to unforgettable locations, then check these guys out at: <http://seatrekbali.com>.

Lynn Gail runs immersive photo expeditions through Cultural Connections Photography Tours, with her colleague Seng Mah, to unique destinations including India, Arnhem Land, Madagascar and the Cocos Keeling Islands. Lynn is a professional travel photographer and writer who has been published in Australian Traveller Magazine, International Traveller Magazine, Get Up and Go Magazine, Get Lost Magazine, SilkWinds (SilkAir's Inflight Magazine) and Australian Photography Magazine. She is represented by the world's leading photographic agency, Getty Images, in the Lonely Planet Collection. In 2018 Cultural Connections will be taking small groups to India, Madagascar and the Cocos Keeling Islands. For more information visit: <http://culturalconnectionstours.com/>