

A free state of photography -

Johan Pretorius

WORDS BY JOHN HOGG AND PIX BY JOHAN PRETORIUS





Bloemfontein based photographer Johan Pretorius is often asked, "I want the photograph big, how big can you print it?" His unwavering answer - "How big do you want it?" It has been this approach and attitude that has helped him after twenty four years as a fulltime professional photographer to make an impressive success of his business. And a business it is. As much as he loves what he does if he was to be given the choice to photograph just one aspect of his work (that gives him the most enjoyment), what would it be? "I would like to cover major sports events around the world, but unfortunately I enjoy the finer things in life and sports photography cannot offer me an income high enough".

One look at his profile photograph on his website tells you that Johan is not the brooding artist type. He views himself as a perfectionist who strives for excellence. "I'm an extrovert, better described as an

A personality type and enjoy working with people, but I can be straight and to the point when I need to be". This trait plays a large part in his success. He firmly believes that his people skills and the ability to understand and work with people are of primary importance and, add to that, service and quick turnaround time. "The fact that a bride can have her photos and storybook a week after her wedding is what I strive for".

Being based in Bloemfontein would probably be viewed by many as a hindrance, but there is a vibrancy that makes it a healthily self-sufficient centre, rich in culture and history. The African National Congress was founded there and it is the Judicial centre of the country. It has a strong jazz, theatre and academic culture and besides, the Free State has produced some of the best rugby players ever to represent the Sharks - and the Springboks. It is the type of place where individuals make things happen and Johan Pretorius is one of those individuals.







"I started with nothing but I believed in myself and knew that by doing my job with hard work and commitment I would be successful somewhere down the line". (That is the basis of his advice to young photographers).

He firmly believes that the city has been a major player in his success. "I had to learn to do everything by myself and become independent as Bloemfontein has limited resources. I had to learn all about fixing computers, cleaning my camera's sensor, printing and binding books to mention just a few things". He has adapted to trends and demands and has developed the photographic versatility to manage these.

As a boy he told his parents that he wanted to work in a 'very clean environment with a white jacket and a microscope' and when pressed by his family what exactly it was that he wanted to do with that he would reply, "I want to work with explosives and build bombs". Perhaps his family should be relieved that there was no Internet in those days where a simple Google search could have led to some anxiety in the neighbourhood. But he grew up and his course altered and during his student years he earned extra

cash as a DJ and Johan the entrepreneur emerged. He spotted a niche and borrowed money from his dad for his first camera, he then photographed people at the functions he provided the music for. Soon his part time job was a roaring success earning him more money than his full time employment as a Purchasing Manager for a local retail store did. Although Johan still has the drive developed in his childhood, his aims have become passive. With the same meticulous approach required in a laboratory he produces lasting memories with his Nikons. He has developed a diverse customer base where in the winter he photographs sport events, mainly for magazines, and in the summer months portraiture makes up the biggest slice. Then of course over the weekends there are the weddings. Technically the boy in the white coat emerges from Johan, his images are crisp and luminous with comfortable looking subjects in his uncomplicated framing.





His assistant (and wife) Anneri plays a very important role in making a success of each studio session. From my own experience two of the most difficult subjects to photograph are animals and children and once they become distracted and you lose them it's difficult to get their attention back. Anneri gets and holds the attention of a small and difficult child, in so doing unfailingly getting the reaction needed for the perfect shot.

When asked what about his photography gives him the most pleasure and satisfaction he's not sure where to start. "There are so many aspects, personally and firstly there is the fact that I do what I love, to get up in the morning and not go to a regular job. Secondly is the fact that I am paid, and paid very well, for what it is I love". He adds, with no small amount of pride that he also has his photographs as art in thousands of homes around the country. "It gives me a hell of a kick".

Besides his photography, Johan is a keen motorcyclist exploring dirt roads and tracks on his BMW GS1200 Adventure bike. (Another plus living in Bloem' is that your backyard is big-sky country). "Funny enough most of my spare time is used by either studying photography

on the internet or reading books on the subject. I thought after twenty four years of doing this full time I would be fed up with photography and everything surrounding it but I become more inspired everyday".

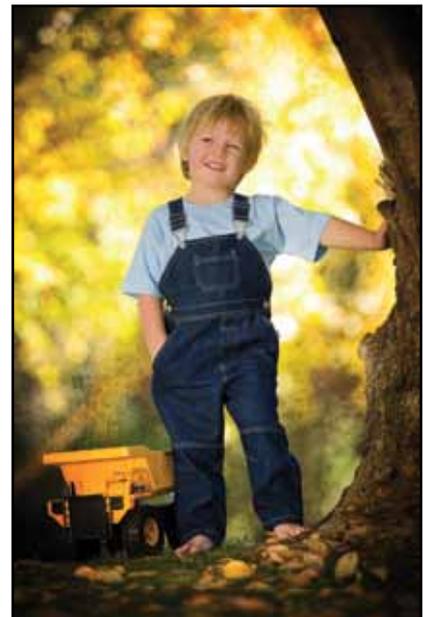
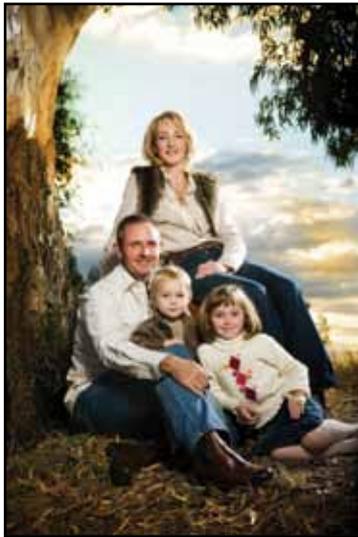
Highlighting some of his memorable moments in photography Johan naturally mentions photographing at the rugby, cricket and soccer World Cup tournaments as well as the World Athletics Championships. "But", he says, "My most exciting trip was when I was sent to Holland by Epson as the South African photographer to attend a workshop on printing by a Hasselblad master photographer, Hans van Omeren". It was an exclusive event with only eighteen photographers, each from a different country and each from a different genre. "That was very interesting", he adds, "rubbing shoulders and sharing ideas with the best of the best". These highlights and adventures do not distract Johan from the reality that there is no rest, and as a successful brand and business, procrastination is not on the agenda.

"My website does all the talking for me, it is very important. In today's digital age you cannot afford not to have an active and attractive site".









The website does its required work by keeping Johan busy. His services range from architecture through commercial work to wildlife, and his weddings include video and photography packages. All the work is in-house by his team. There he prints, to perfection, the commissioned portraits and even frames them for the client if so desired. It is however the man behind all these services, the genial extrovert and peoples person capturing and preserving special moments. Recently Cindy Van Aswegen was so enthralled with her wedding portfolio and storybook that her new husband, Willem, was dispatched to buy a new coffee table for it to be displayed on.

Johan is inspired and inspiring. Adding to the advice given about self-belief, commitment and hard work he adds, "Don't become discouraged when you look at successful older photographers and become depressed about their achievements, equipment and lovely assignments around the world. We all had to start somewhere and as I said, I started from nothing, and today (besides my photography) I am the official ambassador and spokesperson for Nikon, Epson and Elinchrom. It is humbling to think that a Bloemfontein photographer in the middle of nowhere could have this honour. So don't necessarily think of your location as a disadvantage". He concludes, "lastly, be honest and be loyal."