



Fueled by change

BY AIMEE BALDRIDGE

Diverse streams
feed the
ever-wandering
ELIA LOCARDI



The Italian seaside town Riomaggiore beckoned to Elia Locardi through an arresting photograph in a friend's living room. His travel photography career had barely begun, but Locardi noted the location and jumped at an opportunity to visit the town a year later. His growing online following raved about the images he created, and when Locardi later returned to Riomaggiore, he discovered that some of the tourists there were followers of his blog whom he had inspired to visit, just as the photograph in his friend's home had inspired him. Now a successful photographer who has built his career around an online audience, Locardi proves that engaging the age-old travel photography tradition of inviting us to connect with faraway places by showing them in a fresh

perspective works just as well in the social media era.

Locardi's travel photography career began with a departure not just from home but from a whole way of life. After a decade putting in long hours in the animation and

home is wherever we are, where we're together," Locardi says. Their new way of life has proven salubrious for them both personally and as creative professionals. "I think that as creative individuals it's always good to have change in your life," Locardi



design industries and saddled with an upside-down mortgage in the wake of the housing market crash, he decided to opt out. He quit his job, and he and his wife, a graphic designer, jettisoned the home and amenities that ran up their monthly tab. While taking time to travel and reevaluate their priorities, Locardi rediscovered the allure of his long-neglected camera and decided to launch a new career. "It just turned out that photography was always the thing that made me the happiest," he says.

In March 2012, Locardi and his wife relinquished their permanent residence to become full-time travelers. Now "location independent," as they put it, the couple lives in short-term rental apartments at each destination they travel to. "We like to think that

observes. "We literally get to have change in our life every week or 12 days."

Since they first set out, Locardi and his wife have traveled to more than 40 countries, where he has photographed both the little-known and the iconic. Locardi doesn't avoid destinations that some consider over-photographed. "Travel photography is interesting because we can all do it if we want to," he says.

"We can all get on a plane and go take photos of the Colosseum or the Eiffel Tower. People say it's been photographed every way, and there's no way you can do something new with it, but I totally disagree. People have been everywhere, and everywhere has been photographed, but you can always do something better," Locardi says. "You can always raise the bar and find a way to take

something that people have seen and have them see it in a new way."

To create new interpretations of even the most familiar scenes, Locardi uses all the tools current technology puts at his disposal, constantly developing his vision as technical options evolve.

Locardi's process of interpreting each scene begins before he arrives. He scouts locations on Google Earth and checks lighting conditions such as sunrise and sunset hours with the Photographer's Ephemeris app. Once Locardi gets to his destination, he continues the scouting process with his compact Fuji mirrorless camera, noting the times when streetlights, window lights, and other sources of illumination begin to appear. He often returns for the final shoot with his SLR during the blue and golden hours, both to capture the most beautiful light and tonality in the scene and to shoot multiple frames as the light changes. Locardi also uses long exposures to smooth motion, capture star trails, and make sure people passing through the scene don't appear in it.

After the shoot, he creates composites of images taken at different points in time and with different exposures. This "dynamic blending" technique is similar to a standard high dynamic range approach, but Locardi blends image frames manually in Photoshop instead of using HDR software in order to have full control over the look of the final image. A tripod is essential for his shoots so that all of the frames in each composite align perfectly, as is a set of neutral density filters that allow him to use slow shutter speeds even in bright lighting conditions. To set up long exposures and time-lapse series, he often uses an intervalometer or the ioShutter app.

Although Locardi may be following in the long tradition of photographers finding inspiration to travel through each other's work, the business aspects of Locardi's





that sponsor him, a field that includes Fujifilm, Wacom, Really Right Stuff, and Formatt Hitech. Locardi has been careful to collaborate only with brands whose products he has a genuine appreciation for as tools that are integral to his work. His collaboration with the companies includes providing images, creating educational content, marketing, helping with product development, and speaking at photography events.

Locardi points to the rise of social media as the reason his career is possible in its current form. "Social media in photography is just as important as the switch from film to digital," he says. "Social media gives you a way to be known regionally or even globally for what you do. It gives you the ability not only to market yourself but also to integrate



career are decidedly 21st century. Instead of shooting for magazines or stock agencies, he makes his living through a combination of image licensing, workshops, photo tours, sponsorships, and collaborations—all of which have been built upon the foundation of his assiduously cultivated online presence.

"I'm not pulling my income from one single stream in the photography world but many diverse streams," he explains. Locardi has built his own audience of about 2.5 million through his Blame the Monkey blog and regular updates on sites like Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and 500px. It's his audience as much as his expertise that makes him attractive to the photo industry brands





and communicate with the photography community at large, whether that's your peers or your target market."

He's optimistic about the new business model social media offers photographers during an era when building relationships with consumers is often at least as important as straightforward advertising. "I think it's going to open doors for more people to be involved in it. The pie is big enough for everybody," he says. But he also emphasizes that social media doesn't reward the lazy or uninspired.

"There are no real shortcuts," he warns. "You can buy a following, but that doesn't give you engagement. What companies are

looking for is people who are telling a unique story and inspiring people with the content that they're sharing."

As much as his career is built around relationships he cultivates with people, the inspiration for his notably unpeopled images remains his affinity with the places he photographs. "I've always had an emotional connection to my environment," he says. Locardi traces that connection back to his childhood in the Florida Keys, where his experiences with the natural world were unencumbered by manmade sights and sounds.

"I think I'm drawn to recreate that feeling of awe and wonder in my work," he says. Even

at iconic locations that have been captured by countless photographers, Locardi forges a relationship with the place that allows viewers to see it with new eyes. "If you visit these places in the quiet hours before dawn, you're all alone," he says. "You have the whole place to yourself and you're able to connect with it in a personal and emotional way. Often that emotional connection is what I'm trying to convey." ■

See Elia Locardi's work at blamethemonkey.com.

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