



This young man was pulling on heaving ropes in an akhara (an Indian wrestling gym). As one of the leanest, youngest athletes, his diligence and determination captured my attention, and I asked him to stand between the ropes. Using a mid-range zoom lens I captured his eyes – a window to the soul. I felt they reflected not only hardship, but also an inner-strength; a much-needed trait for the tough, daily akhara regimes. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 55mm. 1/320s @ f2.8, ISO 1250.



# TELLING TALES

**Y**ou've finally made it to your dream location, and by dream, I don't mean your own secluded private island with swaying palm trees and a "ring-the-buzzer" butler service, but a place where you can bring your ambition of being a photojournalist to life. But where do you start? What are the guts of your story? You may have a vision of producing a publishable photographic essay or coffee table book to showcase your storytelling imagery, but how do you lock the pieces together to create a dynamic documentary portfolio? As a travel photographer who regularly travels to locations away from trodden tourist trails, here are seven techniques I use during assignments.

Before we start, I would like to talk about the power of research prior to departure. While unexpected, interesting finds, which are worthy of screeching to halt, constantly happen along the road, having a concrete plan beforehand will undoubtedly give you a solid base for bringing your project together. Take time to source a contact who will connect you with your chosen subject; itineraries run a lot smoother with someone who understands your photographic needs. Groundwork, research, contacts – don't leave home without them. Before my departure on a recent trip to northwest India, I sourced a guide/translator who arranged a visit to a traditional akhara, an Indian wrestling gym. Australian gyms offer the latest swanky equipment, while Indian wrestlers train with concrete slabs, heavy ropes, and wrestle on mud floors. I had wanted to document their lifestyle for some time. Having a contact allowed me to cover the story in-depth as the athletes and manager were expecting me. The internet is a great source of information, even for the most obscure subjects.

BY LYNN GAIL

Ever wondered how to create an impactful documentary set of images covering foreign customs and cultural beliefs? Here are seven essential skills to help you design a photojournalism portfolio that will leave a lasting impression.

## 1. CREATING A SHOT LIST FOR YOUR SUBJECT

Your chosen story may be a timely topic, such as global warming, a famous annual festival, or an NGO (non-governmental organisation) type narrative. But once you have a project in mind, flesh it out beforehand so you don't approach your subject paparazzi-style when you arrive. Prepare a shot list, putting the must-haves at the top. I capture these shots straight away, then chase the more creative type images if opportunity allows. It's a good practice to study photojournalists you admire before you leave home. This will help you pre-visualise images to include in the sequencing of your spread. If you would like to see your documentary series published, contact publications who feature similar content to your topic before and request their submission guidelines. There's nothing better than a commission before you depart to spur you on.





**“I FIND A LIGHTER CAMERA BAG WITH A WIDE, PRIME AND ZOOM LENS IS FAVOURABLE, ESPECIALLY IF I’M WORKING IN A CONFINED SPACE SUCH AS AN AKHARA WHERE I PREFER NOT TO FUMBLE AROUND WITH TOO MUCH GEAR. REMEMBER, THE BEST LENS IS THE ONE IN YOUR HAND.”**



## **2. CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES**

Our world is full of diverse and interesting cultures and, when we travel internationally, belief systems and attitudes can vary widely from our own. If you are entering private property, even if it's pre-arranged, put your camera away and take time to connect with the people you will be photographing. This approach will build confidence, give you time to relax and ask any pertinent questions about what you can and can't photograph. Through your interpreter, explain why you are visiting, and check if everyone is comfortable with being photographed. Knowing you can photograph each person, will give you confidence to shoot freely. Wrestlers usually board at the akharas they train in, so everything is in proximity – the showers, sleeping areas and ablutions. Being female and among men who follow a strict Hindi religion, I confirmed any off-limit areas. One aspect I had to be mindful of was where I stood when the wrestlers changed into their training gear. Pehalwan wrestlers wear a langot – a tiny traditional piece of Vedic clothing which just covers their genitals. The akhara afforded them little privacy, and a couple of times I had to quickly “disappear”.

## **3. PREPARATION – LENS CHOICES**

Whether you are attending a privately arranged session, shooting a festival, street parade or protest, think about your lens choices as you will want to cover all possible angles. It might be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure so maximise the time and equipment you have. I always shoot in RAW format (an uncompressed file which retains data) and carry a minimum of three lenses to cover most eventualities. I find a lighter camera bag with a wide, prime and zoom lens is favourable, especially if I'm working in a confined space such as an akhara where I prefer not to fumble around with too much gear. Remember, the best lens is the one in your hand. To capture an environmental portrait, use a wide-angle lens and shoot the whole scene to tell the people's story. When shooting wide, backgrounds








ABOVE: These two wrestlers had just completed a three-hour workout, after which they wrestled each other. They used the bar to stretch out and cool down, and after chatting with them, they were comfortable being photographed wearing the traditional langot. The kushti (mud wrestling pitch) with a man pulling a slab of concrete in the background makes the perfect backdrop, adding depth to their story. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 16mm. 1/100s @ f2.8, ISO 2500. -0.33 EV.



OPPOSITE LEFT: All muscle and half the size of the older, more established wrestlers, this young man exercised on the gym's rough parallel bars like an Olympian warming up. I stood at the end of the bars, capturing him as he proudly showed off his prowess in his skill base, holding a range of postures for several minutes at a time. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 20mm. 1/400s @ f4, ISO 1250. +0.33 EV.

LEFT: Most Indian akharas have small training areas with dated equipment – they build weights from concrete, sand, and heavy ropes. These men executed more than 100 burpees as part of their warm-up, heading into a three-hour training session. Using a wide angle on a standard “workhorse” lens, I layered the image, positioning the weights in the foreground to lead the eye into the courtyard, and onto the building with peeling paint in the background. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 16mm. 1/200s @ f8, ISO 800. -0.33 EV.



A full-page photograph of a man sitting on a mud floor, covered in mud. He is looking down, and the background is a textured, peeling wall. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the mud and the wall.

As one of the akhara's most decorated athletes, I wanted to capture this wrestler as he cooled down on the kushti floor (mud wrestling pitch). I sat down opposite him on the mud as he threw mud over his body as I wanted to capture the quieter and reflective moments of this tough sport. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 25mm. 1/160s @ f4.5, ISO 1000.





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are often messy so be sure to move yourself around as much as possible. Aim not to have your subjects merge into the background or each other, or worse still, have poles “growing” from people’s heads. Likewise, keep people away from the edge of your frame as they can look larger than “Ben-Hur” when stuck on the edge.

In selecting your aperture, you can choose what to have in or out of focus. The 24-70mm f2.8, (often referred to as the workhorse lens) is perfect for shooting wide and zooming in on your subject. A large aperture, such as f2, will render a narrow window of sharpness, while a small aperture of around f16 will give a greater depth of field resulting in sharper detail throughout the image. I rarely use the 70-200mm f2.8 in confined spaces, but if there’s plenty of room, or you are shooting a street festival, it’s the perfect lens for zooming in on interesting characters using a wide aperture of around f2.8/4 to make your subject stand out against a blurred background. Always know your equipment. Prior to your trip, practice changing camera settings in a dark room. You will feel more confident, therefore helping your subjects relax.

#### 4. IT’S ALL IN THE ANGLES

Once you have your main shots in the bag, play with your angles. Lie on your stomach to capture a worm’s eye view, shoot from the hip (you’ll be surprised at what you can capture) or from above if there is somewhere safe to climb to. Without getting too close,

I rolled around in the mud in the akhara to get myself into position as the background was quite challenging – so try every available angle. Frame your subject using available structures or use leading lines in the foreground to guide your viewers. If you are photographing street life, try staying in one place for 15 minutes. This exercise trains the eye to anticipate more exciting images. I usually find by staying in one location, people accept my presence and continue with their tasks. This allows me to capture people candidly and in the moment. Get in close, especially in the middle of a street festival, to capture wide-angle shots as you move within the crowd. It rarely happens, but people will soon let you know if they are not happy with you taking photos.

ABOVE: I often look for triangle formations to add to a portfolio as they add a sense of depth and allow the eye to “look” around the frame. The wrestler in the foreground was holding the rope as others scrambled to the top. Two athletes in the background were busy warming up, adding perspective and a pop of colour to lead the eye through the image. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 30mm. 1/75s @ f4, ISO 2500, -0.33EV.

RIGHT: I was mesmerised by this lean, yet strong focused wrestler as he dragged a heavy concrete slab, topped with a 10kg weight, through the mud for 30 minutes. He seemed to be deep in meditation, his steely gaze never faltering as he moved with determination. I wanted to show his power through his taut muscles, and his mental strength through his expression. Fuji X-Pro2, 16-55mm f/2.8 lens @ 20mm. 1/105s @ f5.6, ISO 1000, -0.67EV.







## 5. PHOTOGRAPHING STRANGERS

A question I often get asked is, “How do you approach strangers to take their portrait?” The short answer is, “It’s easy now, but it never used to be.” Like many portrait photographers, I pushed through my approaching-stranger-shyness whenever I spotted a character I was drawn to. Of course, it’s easier at a pre-arranged shoot such as the akhara when they are expecting you. Even then, you need to connect to your subject to capture soulful portraits. People love looking at themselves on the back of the camera. It’s still one of the best icebreakers and once the person sees you take a good shot, they often relax. Challenge yourself to approach someone interesting at a festival or in the street. If they are willing, but the background is killing the image, don’t be afraid to ask them to move slightly – it’s often the difference between an OK image or an amazing image.

You’ll spark up some interesting conversations, too, as you connect with locals. Most of all, enjoy yourself, and have fun with the people you meet on the road.

I would like to touch on model/property releases. If you want to use your images for future advertising, you will need a signed release. If they are for editorial use only, you don’t need one. There are many free templates available on the internet. Here is a free one from Getty Images I use (there are several languages available): <https://tinyurl.com/y7yqvrwr>.

## 6. GO WITH THE FLOW

Bringing your portfolio together during the time you’re away can be daunting. Although it’s very gratifying, at times it can also be hard work. In an akhara type situation, the action is fast paced. The wrestlers train meters away from onlookers, and the matches







ABOVE: These strongmen do not go lightly with one another, even in practice. I lay down on the outer edge of the floor and used a wide-angle lens to capture the wrestlers as they picked each other up like rag dolls. Their aim is to render their opponent immobile by placing them in a stronghold. Getting down to your subject's level adds a "ringside" perspective, helping the viewer to feel as though they were present. Fuji X-Pro2, 14mm f/2.8 lens. 1/125s @ f4, ISO 1000.

are over quickly as the powerful holds are so intense. In this situation, if you are constantly reassessing the action you can flow with the movements. Be ready to move quickly if you are photographing a street festival or rally. Running alongside participants will often result in some fun, vibrant imagery. Aim to freeze movement with a fast shutter speed of around 1/1000th second but be prepared to use a high ISO if the area is dimly lit (this allows your camera to see more light). Conversely, blurring movement with a shutter speed of around 15/30th second creates energy in your work and adds interesting elements to your portfolio. Remember the quiet moments are as important as the vigorous ones. Be ready to photograph people as they finish their pursuits. These can be the reflective, storytelling images when people's demeanours change as they relax. Wherever you can, add details shots, too. Close up images of equipment people use in their work, their cultural beliefs or during a ceremony. These images join the pieces together and help create an aesthetically pleasing flow to your narrative.

## 7. CREATING YOUR PORTFOLIO

You've arrived home with memory cards full to the brim with thousands of amazing images. Now the editing begins. What do you leave in, what do you take out? I aim for around 40 edited images to showcase a story; an editor will then choose their selection based on publication space and requirements.

Choose only the strongest storytelling photos to engage your viewers, being careful to not be repetitive. A selection of portrait, detail, action shots (fast and slow) and images with shallow depth of field will showcase a stylised portfolio and take your viewer on a journey. Ask your partner, close friend and a neighbour for their honest opinion as they are not connected emotionally. You may need to cull stand-out images because they interrupt the flow of your portfolio. It will feel like you're stabbing yourself in the foot, but the pain soon heals when people admire and compliment your work. Then you can begin to plan your next assignment. 🌟

### WHAT'S IN THE BAG?

As a travel photographer/writer, I keep my gear to a minimal weight to meet carry-on requirements. The fear of losing any of my kit is too great if it disappears in my checked-in luggage. Clothes and chocolate bars, I can do without, but not camera equipment. My kit consists of two Fuji bodies, an X-Pro 3, with an X-Pro 2 as backup, used with Fuji lenses: 50-140mm f/2.8 zoom, a prime 14mm f/2.8, and the 16-55mm f/2.8 zoom. I carry a portable harddrive, laptop and a stack of at least a dozen memory cards ranging from 64GB to 156GB, along with a backup battery charger, card reader and extra batteries. The only item packed in my checked-in luggage is a lightweight tripod put together with a Manfrotto head and a Gitzo base.