

A DIFFERENT WORLD

Renowned for his ability to extract the key moments from a wedding in a discreet reportage style, Mark Seymour put his skills to the test in a different context recently, photographing people on the streets of Kolkata

WORDS **TERRY HOPE** PICTURES **MARK SEYMOUR**

As a hard-working professional with one eye on the commercial requirements that come along with a commission there's always the danger that you could become stale, stuck in a routine and going through the motions. There's a serious need to introduce variety, to shake things up once in a while and to set yourself new challenges – the perfect way to move yourself on and ensure the creative juices are flowing.

Looking at the work of three times UK Wedding Photographer of the Year and Nikon Ambassador Mark Seymour you wouldn't imagine that he would have any need for such added motivation, so clearly is he at the top of his game. He also has the advantage that, as one of the country's top reportage specialists, he never really encounters two commissions that are exactly the same, so there's always the spice of something new to drive him on. However, Mark himself realised some time ago that while he might have what many photographers would consider to be the perfect job, he couldn't afford to sit on his laurels and rest. He still needed to

be pushing on and trying new things out on a regular basis.

Last autumn he got the chance to do exactly that, signing up for a remarkable week-long workshop run by London-based professional photographer Mark Carey. Over the past couple of years Mark has formed a strong relationship with the Hope Foundation, a charity that primarily exists to care for the street and slum children who live in Kolkata (previously Calcutta). This has led to opportunities being created for photographers to travel out to Kolkata to document some of the projects that the Hope Foundation is undertaking, and it's a chance to not just hone street photography skills but to experience the lives of a resilient and remarkable group of people while supporting the work of a very worthwhile charity.

"My photography travels have taken me to some of the most beautiful, interesting and diverse locations in the world," says Mark, "but I can honestly say this was unknown territory for me, and before I left I really didn't know what to expect. The little knowledge I had of India,

from its unique colour and spices through to its religious and cultural heritage and its lush landscapes, could not possibly prepare me for what I knew I was going to experience.

"Kolkata is the principal commercial, cultural and educational centre of East India, and the third most populous area in the country, and yet there is tremendous poverty to be found there. What Mark's workshops do is provide photographers like myself with the most amazing opportunity to build their personal portfolios, but it also enables the Hope Foundation to raise some important funding and the profile of the valuable work that they carry out with local children."

Desperate poverty

It was a difficult experience for Mark, as it would be for anyone travelling from a wealthy western country to India for the first time, to believe the hardship that can exist there. Over 250,000 children are forced to exist on the streets and in the slums of Kolkata, while a further 30,000 children are trafficked into the city on an annual





IMAGES Walking the streets of Kolkata, Mark Seymour photographed everyday life, documenting the realities of growing up in a slum, scraping together a livelihood and the relief that The Hope Foundation's work brings.





ABOVE Kids playing outside the school built and run by The Hope Foundation - one of the many projects designed to give children a better and healthier start in life.

basis to be forced into child prostitution, child labour and slavery. The Hope Foundation provides support to over 60 projects including education, primary healthcare, child protection, children's shelters, vocational training and drugs rehabilitation. The workshop was designed to give a small group of five photographers the chance to see some of these projects in action.

"What confronted me was certainly challenging," says Mark. "But what struck me most, and what I believe I captured, was the spirit of the adults and children as they lived their lives. I spent my time there photographing everyday moments and, for me, the power of the images was in the expressions on the faces. There was so much joy and laughter in such difficult circumstances.

"Initially they were curious and taken aback by our presence as we wandered in and out taking photographs, but then they relaxed and engaged with our cameras, smiling and welcoming us into their world. I can honestly say these people touched me in a way I was not expecting: their sense of pride and joy was humbling," he continues.

Mark's usual approach is to convert his files into black & white, because that's very much the way that he sees the world as a photographer. However, in India he was forced to change his style a little to take account of the vibrant colours that are such an integral part of Indian culture, and it was all part of the learning process he went through.

"My photos captured the very young through to the very old," says Mark, "living, working and getting on with their daily lives. My favourite images are of the children at play, and they're just like children all around the world, enjoying climbing, exploring and making up games. The difference was where they were found playing; not play parks and gardens, but rather railway



lines and amongst the confined spaces between homes and makeshift buildings."

Much as he does at a wedding, Mark worked with his regular Nikon D4s, paired with a 35mm f/1.4 and 28mm f/1.4, while his much older, but still highly treasured, manual focus Nikkor 58mm f/1.2 was also in the kitbag. "All of my shots were handheld," says Mark. "The light was generally really good, although it got dark quite early, which is where the Nikon D4s really came into their own as I was able to up the ISO to 8000 to let me continue shooting without flash. I'm a great believer that it's not about the size of the camera, more about how you conduct yourself, how you move around and communicate that gets you the best images."

It was a memorable week for Mark, one that will stay with him forever, and which will ensure that he never slips into the trap of imagining that the world begins and ends with commercial

work. While the chance to shoot on the streets for a week helped him to hone his eye for a picture, it was more the experience of working in an environment that was completely different to the one he knows back home that he took away with him. "For me I can say with all my heart that I will be returning to India and extending my experiences of this beautiful land of extremes," he says. "It really was a life-changing trip." **PP**



Known for his award-winning documentary and reportage wedding work, Mark Seymour is a Nikon ambassador and has recently launched street photography workshops.

MORE INFORMATION

www.markseymourphotography.co.uk
www.shootthestreet.co.uk

SHARE THE EXPERIENCE

Mark Carey's extraordinary Kolkata workshops, set up in association with The Hope Foundation, give photographers a chance to experience a different world and to see what's being done to make a difference.

Photo workshops these days teach virtually every aspect of photography you care to think about. However, you won't encounter many like those run by Mark Carey. While offering documentary wedding coverage in the UK in the spring and summer, in the winter Mark heads overseas to shoot street, travel and documentary imagery. A while back his work brought him into contact with The Hope Foundation, and Mark has now run three seven-day workshops in Kolkata in association with the charity, his latest one having just headed out on 2 February.

The groups are small - maybe just six or eight people and possibly a local guide - and the workshop taps into the unique local knowledge that Mark and others have of the area. "I aim to have plenty of one-to-one time with attendees," says Mark, "and this will largely be in the evening. At times, depending on the area we're in, we can split up into smaller groups of threes and fours so that we don't all crowd our subjects and come over like a herd of 'snap-happy' tourists. We will always be safe and we always fix a meeting point.

"The occasional local guides we use are invaluable for getting us into the places that regular tourists would perhaps find difficult to navigate. Because we're in a small group it also means we can get around the city very easily using taxis."

Though ostensibly a workshop it's not Mark's aim to act as a full-time instructor: rather he's looking to encourage individuals to think for themselves and to improve through having their work critiqued. "I'm not prescriptive about how people shoot, but might suggest things from time," he says. "It's not my intention to help people shoot like me, but to try and find the best version of their own photographic self. This will come by sharpening up shooting techniques and looking at things in a different way. My role is to be a facilitator."

The £550 cost of the workshop, which goes entirely to The Hope Foundation, doesn't cover accommodation, food or travel expenses. Mark arranges accommodation in the heart of the community rather than at an expensive hotel, at around £30 per night.

- If you're interested in joining a workshop email: markcareyphoto@gmail.com.
- Donations to The Hope Foundation can be made at www.hopefoundation.ie.