



Photography by: Sarah Isaacs
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Taking a nap with the sweetest little boy named Ringo, an orphaned baby southern white rhino at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. He was abandoned by his mother shortly after birth and now Ol Pejeta is taking care of him to ensure that he has a long and happy life. Ol Pejeta is East Africa's Largest Black Rhino Sanctuary and the only place on the planet to see the last three Northern White rhinos.

Photography by: Corey Rich
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Exclusive Interview With **Ami Vitale** *By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues*

Ami Vitale's journey as a photographer, writer and filmmaker has taken her to over 90 countries, where she has witnessed civil unrest and violence, but also surreal beauty and the enduring power of the human spirit. She has lived in mud huts and war zones, contracted malaria and donned a panda suit - all in keeping with her philosophy of 'living the story'. She is an Ambassador for Nikon and a contract photographer with National Geographic magazine. She has garnered prestigious awards including multiple prizes from World Press Photo, the International Photographer of the Year prize, the Daniel Pearl Award for Outstanding Reporting and was named Magazine Photographer of the Year by the National Press

Photographers Association, among others. Vitale now comes home to Montana in between making films and shooting stories about the planet's most pressing issues, including wildlife on the edge of extinction, climate change-precipitated migration, and the struggles and triumphs of the human spirit. She lectures and teaches workshops throughout the Americas, Europe, and Asia, and her work is exhibited in museums, galleries and private collections worldwide. She is a founding member of Ripple Effect Images, a collective of scientists, writers, photographers and filmmakers with the mission of creating powerful stories illustrating the very specific issues women in developing countries face.

After more than a decade covering conflict, Vitale couldn't help but notice that the less sensational - but equally true - stories were often not getting told, like the wedding happening around the corner from the revolution or the triumphs amidst seemingly endless devastation. As a result, she recommitted herself to seek out the stories within and around 'the story', and remaining independent, so that she would have the freedom to shoot what she believed deserved to be shared.

Hello Ami! Thank you for agreeing to this interview with Lens Magazine. Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your photography journey.

Growing up, I was very introverted and shy. I found that the camera became my passport to engaging with the world around me. By putting attention on others, it empowered me. What I never imagined was that by empowering myself, I would also be able to amplify voices and stories. Photography became this incredible tool for creating awareness and understanding across cultures and countries, a tool to make sense of our commonalities in the world we share.

Photography has the ability to create change and remind us of the best of humanity, and what we can achieve. I use photography to focus on what connects us. There is a universal truth that we have more in common than we often realize. And it behooves us as journalists and storytellers to give a broader vision of what the world looks like. Stories of love, courage and those that inspire empathy exist. We must work hard to tell stories with a multitude of narratives. We have become attuned to thinking that the things that give us joy and connect us, the things that everyone can identify with, are not worth publishing and not worth showing. Imagine what would happen if we chose to illuminate the things that unite us as human beings rather than only emphasize our differences?





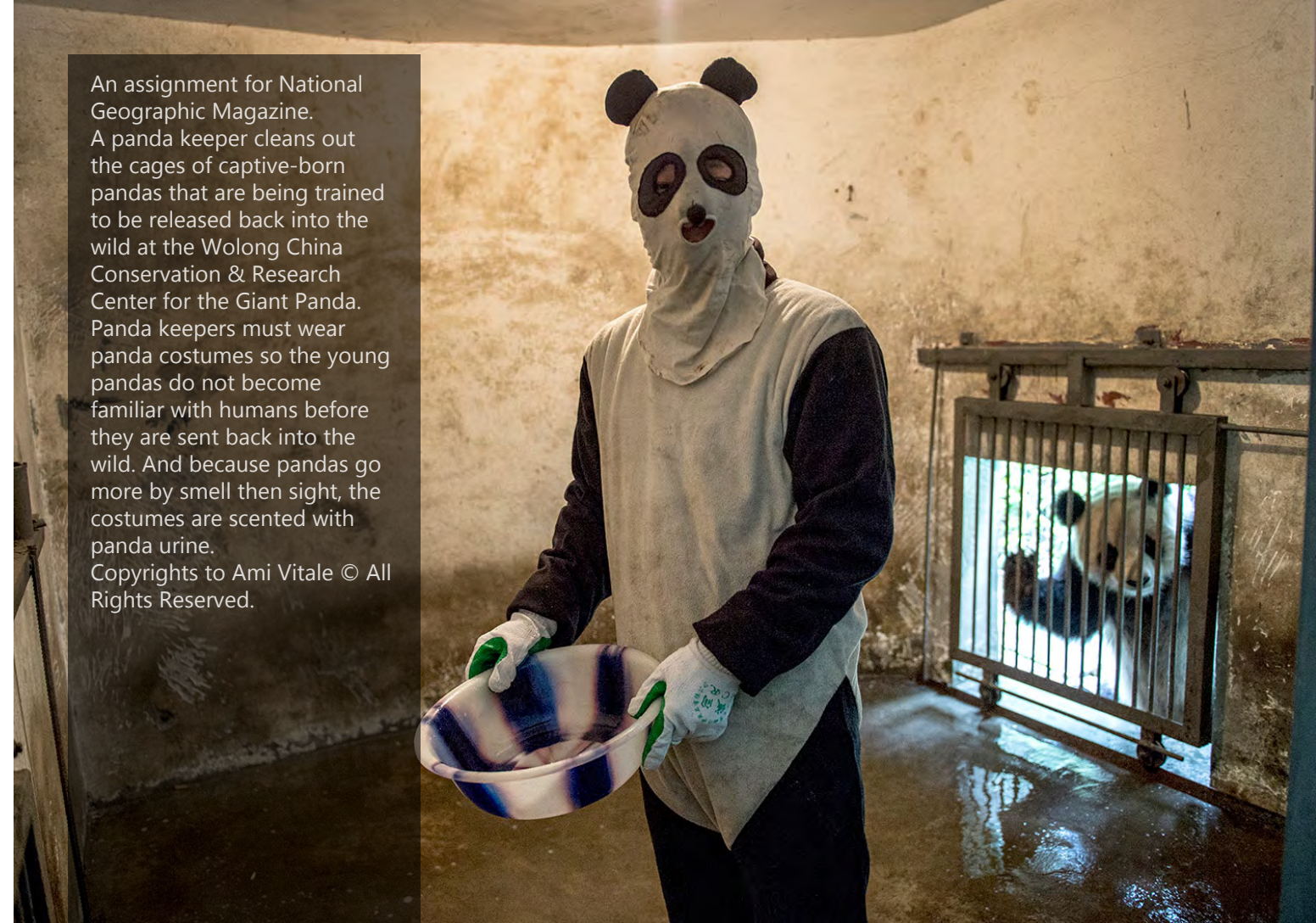
In your photography, you focus on the relationship element as much as you do on the technical aspects. Could you elaborate on that?

A lot of my work involves traveling to foreign countries and living in remote places. My job is to become invisible and get close to people and wildlife, so I can bring their stories to life. So whether I'm in my home state of Montana or in a country 5,000 miles away, for me, the intimate moments matter the most. I've realized that if I want to tell a story, it takes time and patience to understand it. I can't parachute in and hope to do justice to anyone. I have to spend time understanding the complexities. I have to go and live in a place and commit to understanding beyond the headlines.

The easiest way to make compelling, real photographs of people is by being authentic. Making candid images of people is not a trick. It's a skill a photographer can develop, which requires respect for the subject and building a relationship in the time you have together. Successful pictures of people almost never happen from a distance. You need to become a part of the moment.



An assignment for National Geographic Magazine. A cub gets weighed at Bifengxia. In the wild, once they've grown to adulthood, female pandas may weigh up to 220 pounds and males up to 250 pounds, and they'll range from four to six feet long. Copyrights to Ami Vitale © All Rights Reserved.



An assignment for National Geographic Magazine. A panda keeper cleans out the cages of captive-born pandas that are being trained to be released back into the wild at the Wolong China Conservation & Research Center for the Giant Panda. Panda keepers must wear panda costumes so the young pandas do not become familiar with humans before they are sent back into the wild. And because pandas go more by smell than sight, the costumes are scented with panda urine. Copyrights to Ami Vitale © All Rights Reserved.

My advice to aspiring photographers is to talk to people. It could be a nod of acknowledgment, a greeting, an explanation of what you're doing, or a long involved conversation - connect with the people you are photographing. Remember, we have more in common with each other than you might think. Don't look at people as different or exotic. Rather, focus on the things that unite and

You've worked in over 90 countries, documenting both the horrors as well as the triumphs of humanity. What has been the most challenging photo story you've worked on to date? Why?

Ironically, one of the more challenging stories was the panda story (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/08/giant-pandas-wild-animals-national-parks/>)

For starters, it was a matter of how could I possibly create something that might surprise our

readers. The panda may be the most recognized and the most photographed animal alive on the planet. It is not that anyone hasn't seen a picture of a panda. We all have. Zoos pay millions for these panda 'ambassadors' on loan from China and they never fail to attract a crowd. After going to China multiple times, getting to know the people, getting to understand the pandas and learning to really think like a panda, this story blew my mind.

Of course, the biggest challenge was getting access to one of the world's most endangered animals. This is a very rare, finicky endangered animal with teeth and claws. With only a few thousand in the world, the Chinese treat it as a national symbol, and each panda is closely guarded and watched. They are multi-million dollar bears that everyone treats with kid gloves, and they are highly vulnerable. Getting close, without interfering with their biology and conservation, and in a way that is acceptable to

its very protective minders, was challenging. It was not just about getting access and gaining local trust, but also about being able to work with a wild animal.

People forget the 'wild' in 'wildlife'. We forget that a giant panda bear is actually a bear. The temptation is to get up close and personal with wild animals but these interactions can have lethal consequences. The most important way to learn about wildlife is to keep your distance and be respectful. I did push the boundaries though on getting close to these animals. I had to be suited up in a panda costume which was scented with panda urine, like the staff, in order to blend in.

From the wide range of subjects you've photographed over the years, any memorable anecdote you'd like to share with our readers?

My time living in a remote village in Guinea Bissau was a look into the simplicity and beauty of how the majority of people on this planet live. Through it all, I was reminded of how similar we all are despite the distances between us. One memory, in particular, reminds me of this.

My last evening in the village, I sat with a group of children beneath a sea of stars, talking into the night about my return home. One of the children, Alio, asked me if we had a moon in America. It seemed so



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symbolic and touching that he should feel like America was a so far away, we would not share the same moon in our sky. I think of Alio every time I gaze at a full moon and I imagine him standing under that big sea of stars looking up at it. The moon is like a collective third eye. It shows us our common identity without borders. It gives us a sense of oneness, a constant reminder that we are all tied together in an intricate web, whether we believe it or not.

Is there any story you've worked on that is particularly close to your heart?

They are all special. I spend years on my work. From Guinea Bissau to Kashmir to the panda story. One of my latest stories is about indigenous communities in Kenya protecting wildlife (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2017/05/reteti-orphan-elephants-vitale/>). I wrote and photographed this story. You can also read it in the August 2017 issue of National Geographic Magazine.

What is next for you? Where can our readers follow your work?

Back to Kenya to shoot and direct two films. One of them is



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An assignment for National Geographic Magazine. Zhang Hemin—"Papa Panda" to his staff—poses with cubs born in 2015 at Bifengxia Panda Base. "Some local people say giant pandas have magic powers," says Zhang, who directs many of China's panda conservation efforts. "To me, they simply represent beauty and peace." Copyrights to Ami Vitale © All Rights Reserved.

a Virtual Reality film. The best way to follow my work would be on Instagram (@amivitale) or on my website www.amivitale.com All my National Geographic Live speaking events are listed at <https://events.nationalgeographic.com/talks/rhinos-rickshaws-and-revolutions> I'm also on Twitter (@amivee) and my Facebook page is @amivitale1.

What advice do you have for aspiring photographers/photojournalists or those starting out in the field?

Every story has a variety of viewpoints and truths depending on where

you stand. It really takes tremendous time and patience to get to the subtleties and nuances of any story. We do need to focus on the challenges of the world but if we only focus on the things that divide us, we are on a fast race to the bottom. The world is a beautiful place. We need to celebrate the goodness because it is everywhere. You've got to find a project you really care about and work on it for years. Make it yours. Make it unique. Don't shoot what you think people are going to like. Shoot from your heart and find your own style and passion. It's important to go deep and spend time on one story.





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An Egyptian man rests his head on his beloved camel in the desert near Cairo. Climate scientists and geologists have been warning of the danger of saltwater intrusion in Egypt's Nile Delta for decades.
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Pictures should be more than just beautiful images. They need to have meaning.

Remember, photography is not about the camera. It's not even about the beautiful images we create. It is about telling powerful stories. Photography is a tool for creating awareness and understanding across cultures, communities, and countries; a tool to make sense of our commonalities in the world we share. I believe the way to find common ground is by seeing yourself in others.

- Ami Vitale

Thank you for speaking to Lens Magazine, Ami!

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Ramla Sharif roasts coffee inside her home in the village of Choche, Ethiopia. Legend has it that this is the birthplace of coffee. The region is home to the largest pool of genetic diversity of coffee in the world, more than all other coffee-producing countries combined by a huge margin.
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"Child Monk in the Kingdom of Bhutan." East Bhutan c. 2002. National Geographic photographer Ami Vitale captured the vivid colors of the town as a child monk in Bhutan enters the local temple at the start of the day. "He was the first one there, the last one to leave." Prints of this image are available for sale through National Geographic Fine Art.
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In the healing waters of the Széchenyi baths in Budapest, Hungary.
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Hungarians relax in the healing waters of the Széchenyi baths in Budapest, Hungary.
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Left Top: Boys play soccer underneath an enormous Bontang tree. Though the Fulani are a Muslim tribe, they also believe that this tree has a spirit. This mixture of animist beliefs and Islamic law creates a society which has a great respect for the land around them, the supernatural world and the laws of God.
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Left Bottom: The West African country of Guinea Bissau is hot and humid, and by the end of the dry season, there is little water to be found above ground. Children take advantage of the rains and spend a great amount of time swimming when the rains come.
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Top: Alio Balde scrubs his body in front of the touffe in a village in the eastern part of the West African country of Guinea Bissau.
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<https://events.nationalgeographic.com/talks/rhinos-rickshaws-and-revolutions>





ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES

Anne is a writer and a storyteller, with a keen interest in nature photography and fine arts. Having lived in 5 cities, in 4 countries, across 3 continents, and having travelled long-term to several more places, she identifies as a global citizen.

When she is not out exploring, she can be found crafting articles for magazines or blogging about her travel experiences on her blog **'No Roads Barred'**. Anne has contributed to inflight magazines like Holland Herald (KLM), Silkwinds (Silk Air), SilverKris (Singapore Airlines) as well as cross-cultural publications like Passage and ScandAsia. She writes about a variety of topics, from nature and indigenous art to history and culture.

Anne lived in Singapore for nearly six years, and in 2015, researched and authored a 200-page coffee table book on the



decorative tiles seen in the heritage precincts of the city. This book briefly traces the history of tiles from nearly 6,000 years ago to modern day Singapore, and was well received, both by the general public and the media.

During her time venturing through the rainforests of Asia, Anne dabbled in nature photography, an interest she hopes to continue pursuing as soon as she is settled in her new home city of Amsterdam.

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