

Images in nature

What does it take to capture stunning photos of the natural world? Hans Sautter, photographer extraordinaire, gives us a hint. "To capture the images I see in my mind, I climb mountains. I go through jungle rains. I become part of the insect food chain. I endure shivering cold, steaming hot, dry deserts, and primeval forests. I am not someone who sits in a studio brushing what is in his mind onto a blank canvas. I am a photographer."

Text: **CHARLES T. WHIPPLE**
Pictures: **HANS SAUTTER**

Sankeien garden,
Yokohama, Japan, 2010

WHEN Hans Sautter was five years old, his father purchased an Agfa Clack camera for him. He still has photos he took with that point-and-shoot camera. “Basically, view cameras have not changed in more than 150 years,” Hans Sautter says, “and they are commonly used today in architecture, advertising, and landscape photography.” With the Agfa and the Kodak Instamatic 500 he got at age fourteen, Hans knew he wanted to be a professional photographer by the time he celebrated his sixteenth birthday.

A different perspective

Two years ago Sautter ruptured an Achilles tendon that put him in a wheelchair for months. Just talking about the time he spent on wheels brings a big smile to his face. According to Hans, the conveyance gave him great advantages, excellent stability for taking photos, and a great viewpoint. “No one can refuse the request of an invalid in a wheelchair,” he says. “I didn’t have to lug my own equipment around. With my elbows on the chair’s arms, my camera was always stable. I found a wheelchair easy to get around in because people are always ready to help. But perhaps best of all, I got angles I could never have achieved

standing up and walking around on my own two feet.” If anyone knows how to make the most of an unfortunate situation, that someone is Hans Sautter.

Images of the mind

The nights are still cold in early April, and the land outside begins to take shape in the subtle light of predawn as Hans Sautter, photographer, slides the front door of his traditional Japanese home closed, shoulders his equipment, checks his camera, and sets out for the small pond that can be found in the part of the valley where he lives. He says: “Two times of the day are right for nature photos. The false dawn before the sun rises, and the jewel-box light that follows sunset.” And while some of Sautter’s striking photography features a bright burning sun, most are studies in monochrome, even when they are in color. One art director called Sautter the “non-available light photographer.” The lion’s share of his work is shot in dark places or at night, handheld. Startling photos may contain a modicum of luck, a perfect formation of flying cranes, for example. But many of Sautter’s shots of nature are premeditated. He has lived in Japan since 1972 where he eventually found a home built

HANS SAUTTER



He pursues projects with a highly-defined point of view, whether editorial, corporate, or architectural photography. He takes special interest in the lives of humans, their environment, and their modes of transportation. And he is especially conscious of the imminent loss of nature. His photography often sheds light on what is passing from view. He has delivered the worlds of central African Pygmies, the urban jungle of New York cabbies, the broad horizons of Australia’s roadtrain truckers, the cloistered realm of Kyoto’s geishas, the dizzying height of Chicago skyscrapers, and the windy masts of a tall ship in a storm. He has been based in Asia for more than 40 years and currently works from Tokyo, Yogyakarta, and Bangkok. His work has appeared in publications by National Geographic, Smithsonian, as well as the WWF, and in magazines such as Time, GEO, and Nature. Out from behind the camera, Hans enjoys a night at a jazz club, conversation and laughter with friends, relaxation in his very Japanesque home, and extra time to sleep.

by a master carpenter, situated in a nature preserve, far away from the thundering crowds of Tokyo, which puts him in the perfect place to contemplate natural surrounds, build pictures in his mind, and tramp the valley where he lives, early in the day or late in the evening. He also regularly goes to Indonesia, Borneo, and other countries, almost never for the first time. He knows the situations. He has built images of those places and goes to capture them. Still, Sautter sometimes rues the shots he may have missed. Borneo was covered with rain forest when he first went in 1976, but today only a few patches are left. Indigenous customs and ceremonies are waning. Whole cultures are dying or being assimilated. “If I could have anticipated that changes would be so fast and dramatic, I would have shot much more material then. But I thought I would be back soon, and could get them next time. Now I make an effort to take more images of what is still there, before it vanishes forever.”

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