

MICHEL COMTE

Have a Nespresso with a master of photography.

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N: There are probably very few other people in the world of photography who work at your amazing speed. It is really awe-inspiring to see how quickly you can seize the moment and how impressive the results are. When we photographed Angela Missoni at her home for the cover of the first N Mag, the entire session was over and done with in no more than two hours. As for George Clooney, whom we photographed for the European edition of the N Mag, you only needed one hour! This speed has meanwhile become a Michel Comte trademark – but how do you achieve it?

Michel Comte: Well, it's something I had to learn – and quickly – when I started to work with politicians and athletes. I've been photographing Michael Schuhmacher for almost 17 years now. For Nike I often had to deal with Michael Jordan, sometimes also with Carl Lewis. In the case of Michael Jordan, I shot the photograph that's on every sneaker at the Mexico City airport. I had had a huge white wall built at the airport and estimated that we'd have two hours to work. When he arrived, however, he immediately made clear that he had other things to do and only gave me five minutes. I said: "That won't be necessary, two minutes are ample – just jump!" And indeed after two minutes I knew I had the shot, the silhouette was brilliant. As for Bill Clinton, I joined him aboard Air Force One when he went to the Middle East. Celebrities of that caliber pull their power game from the start and make sure you know that they have little time to spare. Which is why I make it a rule to be even faster and tell them: "OK, that's it, you may go now". They are usually surprised and often don't want to go. Carl Lewis originally granted me one hour and eventually I stayed for three days. He was so baffled at how quickly I was finished that he thought I didn't like him and wanted to get out. However, one should be aware of the fact that my way of photographing – analogue, on 8x10 plates – is actually the most time-consuming way. Yet, I always know when I've nailed a shot, even when I shoot from the hip. Speed has always worked for me. I never even look through the camera, I always look at the people. When what I see looks good to the naked eye it'll be a good shot. If something looks good, your eyes see it. Same with filming, really. What I concentrate on is creating the appropriate situation.





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N: After your work on the new Nespresso campaign in Los Angeles you went to New York for three days. I then spent three weeks tracking you down by phone and followed you to Zurich, Buenos Aires, Bahrain. Now I've finally managed to track you down in Rome where you're filming the new Jaguar spots. You're literally always on the move and virtually live in hotels. Can one ever get used to such a degree of mobility?

Michel Comte: Well, one thing's for sure – I'm never bored! I have a house in Morocco where I go if I really want to relax a bit. I always get up early and do my fitness exercises with almost religious zeal. I hardly drink any alcohol, but I do drink good coffee – that's indispensable. I'm quite content with my job and I even find myself in a situation where I can pick and choose what I want to do.

N: You're also a major design fan – you design your own eyewear, have jewelry manufactured according to your own designs and even created your own perfume. Have you worked to such a degree on your own house as well?

Michel Comte: I really make almost everything myself, including my clothes. I did the same with my house. I designed a lot of stuff myself and bought everything myself. The result was “1619 meets 2000”. An old house with a lot of high-tech equipment, none of which is visible, it's all well hidden away. Right now I'm busy designing parts of the house in collaboration with a Chinese artist.

N: So, is this the place where you really feel at home, then?

Michel Comte: That's my big problem – I don't really feel at home anywhere. It's also a major decision to be taken this year. Back when I was married I led a very well ordered life. I had apartments in New York, Paris and LA and country houses. I guess this gave me the psychological motivation to be travelling light these days. Personally, this lightness has been good for me: I could get rid of a lot of dead weight and of the feeling that I had to have this and that at any price. Now I find myself somewhat homeless but I also realised that possession is no prerequisite for a happy life. If it weren't for my kids I could go for two months to Afghanistan right now, as I've done before and have the best Parmesan shipped to me to cook my pasta every month. Life is all about small things, really. Like a good cup of coffee, just like here. You need to find these small things in every place. When I was in Bosnia, I hired a boy as an assistant and his mother was so happy and proud that she wanted to repay me in some way, although she didn't have anything left for herself. As more of a joke I said she should bake an apple pie for me. And then, can you imagine: she turned a part of her car into an oven and baked an apple pie for me in it. It was really unbelievable. That's the kind of thing that makes life worth living. And you realise that the beautiful things in life really are the small things.

N: Which doesn't mean that you can't appreciate life's amenities, however. You are also a regular guest in the most legendary hotels and could surely write an impressive travel guide...

Michel Comte: I certainly could and I actually would like to do that one day. Don't misunderstand me: when I'm working, I insist on very good hotels and every comfort available. That's important if one works as much as I do.



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N: What would be the absolute must-sees in your travel guide?

Michel Comte: There are two places, both major holy Buddhist places, that are almost clichés: Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Muslim Indonesia in Java. Angkor Wat consists of hundreds of kilometres of small temples standing in the water – breathtakingly beautiful! Angkor Wat is really built into the water and can only be reached by water. It was even besieged by the Khmer Rouge. Borobudur used to be a Buddhist center. There is a marvellous hotel there, at the foot of a mountain, called Amanjiwo. It is built in the exact same style as the temple complex of Borobudur. You wake up there in the morning, climb on an elephant and go to greet the sunrise.

N: What does sustainability mean to you personally?

Michel Comte: It is definitely especially important for the individual, too. For me it means to always follow the light – never approach the darkness. You need to see the light behind every door and keep away from the dark side. For my life that’s a fundamental attitude. Part of it is not always to see only the bad sides of life, not always to look for the negative aspects of life. I always try to follow the light. Light is the greatest energy and I believe one can feel one’s way towards it, especially if one has the experience of once having opened the door to darkness, as I did.

N: Talking of films: you are about to begin shooting your first film. What may we expect from it?

Michel Comte: Well, I’m not supposed to talk about it, really. It’s true, however, we will soon begin shooting. It will take about three months and we will shoot in various locations, including Cambodia and Laos. It’s a very violent story, actually, that somehow deals with innocence; the story of Cain and Abel, if you will, done in a very authentic manner. During my work as a Red Cross photographer in various theaters of war, including the first war against Iraq, I was shot at four times – and in all four cases by a child. This phenomenon of violence by innocence is the topic I’m dealing with. I can’t really say anything else about it.

N: Sean Penn is a very close friend of yours who shares a passion for moral courage with you.

Michel Comte: True, but I can’t speak about Sean Penn right now and I don’t want to, either. His brother died recently and he has completely withdrawn – I don’t wish to interfere with that in any way except to say that he is one of the great actors and personalities of our times and one of Hollywood’s most private people. Just like George Clooney he is bent on fulfilling his mission of getting things moving. It’s something one’s got to give them credit for. However, as I said, I don’t want to talk about that much. Let’s rather talk about good coffee, shall we?

N: Not a bad idea. After all you were responsible for all cover photos of the N Mag as well as for photographing both the celebrities and the campaign.

Michel Comte: I enjoyed doing that. I love good coffee, you know. Couldn’t live a week without coffee, actually. I need a good cup of Cappuccino in the morning and an Espresso at noon. Can’t do without, really.

N: Well, here goes. Thanks very much for your time. 🍵

