

PROFESSIONAL photographer

DECEMBER 2009 | \$4.95



the Sweet Spot

Find the recipe for **balance** in work and life



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

James Baigrie takes a serving of the good life

From Dublin to Dubai: Searching for greener prospects

Review: Elinchrom Ranger Quadra all set for onsite

© James Baigrie



On the • bright • side

James Baigrie built a successful career through his positive, personal approach

BY JEFF KENT



ook on the bright side is more than a cliché. For James Baigrie, it's the mantra behind his success.

Baigrie came to America from his native South Africa in 1994.

Fresh out of college, he accepted a job as an assistant at his uncle's New York fashion photo studio. At the time, Baigrie's primary

interest was in international travel, but a job in photography sounded intriguing.

A few months was all it took to ignite his artistic passion, and Baigrie began to see professional photography as the ticket to a career that could include traveling to exciting places. He worked for his uncle for about 18 months, learning the particulars of fashion photography and running a commercial studio. Branching out, he assisted other photographers in a variety of specialties, including rock 'n' roll, still life, food and travel.

He studied lighting and shooting techniques and, not inconsequentially, he learned to behave like a professional photographer. "That's something that a lot of young photographers don't understand," he says. "You may know your cameras or your lights or your gear, but there's a protocol for how to interact with clients and manage a photo shoot. Your clients have invested their time and money in you, and there's a sense of trust. It's vital that you act like a professional and show them that you are up to the challenge."

With three years of assisting on his resume, Baigrie began to build a portfolio of his own. Combining his love of travel and photography, he embarked on an 18-month trans-Africa backpacking adventure





You may know your cameras or your lights or your gear, but there's a protocol for how to interact with clients and manage a photo shoot.



from Cairo to Cape Town. Baigrie produced the trip as a fundraising effort for the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital in Cape Town. People interested in his adventure made donations to a fund for the hospital. He walked, took public transport and subsisted on \$5 a day. At the end of the journey, Baigrie had collected \$20,000 for the hospital. He'd also created a striking photo journal of his travels.

Back in New York, he sent the images to the contacts he'd made as an assistant. The genre of the work didn't appeal to every audience, but editors and art directors loved the story, and began handing him assignments.

"That's where it really began for me," says Baigrie. "I started getting little assignments for some of the smaller weeklies—where to get a good bagel in Queens, shots of hot nighttime eateries, things like that. Then I started to get a few bigger jobs. I called on editors at *Martha Stewart Living*, *New York Magazine*, *Food & Wine*. I contacted people I'd met while assisting and showed them my book. Before too long, I was busy with a range of assignments."

The editorial work led to a break in the commercial field. W Hotel and Resorts hired Baigrie to do a two-year ad campaign. That project led to work for Crate & Barrel, then Pottery Barn, then Garnet Hill, then Nestlé. "I've found that commercial photography is very much about timing," says Baigrie. "You encounter someone at the right time, and they need someone with your skills. That's the way it happened for me. I landed a few commercial jobs that set me up for



the others. The key is to demonstrate to potential clients that your work in one area can translate into another. Otherwise you get stuck in that old catch 22: You can't get the job without the images, but you can't get the images without the job. That's not just starting out; it affects you when try to reinvent yourself or move to the next level. You have to keep pushing your boundaries, actively going after the work you really want."

Baigrie, who recently relocated to San Francisco, feels self-promotion emerges

from personal connections. His greatest marketing asset has always been his confidence. Clients want a photographer who knows he can do the job well, no matter what, and who shows enthusiasm about the project. "A photo editor once told me that I have an intuitive approach to making images. I think that's true. I wasn't formally trained. I feel my way through the work. I do things with lights and shooting that aren't standard practice. That's the way I've approached the business side as



well. The driving force behind the business is *me*. Most clients love to know you. They want to put a face and voice with the name. Without that, you're just another photographer in a sea of candidates."

Baigrie tackles projects head on. His

work is straightforward, yet never mundane. The images are colorful and positive, bringing out the best in the subject, whether it's a person or an ethnic dish. Optimism is very much Baigrie's identity as an artist and a businessperson. "I try to make the best of every situation,

whether it's a photo shoot or a client meeting. That attitude is really what's gotten me where I am today, and I hope it will continue to serve me well in the future," he says. ■

To see more from James Baigrie, visit www.jamesbaigrie.com.

