

Photographer, James O'Neil

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[AL]: When did you get into climbing, it seems to be central to what you shoot?

[JO]: I got into climbing about sixteen years ago. I was always active in lots of different sports, but this one just captivated me. I'm adventurous but introverted so climbing was a good fit. It's an activity that takes you to amazing places all around the world and you are not just a voyeur, you become an active part of the scene. I'm certain my love of climbing paved the way for what I like to photograph which is grandiose landscapes full of fine details that can envelop you.

[AL]: How did you get started in photography? Did you go to art school?

[JO]: Initially I got into photography by mistake. Originally, I wanted to be a personal trainer working in fitness, so I took subjects in school that would complement this career. However, I also enjoyed using my dad's old film camera and as an additional off-hand subject I also chose photography. It absolutely captivated me and was the only subject I genuinely enjoyed. I'd stay after school two or three days a week to use the darkroom and I got to know the technicians who would usher me out in the evening but I'd be back the next day.

[AL]: You started your professional career as a retoucher. How did that happen?

[JO]: During university, I really got into post-production. I realized the more you understand it, the more freedom you have in stylization and imagery manipulation. When studying conceptual photography and art theory I'd be coming up with all kinds of ideas and I needed to know more about post-production to be able to realize them. Looking back I'd probably laugh at my work but I was just starting to learn its capabilities. When I graduated I got in touch with a few retouching studios because I thought it would be the best place to learn. I absolutely loved it because I was seeing professional imagery coming in every day and working with top photographers, developing my eye and technical ability. The thing that really interested me was how to make heavily composited images look real. I was working on a lot with automotive campaigns combining the photographer's backplates, metadata, measurements, and CAD models of cars. It was my job to make it look authentic. There are a lot of very subtle things you need to consider when you combine imagery; the tonal quality of the shadows and whether things look too clean. Retouching is a lot of tidying up but CGI is messing things up and making it look worn. It's those

unconscious subtleties that we really notice.

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[AL]: How did you transition to becoming a photographer? How did you start working with Getty Images?

[JO]: While in the studio I was still shooting my own personal work, shooting landscapes and testing out color palettes to see how far I could push an image and stylization without going too far. At the studio, I was doing a lot of retouching for a photographer that also submitted to Getty Images who saw my work and thought I should submit my own. Two months later I quit my job, though I had already planned to leave. Nine months previously I had booked a one-way flight to travel up the west coast of North America. I'm a planner!

[AL]: Is there a method or strategy for your trips? How do you pick where you're going to shoot?

[JO]: It kind of depends on what my focus is at that time. I built my own custom camper van five and a half years ago and it's pretty much been my home full time since then. I started out traveling purely to climb in world-class locations that I had seen in posters growing up. I decided I better do it while I had the physical ability and then I would look around for what was in the area to shoot as well. Through the years as I've pushed more towards my photography, I have recognized that when I travel to do both climbing and photography, I end up doing neither to their full extent. So, I divide my time between traveling purely for photography and then traveling solely for climbing. When I travel for photography, I map out every location and the time I want to be there for the lighting direction, the distance to the next place, etc. Quite often I will do a sunrise and morning shoot in one place and move on to a different destination for an evening shoot. While I'm on the road focussed purely on photography, the imagery goes on a hard drive, so when I'm staying in a climbing destination or even during the recent pandemic I'm going through my backlog of imagery and working on the edits and all the post-production.

[AL]: Is there any downside to being a travel photographer?

[JO]: Being a traveling landscape photographer is fantastic, though I think the van life has been somewhat glorified. It doesn't show the odd nights where you struggle to find somewhere to sleep or how it changes your friend group. Obviously, I have my friends back in London and friends in the climbing community all around the world but I don't have that core everyday group where you have shared experiences and a continuing conversation about the day to day. Even though I like my own space, it does get a bit lonely from time to time. I think getting a dog is one of the best things I did for sure. Now Jack my dog has traveled to over thirty countries and he never says "no" to a climb or an adventure!

In terms of staying fresh and trying to improve I look to other photographers that I respect and try to decipher what it actually is I enjoy about their work and how it could influence my own. Also, I'll just shoot a lot and experiment with new equipment.

[AL]: You have recently started working in video using a drone. How was that transition? How long did it take you to get the hang of it and were there any major learning curves?

[JO]: The first learning curve was knowing all the required regulations! On the photography side of it, it is a fantastic tool to get a higher perspective for a lot of my landscape shots to create a sense of scale and depth in the imagery. When we discussed that I should start shooting videos too, that was a steeper learning curve for sure. To think about the form of a landscape and introducing time into the equation, choosing in and out points of imagery, new transitions, and keeping the movement of the drone smooth. I'm going to be learning this for a long time though my eye for what and how I shoot has already changed drastically. In the beginning, I fell into a trap, I was in awe of how high you could go with the drone and how you can see so much. I realized it's good for an overview, but you don't get the intimacy of the landscape. Another thing I have learned is you need to review your imagery on set. Bring your laptop. I found that shots, where I thought I'd captured something amazing, did not end up being the ones I selected when I looked on the big screen. You miss important things on a small screen and you may not have a second chance to redo them.

[AL]: Do you ever get in a rut; how do you keep it fresh and exciting? How do you keep growing as a creator?

[JO]: I have a huge folder of inspiration since I started retouching. If I ever saw an image that I liked, I'd screenshot it, I've got them categorized by locations, color palettes, and subject matter. Quite often if I feel a little uninspired with certain landscapes or when I'm shooting multiple days in a row, I'll look through my folders the evening before and put a couple of them on my phone to keep that in mind while shooting. In terms of staying fresh and trying to improve I look to other photographers that I respect and try to decipher what it actually is I enjoy about their work and how it could influence my own. Also, I'll just shoot a lot and experiment with new equipment. That's the joy of digital imagery you can blast off lots of different angles and then review your work. I will also often look at previous years' work and see how I am developing and changing as a photographer.

[AL]: What would be your ideal assignment or a client OR would you rather not work directly for clients?

[JO]: You hit the nail on the head, to be honest. I really quite like not shooting directly for clients and I've always said that I feel very privileged in my position being able to shoot for Getty Images. It has enabled me to travel where I want, shoot what I want and I don't have to deal with anyone on the client side which eliminates a lot of stress. The only downside I found when working in the retouching studio was everyone having their hands on the image; dealing with lots of opinions, timelines, trying to balance clients' needs and what I personally wanted for the images. Collaboration can be great and beautiful imagery is created that way, but now I generally prefer to work alone.

[AL]: For someone who's traveled extensively, can you give an insider's view of some of your favorite

places to shoot?

[JO]: So far I think it has to be the Western United States for the variants of landscape – from the barren desert Badlands to the lush Pacific North West Coast the distinct feel of those places are worlds apart. I find I'm often drawn towards desert and barren landscapes. The subtleties of tones, the big open skies, and the quality of light in these places are second to none. In Central Europe, you have a lot of dramatic mountains and beautiful places to travel to that are rich in history. However, to capture those grandiose landscapes more often you have to be in the mountains, whereas in North America this feeling can be found in all manner of subjects.

[AL]: Where are you traveling next?

[JO]: Well, I've got some grandiose life goals that involve driving and shooting around the world. At the moment, I'm looking for a specific vehicle to live and work out of, one more capable off-road and that is repairable even in the most remote parts of the world. That's part of my five-year plan and I'm hoping by then I should be well into my trip!