

► Christmas decorations,
Fairmont Hotel,
San Francisco,
California, USA

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WOMEN *in* PHOTOGRAPHY

MICHELLE CHAPLOW: *A Room with a View*

By Gillian Greenwood

Almost two hundred years ago, Sarah Anne Bright (1793–1866) produced a photographic study called *The Quillan Leaf*. Not long afterwards, Constance Fox Talbot (1811–1880), the wife of Henry Fox Talbot, took a picture of Thomas Moore's poem 'Tis The Last Rose Of Summer.

These images are now considered to be the earliest surviving photographs taken by a woman. It is unlikely that either Sarah Ann Bright, Constance Fox Talbot or any other female photographer of the nineteenth century could have imagined the extraordinary diversity of photographic careers that are embarked upon by women today. Yet, not unlike the 19th-century and early 20th-century trailblazing pioneers, the female photographers in this series share a deep passion for their work, an unwavering commitment to their objective and a willingness to go beyond the conventional viewpoint to achieve their goal.

Award-winning hotel and travel photographer Michelle Chaplow is one such photographer.

Michelle Chaplow has spent the last two decades photographing a huge variety of travel destinations and some of the world's finest luxury and historic hotels. Michelle's travel photography has been published by such prestigious institutions and publications as the Library of Congress, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, and *Condé Nast Traveller*. In 2010 she founded Hotel Essence Photography, whose purpose is to capture the very essence of hotels around the world. Hotel

Essence Photography has been commissioned and published by highly prestigious hotel groups such as Mandarin Oriental, Paradores de España, Oberoi, Relais & Châteaux, Preferred Hotels & Resorts, Fairmont Hotels & Resorts and numerous independently-owned hotels. Born in Britain, she attended Manchester University and relocated to Spain in 1992. She is a member of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and studied photography at Seville University, The Contemporary Art Museum in Malaga and the MoMA in New York.

She has been a *Nikon Owner* subscriber for the last twelve years and has won a number of awards for her photography.

GILLIAN: What were your reasons for choosing photography as a profession?

MICHELLE: I have always believed that I didn't choose photography as a profession, photography chose me. I studied food science and technology at university, worked in the food industry, and then I discovered photography during a year's sabbatical while travelling in South and Central America. It completely changed my life.

GILLIAN: Can you tell us about your first camera?

MICHELLE: My first camera was an Olympus OM1, which was totally manual and a great camera to come to grips with the basics of photographic techniques. It was extremely robust, withstanding the heat of the Amazon rainforests during my trip and the rough and tumble of backpacking.



► Oberoi Amarvilas,
Agra, India

GILLIAN: Was the trip to South and Central America the catalyst that inspired you to become a travel photographer?

MICHELLE: Yes. The long trip to South and Central America left a strong and lasting impression — the colourful nature and the people, especially the indigenous peoples in Peru, Ecuador, and Guatemala. I knew nothing about photography before I left, but found a new love outside the corporate world, learning from scratch on the road with the Olympus OM1. There was no instant gratification in those days, being able to see the images instantly on a screen on the back of the camera. I didn't even know if the pictures would come out, and I rationed myself to one roll of slide film per week, so I knew that every one of those 36 photographs counted.

Most of the slide film rolls were not developed until my return. I was really surprised by the quality; not all of them were good,

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but there were some firm favourites that ended up being sold in exhibitions and as stock photography.

Learning Spanish on my travels encouraged me to move to Spain, where I immersed myself in the world of photography with all the colourful cities and landscapes of Andalucia on my doorstep. I took a fine arts and photography course at Seville University and within two years I was working full-time as a travel photographer.

I freelanced for EFE, the Spanish state press agency, bought a USRobotics modem, and collaborated with many UK national newspapers and airline magazines. I won a contract from the Spanish Tourist Board to photograph, in medium format, 700km of coastline, from Alicante in the east to Huelva near the Portuguese border in the south-west. I illustrated a coffee table book on Spain for a publishing house in Paris, and also a book on tapas. In addition, I hosted travel photography workshops in Andalucia every year.

GILLIAN: Then, in 2010, your career started to change course. What precipitated the move from travel to hotel photography?

MICHELLE: When you are on the road as a travel photographer, you have to stay in hotels or similar accommodation. In those days, every hotel would have its own glossy brochure. I would often feel that the brochure did not accurately portray the quality of the hotel I was staying in. This was coupled with the fact that travel photography fees were dropping drastically; the photography world was now digital and photographers were creating and archiving travel stock images to sell. Instead of hiring photographers, magazines were often choosing the cheaper option

of these ready-made stock images, and some projects therefore became unviable both for the photographer and the publisher.

I have always loved hotels; I love everything about them, the staff, the guests, the spaces, and the fact that everyone is under the same roof for one night. All those people have fascinating stories, and all those communal spaces have borne witness to many intriguing events and conversations. I saw an urgent need to upgrade hotel photography — to go beyond photographing spaces and to really capture the essence, the spirit, of luxury and historic hotels — as my perfect niche.

I had my “Eureka!” moment and decided that I would like to spend the rest of my professional working life capturing the essence of luxury and historic hotels around the world. I adore history and historic preservation, and I have always been mindful that the contemporary photography we create today will become the historic images of tomorrow. So there I was, in January 2010, with a concept; next I needed a brand and a domain name. I chose Hotel Essence Photography. I knew from day one that my aim was to capture the *essence* of luxury and historic hotels worldwide; I wanted to go that extra mile to not simply document hotels, but to capture their heart and soul.

GILLIAN: Why did you decide to choose the Nikon brand for your work?

MICHELLE: For press and travel photography, Nikon was the natural choice. Looking back at my travel photography years

(1993–2000), destiny must have played a role, as I secured contracts for BBC Books’ Spanish-learning books, and for AA travel guides. Nikon became my camera of choice; my pre-digital workhorse was the F5. Throughout my whole career, I have put my trust in Nikon, and they have never let me down. Still to this day, my photographic gear is 100% Nikon.

GILLIAN: Do you have a favourite Nikon camera?

MICHELLE: My favourite cameras change with time, but at the moment I am very impressed with the Z 7II and the Z 8. The Z 9 is also excellent, but I now prefer more light-weight camera bodies. My crew and I travel with at least 200 kilos of equipment, so every little weight-saving counts.

GILLIAN: The use of perspective and dimension within your work is unique; what do you consider to be the most important lens to take with you on your shoots?

MICHELLE: My preferred lens for hotel photography is the AFS Nikkor 14–24mm f/2.8G ED. The quality of the optics and the wide angle make it a firm favourite. At the other end of the scale, I enjoy capturing the macro details and recently worked with the NIKON Z MC 50mm f/2.8 lens and loved it.

GILLIAN: Throughout your career you have photographed many different types of hotels, some of which are iconic historic properties such as UNESCO-recognised buildings. Is there one hotel that has particularly inspired you as a photographer?

► Finca Cortesin,
Málaga, Spain



MICHELLE: Park Hotel Vitznau² in Switzerland, where we have carried out several photoshoots over the years; it dates back to 1903 and is spectacularly located on the shores of Lake Lucerne. Park Hotel Vitznau is a historic hotel, with state-of-the-art rooms and spa; it has not one but two Michelin-star restaurants.

There is endless photographic potential in that hotel whichever way you look, from the exquisite interiors, to the stunning grounds and scenic mountain-and-lake backdrop.

Paddle steamers sail along the lake, so you can hear their beautiful swishing sound in the distance. That is another thing about hotel photography: you must immerse yourself in the guest experience to feel the heartbeat of the hotel.

The initial assignment at this hotel was to create contemporary images for a book on the history of the hotel and the surrounding area; my foundation as a travel photographer helped to capture those images. We had amazing weather with crystal-clear views, which makes a huge difference, even in close-up photography. The book's success led to further assignments at Park Hotel Vitznau.

GILLIAN: Do you prefer to shoot in RAW or JPEG and do you use Photoshop?

MICHELLE: I always shoot in RAW, with a simultaneous basic JPEG side-car file for quick viewing. You can be confident of having all the data needed within the RAW. I spend many hours of my life editing in Photoshop and Lightroom; this hotel photography business is not only fine dining and cosy bathrobes!

GILLIAN: I understand that your photographic assignments take you all around the world, that you average 100-150 hotel nights per year and have visited more than 60 countries. Can you tell us a little about one of your assignments?

“ New hotel opening photography is incredibly important, as these images of the meticulously restored Cashel Palace would be the first shared with the world; you feel a great responsibility.

► Park Hotel Vitznau, Switzerland





► Cashel Palace Hotel, Drawing Room, Tipperary, Ireland

MICHELLE: The exception to all the travelling was during the COVID pandemic, obviously. I normally work with a team of four people, myself as the lead photographer, an assistant, production manager, and stylist. During the pandemic we had two major photography assignments: the first was a luxury boutique hotel in Barcelona, where only one guest was in residence, a very famous opera singer who had hired the penthouse. This was an interesting experience, as normally we have to schedule our shoot carefully according to the availability of guest rooms. On this occasion, with all the rooms vacant, logistics were no longer a problem, and we were spoilt for choice. It was surreal to see Barcelona's main thoroughfares completely devoid of people — the city looked like a ghost town.

Our crew was also flown to Switzerland during the pandemic; we had the whole plane to ourselves, and we had to quarantine for 14 days on arrival. The Barcelona and Zurich airports were both totally empty.

The owner of the hotel had a private duplex apartment

within the property, with under-floor heating and views to the Alps, where we stayed. He also provided us with room service (trolley left at the door) and a direct line to the chef. This was definitely a quarantine highlight. It felt extremely strange when we left — back to normal life and assignment mode.

GILLIAN: Do you have an unusual story from a shoot to tell our readers?

MICHELLE: Cashel Palace in Ireland was a new opening project; in March 2022, this historic 18th-century hotel in County Tipperary was due to reopen its doors after a major restoration project. We were commissioned to create the images of the hotel.

New hotel opening photography is incredibly important, as these images of the meticulously restored Cashel Palace would be the first shared with the world; you feel a great responsibility. High-quality hotel photos are essential both for guests, to show them the property in its full glory, and for the media, who will need first-class images to illustrate their articles about the hotel.



When we arrived, the builders were still working in the hotel, along with electricians, interior designers, curtain-hangers, upholsterers and carpenters. There was an exciting atmosphere; you could feel that something marvellous was being created. Sometimes, if everything is not in place, you have to improvise. I remember we could not get the linen to lie correctly on one of the beds; we tried ironing and various other options. In the end, as the image was of only one side, my assistant and stylist lay under the bed and held everything straight. Luckily the four human feet sticking out from under the bed were not visible in the photo! On many occasions when shooting curtains, we have someone lying on the floor behind the bed out of shot, holding the pleats in place. With experience, you learn all kinds of solutions

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to practical problems; no two hotels are the same, and over the years we have become masters of flexibility and have developed endless techniques.

It is very satisfying to create a bank of images for a hotel opening; we have now seen those images used in *The Times*, *The Irish Times*, *National Geographic Traveller*, *Condé Nast Traveller* and *Travel + Leisure*, to name a few.

GILLIAN: What projects are you currently working on?

MICHELLE: We are working on the post-production of three Historic Hotels of America projects. Firstly, a five-star property in Boston, XV Beacon, then a family-run hotel in Hawley, Pennsylvania, along with a new Art Deco-style social club, quaint lakeside hotels which look like something from classic American movies, a hotel located next to a waterfall, and a historic brewery. All these properties belong to Settlers Hospitality, which is a family-owned business in Hawley PA.

Finally, a hotel that dates back to 1925, which has never had its facade photographed architecturally, so scissor lifts (the type which fold up and down) were hired and access to balconies of nearby properties was obtained. This hotel is the Hawthorne Hotel in Salem, Massachusetts, where the vintage TV series *Bewitched* was filmed; it is a place which thrives on Halloween. We had to remove a stack of life-sized plastic skeletons to gain access to one private balcony, so that we could set up the tripod! We are also planning our hotel photography assignments for next year; hopefully we will be working in Asia again in 2024.

GILLIAN: Can you tell us any other stories about some of your projects?

MICHELLE: Many of the projects that I work on can't be viewed until the corporate office have approved them or they are released in their marketing campaigns. Last year we renewed the lifestyle photography for the Fairmont San Francisco, including its famous 22-foot walk-in gingerbread house. We are very much looking forward to seeing those images in print. This hotel is where Tony Bennett first sang *I Left My Heart in San Francisco*. In addition, Julia Morgan, the first licensed woman architect in California, worked on this property. The Fairmont San Francisco is busy 24 hours a day, so the only time we could shoot the lobby was at night. Even at 4.00 a.m. people were popping in to see the ginger-bread house, including police officers, random guests, and an in-residence blogger, who all wanted a shot of the Christmas decor without people.

Hotel life is indeed a 24-hour affair, and I feel privileged to have seen every aspect, from the guest's perspective to behind the scenes. This shoot also involved families enjoying festive afternoon tea, again shot in the early hours of the morning. We brought in a lot of studio lighting for this shoot.

GILLIAN: Do you have any advice for our readers who would like to have a similar photography career?

MICHELLE: Look for your niche. It must be something that you truly love, so it will be a natural progression to become an expert in that field. You will have periods when it seems difficult to secure assignments, or perhaps the weather is not in your favour, but those spells never last long.

Share your knowledge. I find that keynote speaking at annual hospitality conferences is very rewarding; it feels great to help hoteliers achieve their aims. Experience brings expertise, and I have delivered keynote speeches around the world on the importance of strong visuals for luxury and historic hotels.

Follow your heart and your dreams. For over a decade I have photographed hotels and I find it magical. Photographers are always navigating the next challenge, with long days and hard work, but it is highly rewarding. I always remember my football-loving uncle Robby saying to me, "You don't have a real job; you have a job like a footballer!"

Remember that you can never know everything about photography.

It is important never to stop learning - I recently studied Contemporary Art Photography at the CAC in Malaga, and also took a course at the MoMA in New York called *Seeing Through Photographs*. In addition, you need to stay abreast of trends and tendencies, as the visual narrative for hotel photography is constantly changing. Keynote speaking reminds me of this and helps me to convey that information. ■

¹Issue 79 Article entitled: *Painting with Light*

²Park Hotel Vitznau in Switzerland:
<https://famouthotels.org/books/1317>

The title used for the article, *A Room with a View*, has been taken from the 1985 British romance film starring Helena Bonham Carter CBE, directed by James Ivory and produced by Ismail Merchant.

<https://michellechaplow.com>



► Moët Chandon
Champagne Tower,
Fairmont Hotel,
San Francisco, USA