



# Photographic Memory

National Geographic photographer Michael Yamashita recalls his career thus far

BY JOEL KELLER

Photos courtesy of Michael Yamashita

Michael Yamashita has just returned from a photo shoot. But it's not just any photo shoot; he's working on a travel guide of New York City and spent the early morning hours taking shots of lower Manhattan from out the side of a helicopter. He's tired and sweaty. But he knows there's more work to be done.

As he looks over the images, he's not happy with what he sees. "The lighting is not that great on these because I'm up there too late," he

says from behind his George Nakashima desk in his home office. "By the time we took off it was already six-thirty. I wanted to get up there at five." He later firms up plans to go up again, hoping to capture the same subject at daybreak.

Such dedication to craft is expected from someone with the experience of Yamashita (pronounced Ya-MA-sh-tä); he's been a professional photo-journalist for more than 30 years. The Chester resident has spent the bulk of his career traveling the world, shooting mostly for *National Geographic*. In the last six years, he has completed two major projects for

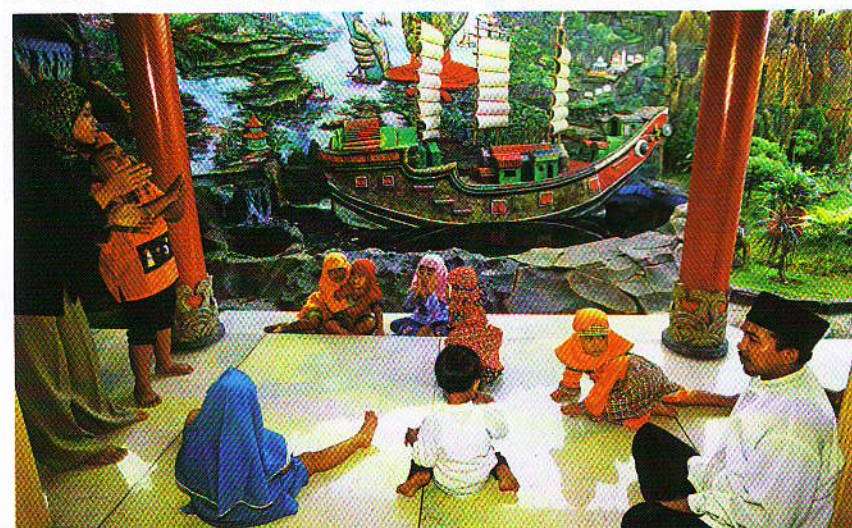
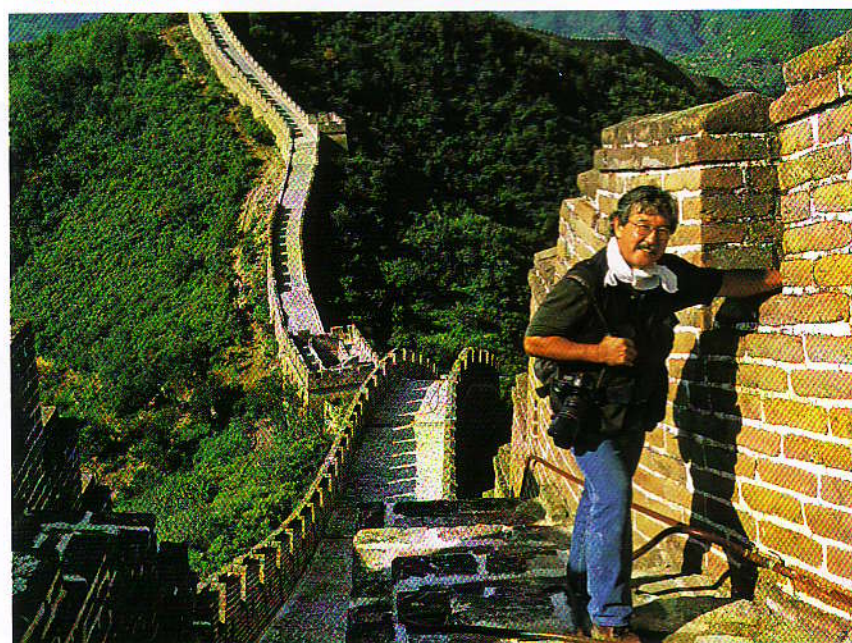
them: one that took him on Marco Polo's journey from Italy to China, and, more recently, one where he followed the journeys of Zheng He, who went on diplomatic trade missions all over Asia during the Ming Dynasty.

"This guy's so little known in the West," he says of Zheng, "compared to, say, Vasco da Gama, who was the first European to come to the Far East by ship. Da Gama's traveling in two beat-up ships; this guy was traveling in a fleet of 300 ships, some as long as 400 feet."

The project, for which Yamashita, 57, and *National Geographic* writer Frank Viviano spent time in the Asian

**IMAGE MAKER** Michael Yamashita travels the world for *National Geographic*, but his home base is here in Chester.





**SOMEWHERE MAN** From top: Noon prayers are observed by young and old in a Brunei mosque; Yamashita on the Great Wall of China; Children take their lessons in a Koran school against a backdrop of Zheng He's treasure ships with a mural depicting his exploits.

locales visited by Zheng and his armada, was featured in the April 2005 edition of the magazine. A documentary of the journey was also made, and a 500-page book, *Zheng He: Tracking the Epic Voyages of China's Greatest Explorer*, will be released by White Star this fall.

It's rare for a photographer to have one book of that size published. But this is the second of Yamashita's publications to reach 500-pages, as he has already received acclaim for the epic *Marco Polo: A Photographer's Journey* (White Star, 2004). In all of his books – he has five in total – the San Francisco native tells a story about the regions through which he travels, using a mixture of scenery, cityscapes and candid shots of the people he encounters. In every case, he tries to couch ancient journeys like that of Marco Polo in terms of what such a sojourn might yield in the modern world.

For instance, the Marco Polo book shows three women at a Kurdish wedding in Iraq. They are enjoying the happy occasion, even while they have automatic weapons slung over their shoulders. Yamashita said he didn't necessarily take the photo with Polo in mind, "But then you read what [Polo] says about the Kurds – you know, that they need to travel heavily armed because of the fact that it's a dangerous place with plenty of bandits. It means to me that in this very modern context, it resonates."

This knowledge of world history stems from how Yamashita became a photographer in the first place. His family moved to Montclair when he was a child, and he graduated from Montclair Academy. After he received an Asian studies degree from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, he decided to reconnect with his Asian heritage by taking a trip to Japan. "Growing up as an Asian-American, and being pretty much the only Asian-American in [high] school other than my brother, obviously you notice your differences," he says. "I went over [to Japan] to live and have an experience, and just basically see how Japanese I was, which wasn't very. I think like an American.

"I learned the language for four years, and that's where I bought a camera," – an all-manual Nikkormat.





**BACK ROADS** A narrow path next to the mud-brick towers of Al Hajirah, Oman — some as many as ten stories high as described in the travelogues of Ma Huan, a Chinese traveler who accompanied Zheng He.

As he took pictures to document his trip, he became hooked on photography. When he got home, he says, “I joined a camera club and pestered professionals.” He decided to give it a go professionally in 1975, after not a lot of experience.

Yamashita soon landed a job taking destination photos for Singapore Airlines. The resulting portfolio from that job got him assignments from the National Geographic Society starting in 1979; his first assignment for the parent magazine appeared in early 1980. During most of his time with *National Geographic*, Yamashita has concentrated on the area of the world that holds the most interest for him: Asia. “They want you to be passionate about the story, or else they’ve failed if they give you an assignment that you’re not dying to do,” he says.

His passion comes through in his photographs. He has no compunction about getting right next to his subjects and shooting them using wide-angle lenses. Yamashita feels that it’s his job to get the perfect shot, which often necessitates getting in the middle of the action and clicking away.

During the Marco Polo project, that wasn’t as easy as it looks. Yamashita and writer Mike Edwards took the trip in 2000 and 2001, and they were one of the few teams of

Western-based journalists to show Iraq between the two Gulf wars and the war in Afghanistan. Saddam Hussein’s government gave them access to Iraq due to their nonpolitical agenda. Yamashita says it also helped that *National Geographic* has such a great reputation around the world. “I had better access than the BBC or CNN, which had an office there,” the photographer says.

An attempt was made to gain access to Afghanistan with the Taliban, which had offices in Flushing Meadows Queens in 1999 and 2000. “They weren’t a terrorist organization or recognized as such [at the time],” Yamashita recalls. “And the question was, ‘Can we visit your country?’ They said, ‘You can come, but you can’t take pictures.’ And we saw the Northern Alliance and they said, ‘come and tell our story to the world.’”

With the help of Alliance leader Massoud, Yamashita was able to get fantastic shots like Alliance soldiers praying next to their tank, and a close-up of the Shah of Whakan greeting a young subject with a traditional kiss.

When Massoud was killed right before Sept. 11, 2001, Yamashita found the news “pretty devastating, because basically we would have never been able to do this story with-

out having his blessings.”

Yamashita often travels into dangerous situations — in Afghanistan, for instance, he was in a helicopter flying just over the tree line, in order to avoid radar — but he chuckles when he’s asked if a person in his job ever ponders life and death in those instances. “If getting killed is the first thing on his mind, I don’t think he belongs there. His job is to make great pictures, so he’s thinking about the picture.”

The Zheng He photos show the same intimacy. A preview of those shots can be seen at Yamashita’s Web site, [www.michaelyamashita.com](http://www.michaelyamashita.com). He continues to travel to Asia for *National Geographic*, as well as work in other parts of the world on projects like travel guides and Nikon brochures.

And he takes a camera everywhere, even during his work as a volunteer firefighter for the Ralston Engine Company No. 1 in Mendham, which he’s been working with for 18 years. Photos that he took at a local fire — after it was contained, of course — were published in the April 2006 issue of *National Geographic*.

“Photography is a lifestyle, it’s not a job,” Yamashita says. “You take a camera around because you never know when you want to take a picture of something.” ■