



# 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.