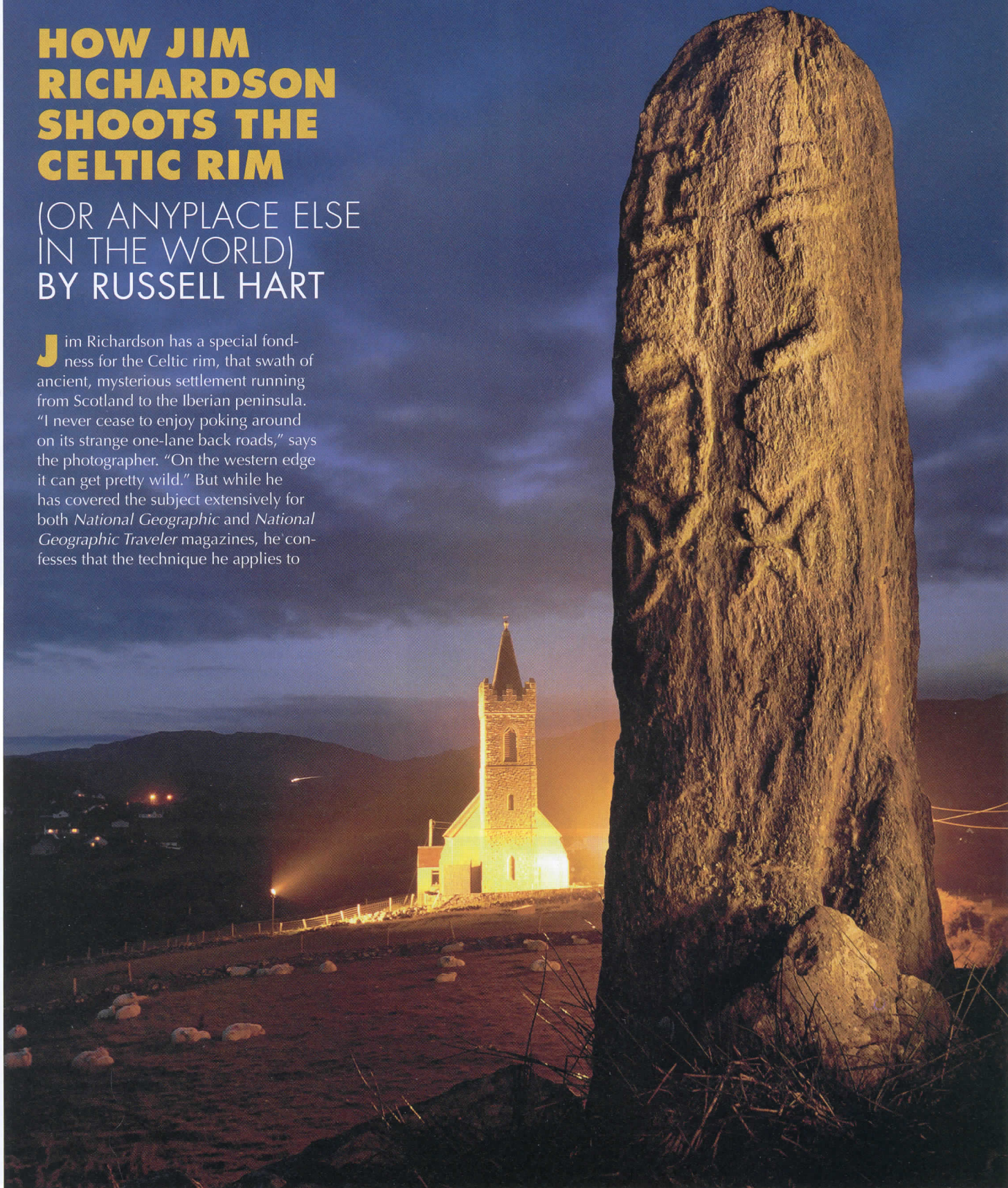


# MASTER CLASS

## HOW JIM RICHARDSON SHOOTS THE CELTIC RIM

(OR ANYPLACE ELSE IN THE WORLD)  
BY RUSSELL HART

**J**im Richardson has a special fondness for the Celtic rim, that swath of ancient, mysterious settlement running from Scotland to the Iberian peninsula. "I never cease to enjoy poking around on its strange one-lane back roads," says the photographer. "On the western edge it can get pretty wild." But while he has covered the subject extensively for both *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Traveler* magazines, he confesses that the technique he applies to



A standing stone on the pilgrimage route in Glencolumbkille, Ireland.





it is not much different than what he has used to shoot China, Africa, and even the small Kansan town of Cuba, which he has been documenting for 30 years. "If you were to look at my work you might say that I take the same kinds of pictures in far-flung places as I do in Cuba," says Richardson, himself a Kansas native. "Just like I might hang around the barbershop in Cuba looking for pictures, I'd seek out the local barbershop if I was in western China or Ireland. The great lesson for me is that human needs are pretty consistent around the world."

Richardson's main advice to photographers who want

**Above, from left:** A piper at a Celtic festival in Brittany; ancient standing stones in Scotland's Hebrides islands; the ruins of an ancient Irish fort.

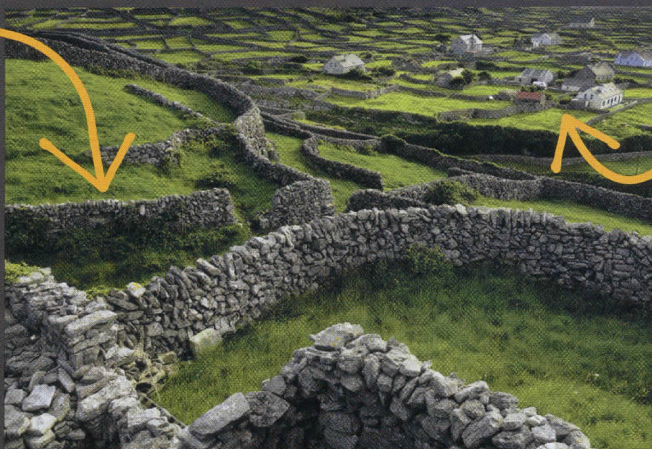
**Below, from left:** Stone fences on the Aran Islands of Ireland; a wild pony on the island of North Uist in the Hebrides.

to improve their travel photographs derives from that lesson. It is simply to seek out the places that minister to human needs, whether physical, social, or spiritual—markets, pubs, or churches—and then to stay there and shoot until the culture reveals itself. "You'll see how those needs are met in other lands by other people," he says.

**Y**ou can talk f-stops, shutter speeds, and workflow until you're as blue in the face as a Celt on the war-path, but it doesn't address the fundamental problem of taking meaningful pictures in another culture: access.

## LESSON 1 RESEARCH IT

"The first and easiest way to get **good travel pictures** is to go when others aren't there. Do your research first, of course. Look at as many pictures as you can of where you're going, not necessarily to find out what to see but to **see what the clichés are**, so you can avoid them. Once you arrive, go straight to the postcard racks. This will tell you two things—one, what are the signature places of that location and two, what are the photographic clichés."



## LESSON 2 EXPLORE IT

"Very often the first thing I do when I arrive somewhere is go find the **town bulletin board**, and root through it until I find the announcement that the dog trials will be on the green on Saturday afternoon, or that the pipe band will be practicing at 7:00 on Tuesday evening. You should seek out those kinds of events, because they act **as bridges between cultures**. As a photographer and a traveler you need to be open to all kinds of experiences."





**CLASS NOTE:**  
"A WIDE-ANGLE  
LENS LETS YOU  
RE-CREATE A FEEL-  
ING OF BEING  
IN THE SCENE."

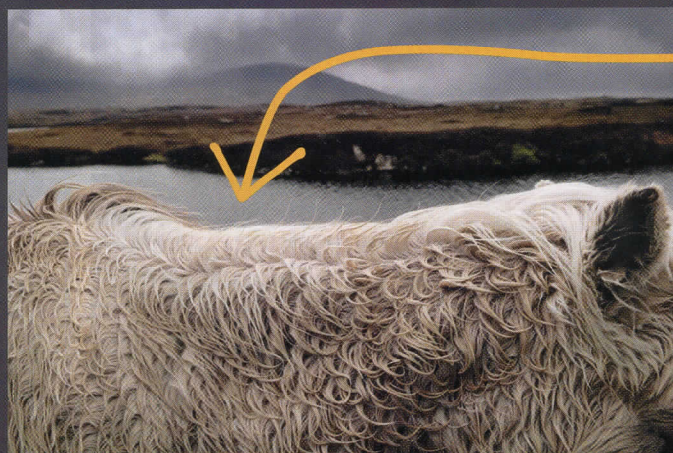
How do you work your way into that society, whether a small American town or a populous Chinese city? How do you communicate your purpose in taking pictures to the people you're photographing? "Not all cultures really understand the kinds of pictures I'm there to make," says Richardson, who describes his genre of photography as cultural documentary. "I'm really confusing to them because I don't want them to stand in a row in front of a wall. Even in Scotland there were many times

when people didn't get it that I just wanted to shoot around the edges of the day, as [National Geographic photographer] Bill Allard likes to say, until something of their inner life was revealed. No, they were there to have their picture taken!"

Richardson says that if you can't explain your purpose directly you may have to resort to "subterfuge." In both Kansas and China, for example, he has found himself in the position of trying to convince a school-teacher to be photographed along with her pupils. "Both times I told her that the kids wouldn't behave if

## LESSON 3 LIGHT IT

"You should get really good at **adding just a little light** with strobes, bouncing it off a wall or ceiling so that it blends in with the existing light. This works well in a pub, for example, when your main subject might be a darker area in the foreground and the background is more brightly lit; the **flash balances the two**. But one of the wonderful things about digital photography is that you can shoot at high ISO settings, with no flash, and still get really good image quality."



## LESSON 4 SHOOT IT

"I use wide-angle lenses a lot. Wide-angles let you create **layers of depth**, images with something in the foreground, in the middle ground, and then the background. Or say you're in that pub and you want to capture the **atmosphere of the place**, the separate conversations happening all around you. Because it lets you get closer to your subject yet still take everything in, the wide-angle lets you make a picture that has the feeling of being **in the middle of it all**."





she didn't stand there with them," he recalls. "That way, she didn't have to be officially shy." Other times, says Richardson, he has made himself as "boring" as possible. "If you hang around long enough, don't talk much, and look a little dumb, people give up on you as entertainment and go back to business," he explains. But the photographic payoff for that patience is big. "It's a spine-tingling moment when someone starts to open up for me," he says, "and I realize that they're speaking through me to others they will never know, by letting me intrude into their life. It's a gift."

**F**inding a reliable translator and guide can make a huge difference in a travel photographer's success, says Richardson. "At *National Geographic* we call them fixers—somebody who knows the lay of the land, speaks the language, and can help you through the etiquette and protocols

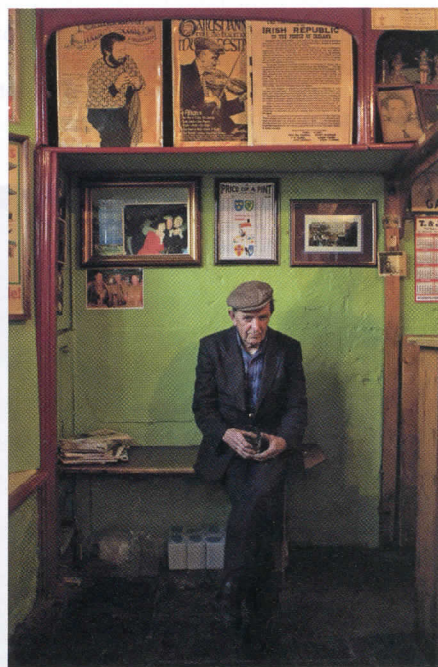
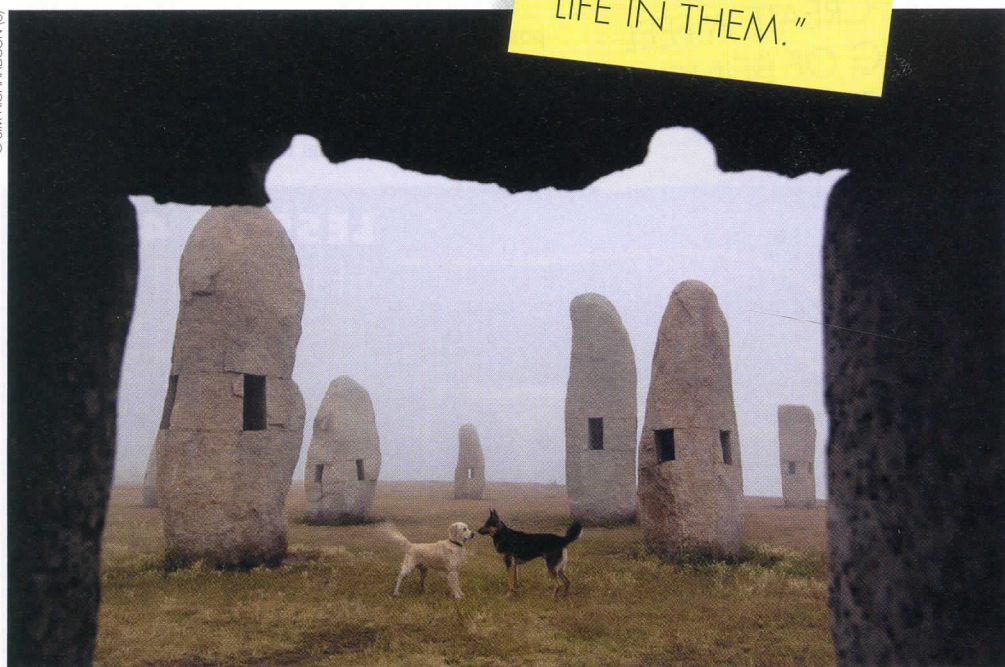
**Clockwise, from top left:**

A tug of war at Scottish highland games; moving sheep to better grazing in the Hebrides; sunset at Glencolumbkille, Ireland; O'Flaherty's Pub in Dingle, Ireland; standing stones in Galicia, Spain.

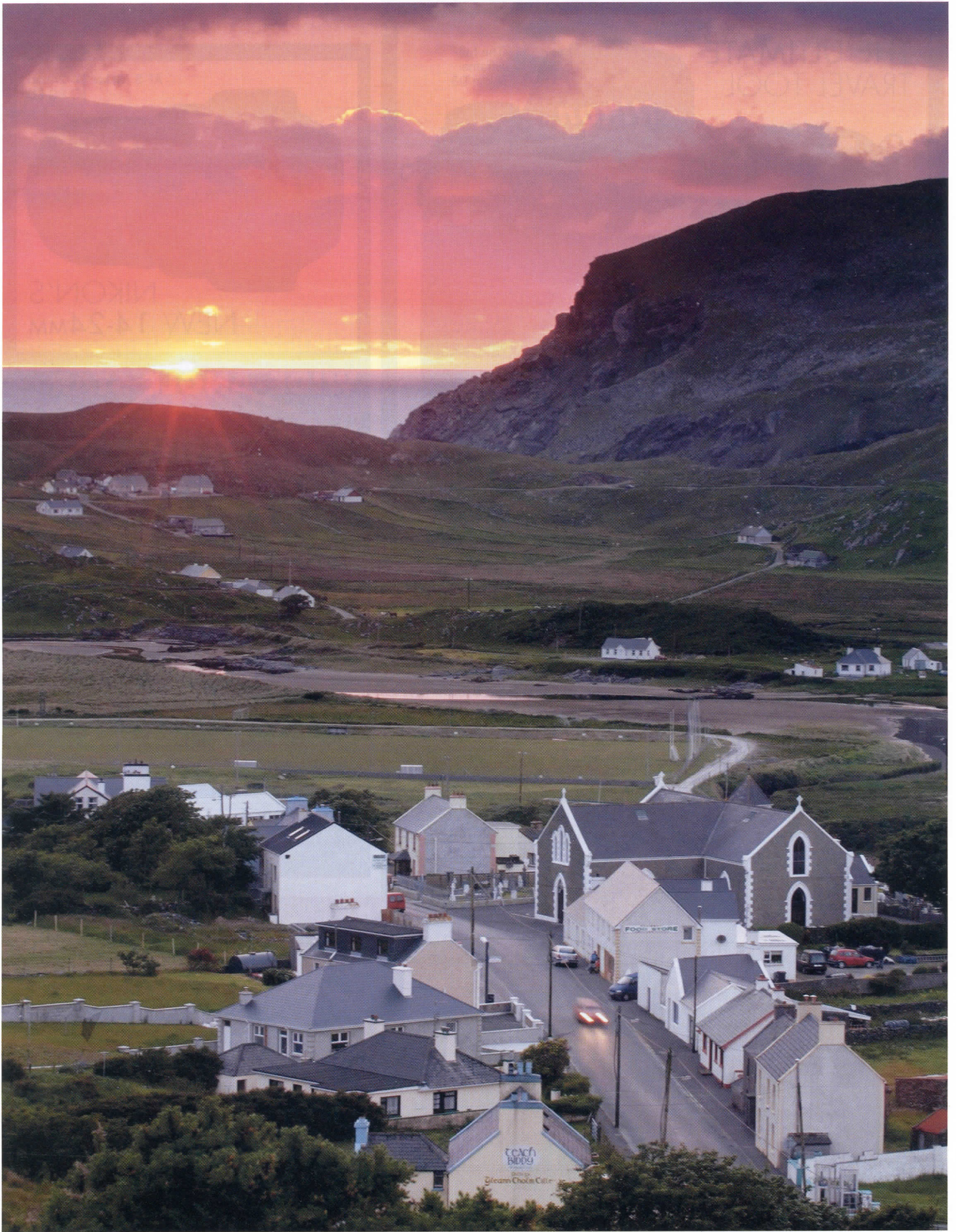
**CLASS NOTE:**  
"LET YOUR PICTURES BE A LITTLE MESSY. IT LEAVES MORE REAL LIFE IN THEM."

of the place." *Geographic* shooters often get fixer recommendations by networking with photographers who've covered the same ground, but less connected photographers have other options. "It might be as simple as finding a local student who wants to practice his English with you," he says.

The fixer's inside knowledge can help you avoid taking the *obvious* pictures. But even if you end up photographing a tourist site you can make fresh pictures by "going against the grain," says Richardson, whose research often includes reading novels set in his destination (in Scotland's case, a series of murder mysteries set in Edinburgh) to pick up its social undercurrents. If you're worried that your photograph of the Taj Mahal will be cluttered with merchants selling trinkets in the foreground, then make those people a deliberate part of the image, he suggests; (continued on page 84)



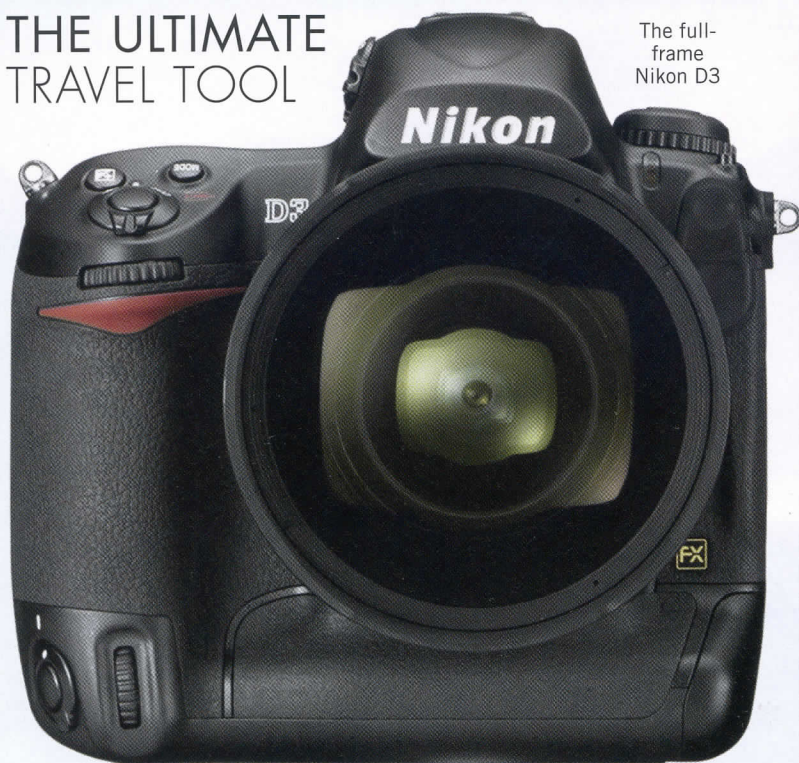






## THE ULTIMATE TRAVEL TOOL

The full-frame Nikon D3



## RICHARDSON ON THE NIKON D3

"Forty years ago, when I was starting out, I remember we used to push Tri-X in Acufine developer to E.I. 1250, and we thought that was screaming fast," photographer

**Jim Richardson** remembers. "Now, 40 years later, we have the **Nikon D3**, a camera that can do color that looks immensely better at ISO 6400. Which means there's really no end to a photographer's day—almost no limit to how low the existing light can be and still allow you to get a picture.

"I used to shoot assignments for *National Geographic* in which the highest film speed you could use, at least if you wanted to preserve quality, was ISO 100. Basically **you just had to edit the world** before you even started shooting. There were many pictures you missed because you simply didn't have the sensitivity you needed. The Nikon D3 **changes how you photograph**. It lets you shoot things you just couldn't shoot before.

"Even when I did my *Geo-*

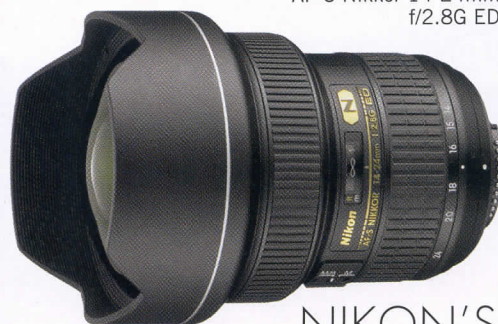
*graphic* story on the Flint Hills of Kansas just a couple of years ago, I felt the upper limit for a good digital SLR was ISO 1600. I struggled to do shots of the night sky at that speed. But I think the D3's ISO 6400 is as good as, or better than, what I was getting back then at ISO 1600. And when you combine that with the ability to fine-tune white balance, all of a sudden we as photographers are **able to open up the night.**"

"Even the small details of the camera make it much easier to do that kind of work. I was recently shooting outside at night, this time for a **story in Niger**, and it was so dark I couldn't see to keep the camera level. So I turned on the D3's Virtual Horizon feature, which converts the f-stop scale to a leveling indicator, and was able to get a picture that wasn't cockeyed. Still, the D3's **viewfinder is amazingly big and bright**. You can actually focus manually again!

You can go down the list of the D3's individual features

and compare and contrast, but that doesn't give you the whole picture. It's the **combination of features** and the way they're implemented that makes the camera so good. That and its quickness. Not so much in terms of frames per second, but quick the way a Leica rangefinder is. Of course it's bigger, but it has a kind of responsiveness that makes it a really great camera for people photography."

AF-S Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8G ED



NIKON'S NEW 14-24MM

## WIDE-ANGLE STAR

It still takes a little mental math to arrive at the narrower angle of view produced by familiar focal lengths when they're used on a digital SLR that has a smaller-than-35mm image sensor, as most do. For example, Nikon's new **AF-S Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8G ED zoom** has the equivalent (in 35mm) of a 21-36mm range when used on a Nikon D300, or any Nikon D-SLR other than the D3. But while its focal lengths make it sound like yet another optic shortened to widen angles of view for digital photography, this astounding chunk of glass **covers a 35mm-sized frame**—and therefore delivers its true, nominal 14-24mm ultrawide range when used on the Nikon D3,

Nikon's first D-SLR with a full-frame image sensor.

Does that combination of range, sensor coverage, and **constant maximum aperture** come at the expense of optical quality or rectilinear performance? In a word, no. But we'll let Richardson speak to that: "I don't think I've ever shot a better 14mm lens," he says, comparing the 14-24mm to the single-focal-length 14mm wide-angles offered by Nikon and most other makers. "I shot the night sky in Africa, and even at f/2.8 at 14mm the stars in the corners of the frame were just about as sharp as the stars in the center. No little coma wings on the stars in the corner—**stunning for a 14mm lens.**" We concur. —R.H.



A cafe interior in Niamey, Niger, shot in the Nikon D3's live view mode.



# AMERICAN PHOTO

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## JIM RICHARDSON

(continued from page 80) and create a picture that's more about culture and less about architecture. "The things you might have considered just to be in your way before can actually become subjects," says Richardson. "Sometimes I actually tell my workshop students that they should let their pictures be a little messy. It leaves more

Edinburgh, Scotland's Beltane Fire Festival.



© JIM RICHARDSON

**CLASS NOTE:**  
"FIND A LOCAL STUDENT WHO WANTS TO PRACTICE ENGLISH TO TRANSLATE."

real life in them. Because what I'm talking about is not trophy pictures, but photography that's about the travel experience."

This advice reflects Richardson's belief that the fundamental purpose and nature of travel photography have changed. "It used to be that travel photography was done for people who would never go to the place," he says. "You photographed the Taj Mahal to show it to people who never expected to see it themselves. But now we all expect to go everywhere, everyone's got a life list of places they want to see before they die. So travel photography should be as much about what it feels like to be in a place as how that place looks."

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