

EXPAND YOUR PORTFOLIO

OUT OF AFRICA

Fashion photographer and trainer Julian Knight and a selection of fellow professionals organised a dedicated shoot in Africa to add some striking new images to their portfolios. Here Julian shares some of the results

WORDS **TERRY HOPE** PICTURES **NIKKA LORAK**

While commercial shoots are the bread and butter of any business and are the ones that pay the bills, the downside is that they often come with a tight brief and time and location restrictions. True freedom is only experienced when you set everything up and pay the bills yourself, but this naturally is beyond the financial muscle of many.

However, by pooling resources with other like-minded photographers it's possible to bring those costs down and to set up a shoot that will give everyone the creative freedom they're looking for and the chance to gain valuable experience and a stunning set of shots for the portfolio. It's also possible by working this way to share gear so everyone has the chance to use kit they might not otherwise have to hand. It would even be possible to collectively hire particularly exotic items, giving everyone even more of a chance to break away from their regular commercial straitjacket. For fashion photographer and trainer Julian Knight the dream had long been to set up a

comprehensive fashion shoot using Africa as a backdrop. That ambition came to fruition last year when he finally got the chance to undertake a shoot in Kenya alongside three fellow photographers, working with a selection of top models in some awesome locations.

"The whole thing took two months to organise," says Julian, "and I travelled to Mombasa with my friend Moritz Stragholz after meeting up with him at Malta International Airport. Fellow photographers Nikka Lorak and Roger Best joined us at the cottages we had booked on Kenya's east coast two days later. We used our initial free time to scout for locations and familiarise ourselves with Diani Beach where we were staying and other suitable areas in the vicinity. The shoot itself was planned to be seven days long, with one day off in the middle to recuperate, and none of us could wait.

"I'd prearranged practically everything that would allow us to have a comfortable, secure and safe time there, and this included the hire of a tour van with →



IMAGE Julian Knight had always dreamed of setting up a fashion shoot with Africa as a backdrop, and pooling resources with other photographers helped make it a reality.

driver, a guide and a policeman to travel with us whenever we ventured out with our cameras. It was only the previous week that Nairobi had suffered an attack on one of its prime shopping centres, so all of us were keen to maintain high levels of vigilance.”

Stylist Sunny Dolat joined the team at Diani Beach, alongside make-up artist and project manager, Kangai Mwititi, and the first two models who had been hired, Faith and Susan. The third model used, Knicco, wasn't scheduled to meet up with the team until the fifth day of the shoot.

“As a fashion/advertising photographer I'm perfectly accustomed to dealing with top London model and styling agencies,” says Julian. “However, sourcing the level of talent we needed in Kenya from abroad was no easy task. I tried all the country's top model agencies and was not satisfied with their books, and it was only the intervention of Kangai, who is very active in the fashion scene in Kenya, that saved the day. She was the one who introduced us to Sunny, who in turn sourced some of the most outstanding models I had seen during my search, beating the quality of the top agencies by miles. In particular, being able to hire Susan, who was Miss World Kenya 2011-2012, was a real coup for us.”

Planning the shoot

One of the main aims was to dip freely into the colour and atmosphere of Africa, and to really allow its spirit to influence the images. Part of the plan was to dress the models in clothes from local designers, and once again this was something that needed to be organised prior to the team meeting up in Kenya.

Nikka and Roger had hired a stunning villa for the team's first shoot, so once the full crew had been brought together everyone got to work planning angles and areas that could be used in this location. The stylists and models had their own room upstairs, while the photographers got on with checking lighting angles, deciding on equipment and the right shooting techniques to adopt considering that the natural light was, in places at least, spectacular.

“As photographers we'd all worked together on previous shoots,” says Julian, “so it was simple enough to find a balance and an order in which we would approach splitting shoot times between ourselves. Essentially the politics were friendly and we all wanted the best for each other. We started with a single softbox and natural light combination, set up on the patio of Roger's villa with its distinct African decorations, and our first model up was Susan wearing a piece from designer Ruth Abade. We kept the flash head low, working with a couple of reflectors to balance out the natural light. Fortunately we were shaded from direct sunlight under a bamboo covering.

“Once the light was looking good we pretty much left the set-up untouched, only adjusting



ABOVE Finding suitable models from Kenyan model agencies while still at home in London was no easy task for the team, and all the clothes were sourced from local Kenyan designers, too.

camera settings for changes in style and effect. Excited to be shooting our first set in Kenya, with none other than Miss World Kenya herself, we ran on for a while and eventually I think we quite exhausted her! Fortunately Faith then came to Susan's rescue, having been styled up very dramatically in a dark, somewhat sinister fashion, wearing clothes designed by Kepha Maina. We were losing natural light by this point and decided to re-shuffle the lighting set-up, going for a softbox and snoot with blue gel rigged on a pathway leading into the now night-lit and ominous looking villa.

“The shots from Faith's first set were interesting, but we'd probably left it a bit late to work the lighting to perfection because by now we were running around with torches and trailing extension cables though thick, creepy-crawly ridden bushes. After pushing it as far as we could until about 7pm we called it a wrap, packed up, had a quick drink together and departed back to our nearby cottages, completely exhausted.”

Following an early 5am start the following morning the group packed its kit into a 14-seater van and headed for the Congo estuary, where this mighty river trickles into the Indian Ocean. The team had previously scouted this location for its white sands, fragile wooden shading and its three to five workable angles from which to shoot at sunrise. Upon arrival, within minutes the styling and make-up were being applied. The first models were ready, →

“One of the main aims was to dip freely into the colour and atmosphere of Africa, and to allow its spirit to influence the images”

Kenya presented its own challenges in terms of lighting; although the natural light is spectacular, it is strong, so the shadows cast are stronger, too.



so even under a just-before-dawn sky it was possible to get to work testing.

The day here proved how crucial it is to be aware of local sensitivities. Although the team was careful not to set up any shots involving nudity in public areas, inadvertently they utilised a building in the background that turned out to have religious significance, and tensions were aroused as locals surrounded the van to make their feelings known. The guard hired for protection took the locals' side, and it was only the arrival of two policemen, called by the team, that restored calm.

The next expedition was to nearby Funzi Island, reached by dhow, a classic Kenyan boat, travelling through crocodile-infested waters. Knicco took her stand for this set and Sunny styled her in white and orange with a black head wrap, loose so it would catch the breeze. "Arriving at the island our guide took us to a circular hut in which a

“ We managed an effective four-hour session shooting among thick tangled vines ”

few residents of the island sat with a cooler box full of soft drinks and beers," says Julian. "This was to be our base, and we styled the models in there. One by one, under Kangai's superb project management, we managed an effective four-hour session shooting among thick tangled vines on the seafront against a backdrop of dramatic fallen logs and the dhow in the distance.

"We were determined to use only natural light with large reflectors. As the sun went down we were urged to return to our boat and head back to the mainland. Without lights on the wooden dhow, as night fell quickly the stars were perhaps the most dense and brilliant I have ever seen."

Fashion on safari

The trip concluded with a visit to the Masai Mara, for a final fashion shoot with a slimmed-down team and for a personal safari to see African wildlife up close. Here there were opportunities, including a shot of Susan posing against flat-topped African trees, as well as challenges as the model later suffered a bout of food poisoning that required a hospital trip.

Overall the shoot was a fantastic experience, one that none of the photographers will ever forget. The pictures made the whole experience worthwhile, and they are all model released so there's the chance for some of the outlay to be recouped through library sales. Furthermore Julian was also able to experience first-hand how viable it might be to expand his existing workshop operation into this area, and this is definitely something that could be on the agenda for the future. It was a productive adventure never to be forgotten, and one that will no doubt inspire everyone who took part well into the future. **PP**

MORE INFORMATION

www.julianknightphoto.com
Moritz Stragholz: www.mostphotography.com
Nikka Lorak: www.nikkalorak.net

LIGHTING CHALLENGES

From a technical aspect Kenya was a challenging location, as the light there was much stronger than in the UK and consequently there were denser shadows to contend with. The team opted to shoot wherever possible during the 'golden hours' around sunrise and sunset, which provided a more pleasing light as well as fewer shadows. Outside these times reflectors and diffusers were used to try to balance the light and take out some of the inherent contrast. Julian carried two Interfit 300W studio heads with him while others in the team carried strobes, but most of the time available light was preferred.