

Tom Carter's Epic Journey Through China by Esha Chhabra

American photojournalist Tom Carter travelled over 35,000 miles, hitting 33 provinces, on a limited budget, with just a backpack and a digital camera. He encountered 56 different ethnic minorities, each with their own distinct languages, customs and lifestyles, which he catalogued in his new book, *CHINA: Portrait of a People*, which has over 800 images from his journey. Through his photography, he is able to capture the essence of an ancient land and a modern superpower. Dowser spoke with him to see how he got this project running...

How were you able to bring this project to life? What was your budget and did you get support from any foundations, organizations, etc to make this happen?

CHINA: Portrait of a People was funded entirely out of pocket and came about by sheer chance. I arrived in China in 2004 as an English teacher, and worked for 2 straight years without a vacation to save my salary so that I could go backpacking across the 33 provinces in China. I took pictures along the way, just for fun, and after another 2 years and 35,000 miles logged, I had amassed a cache of photos which I was urged by my friends to turn into a book. I found an independent publisher in Hong Kong who saw the potential in my work, so together we created *CHINA: Portrait of a People*, which became the most comprehensive book of photography on modern China ever published by a single author.

What compelled you to visit every corner of China - was there a specific drive, though, desire that led you to go on this journey?

Before coming to China to teach, I had spent 1.5 years backpacking down the entire length of Mexico, Cuba and Central America, so I had the wanderlust in me to continue seeing the world, but I didn't have the funds, which is why I decided to teach English abroad, which is an ideal way to travel AND get paid for it. Once I arrived in China, I felt compelled to see it all, because a land this vast and rich with history deserves to be drunk in at leisure, not just a quick holiday to the famous sites. It was not until after I completed my journey that I found out that I was one of the only foreigners to have travelled that extensively across the country, so it unwittingly turned into a groundbreaking journey. But the journey itself was not easy: I nearly lost my life more than once, and my limited budget required me to sleep in the worst places imaginable, subsist on street food, and travel by any means necessary to get from village to village, city to city. Many times I wanted to cry and go home, but I persisted.

In one sentence, how would you sum up China, a country that's become such a fascination in the US given the economic ties?

Summing up China for me personally, I would refer to it as a true Land of Opportunity where anyone, including foreign immigrants, can start over and pursue their dreams. America has lost that title, unfortunately.

What places/ regions/ people surprised you along the journey? Did you find things/ traditions/ customs in parts of China that got you thinking or amused you?

What surprised me the most is that the Chinese are not just one single homogeneous race; there are over 56 ethnicities in China, as physically and cultural varied as any western country. The photos in my book attempt to capture that diversity in as much as I was able while drifting cross the country.

What do you want the viewer/ reader of this book to walk away with after seeing it? What was your goal, your point that you were trying to make - do you feel that you were successful?

I had no point or agenda while I was traveling and taking pictures. All I was doing was seeing the land and meeting people along the way. The photos were an afterthought. But after sifting through the thousands of images I had taken, what I found is that I had indeed captured nearly every aspect of life and humanity of Chinese society, from the daily ordinary lives of the People to the nation's unique industries and subcultures. Perhaps that is why this book has been so well received: because too often professional photographers and journalists have a specific agenda, whereas my photos are completely neutral, candid and honest.

What advice would you give to other young journalists who have such projects in mind but are struggling to bring them to life- where can they go for funding, support, or how can they structure their projects so they are practical and possible?

I don't think there's much funding for photographer anymore unless you are attached to a news agency or corporate publisher. The industry is oversaturated with photos; everyone has a digital camera now. I'm sure there are grants to be had, but that takes time and a lot of paper work. But I don't believe money is essential to travel and art. My journey and my book prove that resilience and a genuine respect for your subjects are equally as essential. If you want to travel but don't have the money, consider teaching abroad. If you only have a short time to visit a country, consider venturing off the beaten path; avoid the tourist sites. It doesn't cost any money to walk the streets all day like I did, and you will invariably learn and see more of the culture that way than if you had spent all your money on some tour.