

LIFE&TIMES ART

WHEN you combine a love of travel and talent for photography, you could very well have a recipe for success. This certainly comes through when you meet two men who describe themselves as “serious travel photographers” — Azim Zainudin, 30, and Carlos Nizam, also 30.

They recently concluded their combined exhibition, *The Culture Hop*, at The Print Room in Petaling Jaya.

The aim of both photographers is to show the shared attitude, traditions and social practices of different people. They want to explore what is similar and still diverse in different cities. Hence the term “culture hop”.

“Think of the hop-on-hop-off bus trips in the city,” elaborates Carlos, a native of Kuala Lumpur. “You get to see in depth bits about everything. You get to see the ‘small’ things that we experience in daily life in different countries. For example, look at this photo of a Japanese girl. I call it ‘The Fringe’. It was taken while walking around Shibuya Street in Tokyo. I chose to focus only on her. It says a lot about the Japanese. Like those flip phones. The whole world has moved on to iPhones, but these Japanese, they love their flip phones.”

HOW IT STARTED

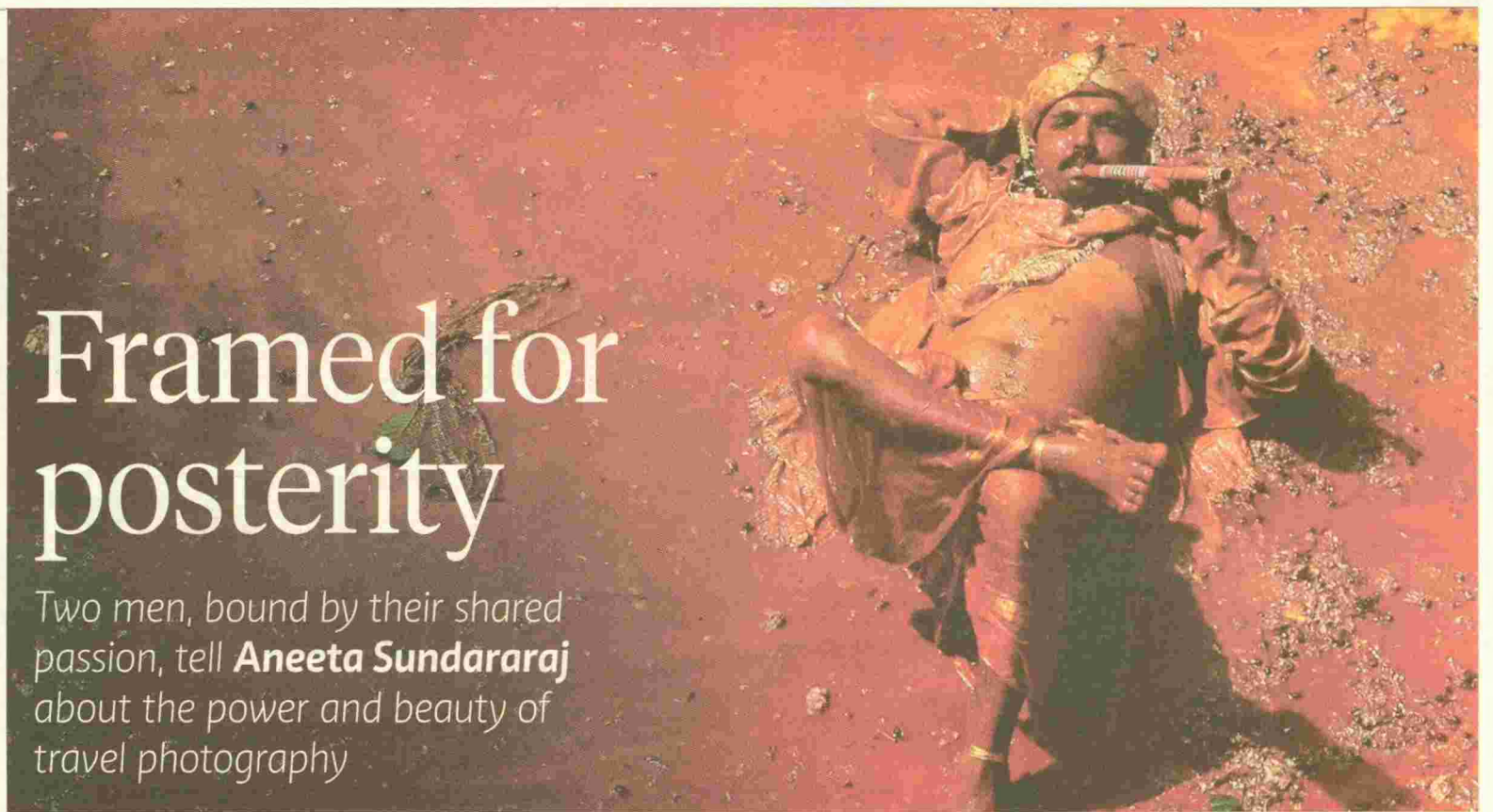
Both men had an interest in photography from young. “When I was a kid, I used to look at *National Geographic* magazines,” says Carlos. “I was so impressed by the photos — especially by David Doubilet — and they piqued my interest. These are photos you can’t see every day. I started to ask this question: how can I do something to make my photos different from others? I mean, so many people have been to Bali or Tokyo. How do I do something that’s different from that which you can find on Google images?” Carlos freely admits that he’s still searching for the answer.

Azim was also a fan of the magazine. However, it was in university (UiTM) when this native of Terengganu first began getting involved in photography. “I joined a local biker group.

This was in 2003. I was 21 then. Most of the others were older and they used to pay for us. Sometimes, when I didn’t bring a camera, I would borrow one. If I didn’t have one, I would even buy a disposable camera. The most enjoyable trip was the one we called ‘Le Tour de Langkasuka’, touring around Kedah. When you tell people Kedah, they will only head to Langkawi. This trip, we went to all the unknown places like Merbok, Kota Sarang Semut and Yan waterfalls.”

Since 2003, Azim has worked on his craft. He shares: “The main aim is to take good pictures. When you see it, you will feel, ‘Oh my God!’ The photo is something that has rarely been seen.” He wags his finger and adds: “But that’s only one part. The other part is the journey.”

The example he cites is the time he ventured to India for a month to



Framed for posterity

Two men, bound by their shared passion, tell **Aneeta Sundararaj** about the power and beauty of travel photography



Carlos Nizam's *The Fringe*.



Barter Trade by Carlos Nizam.

experience the festival Holi. He spent most of his time in Rajasthan, but also went to where Holi is celebrated most in India: Mathura and Vrindavan. “You know, in a small town, I saw these women beating the men with sticks,” says Azim. He has since learnt that this commemorates the legend that while Lord Krishna visited his beloved Radha Rani during Holi in Vrindavan, he playfully

teased her and her friends. She took offence and chased him away.

Learning this snippet of information about the culture of this people was precisely what Azim wanted to achieve. The trip took about four months to research and prepare for. Sometimes, he may pay for a “fixer”. “This,” Carlos explains, “is a person I’ve hired who can help me go to places without hassle. They are the ones who provide communication and navigation.”

This has certainly come in handy seeing that between them, the two men have visited countries as diverse as Australia, New Zealand, Cambodia, Thailand, Palestine, Fiji, Taiwan, Ladakh and China.

Two places remain Carlos’s favourites. He confides: “Japan is so interesting. In Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, I managed to take photos

Azim Zainudin with local students in Ramallah, Palestine.



of the snow monkey. They live in the forest and have red faces. This was something very special. You can’t find these monkeys anywhere else. Another place I love is Indonesia. It’s like going back to Malaysia in the 1980s. Like, when I was a kid, we used to see so many buffaloes in the field. Where are all these buffaloes now? Give it 20 to 30 years and we might not see them any more. I’m not trying to be nostalgic or anything, but in this place called Bukit Tinggi, they still go through the process of planting and harvesting padi the old way. Not using machines. And they still practise barter trade — the farmers will exchange the padi for other goods.”

This underlies his philosophy that photography is a way to preserve history. “I love to read,” says Carlos. “But it’s the photographs that help me understand. When you create

scenes with words, the writer is using his imagination. That’s man-made. For example, I didn’t live in the 1940s. But I read about World War II and the horrors there. But, it is only when you see the photographs of the time that you see the real atrocities. That’s evidence of what happened. A real story can only be captured in a photo.”

THE CHALLENGES

Travel photography, confides Carlos, is addictive. “You’re moving around all the time and you’re not stagnant.” That said, it’s not easy and neither is it an immediately lucrative profession. “My mother still tells me to get a proper job,” says Azim.

Quickly, Carlos defends his choice to pursue travel photography and says: “But, look at most Europeans. At 18 and 19, they travel. That’s not in

Azim Zainudin's *A man relaxing during 'Holi' in Rajasthan, India.*

our culture. Ours is all about study, get a job, make money. We get stuck with work and can’t travel. Next thing you know, you’re doing the same s**t everyday.”

Other than the financial woes, there is also the challenge of unintentionally infringing on someone else’s space and privacy. The example that Carlos gives is a trip to the Pura Tirta Empul temple in Bali which is built around a bubbling spring. He went to photograph devotees who purified themselves in the water by immersing themselves in it. “There was a woman praying there. She went from spring to spring and there was a sequence to what she was doing. A mother and her child saw me observing and photographing her. They were wondering why I was so interested in this woman.”

As such, Carlos has some advice for would-be-photographers of any genre: “Say you’re going for a wedding, go to the venue two to three days before hand and stay two days after, if possible. This way, you get to see the different cultures. Talk to the people there. Ask them why they’re doing something. It’s a lesson to learn. Of course, if you do some research beforehand, it’ll be best. Wear the proper attire. Don’t offend them unnecessarily.”

Of all their challenges, though, the biggest is, ironically, the inability to sustain a relationship. “You have to find the right partner. Sometimes, we’re away for a month or two. They can’t take that,” says Azim.

Carlos adds: “And if you bring them along, they will distract you. These are not photos we can upload to Instagram. We’re taking once-in-a-lifetime shots and that takes a lot of patience. A lot of waiting for the right time.”

All aside, both are certain that there is nothing they would rather be doing more than travel photography. As Carlos says: “For me, money is essential, but it is not important. Timing is important and in travel photography, everything is timing.”



Carlos Nizam

PIC BY SAIFULLITAN TAMADI