Creating Emotion In Your Images
Capturing Feelings, Not Just Snapshots
by Kevin Pepper
The way I capture and process a photo may not be the way someone else would. The image I captured represents the way I saw it and how I felt at that moment. Looking back now, it's when I started worrying less about how others might create an image, and started taking photos for me, that the quality of my images started to increase. The reason? My emotions started showing through in my images. I was telling a story and creating a memory, not just taking a snapshot.

Every scene can be photographed in a hundred different ways, and an image can be edited a thousand different ways. I'm sure you've had the experience of standing with friends, all of you photographing the same scene, and each of you creates a different image. At the end of the day, the only image that matters is the one you took and edited. It's your artistic interpretation of the scene. Don't get caught up comparing your images to someone else's. It's not a competition. It is a personal expression of art and emotion.

The image at right is one of my favorite photographs! It's a simple photo, and I am sure if you have followed me on social media, you have seen it a hundred times. It really speaks to me personally, transporting me right back to my many conversations with the subject, Buybelot, at his home outside of Sagsai. I remember our conversations where he told me how he captured this female Golden Eagle nine years before my first visit. We discussed our families over Airag (a traditional drink of fermented mare's milk) and our mutual realization that no matter where we come from, we have the same hopes, fears, and dreams for our children. We bonded and became friends. It is because of this friendship that he trusted me enough to bring his Eagle into this setting. To show me his love for this beautiful bird of prey which is a member of his family.
The photo below is also one of my all-time favorites, our first photoshoot with a family of camel herders in the Gobi desert. I vividly remember standing there on the sands before the sun rose over the dunes. The family was riding towards us, smiles on their faces, and we greeted them warmly. The day before, we had the opportunity to go into the family’s ger tent and get to know them all. Together we shared vodka, some good food, and a lot of laughs. We became friends, and I knew then that I would come back to visit them in subsequent years.

As I took the photo, I remember the warmth of the sun on my face. I remember Andy Williams telling the camel herder how beautiful the scene was. I remember the hug from a guest, Larry, because he was having so much fun. Another guest, Kip, was flying his drone over the whole scene to get a completely different artistic capture of what we were witnessing. The end result for me was a serene image that conjures that feeling of warmth from the sun’s first rays.
I have traveled to a lot of places and met a lot of amazing people. But this image of Aisholpan and her father, Nurgaiv, represents a lot of great memories for me and a strong sense of family and trust. These feelings are not just because of what you see in front of the camera, but also for what happened leading up to this image.

To start, I was honored to have the trust of this family on that day. They allowed us to pick up their daughter, Aisolphan, from school and take her to the family home. That gave me two hours to talk and get to know Aisolphan as a person. She is such an incredible young woman—grounded, and mindful of what she has accomplished. She has not let her success go to her head.

What you also can't see in the image was the time we spent inside their home, talking and laughing. Her mother, Alma was making sure we were fed. This was an opportunity to continue to build on the foundations of the relationship that I had started forming with them years earlier. The end result is a photo of a caring father giving tips to his daughter on how to ride to give us a better image.

It is because of all these memories that Mongolia has carved out a special place in my heart. I return each year with different workshop groups to create even more memories of the friends I have made. I take new photos that I can look back on with fond memories—images that keep getting better because of the emotions that get conjured up each time I visit. The next time you are out taking photos, take images for yourself, capture the special moments, create memories. Create a personal connection to the people and the location. Let that show through in your images. Your passion will show through, your art will start to be something you're proud to show off.