

BRETT
FLORENS

Perfect Weekend

◀ Jo Noero—architect, Cape Town. Shot with 24–70mm lens at 1/80 at f/2.8 with available light and a collapsable reflector.





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Francois van Coke, lead singer of a successful rock band, Cape Town. Shot with 14–24mm lens at 1/250 at f/3.2 at ISO 1000 with available light.

Consider this typical dilemma for a book publisher: A writer's proposal has been accepted and a very tight production schedule and publication date established, but there's one vital link missing—the ideal photographer to illustrate the book. He or she must be able to work under pressure and on deadline; one who can easily get along with people of varied cultural and professional backgrounds and in the process create captivating editorial portraits. The subjects are in far-flung locales, so the photographer must be adept at on-location shooting under any lighting conditions, either alone or in conjunction with the writer's interviews. And, one last thing, there won't be any opportunity for reshoots—the subjects' work demands and time constraints preclude that luxury.

So, obviously the publisher searches out a leading editorial photographer whose portfolio boasts sumptuous magazine spreads of subjects ranging from celebrities and fashion to exotic travel destinations and off-road adventuring. Well, maybe—but not in this case. Far from going for the obvious photojournalist,

the prestigious South African publishing company, Art Publishers, turned to Brett Florens, one of that country's preeminent wedding photographers, to make the on-location environmental portraits of 52 national newsmakers. And the theme of the book, and consequently the images, was how these identities describe their down time. In a nutshell, the *Perfect Weekend*, the book's title.

The assignment was right up Florens' alley. Cited by Nikon as one of the world's most influential photographers, Florens has established an enviable reputation for superb wedding photography, especially for a photojournalistic style that is complemented by brilliant control of ambient and artificial light. Never one to shy away from a challenge, he enthusiastically accepted the assignment even though it was not typical of his usual line of work. Serendipitously, some years previously he had photographed the wedding of Neil Austen, one of the owners of Art Publishers, who obviously liked the results and recommended Florens.

The book was proposed to Art Publishers by South African journalist Dominique Herman, who had covered hard news as a senior writer for the *Cape Times* after ex-

tensive experience in the United States as a documentary film researcher and writer and contributor to numerous newspapers and magazines. Herman shouldered a large amount of the work, from contacting potential subjects, coordinating interviews and photography shoots, writing all the text—from the interviews to thumbnail profiles on each personality—and attending to numerous other logistical issues. Herman selected most of the personalities while Florens suggested several he knew personally.

Selecting Subjects

The personalities were chosen so that most South Africans would know 50 percent of them instantly, would have heard of 25 percent and would be intrigued about the inclusion of the rest, a breakdown that gelled with Florens' own knowledge of the subjects.

The majority of people approached were more than happy to participate. Some others, who proved difficult with their own demands, such as hair and makeup and stylist issues and fees, were thanked and bid farewell. "If someone of the stature of Bishop Desmond Tutu, for example, could give so freely of his time and cooperation,



we didn't need to deal with prima donna attitudes," Florens says. "There were very few who declined participation. Nelson Mandela would have been first on our list, but it is now well known that he has retired from all interviews and photo shoots of this nature. Our confirmed list of willing participants was a carrot to tempt any of the undecided who were unsure of the project. We found that most people saw it as a great incentive to be in a book alongside famous personalities such as former State President of South Africa F.W. de Klerk, world renowned cricket star Jonty Rhodes; Lyndall Jarvis, who was voted South Africa's sexiest woman of 2009 by *FHM*; and Marc Lottering, one of South Africa's most successful comedians."

While Herman had previously interviewed many of these people, completely new material was required for this project. "As the book takes the unconventional angle of their personal life, there wasn't any existing material or images that we could use so the interviews and portraits were all done specifically for the book. This was, of course, really exciting for us as we had the incredible opportunity to interview and meet 52 of South Africa's most successful and influential people," Florens says.

With about six weeks to photograph 52 people in numerous locations far from his base in Durban, and with the publisher insisting that costs be minimized, Florens had to be efficient with time and travel expenses. "This meant coordinating as many shoots as possible in a specific city on a particular day. I would shoot in Cape Town for a day or two and manage to get seven shoots in, then off to Johannesburg for

- ▲ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Cape Town. Shot with a 24–70mm lens at 1/80 at f/8 with an Elinchrom Ranger portable strobe.
- ▼ Marc Lottering, comedian, Cape Town. Shot with 70–200mm lens and Elinchrom Ranger portable strobe; 1/250 at f/16, ISO 100.

three or four. Towards the end of the project it became a little trickier, with subjects' limited availability and a looming deadline. At times this meant two or three flights in one day," Florens says.

Prepared for Any Challenge

As an experienced wedding photographer, Florens knew how to prepare for any contingency, especially when location and lighting conditions were often unknown variables and presented a host of challenges. This meant carrying a lot of gear, just in case. His typical outfit included Nikon D3 bodies, lenses such as 14–24mm f/2.8, 24–70mm f/2.8 and 70–200mm f/2.8, a battery-powered Elinchrom Ranger RX flash unit, a set of PocketWizards to fire

the strobes, and a collapsible reflector to manipulate ambient light. An Epson P5000 multimedia backup drive was used to back up the images. The equipment was stored in a Pelican storm case and, as can be imagined, excess baggage fees were common when Florens checked it in for his numerous inter-city flights.

Time with the subjects was usually minimal, often half an hour or less, and combined with bad lighting, shooting needed quick thinking and improvisation. "On one occasion, we were scheduled to shoot clothing entrepreneur Paul Simon and his young daughter on a beach near their home, as this is how they usually spend their Saturdays. However, a freak storm put an end to that thought. Quick improvisation ended up with a great portrait of him and his daughter in their pajamas in bed. It was such a natural and intimate portrait that he now has it in his home as a wall-mounted canvas print," Florens says. "Another memorable shoot involved local football stars Teko Modise and Siphwe Tshabalala so we were mobbed by adoring fans wanting to catch a glimpse of their heroes. I have never had so many people watch me shoot before, and we had to get the shoot over as quickly as possible, before we were literally swamped."

An obvious question is about Bishop Desmond Tutu, whose ready smile and twinkling eyes seem like windows to a humorous personality with a great understanding of the human condition and an equally great tolerance for his fellow man. Florens concurs. "Photographing Bishop Tutu was an incredible privilege. He is such a genuinely warm and engaging person. He is very jovial and is instantly likeable—shar-



ing views on sports and current affairs as if chatting to a close peer. He was very cooperative and media savvy, one of the easiest shoots of the entire book,” Florens says.

“I also really clicked with international rugby referee Jonathan Kaplan—we had a deep conversation about spirituality and astrology, which I found fascinating. I have a feeling that we will build a lasting friendship. Marc Lottering, the comedian, was one of the most fascinating characters in the project. I loved the hour or so I spent with him—it felt like a personal perfor-

the-scenes coverage of some shoots, with the resulting segment viewed by millions.

The South African public, it seemed, really did want to know what these people called a perfect weekend. And considering that the subjects included national leaders, sports stars, entertainers, business and religion identities, writers, artists, chefs—in short, 52 of the country’s newsmakers—their idea of a perfect weekend is just as varied. Given that South Africans are fanatical about sports and outdoor recreation, there’s little surprise that getting

it sees a beautiful girl and you’re not concentrating. Then there’s a temporary halt to the prayer,” he says.

In addition to delightful insights such as that, each personality’s favorite restaurant, bakery, winery or outdoor haunt is listed with contact details. And the reader not familiar with the newsmaker is helped considerably by an index of additional portraits and thumbnail biographies.

Florens’ experience with this project should be heartening for any like-minded photographers, wedding specialists or otherwise. If you have a book idea, don’t be afraid to pitch it to a publisher. While you might have a writer in mind, don’t shy off even if you don’t. Provided the idea appeals, there’s every chance the publisher will suggest someone to work with you.

While conceding the intensive six weeks of shooting on the road and on the run distracted him from regular wedding work—and loss of revenue—and took him away from his family, the benefits were great. “It has been an incredible project that has already opened many more doors for me. I have been given access to and have developed relationships with some of the most prolific people in South Africa. This has led to me shooting for a few of them on other projects and hopefully will lead to some high-profile commissions. I would strongly recommend other photographers seriously consider taking on a project like this, if presented with the opportunity. Obviously, you need to evaluate it and the terms and decide if the sacrifices are worth it. I now have the confidence to take on any project that comes along. I would do it again in a heartbeat!” Florens says.

And yes, he does have another book in mind. Lance Klusener, one of South Africa’s most famous former cricket players and featured in *Perfect Weekend*, is also an excellent fisherman. A book encompassing catching and cooking various species of fish around South Africa—possibly featuring celebrated chefs—is being discussed.

Perfect Weekend (Art Publishers, ISBN: 1-919688-81-1; hardcover), Dominique Herman and Brett Florens, is available from leading South African bookstores and also from Brett Florens (www.brettflorens.com).



Lance Klusener, international cricket star, Durban. Shot with a 70–200mm lens at 1/250 at f/16. An SB900 with SC-29 TTL extension cord provided light.

mance that so many would have paid a fortune for. He is hysterical without even trying to be and his intelligence and train of thought are razor sharp,” Florens adds.

While most of the personalities might not be household names beyond the shores of South Africa, the theme of the book and the featured subjects certainly piqued intense interest within their homeland. Art Publishers ensured the book was published in November, in time for the Christmas shopping spree, and it sold well, so much so that a reprint seemed assured. The book was a natural for promotion with three book launches throughout the country, radio interviews nationwide, and a popular TV show, *Top Billing*. A sophisticated magazine program on fashion, décor, travel and entertainment, they did extensive behind-

into the great outdoors is a favored activity. Time with family and friends and entertaining at home figure prominently, especially the braai—barbecue to the rest of us. Restaurants, coffee shops and visiting vineyards are also popular. The way these notable people relax and chill out reveals a lot about private personalities that most often are hidden behind a public persona. What comes across, both in the words and pictures, is that generally speaking, they’re not too different from the rest of us in how they like to spend downtime.

For example, Bishop Tutu—who is featured first in the book—walks every morning. “I do a 30-minute walk that makes me think I’m relatively healthy,” he says. And he hates seeing litter and picks up what he can. He also prays for certain people and uses the walk to think of them. But even Bishop Tutu’s concentration can be broken. “Sometimes my mind goes off and

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