



# PEOPLE, PLACES & PHOTOGRAPHY

## Michelle Chaplow



Michelle Chaplow is an award winning British freelance travel photographer based in Spain, with over 17 years

of experience and an enviable collection of published works, including two books. Michelle specializes in travel, tourism, and luxury hotel photography. She is a member of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and has studied photography at Seville University. Michelle's signature style statement includes three or four fundamental ingredients—people, color, natural light, and Andalusia (southernmost part of Spain), in particular.

**You have been living in Southern Spain for over 17 years now. The obvious question then is what really inspires your passion for this country, considering**

**the fact that you're British by birth, and secondly, what really stands out as your signature style statement?**  
The last 17 years that I have lived in Spain have really

flown by to be honest; I never expected to stay more than one summer. I came here after a year of backpacking and traveling around South and Central America, returned to

England, couldn't settle and Spain seemed to be a natural choice. There have been times in those 17 years when I have fallen head over heels in love with another country, such as Australia for example and in particular Sydney, but a strange

thing always happened. I would return with my passion and enthusiasm for the new, dynamic lifestyle down under and then, time after time, I would immediately receive a commission to photograph a magnificent white village or a castle and

city walls brimming with the romance and history of a bygone age. This would make me fall instantly back in love with Spain and realize that there's a huge attraction between this British girl and the Spanish soil beneath her feet.



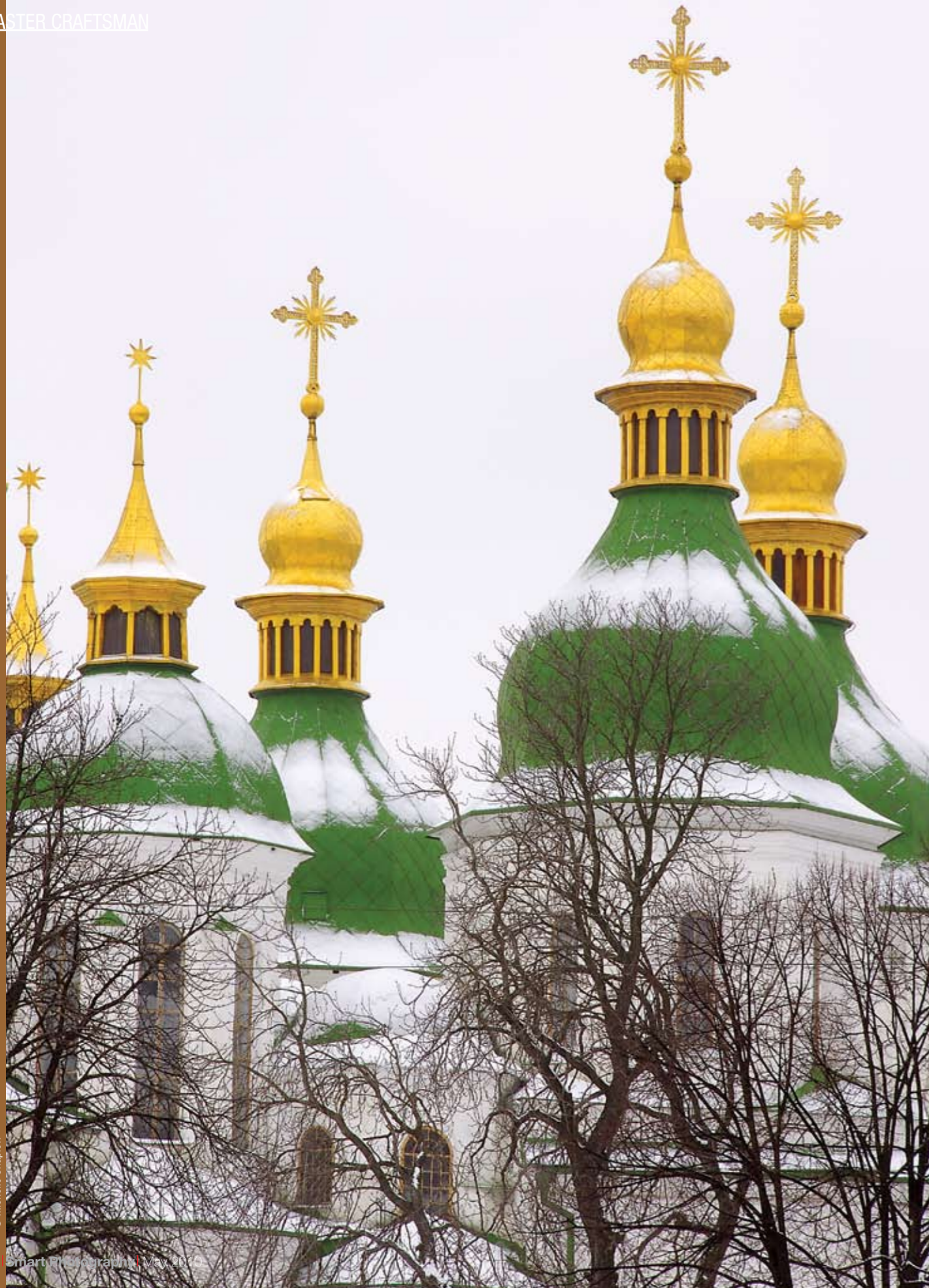
What inspires me about Spain? Many things, the people, the climate, the stunning light, the varied lifestyle and the rich cultural heritage of Andalucia, geographically the southernmost part of Spain. I really admire the way that the Spanish keep their traditions alive year after year, such as Semana Santa (Holy Week), during which people of all generations join in the magnificent processions, and Seville's Spring Fair in April where traditional Spanish dancing is performed by young and old alike, all spruced up in the latest elaborate attire for the occasion. These processions are a photographer's dream.

My signature style includes three or four elements and my most successful photographs always have at least three of these fundamental ingredients: people, color, natural light, and Andalucia. I am well-known for images of Spain, but in particular Andalucia. I adore the people from this region and love to capture them in their own environment.

**In short, mainland Spain and the Iberian Peninsula, in particular, offer a lot of opportunities to capture new and vibrant imagery. What is it that you like the most about being a travel photographer and why?**

Mainland Spain and the Iberian Peninsula offer tremendous photographic opportunities due to their astonishingly diverse geography, rich history, traditions, and of course, that fabulous light.

What I most like about travel photography is that every day is totally different. One day I could be shooting a modern building such as the Valencia Science Park at night, the next day could be working on a commission for a luxury hotel, capturing the spirit of a festival for a magazine or just stumbling across something that merits a photograph, from a gorgeous sunrise to a geranium in a terracotta pot.



**It goes without saying that one requires an immense amount of patience to shoot in different countries. How do you go about conceptualizing images in different locations given the fact that every country is different from the other in terms of language and customs/traditions?**

Planning is crucially important, especially if I have a brief from a client and budget restrictions. I remember a photo shoot in Kiev, Ukraine where the temperature was minus 15 degree Celsius. We approached it like a military operation. In warmer climates you have time to ponder and reflect, but don't fool yourself. Nature can tease you with her light, but you have only milliseconds to catch even a static image in perfect light. The same is true for people. No-one will hang around all day with the same expression on their face, this is one look and it's the photographer's job to recognize this precious moment and capture it before it vanishes forever.

Although it's impossible to speak all the languages of the places we visit it's not always absolutely necessary. Non-verbal communication can be far more important and a warm smile and a friendly, respectful manner will help win over your subject. If you want to make the most of your stay follow the old adage—'When in Rome do as the Romans do'.

**Do you have any particular favorite photograph from your body of work?**

Favorite photographs change over time. I'm always emotionally attached to recent projects and commissions and those that

immediately spring to mind are images of the Maasai tribes during a visit to Kenya, a few weeks ago and an assignment to photograph the up-and-coming Spanish bullfighter, Joselito Ortega. From my body of work, the strong image of a female flamenco dancer in motion and a poised male dancer in a striking pose. Detail images such as the feet of a flamenco dancer used in a *National Geographic* guidebook for Spain also spring to mind. A shot taken inside the mosque of Cordoba, Spain that was the front cover of *GEO magazine*, shot at *f/22* for 30 seconds—I love the symmetry and depth of this photograph. Ask me in a month's time and my answers will be different.

**Secondly, any particularly memorable travel moments that you vividly recall and wish to share your experiences with us?**

I have so many vivid memories and amusing anecdotes!

I remember once working for a very prestigious American client at the summer residence of a Spanish Duke and Dutchess. Present were government officials from the US and Spain, Spanish aristocrats and even some Royalty. There was a lot of pomp and ceremony and I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, yet still capture and document the most important moments. I was about to photograph a presentation, when suddenly, one of the guests yelled out at the top of her voice 'Fire!'. More worrying still, she was staring directly at me! I instinctively put my hand to the back of my head and to my horror discovered that the silk scarf, which I had used to tie my hair back, had caught fire! I quickly pulled it off and threw it on the floor and was immediately surrounded by waiters who looked as if they were doing some furious foot-stomping flamenco routine, trying to stamp out the flames!

Some experiences are life-changing. I was recently invited into a Massai home in Kenya, a mud hut of no more than three meters in diameter with not even enough space to stand up straight, with not even electricity and water and still the family wanted to share their food with me. These humbling moments and there have been many, enrich your life beyond measure.

As a travel photographer there is beauty to be captured everywhere. Sometimes, I want to try and sum up a country with a single image. Thailand is often referred to as the land of smiles and I was lucky enough to capture this image (<http://www.michellechaplow.com/travel.htm>) of the Senrg Tab Laan, which is a fingernail dance. This is a photograph which epitomizes the fact that, sometimes, images are truly worth more than a thousand words.

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▣ As told to Mathew Thottungal

