

LUXURY HOTELIERS

3rd Quarter
2015

SPOTLIGHT ON

*Salim Bitar,
CEO Aujan Group Holding -
Hospitality & Real Estate*

*Data-Driven Loyalty Programs
Reward Yourself
& your guest*

Master Tea
*Blenders share
their secrets*

*Signature Scents to inspire
emotional connection*



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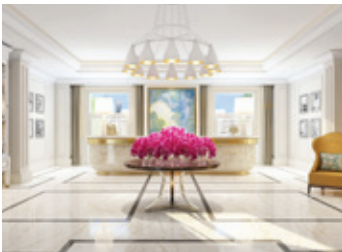
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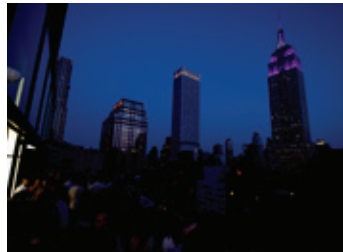
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WRITE FOR US

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SPOTLIGHT ON



Antonio Cuellar *Award Winning Hotel and Resort Photographer*

By Sharon Hirschowitz

ANTONIO CUELLAR is a highly sought-after hotel and resort photographer, most recently honored by the American Society of Media Photographers “ASMP” as best of 2013. He has offices in New York and Miami and travels worldwide for clients, with recent assignments taking him to Mexico, Paris, China, Dubai and London. Antonio shares some of the behind-the-scenes efforts that go into taking that winning picture, and his passion for his art.

You have won numerous awards, including being honored by the American Society of Media Photographers “ASMP” as the best of 2013. Can you tell us a little more about this?

ASMP gives out this award yearly and it is based not only on image

quality but on technical and logistical challenges photographers need to overcome to accomplish their project.

I had the pleasure of visiting Cartagena back in 2008 for my friend’s wedding. I had not visited Cartagena in a long time and I soon realized the city had changed drastically since I last visited. Tourism was booming and there was a surge in the hospitality industry like no other city in South America. All of a sudden luxury boutique hotels were being built where there once were 15th century homes and they spared no expense! Because of the nature of what I do, I knew I had to come back and capture its beauty. Soon, what was supposed to be a single trip turned into a 16 visit project that extended over two years, in which

I photographed 18 boutique hotels, 16 restaurants, and 12 museums and point of interests.

I was determined to capture 200 images of the old city and its surrounding fortifications. This determination was tested many times due to challenging logistics, bureaucracy and high production costs. As we progressed, city officials became increasingly interested in my work, ultimately assigning a government official to help scout locations and coordinate logistics and provided security when needed.

When did you first know that you wanted to specialize in photographing luxury hotels?

Most of the photographers in my field are hired to capture an architectural record of the space or

structure. I didn't want to stop there and started focusing on lighting mood as well. I wanted my images to create a place people fantasize about visiting and soon realized that lighting mood was a very important aspect in recreating this feeling. The style that I started developing became very appealing to luxury and upscale hotels. It was a style that took full advantage of digital technologies but yet felt classic in many ways.

I became obsessed with improving my lighting techniques in order to create my vision of the perfect image. One that not only captures the best angle, but also showcased the mood by focusing on light. So I began putting a lot of work into my productions until I was satisfied with the results. It turns out, recreating cozy and romantic environments required a lot of work on location and in post-production.

It seemed to me that luxury hotels were the only ones willing to go to the extent of this production in order to increase sales. Thanks to the amount of travel that I do, I have made a big effort in becoming more practical so I have been making changes to simplify production. My image production and post-production has become more effective in recent years and I am able to produce better quality images in less time and with less gear.

Why do you think it is important for a hotel to use a professional photographer? What is the difference between a reasonably priced photographer and one who charges a higher rate? What questions should an hotelier ask when looking for a good photographer?

Historically hotels have heavily relied on name recognition for healthy

bookings. Even though this still is an important factor, travelers are expecting top quality images to match established luxury brands when doing online research. High quality photography is a primary factor unestablished brands need to consider when attempting to break into the market and compete with established brands.

The difference in price from a budget photographer to an established photographer with a lot of experience in Hospitality is a question that comes up frequently. The reality is that, unless you are dealing with someone such as an AD agency who is familiar with the extensive work that goes into the production of a great image, selling photography services is not an easy task. What is frustrating is that this will always become clear to the hotelier after the fact. I have never performed a job in which a client concluded that I have an easy job, or that my work is not worth the investment. It is not just about expensive equipment, I have a 3 step production process in which I approach all my jobs and they all involve extensive work.

It is a common mistake of hoteliers to expect a commercial photographer to deliver 100 images in order for them to have options to pick. This is what we call the "wedding photography approach", as the production value of wedding images shot in a journalist style are absolutely minimal. In reality this would be a very expensive session. Commercial photography productions take a lot of prep time and it is not cost effective to have this approach. Therefore I would always question the quality of the work of a photographer who suggests this approach or agrees to it. If the hotel wants to have the approach in which they have options to choose from, my advice is to ask the photographer to perform a scouting day prior to the actual shoot, in which he/she will deliver a large volume of images showcasing different angles for each area with little production value. The most common practice is for the hotelier to be an active participant during the photo session.

There are several steps an hotelier can take to ensure they are hiring the right hospitality photographer. Without a doubt, the most



important step would be to ask for their online portfolio in order to see if their style is a good fit for their brand. Ask the photographer about their experience in hospitality and maybe some recommendations. Chances are during the interview most questions should be coming from the photographer. Most experienced photographers will try to collect extensive information in order to determine what can be accomplished in the facility and what your expectations are in order to deliver an accurate quote. Finally ask them about their work process. If a photographer is only going to show the day of the job and take 30 images by himself, much like in the scouting process, I would definitely question the quality of their work.

Can you explain the production process? What percentage of your work is done on the computer and how much is done on site?

As I mentioned earlier I have a 3 step approach to most of my jobs. The pre-production stage involves meeting with the clients in order to coordinate logistics and discuss ideas. It also involves a very extensive location scouting in order to determine the best angles and what the best time of day is to photograph them. And finally meeting with the stylist to determine what props are needed or allowed by the brand guidelines in order to help accentuate the existing decor.

If the first stage is done properly this would mean



we would have a detailed shooting schedule during production and no time would be wasted in scouting for angles. The stylist would also be more prepared to deal with her job and all the props for that particular day would be readily available. The focus during production should be lighting, propping and coordination with talent should models be involved.

Because of my unique approach to photography and my commitment to high quality of work, most of the time I am in charge of post-production. My style involves several techniques such as light painting, where multiple images are blended together in post-production. So, to answer your question, my work is heavily dependent of post-production. However all steps in the process are equally important.

How can a hotel prepare for a shoot to ensure they get the most out of the pictures?

This is a very good question and I believe partially answered in the previous question while discussing pre-production. My preference is for the hotel to be involved in the production and pre-production process. Discussing ideas and logistics is crucial to achieve better results and exceed client's expectations. I might determine that the best time to photograph an area of the hotel, such as a lounge, could be dusk, but this could be the worst time due to the popularity of that area at that time. Collaboration and planning are key in a successful production. Being present as a semi-active participant during the production process is also key.

What is a favorite recent image you have shot recently? Can you describe the creative process behind it?

A lot of photographers fall in the trap of becoming attached to images that present the biggest technical challenge, or ones that required the most work. If this was the case photographing the San Felipe Castle in Cartagena would be without a doubt one of them. This image took 8 hours to photograph and involved, the closing of a busy streets, 2 power generators, 6 assistants and even

armed security. The results were spectacular and the image won awards.

The reality is that I feel I have matured my skills to the point where the lighting and technical aspect has become second nature and I am more focused on capturing beautiful spaces and telling a story while doing so. Nothing excites me more than a positive reaction from an hotelier when I deliver an image that can help boost sales.

