



BEST  
OF  
ASMP  
2013





American Society of Media Photographers

**BEST OF 2013**

**Antonio Cuellar**



Antonio Cuellar accomplished a huge technical feat in picturing Cartagena, Colombia, at its most beautiful — from dusk to dawn. During a shoot spanning more than 100 days, Cuellar directed multiple assistants to illuminate bits of each scene using artificial, continuous lighting. Multiple image layers were superimposed digitally for optimum lighting effects.

“I was determined to capture 200 images of the old city and its surrounding fortifications,” explains Cuellar. “This was tested many times due to challenging logistics 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.”

**ASMP: How long have you been in business?**

**Antonio Cuellar:** Since 2007.

**ASMP: How long have you been an ASMP member?**

**AC:** Close to three years.

**ASMP: What are your photographic specialties?**

**AC:** I'm an Architectural photographer and my main focus is hotels and resorts.

**ASMP: What do you consider your most valuable tool or piece of equipment?**

**AC:** Equipment is always secondary to me. But in order not to avoid the question, I'd say my SEKONIC C-500R color meter and my gels. What I like to call my most valuable asset would be my constant inconformity with my images and my desire to get better. I like for my creativity to dictate whatever tool or piece of equipment is necessary and not the other way around.

**ASMP: What is unique about your style/approach or what sets you and your work apart from other photographers?**

**AC:** In and of itself, the field of architectural photography is already an art form very different from other photographic fields. Most of the time I am not dealing with moving subjects, which allows me to focus on composition and lighting.

I could go on and on, explaining how I understand the components of a building and its architecture, but the reality is that even though this is relevant, sensitivity and imagination play a much bigger role. Framing the camera an inch to the left or to the right, choosing to light a certain area of the image or not, or waiting for the right time of day to shoot an interior are all decisions that can make a huge difference.



**ASMP: Your personal project *Behind the Walls* consists of 200 images of the old city of Cartagena, Colombia. What was the inspiration for this project? Why did you choose these words for the title?**

**AC:** I had the pleasure of visiting Cartagena in 2009 for a friend's wedding. I fell in love with the city and just knew I had to spend time photographing it. The title *Behind the Walls* has a double meaning. If you have a chance to visit Cartagena you'll soon realize that most of its Architectural beauty is inside the old city, which is surrounded by walls. These walls were built mostly in the 16th century to protect the city from pirates. Most of my images are focused on the city inside the walls, with the exception of some fortifications outside the walls.

Additionally, due to an economic boom, a lot of the houses inside the city walls have undergone a major restoration, due to a surge in the boutique hotel industry. Most of these boutique hotels consist of six to 10 rooms and therefore outsiders don't have access to peek inside unless they're booked for the night. My images take you inside those walls as well.

**ASMP: Are you of Colombian heritage? How much time had you spent in Cartagena before embarking on this project? How much advance research and planning did you do before arriving in the city and starting to shoot?**

**AC:** Yes, I was born in Cali, Colombia, and both my parents are Colombian. I moved to Boston as a teenager before moving to New York. I grew up in Cali, and I remember visiting Cartagena on family trips when I was a kid.

I took a pre-production trip in order to scout locations, apply for permits and search for security and assistants. I focused on landmarks during my first three trips. Applying for permits for the landmarks was straightforward, since landmarks are often used for film and TV shoots and the process is pretty standard. The curve ball came when I explained that the photo shoot was taking place after hours and that I would need to close down some streets.

**ASMP: What equipment and software did you use to create "*Behind the Walls*?" Do you generally work with the same gear or does this vary on a project-to-project basis?**

**AC:** *Behind the Walls* was shot with three Canon 1DS Mark III cameras and Lowel hot lights. I used three cameras simultaneously in order to be able to capture dusk shots more efficiently. I used Aperture software and I shot everything tethered to my 17-inch MacBook Pro. Most of the postproduction was done in Photoshop. The gear does vary, as I use medium format cameras on jobs that require them and I also use strobes for most of my daytime shots, but *Behind the Walls* wasn't shot during the daytime.

**ASMP:** The images from *Behind the Walls* are composited from captures created over several hours using intricate lighting over a darkened scene. Do you use any means to rough out composites as you work, so that you can evaluate what you're getting?

**AC:** Yes, I do. I always shoot tethered and I have ways of preselecting the better images in Aperture. It makes the postproduction easier.

**ASMP:** Many people like photography because one can create an image in a fraction of a second, yet you often choose to spend hours doing so. Why? What do you get out of prolonging the image making experience?

**AC:** *Behind the Walls* is a photography collection shot at night and dusk. When shooting daytime assignments I can also create images in a "fraction of a second." The decision to shoot in daylight versus at night is made after extensive scouting, planning and discussion with the client, in an effort to determine what is best for them. However styling and preproduction are an important part of my job, so it's never really a "fraction of a second."

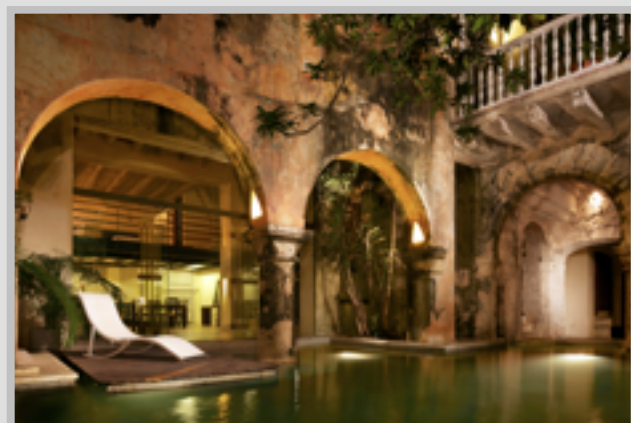
Some of my night photography shoots take a long time, depending on the expanse of the scene being captured. The San Felipe fortress was the most epic shoot in the book. We started shooting the front of the castle at 1 a.m. and worked on lighting the scene until 5 a.m. Then we waited for dawn to get the morning sky in the mix. We were very lucky with that particular morning.

**ASMP:** Please briefly describe your workflow for this project. Approximately how much time did you spend in post production per image? Did you do all the post production yourself or did you outsource any of this process to others?

**AC:** I did all the postproduction. It is very hard for me to outsource the postproduction because of my unique workflow. I've tried outsourcing it in the past, but I found myself spending more time preparing the files and explaining the work to the editor than actually doing the work myself. The time I spend on an image varies. For example, the San Felipe fortress consists of 137 layers so it took an entire day and a next-day revision. Some of the interior shots took as little as one hour in post. I've gotten into the habit of always doing next-day revisions for everything.

**ASMP:** You have a behind-the-scenes video of the making of an image from *Behind the Walls* on Vimeo. Who shot the video? For what percentage of your shoot time did you have a videographer working? Did shooting video cause any disruption to your photography process?

**AC:** The video was shot by local film house called Cartagena Film Academy. They were a big part of the project and provided some rental equipment, assistants and the video crew. The video guys in the crew were very professional and never got in the way.



They were involved and passionate about their work and seemed very interested in the project. The project was self-financed, so only 20 percent of the shoot was captured on video. There are many more videos on the way.

**ASMP: What has been the reaction to the video? Has this been useful as a marketing tool in promoting the book?**

**AC:** The video has been an incredible tool and worth every penny. Most people are familiar with what goes into a fashion shoot and the average portrait session, but they're not at all familiar with an architectural shoot, especially with my approach. By watching the video the images become that much more interesting.

**ASMP: Is this video something you share or talk through during meetings with commercial clients, especially prospective clients who may not understand your process and working methods?**

**AC:** Yes, this video is definitely a useful tool to educate clients, especially when it comes to justifying budgets, although most of my clients come from the hospitality industry and are referred to me by word of mouth. I've found that most of the work to educate new clients comes from the person referring me and I'm grateful for that.

However, the video for this project was a key factor in getting city officials to become more interested in the project.

**ASMP: Many of your pictures from *Behind the Walls* require a large crew — multiple assistants, generators and sometimes security. What have you learned from this project about being an effective leader? What works, and what doesn't work?**

**AC:** Being an effective leader starts with good communication skills. This trait is especially important when working with new and inexperienced assistants. Educating them in the process is key to minimizing the element of surprise.

Empowering people, giving them credit when credit is due and rewarding them when they've done a good job, is very necessary. Taking the blame for your assistant's mistake in front of your client creates a sense of unity, trust and helps create the sense of a team.

I believe the most effective way of managing your team is by creating a positive working environment. Being the angry photographer on set does not work. I've learned that, by making my employees believe in the high expectations I have for them and my respect for their work, I can bring out the best in them.

**ASMP: When making *Behind the Walls*, do you envision each photograph before you create it and then execute that vision, or are there variables and surprises that cause each photo to differ from what you had in mind?**





**AC:** I've been doing this long enough that I can create an accurate expectation of the end result during the preproduction process. The surprises in this project always came from the subjects. A lot of the beauty in Cartagena is behind closed doors. I never knew what to expect when I opened the doors to a boutique hotel, religious facility, museum or any other indoor point of interest. Whether there was a beautiful indoor pool, waterfall, rooftop terrace or a place rich in history, the element of surprise was always present and always rewarding. The project included 15 hotels, 10 restaurants, five religious institutions and many other key points of interest. Therefore it provided me with a great opportunity to experiment with different lighting techniques.

**ASMP: City officials became increasingly interested in *Behind the Walls* as you progressed. What interested them most about the project? How did they show their interest?**

**AC:** Tourism is the most important industry in Cartagena, and I believe I was able to persuade people of the fact that this particular project was different from any previous project and therefore it would help contribute to the promotion of tourism. I was referred to a governmental agency called IPCC, which is in charge of promoting cultural heritage. A government official was assigned to me after my fourth trip in order to educate me about the places that were best to photograph, much like a tour guide. He was crucial in introducing me to the right people in private installations such as museums, churches, hotels, restaurants and, of course, government facilities and public areas. The project ran much smoother from that point on.

**ASMP: Now that the project is complete, please describe how you present these images. What are the specs of the book, and how was this produced? Have these images been exhibited?**

**AC:** The project was recently finished and the promotion has recently begun. The Cartagena airport has shown an interest in displaying the images permanently, as this facility has recently undergone major remodeling and construction. I also have plans to display the images in art galleries in Texas, Milan, Dubai, Miami and I'm still looking for a place in New York City, as well as some cities in Colombia. The response has been amazing, especially from the people in Cartagena. I kept images on my iPad as I scouted for new locations, and business owners had no problem opening their doors to my project in spite of the late hours of my shoots. The book is currently being edited and, most likely, it will be self-published with the financial help of sponsors.

**ASMP: You are obviously particularly interested in light and in tackling its complexities. When did you begin to see light and lighting as an art form?**



**AC:** I began looking at light differently as I began to shoot at night. Color metering and color correction became crucial in order to create the right ambiance, especially when shooting interiors. I am one of the few remaining photographers who still uses a color meter in spite of shooting 100-percent digital.

**ASMP:** Please elaborate on various ways you work with lighting in your images. Which light sources are your favorites to work with? Do you approach various types of lighting differently or is your handling consistent from one type of lighting to another?

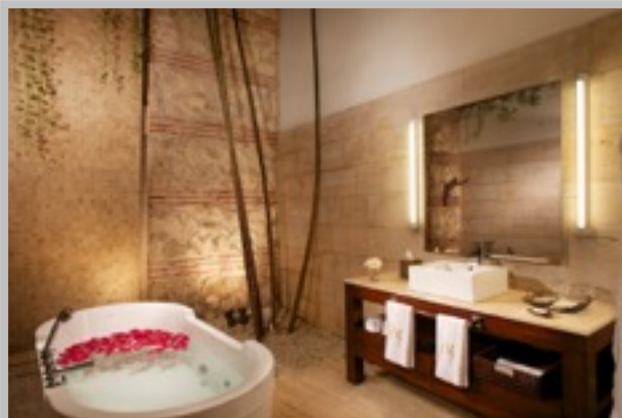
**AC:** I prefer using continuous tungsten light sources when shooting at night, with strobes during the day and sometimes for dusk shots. *Behind the Walls* was shot 100-percent with Lowel gear, such as DPs, Omnis and Pro. These lights are very versatile and can take the abuse, so this was definitely the right gear. I have several approaches to lighting an image, and this is dictated by what is best for the image. I have an extensive collection of color gels and filters. **ASMP:** You have an MBA — from where? Did you have a prior career in business or economics? Tell us what prompted you to get a graduate degree in business.

**AC:** I have a degree in music production and sound engineering from the Berklee College of Music. I worked as a recording engineer for a while and photography was always a hobby. I thought it was a smart move to go into the business side of music and had the opportunity to enroll in the MBA program at the University of Miami. I graduated in 2004 and was already taking some paid photography assignments shortly after graduating.

**ASMP:** In what ways has your background in business aided your career as a photographer? Do you emphasize your business background when you meet with clients?

**AC:** My business side has definitely aided my photography career. It has helped me to market myself effectively and to have a better understanding of the business in general. I don't bring this up when meeting with clients, but it's part of my online credentials because I believe it doesn't hurt. In this business your portfolio speaks for you and not a fancy resume and I find this to be a positive thing.

**ASMP:** Your Web site says you have an “obsession with perfection.” Are you often able to create images that reach 100-percent perfection, or do you feel it's impossible to make an image that is absolutely perfect? What types of details do you typically obsess over the most in your images?



**AC:** I am my biggest critic and never 100-percent satisfied with results. The images seem to grow on me after a while. I am obsessed with color exposure. The images will only be close to perfect for a little while until I develop new techniques and then become unhappy with older images. Other photographers that I admire from different subject areas have the same problem, but in the end I believe this is one of the keys to success.

**ASMP:** You are based both in New York and Miami. Do you use the same marketing approach in both cities, or do you find clients in each city need to be handled differently?

**AC:** My marketing approach is the same in both cities. I constantly travel back and forth, and I have equipment in both cities. I am now based out of New York, so this allows me to take smaller assignments up north.

**ASMP:** In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges a photographer must overcome when lighting and photographing an interior? What are the biggest shortcomings that you find in other photographers' images of this subject?

**AC:** The first, biggest challenge is the approach to composition and not so much lighting, as one may think. I always try for my interior images to have depth and flow. A well framed and styled image is crucial. I would much rather have a poorly lit but well framed and styled image than poorly framed but beautifully lit image. Dead space is the number one enemy when shooting interiors. In the past three years I've encountered a growing number of LED lights, dimmable LED lights and variable-temperature LED lights. This is a white-balance nightmare that an interior photographer must overcome on location and not postproduction.

**ASMP:** The work that you do requires significant preparation on all fronts, from background research to technical aspects to logistics. What has been the biggest challenge you've faced on a project?

**AC:** The San Felipe Fortress in Cartagena was by far my biggest challenge logistically, but the Blue Bar In New York is one job that comes to mind where my technical abilities were tested. In San Felipe I was dealing with many variables such as security, weather conditions, rented equipment including a 16-kilowatt generator, and, on top of that, dealing with new assistants. When shooting the Blue Bar, I was dealing with a cave-like bar being lit 100-percent with blue neon light.

**ASMP:** In regard to being prepared, what are your most essential recommendations to offer someone embarking for the first time on an undertaking along the lines of *Behind the Walls*?

**AC:** Preproduction is the key element. Understand that the country we live in is very efficient in dealing with paperwork and bureaucracy when it comes to permits, and be prepared not to expect the same elsewhere. However, as a silver lining, there is very little that cannot be achieved in countries like these by finding ways for people to like you. Maybe you'll get assigned your own government official to help you scout for locations.

**ASMP: You have over 50K followers in Social Media. Does your social media presence benefit your business?**

**AC:** Facebook and social media are extremely efficient for other fields such as wedding and portrait photographers, but not so much for architectural photographers who specialize in hotels and resorts. Although I do think that having a large number of “likes” could be reassuring to a client in the decision making process while doing research on your background.

**ASMP: You describe yourself as an architectural and interiors photographer. What is it that attracts you to these subjects that are largely without people?**

**AC:** The first paid jobs I got all came from friends in the interior design field, so inevitably I started building a portfolio and a skill set that focused on that area of photography. But the reality is that I enjoy every aspect of photography. As a matter of fact, I have a smaller lifestyle and food photography portfolio targeted to the hospitality and food and beverage industry that I use upon request.

**ASMP: You travel internationally with a great deal of equipment, we presume. Do you purchase travel insurance? Have you ever had to cash in on insurance?**

**AC:** Yes, I do have a liability and equipment insurance from The Hartford. Liability insurance is required in most commercial facilities. Equipment insurance is covered internationally, but not liability. I have never made a claim on my insurance.

**ASMP: Are there any air travel or international customs horror stories that you don't mind telling, now that they're over? Do you have advice for other photographers to assist in troubleshooting international travel for photography?**

**AC:** I've encountered problems in the past but have gotten off easy. This is all part of preproduction. If you're constantly traveling outside the country, the best thing to do is to get an ATA carnet, which allows you to temporarily import professional equipment to affiliated countries. If you cannot afford it, you have to be willing to wait in customs in order to register equipment into the country where you're traveling.

**ASMP: Now that you've completed *Behind the Walls* are there other locations you'd like to photograph in a similar manner?**



**AC:** There are a lot of cities that come to mind; some of them are in Puerto Rico and Costa Rica. The current project consisted of 18 production trips that were self-financed, so right now I'm focusing on searching for sponsors for *Behind the Walls* and on for-profit work.

**ASMP: What have you learned from shooting "*Behind the Walls*" that you can most readily apply to commercial photo shoots? Do you foresee being able to do such a complex documentation as "*Behind the Walls*" as a commercial assignment?**

**AC:** *Behind the Walls* made me a better photographer in many ways. I experimented successfully with lighting techniques in ways that I couldn't have done working with another client. It also forced me to make my workflow more efficient. But most important of all, after coordinating such huge productions overseas that at first seemed impossible, any other local production project seems much more manageable.

**ASMP: What projects, personal or professional, are you currently planning? Where do you see yourself in five years' time?**

**AC:** I'm focusing on marketing to other countries. Travel and photography are two of my passions and it would be great to combine them. I would love to be able to gather enough material to create a book on the most exotic hotels in the world. Some of the hotels from *Behind the Walls* would definitely be included.