

PRESTIGE AWARDS

MEXICO 2021/22

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THROUGH THE LENS
AN INTERVIEW WITH
ANTONIO CUELLAR

WEEKEND BREAKS IN MEXICO

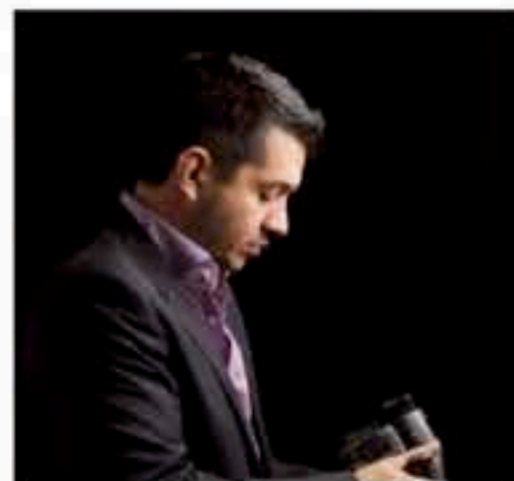
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THROUGH THE LENS

ANTONIO CUELLAR

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Antonio is a highly sought-after hotel and resort photographer in the luxury market. He has offices in the US and UK and has production teams around the world. As a hotel photographer, Antonio gets to stay in all of the properties he has worked with over the years and therefore received the full guest experience at a large number of prestigious hotels and brands across the globe. Additionally, his keen eye for interior design and aesthetics of luxury hotels has made him an invaluable guest judge for the Luxury Travel Guide Awards since 2014.

■ Tell us how you become interested in photography?

I have always had an overriding interest in art which has generally influenced the choices I have made. My interest in photography developed over time, and it has been quite a journey, to say the least! Initially, I completed a degree in music production and sound engineering at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Following graduation, I entered the corporate world of the music industry, and I was encouraged to complete an MBA to assist in moving up the ranks. During my MBA studies I developed a bug for photography, and by the time I received my MBA in 2004, I was hooked! I suspect the artist in me was not letting me settle for the corporate world as there were better things in store!

During the final year of my MBA, while I was beginning to experiment with portraiture and lifestyle photography, a few friends who were real estate developers encouraged me to photograph some of their projects. My knowledge of architectural photography was limited, to say the least, and there was minimal information available at the time on the subject. So, I began experimenting with different photographic techniques, honing my skills and really learning through the process of trial and error. The next thing I knew was that I had a growing portfolio of architectural clients.

■ Why hotel photography?

Hotel photography seemed to be a logical way of combining my newly developed fascination for architectural photography with three of my other great passions; food, travel and lifestyle photography. Due to this logic, I decided to focus solely on hotel photography.

Once I had made that decision, I knew I had to develop my portfolio, so I engineered a personal project that would allow me to improve my skills in this area, as well as to gain important recognition as a hotel photographer. I had recently attended a friend's wedding in Cartagena, Colombia, and I was fascinated by the destination and thought it would be the perfect location for my project. Cartagena was truly magical and very much worthy of a photography project, especially as it was experiencing a significant renaissance due to a nationwide economic boom. The old city had some incredible architecture and was surrounded by ancient walls that were built to prevent piracy during Colonial times.

My project was transformed into a book titled Behind the Walls which featured 20 of the most beautiful boutique hotels located within the historic city walls of Cartagena. Behind the Walls was a double entendre of sorts, referring to the location within the city walls and also the fact that many of these exquisite hotels were not able to be accessed by the general public. The project was a massive success with some of the images being featured by Cartagena in the VIP areas of the airport, and the American Society of Media Photographers selected me as one of the top 20 photographers of the year. This project cemented my position as a luxury hotel photographer and opened many doors for me – the rest, as they say, is history!

■ Why is a luxury hotel photographer different from any other type of architectural photographer?

Many components are vital to be a successful luxury hotel photographer. Not only do you need to have a thorough understanding of interiors and architecture, but you also need to have an in-depth awareness of the hospitality industry itself in addition to experience in lifestyle and food photography. Before commencing a shoot, we need to familiarise ourselves with hotel brand guidelines, to understand the hotel's marketing concept as well as having a realistic appreciation of styling. Some brands are concerned with over-styling a space for fear of setting an unrealistic expectation, whereas for others luxury styling is a vital part of their brand. As a luxury hotel photographer, you must be able to tell a story with a single frame. This is easier when you have talent, posing as guests, it is somewhat more challenging when you are dealing with a space that is without people in the frame.

Another significant difference between myself and other photographers is marketing. Most photographers market their business directly to consumers, whereas I am always marketing my services to other companies which requires an entirely different approach.



■ **Where has been your favourite destination?**

That is a hard one as I find there is an appeal to all destinations. Luxury castles and manors in Europe certainly make my life more comfortable, and luxury beach resorts are always fantastic for obvious reasons. I do have a fascination with Asia, especially as it experiences a significant boom and I often marvel at the extravagance you can experience in Asia. The Eclat Hotel in Beijing remains prominent in my mind as it was home to the most significant private Dali collection and was probably the most outstanding art collection I have ever seen in a hotel.

I also love working with local talent, interacting with locals and meeting interesting people which is all very much a part of my job. I recently photographed the Lyrath Hotel in Ireland and had the pleasure of spending an entire week with two former Miss Ireland pageant winners.

I also have a great love of photographing different cuisines that represent a culture and country. I am often asked a similar question about which my favourite culture is. Some cultures are obviously more challenging than others, but the reality is that generally, people that work in hospitality are very hospitable and easy to work with.

■ **Do you have any particularly memorable stories from your hotel shoots?**

I have had so many exciting experiences, that they could almost fill a book! In 2018, I was working in Las Vegas for a high-rise hotel. I needed to gain a better vantage point, so I rented a room from a neighbouring hotel. We requested a room with a specific view and from then on, the evening got a little weird. We were told to wait and were questioned by the manager who repeatedly asked us questions. We weren't sure what was going on, but our request had caused some sort of commotion. While we were waiting for the manager to return we were surrounded by a large group of police who swarmed into the hotel with the word SWAT on their uniforms. We were asked to open our Pelican bags and verify our identity. It turned out that Pelican bags are often used to carry military gear which includes assault weapons, and the last time that someone had requested a "room with a specific view", 56 people were murdered, and hundreds were injured during the fatal Las Vegas mass shooting in 2017.





**Grand Solmar Land's End Resort
& Spa | Cabo San Lucas, Mexico**

The idea here was to showcase the eight lagoon style pools featured throughout the property which ensures sunlight at any point during the day. The girls walking give a great sense of scale to the magnitude of the pools and their architectural design. I achieved this by playing with leading lines along the image.

Anica Restaurant at Rancho San Lucas | Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

Situated within a brand new golf resort designed by Greg Norman, Anica Restaurant features 35-40ft ceilings and houses an international fare and Baja-inspired dishes masterfully created by Chef Hector Lucas. Having motion blur in an image offers a sense of liveliness. This is important when you are dealing with big empty interiors.



Playa Grande Resort | Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

This image shows the hotel porter working against the stunning backdrop of the Pacific Ocean. However, it also captures the grand architecture which evoked memories of the impression I got when visiting the Pyramids of El Tajin in Southern Mexico.

