

MIDDLEBROOK



The reason for it all, getting the shot and adding to my project.

A BIT OF WHAT YOU FANCY

After a week in Provence shooting bullfighting, risking his life Hemingway-style for a personal project, MARTIN MIDDLEBROOK discovers the French do some things better than us Brits: living and loving photography...



I have always had ongoing personal projects, which have become a source of hope and pleasure in equal measure. When you are photographing paint drying in February, the thought of

continuing a long-cherished project on bullfighting in Provence in July provides a little spring and appetite that are often hard to find. I can say without fear of contradiction that 2011 has been the most turgid year ever in terms of quality of commissions, in stark contrast

to 2010, which seemed ripe with potential. In a year of swings and roundabouts, I have been losing on both. So a week in Provence was a heaven-sent intersection in the *péage* of my year.

I have, this year, for the first time, lost a little of my thirst for this thing we call a career, but which is often, at best, a hobby and vocation. A hobby and vocation with expenses and responsibilities, mind, but a dirty little indulgence all the same. So I cannot express adequately enough in *bons mots*, how excited I was to pack my bag and head to Birmingham Airport in July, in the certain knowledge that I was going to

indulge my dirty little habit for just one week. As fixes go, I would be full to the brim by the time I dumped my Peugeot 207 back at Montpellier Méditerranée Airport a week later.

Like all pros, I have spent many an idle hour imagining a Hemingway-like existence of travel, photography and writing, sun-dappled evenings and cicada-filled nights. But when you have kids and a big mortgage and an ex-wife (not her fault, I would point out for purposes of balance), first you photograph paint drying and only then do you immerse yourself in the luxuriant dreams of another era. I wonder if those idyllic



CAROLINE TAYLOR

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days are now simply that; days of yore never to be repeated. I can't imagine a battalion of photographers making a grand living in such a manner anymore, but I can definitely imagine trying.

There was a battalion of photographers, of course, cataloguing and documenting and archiving every part of life in Provence in July 2011. They are tourists, but each has a quality SLR and a barrage of lenses these days. When I first began photographing the *course camarguaise* style of bullfighting in Provence in 2003 it was a given that at any event I would be the only person with a camera and would have free access to any part of the arena. This year I was falling over bodies to get to the best spot. It's the antithesis of women and children first' as the ferry sinks. You are no longer a photographer, you are just another person with a camera.

Nevertheless, this is not a desultory philippic on the changing reality of it all. It does make you question the value of your images in a wider sense, though. I mean, if I were a picture editor, would I go to my website and buy images for an article, or would I go to Flickr and get similar images for peanuts? As an exercise in stoic boredom I have visited Flickr and arrived at my own pronouncement on that thorny tableau. Monkeys, but peanuts all the same.

So I know that my images are for me, and maybe that's how it should be. This dirty little habit is an indulgence after all. It started, like it does for everyone, as a hobby, and the blessing is that it still retains some of that idealised innocence. My week in Provence was a cocktail of professionalism and amateurism. I was fixated on covering as many events as I could, shot everything in RAW, technically treated the whole thing as a commercial shoot and worked each

Above: Nearly a statistic: a *raseur* jumps over me, the bull follows, I leg it! Opposite page: Would you do this for €20? Me neither!

event as hard as I could. Except I was never without a beer in my hand, I had family around me and didn't beat myself up if I missed a sitter; I shot what I wanted and what inspired me, simply ignoring those things that didn't. "Now if I could just make a living doing this," I thought.

I had more fun and gained more satisfaction than I have in six months and this is why I have always had my personal projects. I wrote last month that when I'm working in a provincial market, commissions are often only as tasty as bones: it's *steak haché* rather than *filet de boeuf*! I swear blind that if I didn't do this for me I wouldn't do it at all. The beauty is that personal projects never finish, you keep changing the scope and the narrative, and it will excuse me for life. I will die on the horns of a bull, happy!



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If I can view it all this way, I pondered, I can keep despondency at bay. I would check my emails on the iPhone every day, awaiting the biblical flood of enquiries that would doubtless come my way in my absence. I wouldn't quite call it a flood, though; I wouldn't even call it a trickle. The eurozone was in meltdown, bank stocks were on the slide again, Norway was in mourning and so were fans of Amy Winehouse. Still, on the plus side, if I took up every cosmetic offer that was emailed to me, porn star Ron Jeremy could step aside and no woman in the world would ever leave my boudoir dissatisfied! Every cloud!

Ernest Hemingway said: “There are only three sports: bullfighting, motor racing and mountaineering; all the rest are merely games.” Well, it's hard not to agree with that. I took in five bullfights in my week away, saw a lot of damage to property, watched a dreadfully injured man get stretchered away and just missed becoming a

statistic myself. The French have a beautifully laconic way of dealing with it all. When the poor young man was carted off with injuries that will see him eating through a straw for life and the bullfight was cancelled, the crowd booed. Not a slightly agitated boo, but an emphatic tyre-burning ‘let's barricade Calais' kind of a boo. This is a place where, if you are stupid or drunk enough, you can get in with the bulls if you wish. I have done it several times and I admit it is scary, though crazily fun all the same.

The French have not lost this lust for life, as they have not lost their passion for photography either. If you are a photographer in France you are an artisan with significant rights and benefits. I have been visiting the town of Saint-Rémy de Provence for many years and on the main street there is a photographic gallery owned and run by a local photographer. It is full of beautiful imagery, has been for years

and will be forever. Saint-Rémy de Provence is tiny and yet during my stay it was staging a retrospective of the work of English celebrity photographer Terry O'Neill. I tripped down to Arles for a day and visited the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie and its famous summer exhibition. The bookshops were filled with obscure but beautiful photography books and when questioned, if you reply that you are a photographer you are afforded the utmost respect. If you say this in the UK, people presume you do weddings.

‘Halcyon days’ is a strange term, insofar as it evokes displeasure with the present as much as it does viewing the past through spectacles of the rose-tinted variety. God, I do sometimes wish for the halcyon days though and I can't help feeling people have a firmer grip on all that is good about the past in France than we do here. There is no health and safety, and parking is free;

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Above: Half-time in Arles. Everyone a photographer; the crowds review their images, ready for the second half to begin and the Flickr upload to finish. Right: Here's 800lb of meat running at 40mph with these as weapons. Hard to bitch too much about the frailties of our profession when people die for €20.

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if you want to kill yourself at a public event you are free to do so and if you wish to be a photographer you will be greatly supported by a nation that still buys photography and hangs it on its walls. That's something to shout about, I think, and why my bullfighting project will probably never finish.

So while a plummeting reality dawned as we touched down at a gloomy Birmingham Airport, I made the same promise to myself as I always do after these trips: “This is still the best job in the world, just so long as you can pepper the anodyne with the sublime every so often.” 📷

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