

Russ Roca

The Eco-Friendly Bicycling Photographer

By Jennifer Chen

Portrait photographer Russ Roca doesn't own a car. And he lives in Los Angeles County, a place synonymous with vehicles and traffic. His unique spin on his mode of transportation and photography business is to call himself the "eco-friendly bicycling photographer." Toting his bicycle and camera has caught the attention of many, including environmentally-conscience clients, KTLA (a local Los Angeles news channel), *Marie Claire Italy* and, most recently, *Sunset* magazine.

Nine years ago, Roca's car died and, as a social experiment, he decided not to buy a new one and instead try

out a bicycle. Many reasons factored into the decision but a personal promise he made with himself set the stage for the change. Shares Roca, "I have a younger brother in Iraq. On his second tour, he told me that he was over the war. That's when I decided not to use gas anymore." The change sparked several positive improvements in Roca's life. He lost 25 pounds, with no car payments or insurance his finances improved, and his bicycle reinvigorated him to try out photography. Burnt out from working at a design firm, Roca transitioned into a new full-time career.



Jennifer Chen: What are some challenges riding your bike when you present yourself to clients?

Russ Roca: People ask me, “Did you get a DUI?” or they think I can’t afford a car. So I thought about a way to say it succinctly and market myself as the eco-friendly bicycling photographer. But people still ask me if I only take pictures of bicycles. The biggest challenge I face is that where I live [Long Beach] isn’t very bicycle friendly. Bicycles are seen as toys, not as serious transportation.

JC: What has been your longest ride to a shoot?

RR: From Long Beach to Laguna Beach (about 75 miles round trip). It took me two-and-a-half hours there and three hours back.

JC: Your portraits have a fresh, focused look. How do you prep before a shoot and what is your post-processing workflow?

RR: The way I approach portraits depends on the subject matter—whether it’s an on-the-fly type portrait or staged and dramatic. I studied American literature at UCLA so I always want my portraits to tell a narrative. I try to get a sense of what the story is about and then I pick the location and lighting style. For example, a local

community activist wanted to turn a dead space into a park so I wanted to shoot him with a strobe that overpowered the sun to get an urban look. After shooting, I go home and download, then backup. I do my post-processing in Lightroom 2, which gives me room to bring up highlights and shadows. I shoot with a Nikon D300 and D200 and primarily a 17–55mm f/2.8 lens and a 70–200mm f/2.8 VR. On the bike, I can’t afford to carry a lot of weight.

JC: How do you capture a person’s personality in a portrait? What’s your approach?

RR: If my clients want a documentary style, we talk and interact before I even get my camera. I leave myself open to their personalities. It’s seeing what they do naturally and then adding a little bit of posing. Especially since they are not professional models, you have a ticking clock of how long you can shoot. Expressions aren’t always authentic the longer you go.

JC: You have a great family portrait on your website of a family riding a surrey together (pg. 78, top). How did you come up with that concept?

RR: This particular family wanted to have a portrait together of the whole family doing something. When I pull up on

my bike for family portraits, families really enjoy seeing me riding it so I suggested a surrey. It turned out really well.

JC: Your portraits of athletes, particularly bicycle riders and runners, illustrate their power and pure athleticism. Describe how you work with athletes to capture them at their peak performance.

RR: If there’s one singular action that illustrates an athlete, I try to capture that moment in their sport. For the runner (pg. 74–75), the image was for Memorial Hospital, shot at Bluff Park in Long Beach. Antisha Anderson was an Olympic hopeful. Her doctors had used a DaVinci robot on her during heart surgery. She was able to recover in time to try out for the Olympics. The hospital wanted me to take her photograph in the hospital but I thought, she’s a runner, she should be running. The advantage to riding my bike everywhere is that I see locations while I ride. I thought of a location over a bluff where there is a path to the beach. I thought it’d be perfect. I had her run by the tree a few times and afterwards I added a little bit of lens-tilt effect.

JC: Your lighting brings out the best features of your subjects. Tell me how you light.

RR: With family portraits, it’s all about



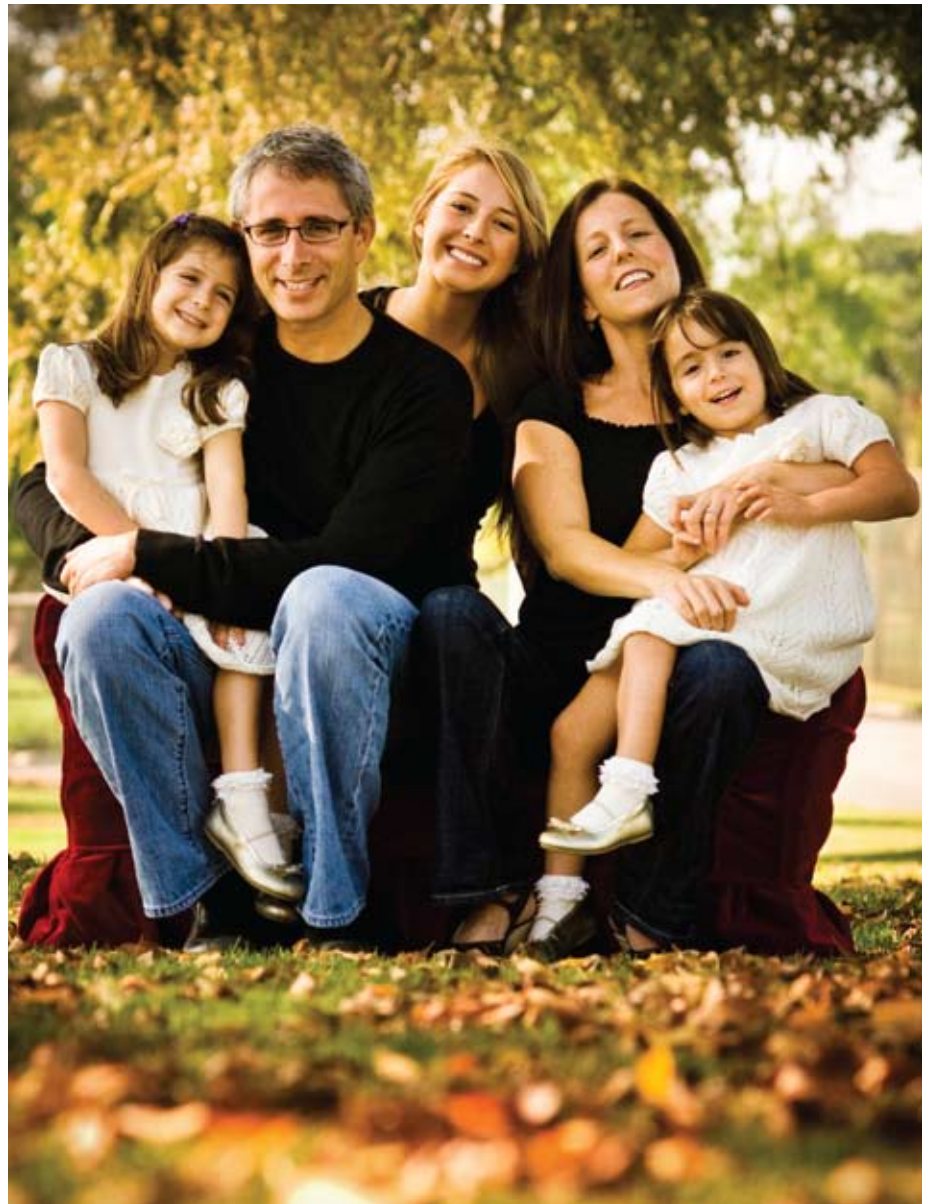


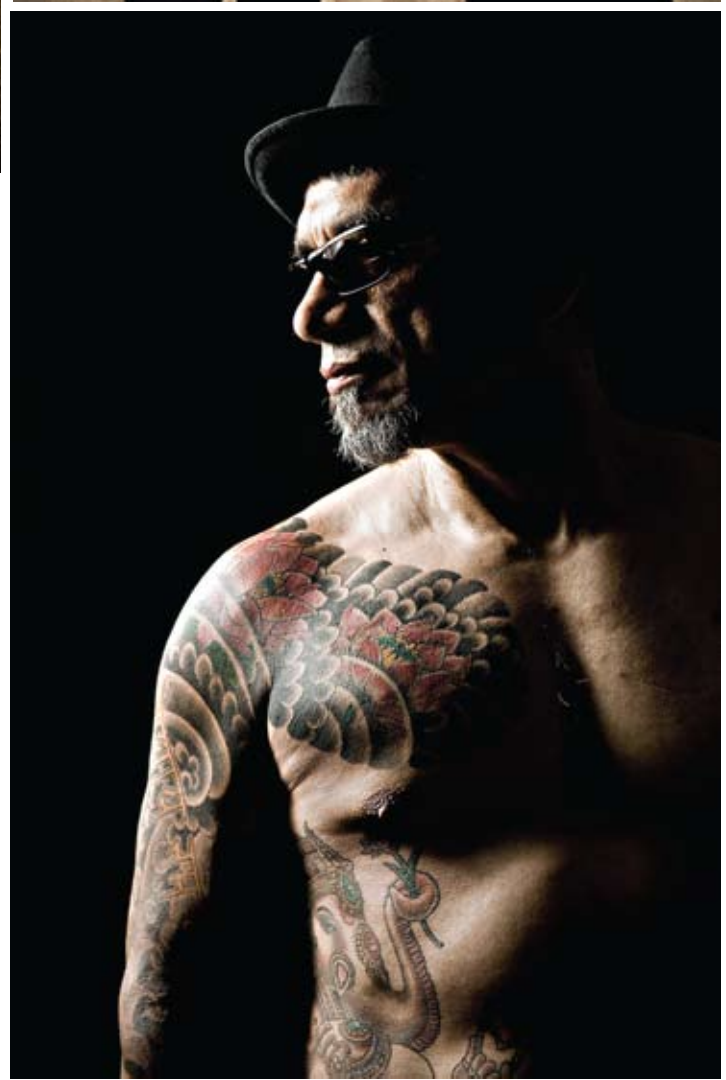
available light. I go in and evaluate the lighting situation and its direction. I use the sun as my rim light then I orientate myself so that the light is hitting correctly. Inside a building, I use older Nikon SB-28 flashes with Paul C. Buff radio slaves and they work really well. I generally use Nikon strobes and I have a full Profoto kit, but since I'm limited to what equipment I can carry on my bike, it forces me to be creative. I use a lot of gaffer's and duct tape. The website Strobist.com has a lot of information about using small Nikon flashes instead of big studio lighting.

JC: How do you market yourself? Do you find that your clients are drawn to your eco-friendly ways?

RR: A lot of my work is local and word-of-mouth. I leave postcards everywhere. I put postcards on my bike with a sign that says, "Take one." When I park my bike, because it's so big, it attracts a lot of attention. I make sure to go to the busiest coffee shop in town where moms and dads go in for coffee and prop up my bike—it's an instant billboard. My eco-friendly stance has gotten me a lot of media attention. KTLA did a segment on me and I was profiled in *Marie Claire Italy*, *Discovery* and *Sunset* magazines. I hope my bike inspires others to look at other modes of transportation.

JC: How much do you spend on the






upkeep of your bike versus what you would spend on a car?

RR: My crank cargo bike was custom made in Pittsburgh, PA. The bike cost about \$3000. What kind of car can you get for \$3000? With a car, you have to spend money on insurance, gas, parking and maintenance. With my bike, the expendables are the tires and brakes, which costs around \$30.

JC: I read about your dream assignment on your blog. Tell us more about what you'd want to do.

RR: I'd love for Oprah to hire me for an issue of *O* magazine. I'd ride from Long Beach, CA, to Chicago, IL, and take pictures of people along the way. I'd have to make sure to leave in the spring to avoid the snow. Another project I'd love to photograph is portraits of celebrities with their bikes to raise bike awareness. I'm not anti-car but I'd like people to re-examine trips that they take—40 percent of car trips are less than two miles. It doesn't take an athlete to make a change. 

You can view more of Russ Roca's work on his website www.russroca.com and get bicycling tips and view his latest images on his blog at www.russroca.blogspot.com.

Jennifer Chen is the features editor for both Rangefinder and AfterCapture magazine. She has written for Every Day with Rachael Ray, Bust, Audrey, Veg-News and is a theatre critic for the online publication, Edge.