



Striking gold in Lagos

Nigeria's Capital, Lagos, is booming and Nigerians from the worldwide diaspora are moving back to the motherland, fuelling the growth. NOOR photographer Bénédicte Kurzen documented this emerging middle class.

'I was very glad that *Le Monde* commissioned me to do this assignment, because it's such a positive story', says Bénédicte. 'I had done a big project about Nigeria's North, portraying it as a very chaotic place and was pleased that I got the opportunity to show another side of this amazing country. There is a clear division between the Muslim north and the Christian south. Lagos is very far away from the conflict in the north – not just geographically, but also in every other respect.'

The French photojournalist has been working on assignments in Nigeria for the last six years, but her meteoric career rise started when she moved to the Middle East in 2003, aged only 23 to cover hard news in the Gaza Strip, Iraq and the Lebanese Republic. She soon moved towards documentary photography and has since worked for

numerous publications, including *TIME*, *Paris Match*, *Newsweek* and *Stern*. The Pulitzer Centre awarded her a grant and last year she was invited to join NOOR one of the foremost photojournalism agencies.

For the last eight years, she has been specialising in Sub-Saharan Africa. She says 'Africa has been stereotyped as the Dark Continent. This has become some kind of hysteria. Every time somebody tells me that they hear only negative stories coming out of Africa, I ask them to have a look at this continent's coverage in the European mainstream media – from the *FT*, *Sunday Times* or *Le Monde* and they'll find very diverse subjects.'

Benedict's own work also reflects this. She has covered a wide variety of stories in Africa over the last eight years, including portraiture of entrepreneurs, documenting the continent's political challenges and frontline conflict reportage.

Official figures confirm that far from being a place of destitution, Sub-Saharan Africa holds a lot of promise.

The Economist reports that since the

early 90s, 30 ruling parties or leaders have been ousted by voters, which resulted in ending Nigeria's military rule in 1999 as well as decreasing the number of conflicts by half. Although corruption, fraud and vote rigging remain a problem, these figures are still a strong indication that the people are taking control and democracy is taking hold.

Increased literacy and access to information has exposed corrupt leaders

'Everything is changing in Lagos and many have realised that there is a huge commercial market.'

and developments in neighbouring countries, making people less tolerant toward erratic dictatorships.

This increased stability has helped Sub-Saharan Africa's economies grow by around five per cent every year in the last decade alone, despite the financial crisis. In fact many investors see Africa as a big and almost untapped market, with a wealth of natural resources and huge potential.

Nigeria, Africa's largest oil producer, is of course on top of this list, with the wealth from natural resources driving consumer demands.

This isn't only attracting investors but is also prompting Nigerians living abroad to come back, especially as the economic crisis meant that there were fewer opportunities elsewhere.

'Nigeria is an incredibly dynamic country,' Bénédicte explains. 'Everything is changing in Lagos and many have realised that there is a huge commercial market – Lagos has 14m people. It's like the Wild West, everything can be created. It is expensive, but money also flows a bit more easily because of the oil industry. The other factor is that it's still here that many re-pats feel at home.'

'Many told me that they feel comfortable here, because for once they are with the majority and with their own people. They like that they can just walk down the street and find the food they like.'

The re-pats are part of a rising middle class, which is the driving force behind Nigeria's boom.

'They are all part of the upper middle class.'

LEFT: Zainab Ashadu lived in London, before moving back to Nigeria to start a design company for handmade handbags, targeting Lagos's new middle class. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 800, 1/2000 Q, f/2.8



says Bénédicte, 'filling the gap between the very rich and the very poor. They can afford to travel and have homes in good areas. It's not without problems though – many people are also getting poorer and there is an exodus from the countryside to the cities.' Over the years, Bénédicte has a built up

'I have contacts in all different spheres, from business to cultural, so it was relatively easy to get in touch with the right people.'

a network that has helped her to cover this story in a relatively short space of time. 'I have contacts in all different spheres,' she explains. 'From business to cultural, so it was relatively easy to get in touch with the right people and I kept on coming across characters, who fitted into the story. I used the D800 and

the 35mm, 50mm and the 80mm, which is amazing for portraits – I like primes, I prefer to move. I also really enjoyed working with the D800. It's colour reproduction is excellent as well as the balance between the highlights and the shadows. I barely have to retouch my pictures, which helps when working to tight deadlines. The 5:4 crop feature, which I used for this story, is really cool, too.'

Working on this project has allowed her to see Lagos from many different points of view. When Amaechi Okobi invited her to photograph him cycling, Bénédicte, thought he was out of his mind.

'I told him that he would get himself killed, because the traffic in Lagos is appalling – it's so dangerous. There are traffic jams from 7am until 10pm, so you can end up in traffic all day long. But he persuaded me to meet him at 5am in the morning. I told the driver that we needed to get pictures of him and we took up the whole street, but it was great to see him cycling at sunrise – it was a performance. I like the images, because they portray Lagos in a very untypical way and really show how the re-pats mould the city so it suits them. They want to do their thing, so they make it happen.'



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PREVIOUS PAGE, LEFT: The night club Reeds on Ikoyi Island in Lagos is a repats hotspot. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 1600, 1/15 (Q f/1.6)

PREVIOUS PAGE, RIGHT: The office of Hotels.ng is based in a house dedicated to new e-enterprises and supported by Iroko, the online film and music distributor. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 800, 1/60 (Q f/2)

LEFT: Amaechi Okobi, one of Lagos's many repats, cycles through a wealthy neighbourhood of this fast-growing metropolis. Apartment blocks are springing up everywhere for the growing middle classes. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24mm f/1.4G ED, ISO2000, 1/40 (Q f/3.2)

Behind the picture

I have been working on assignments in Nigeria for a long time, which helps me to understand the country, its people and produce better and more pertinent images. Recently I went to Latvia for a project about its youth and it took me a month to understand what I was looking at, because I haven't worked in Europe for ten years. It's really crucial to know what you are photographing and why it is interesting in order to convey it to the readers.

'it's important for photographers to explain that taking photos is a real job – you have an ethic, a way of doing things, you build up information.'

Our goal is to educate people, to inform, entertain and to keep on providing windows to the world for them. Without this, people become insular and fall back on stereotypes when it comes to understanding the world.

I think we are past the idea that journalism is objective. What's obvious to me is that behind the picture is a brain and a heart and of course, I have beliefs – which determine which stories I want to tell and where I want to go. This already introduces a bias. The NOOR photography agency, holds humanistic values, which are also important to me and which influence my work. I still

ABOVE: Expats and Nigerians taking part in a gym class at the Radisson Blue Hotel overlooking one of the arm of Lagos's lagoon. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 2000, 1/40 (Q f/3.2)



always try to be on both sides of the fence, but I tend to fall back on the side of the victims. There are grey areas though – in northern Nigeria the victims can quickly turn into perpetrators and vice versa.

For me the most important thing is to share stories. I want people to be interested and make up their own minds.

Social media is an amazing tool that allows us to reach many more people than we could have done before. For example, the audience of this feature was the readership of *Le Monde*, but because NOOR has a popular Facebook page, 27,000 more people had access to these images. It's wonderful to be able to reach out like this, although the downside is the flood of images.

This makes it even more important for photographers to talk about their work, to explain that taking images is a real job – you have an ethic, a way of doing things, you

build up information. It's all these elements that make a huge difference between all the pictures that are uploaded every second and what we do. I really hope that people make the distinction between the two.

Social media has opened up new possibilities and innovative ideas. It's also forced us to do things differently, changing the way we think. The young generation are at the forefront of this. When I was a student, I would go to the library at the university and pick up a huge pile of books and browse through them to see what other photographers were doing. Now the internet does all that. It is an incredible, but also an ambiguous tool. As the French philosopher Virilio said 'the invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck'. It's the same with the internet and social media. It is a beautiful tool, but it can also be terribly misused. **N**



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CLIENTS:
Magazines and newspapers

WHY NIKON?
The D800 is very fast and its colours and contrast are spot on. I also think that NIKKOR lenses are beautiful.

WHAT'S IN THE BAG?
The D800 and the AF-S NIKKOR 24mm f/1.4G ED, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.4G and the AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f/1.4G. I only use prime lenses.

NEXT PIECE OF EQUIPMENT?
The Nikon Df! I am really, really excited about it. It's super stylish and small, so won't hide my face, which will be great for my kind of work. There is no doubt that it is a great piece of technology and the reason why I will choose it.

KIT BAG



Nikon D800



AF-S NIKKOR 24mm f/1.4G ED



AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G



AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.4G



the AF-S NIKKOR 85mm