

JUNE 25, 2007

BW SMALLBIZ – TIME OUT

Faraway Images

Intense photo classes in interesting places

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Don Pogany began taking photos of American flags while traveling. To sharpen his skills, the 45-year-old founder of Sticky, a Chicago marketing startup, signed up for FirstLight Workshops, which combine photography education with travel to intriguing places. He has since shot a grape-picking festival in France and a livestock auction in Scotland, coached by experts. "It was rewarding to work like a professional photographer, not a hobbyist," says Pogany. "The workshops take you to another level."

Photography classes have long been mainstays of schools, summer camps, and YMCAs. But a number of companies such as Littleton (Colo.)-based FirstLight now have photography boot camps—in-depth classes in which experts offer instruction in inspiring locations. FirstLight participants have spent five days shooting oyster fishermen in Maryland and cowboys in Wyoming. Santa Fe Workshops features an "on the road" class in Oaxaca, Mexico, that coincides with an annual dance celebration that students photograph. One of the largest, Maine Photographic Workshops in Rockport, Me., offers 250 one-week courses every year, up from 200 a few years ago.

The popularity and ease of digital photography have spurred interest in the workshops, But they aren't Photography 101. Jay Dickman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer who founded FirstLight in 2003, says applicants must be beyond basic "this is the lens, this is the body" instruction. Some schools require potential students to submit a portfolio.

BAD ROADS, NO WATER

Workshops typically have 14 to 16 participants. Instructors include photography teachers, professional photographers, magazine editors, and art directors. The schedule is intense, with mornings often spent in classes that include instruction and critique and afternoons devoted to taking pictures. After a dinner break, there are more discussions, or lectures and social activities. At the end of the FirstLight workshops, students produce a gallery show and a magazine they present to the community that they photographed.

For many courses, you don't even need your own camera. Generous sponsorship from photography companies often enables workshops to supply students with equipment, from the latest digital cameras to flash cards and a studio with large-format printers. Costs vary and generally don't include travel expenses. FirstLight's France expedition runs about \$2,100, including lodging in a chateau, and Santa Fe's Oaxaca workshop is \$2,595.

Some trips can be risky. Applicants to Maine Photographic Workshops' "Assignment: Uganda" are warned that "water and electricity may go at odd hours. The roads are bad, things do not happen on schedule, your stomach may rebel, but Ugandans are friendly and welcoming and they like Americans."

Facing professionals at a workshop can spur students to do better work. Says Pogany: "You know you have to come back to class with the goods that a magazine editor would look at, so you put a lot more effort into it." Pogany has learned the importance of research and of observing a subject intently before shooting. And he's carried those techniques into his job as a marketer. "I look more closely for things that resonate and have more depth," he says. "It means going beyond the superficial."