



AFRICA

Michael Poliza

teNeues



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Preface

About the photographer

Michael Poliza is the Marco Polo of the New Millennium. As a young entrepreneur he introduced Germany to the digital world, then he went on a thousand-day journey around the globe in search of the most beautiful and endangered places, following the trails of the discoverers of old. But rucksacks and travelers checks were not for him. Instead, he filled a custom-built boat to the scuppers with the latest technologies and media, and through visionary business acumen, had the venture funded by prominent international sponsors. The book and DVD about this unique journey still reveal the world in a whole new way to tens of thousands of people. After selling the boat that had been his home for three years, Poliza then undertook a mental journey around the globe, contemplating what the most fascinating, beautiful and exciting place might be to use as a base for further travel. Though he was intimately acquainted with many regions that could fit that description, he settled on Southern Africa, and the results here speak volumes for the wisdom of that choice. Through this rich volume of his magnificent images, he takes us on our own journey of discovery into the mysterious and magical continent of Africa. If only there were more men like Michael Poliza in the world!

Florian Langenscheidt

Florian Langenscheidt, a partner of the Langenscheidt-Verlagsgruppe and author of numerous books, is member of the board of trustees of the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and member of the Chairman's Council of The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Three Lives

What type of person must one be and what kind of character must one have to be prepared to wait hours, days or even weeks for the perfect shot—that ideal photo, the unique wildlife composition? Sitting in a Land Rover, crouching behind bushes, lying in the grass or circling in an airplane, one must focus so on the moment, searching for visual opportunities in each scene and movement, camera constantly present and always at the ready to capture the perfect instant.

What thoughts and feelings march through one's mind while hours go by in the shimmering heat of the savannah and the clamour of crickets ring in one's ears? Is it a time of complete relaxation, a total awareness of the here-and-now that leaves no room for self-reflection? Are these moments just the right kind of setting for the "windless calm of the soul," as Nietzsche so beautifully phrased it?

Or are these, instead, the best, most peaceful moments to think about one's life? To think about coincidences and connections and the great, ubiquitous question: Are you happy? What makes you happy?

Michael Poliza knows one thing for sure: He is happy in the bush.

And if there is one thing his photos of Africa express most vividly, then it is the joy of seeing: of truths perceived in an instant. He hunts for graphic structures and artistic arrangements in the wilderness, and though his pictures take their aesthetic focus from Mother Nature, he brings his own unique perspectives. These pictures document the enormous patience that seems to be necessary to actually achieve the images one has imagined. A patience that allows one to wait, in joyful anticipation and with one finger on the shutter release button, for that phenomenal act of providence that combines light and shadow and wildlife—that instant in which the completely independent world of nature and animals allows exactly that event to occur which one has anticipated through experience. Or until Mother Nature delivers a scene of even greater beauty and charm—far more perfect than anything one could previously have imagined.

You could refer to this almost athletic discipline as "Catch the moment," explains Michael Poliza. It requires that the wildlife photo-hunter be completely at one with the laws of wilderness and nature. "Because animals sense the energy with which you approach them." They also sense whether the person in question possesses the necessary inner calm and that certain humility that allows him to anticipate the subsequent action of the animals and, with the camera cocked and lens focused on the right spot, to capture the desired image in his line of vision at precisely this unique moment in time. It is a sense of anticipation that generates a new desire and challenge every day. And it is a mixture of luck, coincidence and patience that produces an array of gifts in the form of perspectives and pictures.

Three Lives

When Michael Poliza talks about himself and his eventful life, he does so at a speed that either makes you seriously doubt his endurance in the wild or, on the contrary, allows you to imagine it quite well as a kind of balancing element. In April 2002, television Talkshow moderator Johannes B. Kerner summed up Poliza's biography with the term "three lives." Poliza has had three quite contradictory life phases or careers, the first of which began at the early age of eleven by coincidence, one could say. The precocious son of an insurance agent in Hamburg, Poliza was offered a small television role by an employee of Studio Hamburg—originally intended as a clever way of getting a date with his sister. It turned out to be the first in a seemingly endless series of film offers for the young man. As a teenager, between the ages of 12 and 17, the newly-crowned child star appeared in over 70 feature films, shows and television series; he worked for Hamburg's Thalia Theater and at the *Kammerspiele*; he was on the cover of German newspapers and tabloids and received basketsful of fan letters from young girls in love.

His success did not lead to any professional ambitions, but did result in a "joie de vivre" principle he still believes in today: "If you're having fun, then you can become good. If you're good at something, then you can be successful. And if you are successful, then you may eventually earn money with it." Poliza's acting role in the oft-repeated 1975 film version of Walter Kempowski's "Tadellöser und Wolff" was his most important role. He chose to end his brief acting career, at the age of 17, by going to the United States as an exchange student, spending time in Dallas, Texas, and Oklahoma. His time there was, in his own words, "not much fun," but as a result, he studied more industriously and, most significantly, discovered his passion for computer technology.

Back in Hamburg, Poliza began studying computer science, sharing knowledge and cheap B&Bs with other techno whiz-kids like Bill Gates on their trips through Germany. During his internship at IBM, Poliza took on customer service duties for Deutsche Grammophon, receiving an hourly wage that far exceeded a typical student salary. His first answering machine became the embodiment of his success, and the four lights on his pager soon signaled each of his first four private customers, to whom he would race on his motorcycle to provide services as a computer coach and helper in emergencies. He soon had five young employees working for him and by the time he was 23, with the breakthrough of the personal computer, a gang of 120 young people was racing through the city in his name. Since he was a kind of "backyard handyman," IBM was at first doubtful of his ability to sell PC hardware. But within a few months, Poliza used a clever concept to become the number one dealer in Germany. With John Jahr, he founded the Polisoft computer firm as a capital venture. All of this occurred well in advance of the

Internet boom and before it was common for "little upstarts like me" (as Michael Poliza says) to start large-scale enterprises.

By the time he was 27, he had had enough of the businessman's life, which included flying back and forth between his offices in Munich, Hamburg, Hanover and Boston. The "outrageous sales growth" didn't really make him happy. "I needed to catch my breath and take a look at what I was actually doing." He sold all of his companies to a Swiss corporation and promptly landed with a thud in his first midlife crisis. "I had money in my bank account. But what do you do with yourself when you have only ever defined yourself through your job?"

The "pretty boy" Michael plunged into a classic consumer frenzy only to find out first-hand that financial riches do not equate to happiness. And the young women who threw themselves at his feet vexed the rather down-to-earth man and his world views. He would put them to the test: "Spend all the money, then see who is still hanging around."

Poliza invested in the film industry and founded CINEMAXX with Achim Flebbe. Three years later, he pulled out of the business because bigger financial partners were required and he had lost three-quarters of his fortune during the stock market crash of 1987. With renewed motivation and together with his old buddies, he turned Prisma Holding into a group of companies, but in the process ruined a meaningful relationship with his girlfriend of the time, he now admits. It was her departure that truly knocked "Mr Goldfinger" into an existential crisis as he struggled to deal with what he considered the first real failure of his life. It would take him nearly three years to find his way out of his personal misery.

So it was not until the age of 32 that Poliza posed the question as to his own happiness and began his third life "on the path back to nature." He dug out the camera he had so loved as a child and now made a point of traveling two or three months every year; he went on diving expeditions in the Pacific, visited the whale sharks in Australia and trekked through the high forests of Papua New Guinea with his friend Tom Jacobi, a photographer for *stern* magazine. Together, they published their collected photos of the trip in *stern* and overnight Michael Poliza had established himself as a photographer. His first underwater film about the "Gentle Giants" was snapped up by television, and it seemed there was a realistic possibility that this new life of adventure could crystallize into an actual profession. With this in mind, Poliza attempted to gradually withdraw from his duties at his company and finally sold Prisma Holding in its entirety to an American company in 1996.

Paid in stocks, he set about living a comfortable life in California for the next two years, dreaming of cashing them in to buy his own expedition ship. In light of the catastrophic developments on the stock market, however, the potential of his boat began shrinking a few inches every day. Undaunted, Poliza declared it a "project." With the turn of the millennium just around the corner, he found a major media partner in *stern* as well as the additional sponsors

necessary to execute his idea of sailing around the globe and reporting daily via the Internet. The “STARSHIP MILLENNIUM VOYAGE” became a global snapshot of the earth at the end of the last millennium from a vehicle able to access the most remote reaches of the planet. The trip also generated stories that regularly made headlines during the 1,009 days at sea from September 1998 through June 2001—supported by Poliza’s own photos as well as those of the various guest photographers who spent time on board. The subsequent book reached the bestseller lists and Poliza became a favorite talk show guest.

Only after the voyage, after he had docked his STARSHIP in the Hamburg harbor, did Poliza realize what a great strain and, above all, what a great responsibility his trip around the world had been. Once again, he asked himself: “What shape will my life take now if I don’t live it according to the better-higher-farther principle?”

He took off again, this time toward Madagascar, stopping first in Cape Town en route—and there a spark was lit. Spontaneously, Poliza packed his bags in Hamburg and a container in California and moved to the Cape of Good Hope. He built a house on the slopes of Camps Bay, and Cape Town became the base for his subsequent travels. After becoming acquainted with Colin Bell and his company, Wilderness Safaris, Poliza fell deeply and truly in love with life in the bush and with watching animals in their natural habitats. With his digital camera in tow, he made his way through the 55 safari camps and lodges in Botswana and Namibia that had won prizes for their environmentally friendliness, and visited countless other camps in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and South Africa. Between his trips, he briefly “played” hotel director at the exclusive North Island Lodge in the Seychelles for half a year, with the luxury resort winning a number of international awards during his tenure. After that, he once again devoted himself to the self-prescribed “leisure to develop my photography, to experiment,” as well as to “documenting, simply for me” his many trips throughout the continent.

Poliza, in changing professions so late in life, never dreamed he would be able to build a career in the “bush business” so successfully. He is happy to be always welcome at all the camps and to have met such interesting people—those who have taught him how to understand the bush. It is a fundamental knowledge without which one cannot acquire that ability to “anticipate,” explains Poliza. “It simply helps enormously if you can roughly assess and predict the behavior of the animals. And when they do what you expect, it’s a small triumph every time.” Poliza was astounded by the degree of patience toward the animals he was able to summon from the very beginning—after all, he has a reputation for impatience. “It is a really valuable lesson nature teaches us when we experience in an almost physical way that we cannot speed up, push or change anything at all. You can only wait and hope that the lion, once he has yawned repeatedly, will eventually stand up.” Nature is “fortunately, completely incorruptible.”

But the peace and quiet can disappear in a flash: “Then suddenly everything turns to chaos. The hyenas approach from the left, a lion from the right, an elephant from the middle and all around you there’s nothing but a loud racket and a lot of screaming going on.”

Then it is best to keep one’s cool. When the elephant moves toward the photographer sitting in his Land Rover, approaching to within ten feet, and the photographer consciously ignores the bush giant until the last second, all the while trying to get a close-up shot of the soles of the elephant’s feet—in such cases, it is quite useful to be able to determine the point at which what seems to be a pretend attack turns into a real threat.

We’ve seen plenty of close-up pictures of animals. But Poliza focuses so acutely on the details that his images not only have a visually impressive effect but a uniquely expressive power. In fact, they demonstrate the focusing perspective and signal-oriented vision of the animals themselves. Don’t the jaws of the lion king express enough of the animal’s entire authoritative majesty? Could a view of his nose and his paw in the buffalo’s flesh be enough to make us feel the violence of the situation? Have we ever taken a close look at the mysterious soles of elephants’ feet—which, according to the latest scientific findings, they use to communicate with their tusked friends within a radius of more than seven miles by generating low-frequency tones and vibrations in the earth?

Many of Poliza’s photos are “simply the reward” for waiting a long time. This passionate picture-hunter is out stalking before sunrise at half past five or sitting in his Land Rover with 600 to 1200 mm lenses at the ready in his lap.

The shot of the leopard baby with its mother, for example, required precisely 72 hours of patient observation and waiting in the bush. Only then did the longed-for mother return from the hunt to tend to her offspring and, together with him, do a little modeling for the camera.

Most things, however, occur very suddenly and unexpectedly, says Poliza. All one can ever do is be well-equipped and alert to react to sudden, photographic compositions that arise and that can only be explained by nature’s good mood. “Luck is when preparation meets opportunity,” Poliza is fond of saying, and only lets his digital camera get going the moment an elephant poses so elegantly before him that two antelope can be seen behind it, one within the framework of its legs, the other framed in the curve of its trunk. Or when the tiny oxpecker birds are perched in totally symmetrical fashion inside the right and left nostrils of a buffalo. When the lion looks directly through the bloody rib cage of a buffalo, or the scarlet red carmine bee-eaters sit on a long stalk just above the herd of buffalo.

Sensitive Moments

It usually takes a brief eternity before a giraffe feels safe enough to spread his legs wide and bow his long neck down

to the water. This is because it is the only moment when the giraffe—which due to its imposing height has nearly no natural enemies—is extremely susceptible to attack and unable to defend itself. By the time it can move its spread-eagled legs, the lion has already had plenty opportunity to seize it by the neck. So the giraffe often teeters at the watering hole for hours, looking to the left and to the right, checking for scents until it feels secure enough to lower its head.



The giraffes at the Linyanti Game Reserve in Botswana are familiar with vehicles, allowing Michael Poliza to move within 65 yards of the long-necked creatures. He maneuvered and parked the Land Rover in an inauspicious and calculated fashion so as to get a good view of the frontal geometry of the giraffe’s legs without irritating these shy creatures in the slightest way. Poliza did not even dare leave the vehicle; this would have drastically disturbed the silhouette and caused the giraffe to flee. His solution was to simply open the door, lie flat on the vehicle’s floor and balance the telephoto lens (which weighs more than 30 pounds) until he was able to get a sharply focused shot of the symmetrical alignment of the giraffe’s legs. He proudly proclaims this “a moment of pure luck”—which he has not been able to repeat since 2002.

Funny Coincidences

A rhinoceros on the beach is not a subject you come across every day—never, actually. The fact that Poliza was able to take this extraordinary photo is due to the trust of a rhino that had been raised by the National Park employees in the



Matusadona Range of the Kariba Reservoir in Zimbabwe and later released into the wild. When the rhinoceros noticed Poliza driving in his vehicle toward the beach, it galloped after him, joyful and curious, clearly wanting to make his personal acquaintance. However, considering the rhino’s body weight of nearly two tons, the two feet long horn atop his nose and, above all, his innate, extreme shortsightedness, the situation was not completely free of danger. Poliza cautiously crawled from the Land Rover on hands and knees, nearing the colossus splashing around happily in the water, and from the courageous distance of eight feet eventually pulled out his camera and wide-angle lens. The rhino’s phenomenal trust later proved to be its demise, however. In Asia the rhinoceros horn is still reputed to have a magical aphrodisiacal effect and the Chinese market pays horrendously high prices for it. This animal was one of the many to be killed, or rather poisoned, by poachers. The rhinoceros is thus now an endangered species.

Quick Decisions

Michael Poliza has long been a fan of the desert elephants of Namibia. He calls them “true masters of survival” and describes how they dig holes up to seven feet deep with their hooves in order to drink from underground water sources they locate in the middle of the desert using their “sixth sense.” Poliza has always been especially impressed by the way these creatures, which nourish themselves on branches, leaves and greenery, manage to live in dried-out river beds and occasionally tramp across the endless sand dunes. He had always wanted to photograph one of these elephant caravans through the desert from the air—in other words, while truly out on the open plain.



For this reason, during the Namibia New Year’s Safari 2005–06, Poliza boarded an ultra-light aircraft every morning at six a.m. to seek out the elephants. And on the very morning he was due to return to Cape Town, he spied a herd marching off in the direction of the open plain. A quick decision was required. Should he board the plane that was already waiting on the runway to take him home? Or should he drop everything and devote himself to the elephants that were migrating as if they had been ordered to do so? Naturally Poliza decided to let his safari mates return to

Pioneer of Digital Wildlife Photography

Cape Town without him. So he got back into the ultra-light aircraft and grabbed this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by the horns. The sun was rising at just the right angle through the morning mist, painting the eternal sands with shadows and light, while the elephants in the herd trotted along perfectly, one after another—one of them with its trunk raised to orient the group: “Bingo.”

Each time he makes such a visual conquest, Michael Poliza feels completely fulfilled. That is why he has dedicated himself, body and soul, to this kind of photo-hunting—regardless of the consequences. Of course, he is already planning his next trips and expeditions; these are not increasingly difficult athletic feats done for the sake of achievement, but rather journeys of visual discovery and adventure designed to simply give him, and ultimately us, pleasure. His latest activities can always be tracked at: www.michaelpoliza.com

Uta Gruenberger

In 2000 I started to get emails from a vessel called “STARSHIP” that was cruising the world on a three year environmental awareness expedition saying that it was coming into Southern African waters shortly and that some of the crew would like to visit some of the best wildlife areas in southern Africa. It was an unusual message to receive in those early days of emails in that the message was being sent by a small ship far out at sea. The email pointed me to the ship’s website at www.ms-starship.com. I logged on out of curiosity to try and find out more about these adventures and what they were up to. That’s where our journey together started. These fellows were pursuing their dream and were travelling around the world visiting all the remote and out of the way places, often bringing and donating much needed equipment to the scientists who were working in these remote locations.

On that first safari, I arranged for Michael Poliza and some of his crew to visit the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Instantly he fell under the spell of this wonderful country, its wildlife and people. The connection was made, Michael came to see me in my office a few years later after he finished the project and we started on a journey of discovery together. I was bringing him to some of the planet’s wildest and most intriguing wildlife areas—and he was easing us techno-dinosaurs into the world of digital photography and technology, and into his unique way of photography.

Michael changed our lives. Under his inspiration, we took the plunge. We sold ALL our slide film cameras and went totally digital, long before it became acceptable and fashionable. In those early days, all the safari companies and photographic fundis were not recognizing digital photography’s value and what it could do to change our lives and improve our imagery. As a result of moving into digital photography very early, Wilderness Safaris was able to leapfrog our photography and our business into new levels of excellence not seen before in the safari industry at that time. Now, everyone is into digital and it seems strange to reflect back on those early digital days and wonder what all the reluctance was about.

Michael became part of our lives at Wilderness Safaris as he fell under the captivating spell of Africa. He packed his bags and made Cape Town the base of his excursions into Africa, spending lots of time in Botswana, Namibia, and venturing into Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya a bit later in his time down here.

Michael brought a new perspective into wildlife photography. He managed to photograph many animals in a way that was departing from the general rules of wildlife photography. He is able to portray the Lion king in his full pride and dignity in a close-up without showing his eyes (pages 38/39). All the essence of this majestic character was

caught in this beautiful photograph, yet he broke the rules and did not show the eyes.

He captured the essence of these wonderful areas and amazing wildlife in his very own style. He brought a new, more artistic view into wildlife photography. Many of his images portray an animal in a way that I had never seen before. A different angle, extremely close or very graphical, often waiting for hours and days to get that special shot. And he was never getting tired of trying and trying again, believing that there is always a better shot out there.

Michael has inspired many of our guides, staff and guests to become better photographers. He often shared his knowledge with any one that was genuinely interested, happy to give a few secrets away, rather than being all territorial and competitive.

And he has challenged us as a company to go further and better. When we needed help to guide and educate our guests and staff, he jumped in and helped with gusto. When North Island in the Seychelles needed help to lift the standards, Michael dived in, boots and all, and relocated up there to run the project.

What else can I say about Michael? I think the images in this book show the enormous amount of the passion and dedication Michael has to bring out the best there is on this planet and to show it to everyone he comes into contact with.

Have a look yourselves.

Colin Bell is a genuine pioneer of the African safari industry. He is a true conservationist at heart and had made his belief a fundamental part of Wilderness Safaris’ business strategy. His camps redefined the African safari experience and in years of enormous growth he brought the company to over 50 camps and lodges. But doing so and making a major contribution to protect the fragile wilderness areas and integrating the local communities made his company so unique. He has accepted many of the world’s most recognized environmental awards on behalf of his great team before he decided to move on to new ventures in early 2006.