

# *the* Parachutist



Taking on a commission with limited time to work in is all part of a photographer's life but for **Roderick Field** it means going in blind and discovering what a location has to offer. The story he comes away with is singularly his own. Elizabeth Roberts reports

## Profile: Roderick Field



Roderick Field is a travel photographer and writer as well as a qualified psychotherapy practitioner. His work has appeared in many prestigious publications and a number of his

portraits are held at the National Portrait Gallery. He lives in West London.

Barrel ageing cellar,  
Juan Alcorta winery,  
Logroño, La Rioja, Spain

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Barrel ageing cellar,  
Faustino winery, Oyón,  
La Rioja, Spain

**H**is client list is impressive – the *Sunday Times*, *Food and Travel* magazine, *Condé Nast*, Jonathan Cape, Penguin Books and more – his awards started early in life with the Nikon Young Fashion Photographer of the Year in 1984 and a Guardian/Janneau prize in 1990; and a good number of his portraits are held at the National Portrait Gallery. But meeting Roderick Field is not a predictable experience.

Born in South London in 1965, he describes his education as 'brief but entertaining'. He went on to train as a fine art monochrome printer and, eventually, a photographer. 'I worked for a company called Light Fingers in Belsize Park,' he explains. 'I was paid for 10 hours a week at £3 an hour and anything over that I was allowed to have in materials. It was great – every couple of weeks I got a box of Record Rapid. I loved it.' But the roots of his passion

for photography lie, he tells me, with his late father's Kodachromes from the early sixties – a fascinating documentation of Roderick and his siblings growing up.

I meet Roderick at his flat in West London to talk about a project he did on the Rioja wine region of northern Spain. This area is known not only for its wine but for its avant-garde architecture by some of the world's most famous architects including Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava and Zaha ▶



Juan Alcorta winery, Logroño, La Rioja, Spain

◀ Hadid. Roderick was commissioned by a PR company for the Rioja winemakers to make a photographic story about the wineries. Being aware that he is an excellent portrait photographer, I half expect this project to be about the people of the area. When I look at the pictures I'm surprised to discover only fleeting glimpses of the human – a figure disappearing through a doorway, a couple seen in silhouette walking down a ramp. The answer lies, perhaps, in Roderick's other life as a psychotherapist. 'I'm always looking for symbols that talk about people and what they have done. Sometimes there is a place for

defining a region through the people and sometimes there's a place for defining it through the setting in which the work happens. But the thing I always like to come back to is the surprising. I go into a place and I think, this is the flavour of the place, the backdrop to the activity. Things present themselves to me – like the rusty old key I found in a damp smelly cellar that I didn't really want to be in. It's lovely when that happens. But you can't plan it.'

Despite the fact that Roderick travels extensively for his work – at the time I met him he'd just returned from the Outer

Hebrides, had been to Brazil a couple of weeks before and was heading off somewhere else in the near future – he is not a great one for planning. 'I kind of have a policy of not doing any research about where I'm going,' he tells me. 'So when I get there it really is about first impressions. I like the idea of waking up in a hotel and not knowing which country I'm in, so when I go out I'm really looking – looking for information, looking for clues.'

The intensity of this looking is accentuated by his technique, often using a short depth of field. 'It's the way your eyes see, they don't see everything sharp at once,' he says. 'You don't ▶



The bottle ageing cellar, Marqués de Riscal winery, Elciego, La Rioja Alavesa, Spain

**[INTERVIEW]**

◀ need to make it hard for people when they look at your images, they don't need to struggle. They should always be able to see what the picture is about – it's what you as the photographer have decided the picture is about – and it depends on how well you've conveyed it.'

There is a distinct storytelling element to Roderick's work in which his fascination for people and the way we experience our lives is apparent. On his website he writes: 'A continuing theme of relationship runs through my work. In my intimate portraits I am seeking to bring my relationship with the subject home to the viewer. In my 'found' scenes from travelling, I am attempting to describe something of my inner world.' It's not a great surprise then to discover that he writes articles to accompany his photographs, and is currently working on a novel.

With the Rioja project, the architecture of

the wineries was almost as important as the winemaking, and Roderick's approach was dictated by the architect's use of light. 'When you walk into a building there are certain vantage points that present themselves. You look to see where the light's coming from, but you do it without thinking. I always like to experiment but there's no point in going against the grain if the light's not there.'

Having been used to shooting with 400 to 1600 film, Roderick has found the switch to digital instinctive, using his Nikon D3. 'It lets me shoot at 3400 which is great.' Convenience and speed are important factors when carrying out a commission. Roderick generally takes between four days and a week to complete a job. 'I tend now to shoot about 300 images a day and my hit rate is about one in five, which is quite high. So in four days I'll shoot around 1,200 pictures and I'll edit those down to about 250 for the ▶

**The bottle ageing cellar,  
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**Wine vat, Faustino  
winery, Oyón,  
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**The bottle ageing cellar, Marqués de Riscal winery, Elciego, La Rioja Alavesa, Spain**

◀ client. I used to think that the longer I spent, the deeper I would get, but now I think so much of it is first impressions and you have to admit that you're not going to penetrate a country in four days. Most of your shooting is on the second day – the first day you're getting used to the place, the third day you're filling in and the fourth day is for anything that's left. It's like being a parachutist, you just drop in and then leave.'

When you stand back from Roderick Field's work you start to see how it is constructed – there's the storyteller looking for a narrative; the psychotherapist's belief in healing; the attentiveness of the traveller. His pictures transform the ordinary into something special. 'The camera changes what's in front of it,' he says. 'It can make things look better than they are. That's what I do, make things better than they are.'

## **Roderick Field's kit**

### **For the Rioja project:**

● Nikon D3 with Nikkor 28-70mm f/2.8 lens

### **For travel and food assignments:**

● Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8, 60mm AF-S micro and 50mm f/1.4 lenses

To see more of Roderick Field's work visit

**fieldfield.com**

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