



# Culture chronicles

FAIRFIELD  
PHOTOGRAPHER  
DOCUMENTS A  
CHANGING WORLD

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**L**ots of people hang their important pictures in the living room. Claudia Schechter is no exception. Except, instead of photos of friends and family, Schechter has photos of Vietnamese women swathed in traditional colorful garb.

She also has photos from Myanmar, as well as Peru, Mongolia, Thailand and countless other countries. In fact, the photos aren't just in her living room — they're all over the Fairfield home Schechter shares with her 10-year-old Golden Retriever, Dakota.

Schechter is an international documentary photographer and, as such, travels the world capturing the people and customs of other countries.

Her work has taken her to a yogurt festival in Tibet, and to the shores of the Ganges River in India. It has required her to eat such local delicacies as yak butter in Tibet and guinea pig in Peru. She's met people of all ages and stations in life.

"I document the lifestyles of these countries," Schechter said. "Their festivals, ceremonies, homes and school — before everything is all gone and everything looks homogenous."

Photography has always been Schechter's passion. She earned a degree in medical photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y.

It was an unglamorous start to be sure, snapping photos of patients undergoing plastic surgery, open-heart surgery and other procedures. She worked for the University of Pennsylvania for a while, then moved into the commercial end of the photo business, as a professional representative for Fuji film.

She had a similar post with Polaroid before leaving photography to sell pharmaceuticals. "It was just another avenue that I thought would be of interest in terms of my medical background," Schechter said of the career change.

A sample of photos by Claudia Schechter taken in Vietnam, Myanmar and Tibet.





# Photography always her passion

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Still, Schechter's love of photography remained latent within her. It sprang back to the surface about a decade ago, while she was on a safari in Kenya. Though she was just making the trip for fun, Schechter said she so loved photographing the wildlife that she decided to return to photography as a career.

"I realized that this was my passion and it was time to go back to something I loved," she said.

She decided to travel the world taking pictures, and then selling them to galleries, magazines and other interested parties. Schechter called her business The Listening Lens, because she felt it best illustrated her philosophy toward photography.

"I listen and I smell and I taste when I travel," she said. "It's visual, but other senses are stimulated."

Though she's done some work stateside — mostly public relations photos for groups like the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the Stamford-based AmeriCares — the bulk of her work takes her overseas.

When selecting her travel destinations, Schechter tries to choose places that are "off the beaten path." She's tried to represent a broad spectrum of places and faces in her work. "It's about 'What kind of culture do you want to capture?'" she said.

The point of her excursions is to document the way people in other countries live, so she always tries to experience as much of the local culture as possible.

That means dining on the aforementioned guinea pig and observing local customs. For instance, while attending a festival at a temple in Myanmar, all the women were required to wear long skirts, so she followed suit.

"You have to blend in, and be open to the experience, so you're growing and learning, and you can express that in your photos," Schechter said.

She often spends the initial part of her trips just observing, and not taking any pictures. She said she wants to give people a chance to get used to her presence before she picks up her camera.

A white American is always going to stand out in Vietnam or Mongolia or Tibet, Schechter said, but the key is to respect the host country, and be friendly.

"Certainly, you're an oddity at first," she said. "But you just kind of go around and smile at people."

Though Schechter usually focuses on countries that aren't typical vacation spots for most Americans, her work sometimes takes her to more well-traveled places.

She recently returned from a trip to Italy with students from the Fairfield University School of Nursing. Schechter is on the nursing school's advisory board, and offered to travel with the students, documenting the school's overseas program at the University of Padua.

Photos from the trip were on display at



Jeff Bustraan/Connecticut Post

**Photographer Claudia Schechter stands in front of her work in her Fairfield home.**

the university last week as part of a professional development day. Schechter's work also will be featured in brochures and other materials for the school of nursing.

The school's dean, Jeanne M. Novotny, said she was thrilled Schechter made the trip. "Her work is phenomenal," Novotny said. "We were so privileged to have her travel with our students."

Schechter said she enjoyed the trip, but it wasn't all work. The group had time to hike through Tuscany and take in some of the local customs. Schechter was particularly tickled by the structure of the Italian workday. "From 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. they work," she said. "Then, from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m., they have siesta. And from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. they work again. So it's not a bad system."

Schechter said that despite the diversity of her subjects, nearly all her photos share an underlying theme: "People are basically the same."

They may wear different clothes, observe different religions and eat different foods, but there are many constants from culture to culture. Everyone needs food and shelter. Every culture values family. Everyone is, underneath all the trappings, just trying to survive.

It's getting to that basic level of humanity that Schechter sees as both a challenge and a reward. "If you are willing to spend some time getting ensconced in their culture you have a better chance of getting to know them," she said.

*To learn more about Schechter and The Listening Lens, visit [www.thelisteninglens.com](http://www.thelisteninglens.com).*