

The saintly life of a photography wife

January 15, 2003

I'm a photography wife. It's sort of like being a golf widow, with one fundamental exception. Rather than having the good sense to wave good-bye when my camera-laden husband walks out the door, I've chosen to tag along on his never-ending quest for The Perfect Shot.

Back when we were a one-camera family, we filled our albums with simple, touristy pictures of each other in an array of scenic vacation locales. Over the years we became more interested in capturing the flavor of the places we visited, he with a 35mm and me with my trusty Instamatic. Whether it was California redwoods or windsurfers lined up on a beach, I would snap a few shots and spend the next 20 minutes watching him change positions every three seconds in order to focus on angles or shadows that I simply didn't see. *Guy with a camera* was beginning the metamorphosis into *artist with a vision*.

After moving to Phoenix, his hobby blossomed into a full-blown obsession, a process in which I played a significant role. *I* was the one who encouraged him to enter his first national contest, and *I* selected the photo that netted him a first prize. Buoyed by this public recognition of his talent, our life became one in which film shares space with cheese in a refrigerator drawer, and camera store clerks know us by name. John's burgeoning collection of equipment outgrew our two-seater convertible, enabling him to completely justify the need for an SUV to carry us on our quests for the quintessential shot of a saguaro cactus.

During the hours we spend searching for remnants of ancient civilizations bathed in the perfect juxtaposition of light and shadow, I spend 90 percent of the time admiring John's talent and persistence.

During the remaining 10 percent, I wonder if it's possible to keel over from pueblo, petroglyph, and Indian ruin overload. When it comes to such things, I have the attention span of a flea.

John, on the other hand, has connected with his inner child. Cave dwellings, precarious ledges, and crumbling walls with windows to the sky mesmerize him, and he never - *ever* - gets tired of photographing every teeny nook and cranny.

Since I'm fortunate to have a completely viceless husband, it would be downright unreasonable for me to whine about the pains he takes with his art. So, I've chosen to be a partner in his creative adventures, and I've learned how to preserve my sanity by maximizing my limited supply of spousal-support energy.

When that tank of support is full, during the first few hours of a trip, or right after I'm fed and rested - I'm photo assistant extraordinaire. I follow him up hills and down paths, into ceremonial caves and out again. I carry equipment, hold his hat, wait patiently, smile often, and even occasionally suggest an interesting shot.

When my supply is around the half-full mark, I hang out with him for a few moments before moseying ahead to see what's around the next corner. I estimate how long it will be before we finish a particular trail, and then double back to join him at the next scenic vista that looks exactly like the previous 10. I drink water, readjust my hat, clean my sunglasses, sigh quietly, and think about how virtuous I am.

When the tank is nearing empty and I feel dangerously close to acting like a nap-deprived toddler, I just check out - mentally if not physically. I adopted this technique during one jaunt that took us to our sunset destination a full *two hours and 15 minutes* before the appointed time. With nothing to read but a Coppertone bottle, I urged John to go on his way while I sat down on a creekside bench.

Although I've never actually achieved the state of total tranquility meditators raves about, I gave it my best shot. I closed my eyes, tuned in to the sound of water tumbling over rocks, tried to ignore the long wait before me, and actually zoned out - for a quarter of an hour! Not a major success, but it did enable me to hang on until sunset without pitching a fit.

The next time we stopped at a ruin in which I couldn't even fake an interest, I was prepared with a paperback mystery. I buried myself in my story, while John and his camera captured every inch of another pile of broken rocks that was designated as a national monument. We both returned to the car relaxed and happy, and I knew we were onto something.

There is no end in sight to John's passion, and since there are hundreds of picture-worthy destinations on our travel "to do" list, I've settled in for the long haul. I'm convinced that behind the best photographers stand spouses who recognize their own limits - who know the precise moment when they don't have a single indulgent smile left in response to that "just one more shot, honey" look.

Should John ever be counted among the ranks of people like Ansel Adams, I want to make sure that my own small role gets an acknowledgement. While he hones his craft, I'll be working hard on mine - on raising the art of supportive spousal self-control to a level worthy of my *own* impressive footnote in the annals of photographic history.