

PEAKS OF EUROPE

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S JOURNEY

JOHAN LOLOS

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GENESIS

PEAKS OF EUROPE

a one-year project

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hank you for choosing my book. I had the idea for the Peaks of Europe project in the autumn of 2016, after I had spent the three previous summers exploring and photographing places that were very far away from Belgium, where I live.

When I started taking photos, initially as a backpacker spending two consecutive years traveling around Australia and New Zealand, I really had no idea that Europe had so much to offer in terms of landscape and diversity. As a very inexperienced traveler, I thought I needed to travel to the other side of the planet to see some unique scenery and experience some unforgettable road trip vibes. It took me three years to figure out that my hometown Liège is less than a day's drive away from some of the most beautiful mountains in the world. Yes, the Alps.

MONT-BLANC MASSIF, HAUTE-SAVOIE[**45° 49' 57.6" N | 6° 51' 54.6" E**]

"Western Europe's highest mountain, Mont Blanc, in its pink dress. I had very little hope for any spectacular sunset that day, but once again, nature proved to me that patience always pays off."

As soon as I realized this, I started to list all the places in Europe I would like to visit during the summer months. I had taken some road trips in the past, but they were never longer than three months, which I always considered just the right amount of time. Not too long, not too short, just what I needed before I started to miss home. At the same time, the trip was a fulfilling experience, a getaway. However, three months didn't seem long enough to explore most of the Old Continent, and this time I really wanted to challenge myself and break out of my comfort zone. I ended up putting together an itinerary that included three of the main regions of Europe, which would take me on a journey through 17 countries over a five-month period. I wish that I had included more countries and more regions like the Iberian Peninsula, the Carpathian Mountains and the Eastern Balkans, or even the Caucasus, but this would have required me to be on the road for an additional five months, which I didn't really want.

I seriously started to think through this project in January 2017 once Toyota confirmed that they would be my main sponsor on this road trip and would help me out with the vehicles I needed. Hundreds of e-mails and a dozen meetings later, I had found a sufficient number of partners to help me foot the bill of my Peaks of Europe project, which officially kicked off on May 15, 2017.

This book is the result of this one-year project and I couldn't be prouder to share it with you. Follow me on my journey, during which I weathered the harsh conditions of life up north where I chased the midnight sun for several weeks. Experience the warm summer vibes of the Mediterranean coast in the Western Balkans where I spent seven weeks with my partner, living out of a 4 x 4. And finally, let me take you to one of the most majestic places in Europe, to the Alps and their ever-changing weather conditions.

I tried to interact with foreign cultures as much as possible, either by connecting with local people who shared the road with me for a few days, or by striking up a conversation with complete strangers.

The reason I decided to publish a photo book about this five-month journey is obviously to showcase the diversity of Europe's landscapes. Above all, however, I wanted to document life on the road, with all its good and bad times. Living out of a vehicle for several weeks on end doesn't mean rainbows every day, and I wanted to point out that what people share on social media nowadays may look like the perfect life, but they never show you the downside of the story.

I used my Instagram Stories to post series of twenty photos every day while I was on the road, documenting what happened the previous day. My followers really appreciated the authenticity of what I posted and the very unique

concept of this kind of InstaStory. They inspired me to combine the very best of these 145 daily series in a book, which you're holding right now.

As such, *Peaks of Europe* is essentially a travel diary, a continuation of the daily InstaStories that I published last summer, with photography as the main medium as it features a series of photos with a focus on storytelling as much as on the imagery.

After covering 40,000 km (24,854 mi.), visiting 17 countries, spending 145 days on the road and meeting many, many people, I found it really hard to whittle down my selection to only 200 photos out of the 27,000 that I brought home. So in an effort to show you everything that happened during my amazing five-month adventure, I invite you all to have a look at my 145 daily stories, which you can find on my website: <http://stories.peaksofeurope.eu>

"The one thing I realized during this journey around Europe is that it's not the places and destinations you go to that make your trip successful or memorable. It's the people you get to share it with."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Johan Lohar".

Without a doubt, creating this book has been the hardest thing I've ever done. I found it even more difficult than saying goodbye to my family and friends in 2013, when I told them I would go on a world tour for an undefined period of time. More difficult than writing my master's dissertation.

Many people might think that I have the best job in the world. Don't get me wrong, I love my job and I love the freedom it gives me, that's why I chose it in the first place. But it has many cons as well, like any other job. It's hard for me to plan more than six months in advance. Many times I had to deal with being away from the woman I love. Every time I return from a long trip, it takes me months to review and process all the images that I created. At the end of the day, this means I spend four or five months of the year sitting in my office. That's something people don't necessarily share.

However, this life also inspires so much joy. And one of the greatest joys of all is to see the amazing feedback and response I received from so many of you who followed me during my road trip. Some of you came up with the idea of compiling a selection of the very best images of these five months and publishing a book. That is why I want to dedicate this book to the community that has been following me on my crazy journey as a photographer. Whether you were there since day one when I was backpacking through Australia, or whether you've just jumped on the train, this book is for you. You really have no idea how much your support means to me, and how much it helps me to push my limits to new heights.

I hope you'll be inspired. I hope you'll enjoy what you see. And I hope to hear back from you after I take you with me on this journey.

A pair of large, decorative black double quotes at the end of the quote.

PART I

THE NORTH

days 001 – 042

“ T

he North of Europe. I had been there many times in the past and yet, I found that I couldn't plan a five-month trip without revisiting my favorite region of the Old Continent and two of my favorite countries in the world.

Although this was my third time in Norway and my fourth time in Iceland, visiting both these countries in the summer was quite different. The main reason I included them in my itinerary was because I wanted to finally experience the midnight sun, something I had never witnessed before, something that had been on my bucket list forever. It's something I wish everyone could see at least once in his life, just like the northern lights, two of the most incredible shows Mother Nature has to offer, which require you to travel to extreme latitudes.

South Iceland doesn't have a proper midnight sun as the sun sinks below the horizon for about three hours every night. At the same time, it's still bright enough outside to

"Of all the follies and aberrations that one encounters in humanity, the one that I find the most inconceivable is that man, during his fleeting passage on Earth, lacks the curiosity to discover it in its entirety."

ALAIN GERBAULT

roam around and shoot photos. Norway is a whole different story. Once you are above the Arctic Circle, the sun never sets and never rises. The more northwards you go, the lighter the summer nights are. In Northern Norway, you can enjoy the most beautiful light between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., with the sun being at its lowest point at 1 a.m. That's a full 8 hours of golden light! A photographer's dream, compared to the standard 60 minutes you have on average in other locations (the closer you travel to the equator, the shorter the golden hour lasts). This also meant that to have the best light for my photos, in Iceland and Norway, I needed to switch around my rhythm for a full four weeks, living at night and sleeping during the day.

Of the three legs of my trip, the first one, up north, was the only time that I needed to fly from one place to another, because of the very remote regions I had decided to cover. After Scotland, which was my first destination, I flew back to Belgium, where I spent a couple of days packing for four

weeks in the Arctic. Then I flew to Lofoten in Norway where I picked up a Toyota Hilux. I also had the idea to spend three days halfway between the North Cape (continental Europe's northernmost point) and the North Pole, on Spitsbergen Island in Svalbard, trying to spot some polar bears. Obviously, I would need a plane to get there. Then, instead of losing one whole week on a boat that would take me from Denmark to Iceland, the last destination of this first leg of my journey, I thought it would be easier to just fly straight from Northern Norway to Iceland and pick up another car in Reykjavik. I know, it doesn't really sound like a road trip, but at the end of the day I spent most of my time in the three different cars Toyota provided to me and drove a total of 8,430 km (5,238 mi.) in just six weeks. That's 200 km (125 mi.) a day!

”



THE QUIRAING, SKYE, HIGHLANDS.

SCOTLAND

“ I

If there is one place in Europe that attracted attention from photographers and visitors from all around the world in 2017, it's got to be Scotland and, more particularly, the Isle of Skye. I had always wanted to see this island, so it was obvious that I was going to pay the Scots a visit last spring, as part of my new photography project.

Before Peaks of Europe, the first and only time I travelled to Scotland was in 2005, as a 17-year-old boy scout. I wasn't into photography at the time and I have very few memories of that two-week road trip with my friends. I do remember the country was vast, green and rainy, with lots of beautiful pristine nature, and that we had permission to camp almost anywhere. In other words, this seemed like a perfect place to me. The only thing I remember not having enjoyed back then was what the Scots call midges, those 'wee bastards' that made me cry while camping in the Highlands in the summer. Fortunately, I learnt that the biting kind only show up in June.

As this was the first destination of my five-month-long project, the original plan was to drive from Belgium to the Scottish Highlands. A couple of last-minute issues forced me to reorganize everything when I found out that my car wouldn't be ready in time. Instead of driving all the way, my cousin Jeremy and I flew from Charleroi, Belgium to Edinburgh, where we picked up a mighty Toyota Land Cruiser and drove westwards.

We had eleven days to explore the area around Glen Coe, Skye and the Northwest Highlands. We had no set plan, we were just driving around and chasing the light.

As might be expected in Scotland, it rained a lot, which forced us to cancel a couple of the hikes we had planned. Instead we enjoyed some good times with old and new friends around a bonfire or in a tent. ”



GLENFINNAN VIADUCT, HIGHLANDS.

[$56^{\circ} 52' 35.1''$ N | $5^{\circ} 25' 53.5''$ W]

"For the first two nights of this adventure, we decided to work out of Glen Coe, which was the perfect gateway to the Scottish Highlands. The famous viaduct, which was built in 1901 and is featured in the *Harry Potter* movies for the Hogwarts Express, is just an hour away."

**BRIDGE OF ORCHY, ARGYLL AND BUTE.****[56° 30' 49.8" N | 4° 45' 57.9" W]**

“Some of the photos I take, like the one of the viaduct, are planned in advance and I know exactly what I want to get in the frame. Some others aren’t though, like this shot of a Highland cow, which is perfectly aligned with the mountain in the background. Jeremy and I were driving around near our hotel to photograph the sunset, when we stumbled upon this classic Scottish scene, at the best light of the day.

I carefully tried to edge closer to the cow, and when I saw how relaxed she was, I just waited until she decided to gaze at me behind her long hair to get that shot.”



LOCH LOMOND, ARGYLL AND BUTE.

[**56° 06' 45.2" N | 4° 37' 44.1" W**]

“It was an early start from our hotel. We set our alarm for 3:45 a.m. in order to hit the west shore of Loch Lomond in time for sunrise. I wasn’t really sure of what we would find at the lake but I wanted to give it a try anyway. When the light was bright enough, I randomly pulled the car over somewhere and we started to walk along the shore, looking for interesting frames to photograph. What I remember the most from this morning was the serenity and the calm of this place. I was definitely back in the wilderness, and it felt so good!”



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank every person who followed me on my journey on a daily basis and who pushed me to create this book. Without their feedback and amazing response as I documented my road trip on my social media platforms, I would never have finished—or even started—this book. Thank you for your genuine support and for helping me push my limits to new heights every day. And thank you Éditions Racine – Lannoo, my publisher, for entrusting me with this book project.

Thank you, Delphine, my love, for sticking with me and for following me on my craziest adventures every single time. Thank you for your *joie de vivre*, for your laughs, for your support, and for believing in me. I couldn't do any of this without you by my side.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for being my number one fans. I'm grateful to have received a wonderful education, and one of my biggest joys is to see you being proud of me. See, it wasn't such a terrible idea after all to go on that crazy adventure to Australia back in 2013, where it all started!

I also want to thank all the amazing people that I met during this trip, or who shared the road with me for one day, one week, or longer. The one thing I realized during this journey around Europe is that it's not the places and destinations you go to that make your trip successful or memorable. It's the people you get to share it with. So for that, thank you Jeremy, John, Robert, Stuart, Bertrand, Inge, Marco, Kristian, Roar, Sascha, Kristiane, Tina, Steffen, Even, Belén, Tristan, Hege, Michel, Evgenia, Olivier, Ørjan, Pie, Toine, Joe, Delphine, Nikos, Lisa, Great-Uncle George, Great-Aunt Irini, Andreas, Evangelia, Jack, Lauren, Papou Yanni, Upper Great-Aunt Georgia, Great-Uncle Labi, Eleni, Lower Great-Aunt Georgia, Great-Uncle Dinako, Labis, Ada, Panagiotis, Magdalena, Dimitris, Giorgos, Great-Uncle Mitsos, Great-Uncle Panagioti, Nardi and the Polia family, Dejan, Luca, Flore, Shane, Giulia, Josh, Floryan, David, Fabian, Benedict, Eva, Gerhard and the Kirchmair family, Dominik, Alex B., Marco L., Federico, Alex dT., Alex F., Thomas, Léon, Niklas, Phil, Max, Hannes, Amy, Danilo, Rafael, and all the strangers who accepted to pose for me and my camera.

This book is published by Éditions Racine.
Éditions Racine is part of the Lannoo Publishing Group.

All photographs © JOHAN LOLOS

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Thank you, Toyota Europe, for your amazing support throughout the years and for being my trusted companion on all my travels. Thank you for the Hilux that was my home for three months, and thank you for believing in me and my crazy ideas.

Thank you, Toyota Belgium, Toyota UK, Toyota Iceland, Toyota Norge, and Toyota Nordvik for organizing all the different cars during this project.

Thank you, ARB 4 x 4 Accessories, for setting up the Hilux to be a fully autonomous vehicle for all those months of travel. Thank you Nikon BeLux for your support over the past years.

Thank you, Haglöfs, Icebreaker, AS Adventure, Primus, Eagle Creek, DJI, Transcend Benelux, XTorm, Nemo Equipment, f-stop, Rode Microphones, Pilotfly, Clif Bar, LaboPhotos.fr, Hahnemühle France, LeVif Weekend and Adventech for your precious support on this journey.

And last but not least, a very important thanks to all the local partners and tourism boards who put me up for a few days: Visit Scotland, Northern Norway Tourism, Norwegian, Destination Lofoten, Hattvika Lodge, Visit Vesterålen, Visit Senja, Norwegian Wild, Visit Tromsø, Visit Svalbard, Anek Lines, Visit South Tyrol, Visit Austria, Visit Tirol, Innsbruck Tourismus, Visit Vorarlberg, Visit Alpbachtal, Visit Lech Zürs, Germany Tourism, France Montagnes, Savoie Mt-Blanc Tourisme, Chamonix-Mt-Blanc, Valloire Galibier, Switzerland Tourism, Visit Graubünden, Visit Ticino, Valais Wallis Promotion, Interlaken Tourismus, Jungfrau Region Tourismus, Kandersteg Tourismus, Pays du St-Bernard, Les Coteaux du Soleil, Val d'Hérens Tourisme, Zermatt Tourismus, Blatten-Belpalp Tourismus, Lötschental Tourismus, Engadin St-Moritz Tourismus, and Surselva Tourismus.

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D/2018/6852/8

Legal deposit: April 2018 / ISBN 978-2-39025-044-9