

# WORKING STATESIDE

**Fed up of the credit crunch? Ever dreamt of emigrating for a better life abroad? Well, have you considered chasing your dream to America? *Pro* has, and the results are intriguing**

WORDS Georgie Woof PICTURES Tomo Delaney, Rob Hann, Disco Meisch

**N**O DOUBT EVERY photographer, even if just for a split second, has imagined packing up their portrait studio or ripping up their wedding rates list to follow a life of adventurous and exotic travel photography. But how many of you have thought about permanently moving to another country to pursue your career in professional photography? Probably not as many. If you have thought about it, I wonder what stopped you. The prospect of a long process applying for a visa? Perhaps you think it might cost too much? Or is it the fear of failure? With so much to consider it's no wonder you feel a little daunted by it all. Well worry not; *Pro* thought it was about time we put those fears to rest and found out the truth about getting yourself a permanent place working in one of the busiest cities in the world; New York. So, was it a rough ride or a smooth landing?

Before we give you too much of an idea of how you can pack up and jet off on the next plane available, it's key to identify why you should go, and just what you'll get out of it. So what is the big appeal? We spoke to one photographer who didn't need to think too hard about it. "I went for a one-week vacation, and from the minute I

stepped off the plane I knew I'd love it here. There was just something magical about this place: a real sense of adventure," says fashion and editorial photographer, Disco Meisch.

Originally born in Germany, Meisch had already tried moving and working in a different country some years before, in London, and so was possibly a little less intimidated by another 'big move'. "That's not to say it wasn't at all daunting. I just felt like I had achieved all my goals in the UK, and after my trip to New York I had fallen in love with the city. The way of life is more enthusiastic here," explains Meisch.

However, that's not the only thing that appealed to her. "There is much more work here: you don't just have your small group of regular clients – there is a more constant stream of new projects and businesses needing photographers," says Meisch. But, don't be fooled – she doesn't spend all of her time looking through rose tinted glasses. "Things are pretty tough at the moment: budgets are being cut and money is tight. I don't think day rates have changed for a while."

She continues: "We have definitely felt the credit crunch here too, especially as there are more British clients looking for photographers out here than you'd expect. Having said that, the budgets may have been cut, ◀



ROB HANN

Completing personal work, as well as commissions, is important to living happily and successfully in the US or any foreign country.



↑ The areas of photography you're most likely to succeed with in the US are usually commercial, editorial or advertising. However photojournalists and fine-art photographers can also do very well. Beware if you're a social or wedding snapper though – in a competitive climate work can be somewhat sparse.

but they still amount to more than what you'd get in London."

With the US feeling the pinch too, how many UK companies are looking for photographers in New York?

Another successful editorial photographer who works for the likes of *The Sunday Times Magazine*, and *The Scotsman Magazine*, not to mention *Q* and *Kerrang* from the US, is Rob Hann. And he thinks there certainly is something to be said for keeping in contact with British clients when making the move abroad.

"I knew when I left that it would be foolish to cut the ties I'd made with clients in the UK; if I had I would have thrown away a large proportion of my current work," explains Hann. "There is a huge benefit to being a UK company's New York contact. They know you, they know your work, and they know they can trust you with it.

Plus, there's the added element of the British appeal: it's more familiar for them when they're pumping a fair amount of money into a job abroad, and it's cheaper than including airfare to the US in their project's budget."

There is clearly great appeal for UK clients to take on Brits abroad, but what about US companies? Do they see the appeal in our UK talent?

"It is very competitive out here," says Hann. "But the volume of work in the US accounts for that. For example, if you're into fashion photography and at first you don't have much luck pitching yourself to the more up-market designers, you can easily tide yourself over by doing catalogue work; there's tonnes of that. Not to mention all the little boutiques that need their collections photographed."

With all that work around it comes as a surprise to hear that wasn't Hann's

only reason to make the move. "It was actually the thought of getting to complete some of my personal work that was the real draw for me. I was interested in doing a project called 'road trips' (a typically American activity), and I couldn't do that in the UK as the series is meant to be continuous throughout the country."

Some might consider that a drastic move for some personal work, but having lived in New York when he was younger Hann had more of an idea of what to expect.

So what can you expect? Well it's safe to say that if you're a fashion, editorial or advertising photographer then this is the place for you. New York is such a cosmopolitan city with a constant buzz and a large amount of money being pumped in and around it. And with retail at the heart of the city it is fair to say you'll do better here as

## CASE STUDY Amanda Gillespie – Extraordinary Visa Services



Considering the hurdles you need to overcome when applying for a visa, it's always comforting to know that there are people out there willing to help you. What's even more reassuring is knowing that Amanda Gillespie and her team of 11 are there to assist you if you decide to apply for a more specialist type of visa. This visa is an O-1, and is primarily for 'aliens with a difference'.

Anyone with a talent in science, sports or the arts can qualify for an O-1 if they prove they have had national and professional recognition in their home country first, and are hoping to come to the US to continue on that career path.

"I had a very humble career path myself," says Gillespie. "I achieved an MFA in creative writing, and soon after found myself working for an immigration attorney. This is where I learnt about O-1 visas.

"I decided that there was a niche in the market to help those seeking work in the US, so I set up my company, Extraordinary Visa Services. At first it was just me, and one lawyer I'd get advice from. Now the team has grown, and with it has my list of clients. I deal with musicians, models, designers – all sorts! But a large part of my work is helping photographers, all variations of them too.

"I only take on cases where I know I'll be able to help the person involved. I can tell when I meet someone if they'll have what it takes, work-wise and personality-wise."

If you need advice on whether you'll succeed here Gillespie really does know what she's talking about. As well as providing you with a set list of things you require to achieve an O-1 visa, Gillespie and her team will also help you complete them. "One of the major things you need to apply for an O-1 is 12 letters of recommendation. These have to be from professionals you have worked with, who can vouch for you. Obviously you'll have to find the 12 individuals that are willing to help you yourself, but once you have them, we can write up the letters for you and send them to your chosen 12 to sign and approve.

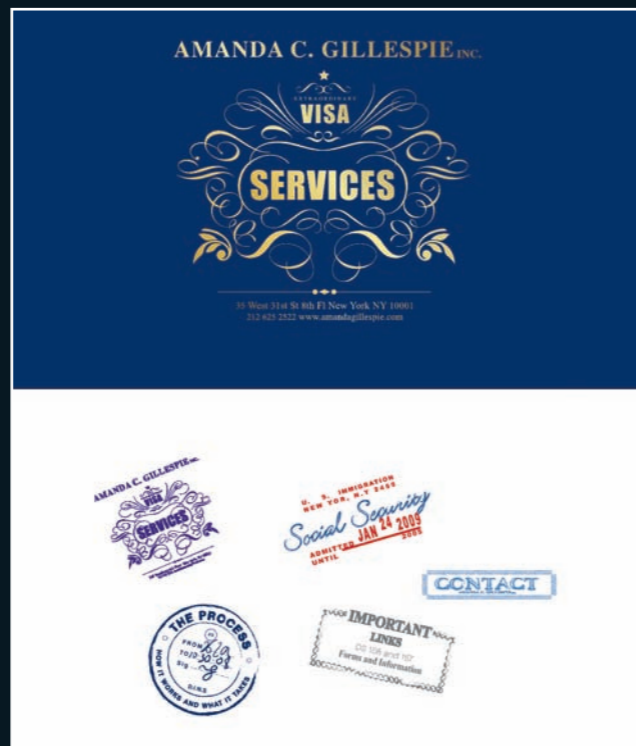
"This isn't to cheat the system. Not at all. But if you want letters that will have the correct information to get you a visa then you need to appreciate that it will sometimes take some very important people a lot of time – possibly time that they don't have. So that's where we step in. Anything we do write that they aren't sure about we take out – simple," assures Gillespie.

As well as your 12 letters, you'll also need as many samples of your work and press coverage as possible. "That is when you'll start

to appreciate you're mum keeping all those newspaper cuttings you were mentioned in ten years ago," she laughs. "Keep all your tear sheets too. They'll come in really handy when you have to show all the work you've done in the past, and in this case, the more the better."

When asked what to do about making the most of your time once you have your visa, Gillespie advises: "Networking is essential. In the first three months make as many contacts as possible. You might find an agent that way, but they're not vital. It's more about making contacts in the practical business side of the industry. And on a personal note, the British accent can get you a long way!"

● *Amanda Gillespie will be available for UK appointments from February. For additional information on her services or to attend her London-based Extraordinary Alien parties visit her website at [www.amandagillespie.com](http://www.amandagillespie.com)*



commercial or editorial snapper, than say a wedding or social photographer. However, from what we hear, photojournalists and fine-art photographers can also find their place and make a decent living from this commercial climate too.

So now you know who is more likely to thrive in New York, and what the benefits of this location are. But how do you go about getting the work and putting down roots? Originally a producer, advertising photographer

Tomo Delaney, who has worked for the likes of Tom Ford and Apple, made the switch much more steadily: "I worked here for two years before I even considered living here. It gave me the chance to see what New York life is like properly, but after a while, I was getting sent over on commissions so often that it got frustrating. That's when I decided to look into moving out here." He continues: "Of course there are plenty of extremely successful photographers that manage to work in

the US without deciding to live over here, like Nick Knight. But I was quite keen on making the move: for one thing, the sun shines here a lot more!"

In terms of logistics, how difficult can you expect it to be? "It's as difficult or as easy as you want it to be, you just have to be prepared to put the time, effort and money into it. Getting a visa is no small feat."

So what should you do? "Well my first bit of advice to any professional photographer hoping to move and

TOMO DELANEY

## “You’re constantly building up a reputation”

work in the US would be to see if you qualify for an O-1 – they’re like the Holy Grail of visas,” clarifies Delaney.

An O-1 is a type of employment visa that applies to aliens who have an extraordinary ability in either sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics. And if you thought a visa was hard to get hold of you’ll soon realise that these are like gold dust. So it may be encouraging to hear that all three of the photographers we spoke to have achieved O-1 visas, and a couple even went on to attain full residency. But the best bit of news is that there are people out there that can help you achieve a specialist visa, like Amanda Gillespie’s Extraordinary Visa Services.

If you were to ask our three photographers what other advice they have they would all say working hard is the key. Don’t forget that you’re constantly building up a reputation in the UK, and you’ll need contacts to

obtain your working visa, so don’t let the ball drop just because you’re planning a big new adventure.

“It’s vital to remember it is an adventure,” claims Hann. “Don’t get me wrong, you can really succeed here, but there are a lot that don’t put the work in and end up going back home.”

So if you have learnt anything from the experiences of the photographers included in this feature hopefully it’s that if you want a new adventure and you’re eager to take the plunge and make the move, it can be done. Just be prepared to put in a lot of hard work and effort to prove yourself.”

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