

RANGE FINDER MARCH 07, ARTICLE

Gordon Nash developed his love of beaches and the ocean in his hometown of Galveston, a resort island off the coast of Texas. His grandmother and uncle were amateur photographers, and at Trinity University, Gordon took portrait and commercial classes. But his main interest was radio and television, where he hoped to someday direct. On a trip to Europe at age 19, Gordon bought himself a Nikon SLR to document the sights.

"I've always been an entrepreneur at heart," he says, "and my first business was a portrait studio at home. I put handwritten notices on bulletin boards, bought small newspaper ads and mainly solicited models who needed portfolios." The business was part of Gordon's hands-on self-training. "I experimented, made mistakes, and after achieving some success and getting engaged when I was 22, I realized my income would be limited. So I sold my equipment and moved to my fiancé's home country of Japan, where I took my portfolio to high-end studios. But opportunities were limited because I didn't speak Japanese."

So, Gordon accepted a job handling import/ export operations for a large seafood company where English was an asset. Meanwhile, he studied Japanese. As he became fluent, he sent out résumés and landed a job at a large ad agency producing TV commercials. He also developed his talent for directing, a skill that serves him well today as a successful wedding photographer. Traveling widely with a TV crew for a few years eventually brought Gordon to Maui, Hawaii, where he moved in 1997.

"I evaluated the photography market," he explains, "and settled on weddings as the field of opportunity in which to build a business. I again enjoyed the nearby ocean and had my own studio. At that time, the Hawaiian Islands were a very popular wedding destination for the Japanese, and my connections brought in many clients." When the Japanese economy went downhill and that market shriveled after 9/11, Gordon refocused on his current clientele, mainland U.S., Canadian, Australian and Western European couples. Today, his main company, A Paradise Dream Wedding, is one of Hawaii's largest and most successful wedding photography and coordination businesses. He also developed a second, lower-end wedding company called Aekai Beach, staffed by younger photographers he mentors. Weddings comprise 99% of both businesses.

"Nearly all our work is done outdoors," Gordon tells me, "with occasional flash fill. I have been shooting digital since 1993, but my company didn't switch entirely to digital until November 2005. I was quite happy with Fuji film, but digital encourages more creativity, since my photographers can shoot more without extra costs. However, the overall bottom-line costs of film and digital are about the same, because more people are needed for computer enhancement work. My staff also retouches, color corrects and prints our images. We use the Nikon D2X and studio equipment including Mac computers and Epson printers."

Currently, Gordon has six photographers on staff for both his companies. About Aekai Beach he says, "I like developing local talent and training photo assistants in the field. I can teach them the techniques I know work, including the art of directing couples.

Maui wedding shoots are generally shorter than on the mainland, averaging about two hours. A big wedding shoot would be a 10-hour day, and occasionally wedding clients ask for multiple sessions over several days. Couples tell us they saw our website and our photographs helped them decide to come here. We attract people to Maui who might have gone elsewhere."

Gordon continues, "Wedding ceremonies are always photojournalistic, because you are usually capturing spontaneous moments rather than directing the couple. The key to a successful photojournalism style is a reliable sense of intuition. You have to be ready for what's going to happen next, or you'll miss the shot. Sensing what action and expressions may be next is not enough to get the shot; it requires the ability to combine this innate awareness with speed. It's like a hunter aiming at a spot before the prey arrives there. For instance, you need to be aware of when the bride is going to cry to catch the tears on her cheeks, and the groom whispering in her ear, and to be in position for her fleeting smile when it happens."

Gordon says that after the ceremony, the situation changes to what he calls fine art portraiture with a twist. "You must set up the situations for the bride and groom, he says, "helping them to feel comfortable and be spontaneous. These moments require some control because people need direction. They come here to be photographed in beautiful surroundings. They love the ocean and greenery settings in what I call a tropical paradise. I aim in some shoots for a dream-like hyper-reality quality.

"I place the newlyweds in a movie scene of sorts. They may be near palm trees with sea and sky background or walking on the beach. My stage is Maui, and I help couples create authentic moments of spontaneous interaction— moments of beauty and romance. I try to avoid a posed look, even though poses are orchestrated. Brides and grooms are focused on one another, creating more emotional content in the photographs. I direct them like actors, but they're in love and don't have to act."

Destination weddings tend to be smaller than the hometown variety, Gordon explains, so there are fewer group shots and more time to concentrate on couples he is usually meeting for the first time on location. There is rarely time to get together earlier; most previous arrangements have been made by phone and email. He chooses the photo situations, and each shot is developed with the couple during the shoot, so even "stock" shots look like spontaneous moments.

Gordon addresses brides and grooms with a low-key sense of humor. He says, "I don't ask them to do things that would make them uncomfortable. I try to coax out their playful spirits enough to frolic on the beach for me. I'm gentle but persistent. If we shoot at a second location five or ten minutes away, I don't charge a separate location fee. Our packages are based on how long a wedding takes to shoot, so travel fees are sometimes in the package price.

"Until recently, we haven't tried to make money selling prints. A package covers the photographer's time, a set number of prints of our choice and photo DVDs of all the shots. We grant the right to make additional prints with no further payment. We're now transitioning into using an online proof and print vendor though, which will take us out of the print business."

At each shoot, Gordon has an assistant who "pampers" the bride, helps with lighting and is a second shooter. Assistants are also responsible for putting digital files on the computer, making backups, making photo selections, color correcting and designing albums. Staff photographers shoot weddings every day of the week, and brides usually book two months to a year ahead. Gordon shoots only during the work week near home, unless packages are four hours or longer. He covers weddings on all the islands, but his company only coordinates weddings on Maui.

"Maui is the best island in the world according to travel writers," he says, adding, "Oahu comes next. There are about 40 to 50 busy photographers in the Maui wedding market, with maybe 60 more on the edge of poverty because Maui is saturated, and even talented shooters may have a hard time making ends meet."

The company's website is furnished by LiveBooks and updated by Gordon's personnel. "It's a simple system to replenish," he informed me, "and that saves us money." His companies are heavily promoted on the Internet and in wedding magazines. The emphasis is on portfolios where customers can better see the quality of the work. He says most brides are looking for excellent tropical wedding photography first, and then top-notch wedding coordination.

Gordon and his wife, Keiko, work together closely. "She's my business partner," he states, "and has helped generate our success. She selects pictures for the website, and her sense of what's beautiful guides her. She also does color corrections, and is very discerning about what will appeal to our market."

It's refreshing to realize that even with two companies to run, Gordon still enjoys a passion for his work, which is apparent when you see him with brides and grooms. "They can feel my enthusiasm," he declares, "and it makes them try harder to help make good pictures. My photographers also cultivate an attitude of service to create beautiful images that newlyweds want to share with family and friends. No matter how small the package, we want to create gallery shots at every wedding. It's almost like treating every wedding as our last, trying to outdo ourselves."

Visit www.gordonnash.com.

Lou Jacobs Jr. is the author of 30 how-to photography books, the latest of which is *How to Start and Operate a Digital Portrait Photography Studio* (Amherst Media). He has taught at UCLA and Brooks, is a former president of ASMP national, and has also written and illustrated numerous books for children. He enjoys shooting stock during his travels in the U.S. and abroad.