

# LIGHT FALLS LIKE BITS

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF TREY RATCLIFF



# FOREWORD

By Maura Reilly



Trey Ratcliff

Works at [StuckInCustoms.com](http://StuckInCustoms.com)  
Attended Southern Methodist University  
Currently in Marina del Rey, CA, USA

8,486,161 followers | 101,411,603,261 views

*I'm a warm-hearted, old-school gentleman explorer with really cool toys. INTJ. Browncoat.*

—Trey Ratcliff

Trey Ratcliff is the world's most famous travel photographer—and with good reason. Despite having been born blind in one eye, and having never taken a photography course, he has mastered the medium of High Dynamic Range (HDR) photography, produced some of the most stunningly beautiful photographs available today, maintained since 2005, the #1 travel photography blog on the Internet, Stuck in Customs, and created a social media following unprecedented for a non-Hollywood superstar. As of March 2015, Trey sits at the #7 slot on Google+, with 8.5 million followers, with stars like Lady Gaga, Madonna, Snoop Dogg, and Britney Spears beating him, just barely. To put this figure into perspective, it helps knowing that he has more followers than Alicia Keys, Tyra Banks, 50 Cent, and even the Dalai Lama. His status on other social media sites—Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr—is equally impressive. His Stuck in Customs blog alone gets a quarter of a million hits per month, and according to Google his images have over 100 billion views. On Facebook, he has over half a million followers, and on Pinterest, another 4.7 million. And while his sixty thousand followers on

Twitter might seem miniscule in contrast to these figures, it is awesome when compared with art world giants like Jeff Koons and Gerhard Richter, who come in at twenty-three thousand and twenty-four thousand, respectively.

Trey Ratcliff is a giant on social media. Yet, meeting him in person, as I did in August 2014 in his now-hometown of Queenstown NZ, one is immediately struck by his humility, charm, and friendly nature. How is it that a quiet, unassuming man from Texas could have created such a media empire in and around his HDR photography? I was beyond intrigued, and eager to know more.

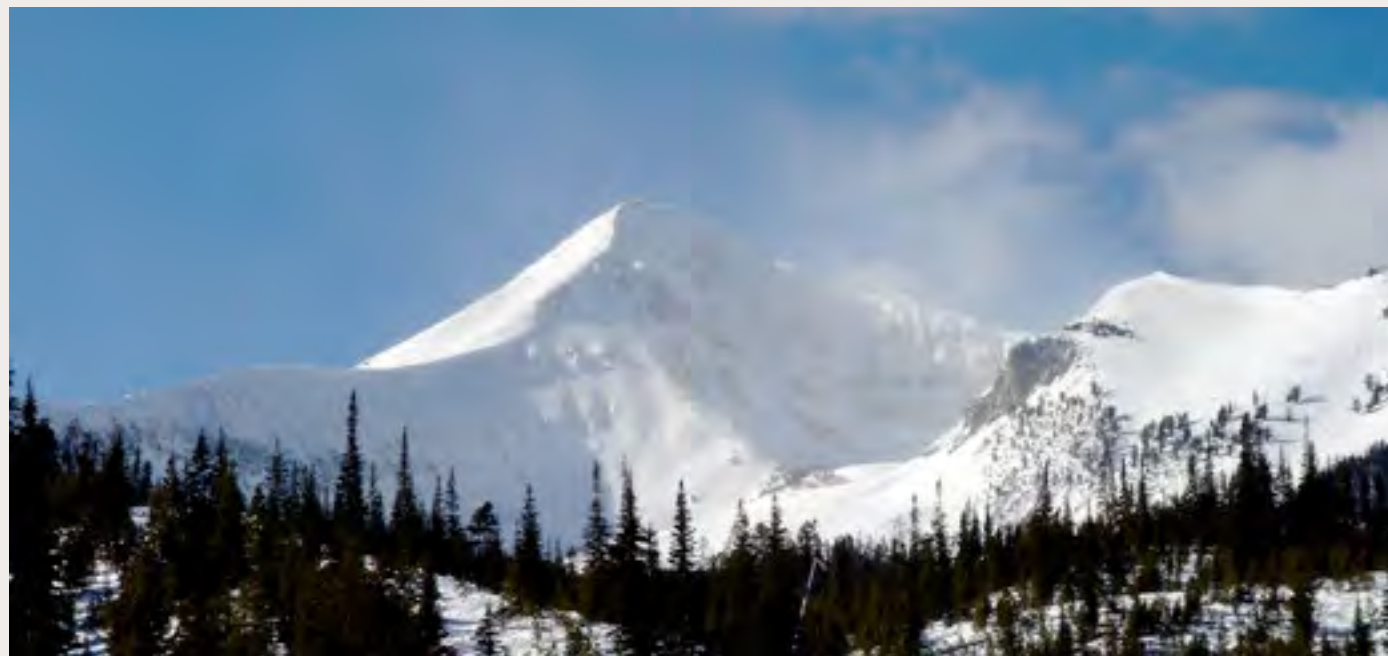
Trey was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1971, the eldest of two children. His parents both worked to provide for Trey and his sister, Bianca—his mom as a speech pathologist, and dad as a racecar driver for Porsche and a real estate businessman. A self-proclaimed geek, as a kid Trey was addicted to video games and consoles like Atari, Colecovision, Commodore 64, Timex Sinclair, and Pacman (in fact, he claims to have memorized the pattern and sequence of Pacman to the point where he played for 5 hours before his mom demanded he leave the pizza joint!) On weekends, he would play computer games endlessly with his friends. He tried soccer, but was kicked off the team. Trey always received good grades, even at his strict all-boys Jesuit college prep school.

He attended college at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, where he majored in Computer Science with a minor in Math, excelling in both. After graduating in 1995, he pursued a career as a computer programmer, working first for Anderson Consulting, and then entrepreneurially as a consultant. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he started a few business enterprises of his own, all tech-related, settling finally on a game company called John Galt Games, which developed several cool games, the most memorable of which is Web Wars, a game about conquering and controlling websites.

It was while working on his startup game company that Trey began shooting photographs. Unlike many other stories about famous photographers who

began shooting as teenagers, or in their twenties, Trey purchased his first camera when he turned thirty-five. He had never studied photography—its history or practice—but felt compelled at the time to ‘take photos of things’. His first photographs were of sunsets, city- and sea-scapes captured while on vacation (Figs. 1 & 2). He was disappointed with the resulting images, and confused as to why the photos themselves hadn’t captured the beauty he’d encountered first-hand. What had he done wrong? Or, he wondered, what could he do differently next time? To answer his own question, Trey began researching online, and came across the perfect solution: High Dynamic Range (HDR) photography, which combined his knowledge of computers and algorithms with his new love for photography. Seeing his photos as ‘balls of data that he could manipulate’ freed him to explore this innovative technique, developed by scientists at MIT and Stanford, which allows for a more dynamic range of luminosity than standard digital imaging by way of compositing multiple exposures of the same image. In other words, by taking several shots of the same subject at varying light levels, and combining them digitally into a single image, the result is a photograph far closer to what was experienced in reality, on-site. For Trey, the discovery was life-altering, and he has never looked back. Almost immediately, he began sharing his newly manipulated HDR photographs and his own technique for producing them, via his blog, Stuck in Customs. From day one, he promised one free hi-res, downloadable photograph per day—a promise he has dutifully kept till this day.

Within a year, his blog had a few thousand followers—but not all of them allies. Many ‘old-school’ photographers, traditionally trained, were quite skeptical, suspicious as they are of digital photography, in general, and its possibilities for the manipulation of content in particular. Moreover, these same photographers took issue with Trey’s sharing of information and techniques on the web, versus the careful dissemination of information via accredited



*Two of Trey's early photographs*

photography schools. His free hi-res images also belie the whole concept of the unique work-of-art (aka photo series as limited editions) so precious to old-school photographers. On the contrary, Trey has always viewed his imagery as beauty to be shared. He is the true ‘people’s photographer’.

He has been very keen from the start to assist his followers in the creation of HDR images. Trey offers online and in-person tutorials, and, since the late 2000s, has written three HDR-process books and developed several photography apps, all available on iTunes, which help photography aficionados with everything from the layering of light levels (100 Cameras in 1) to real-time “Live View” filters and effects (The Light Camera) to a travel app for explorers that showcases the best places in the world to photograph, visit, and experience (Stuck on Earth). Trey also hosts a YouTube channel—where one can view interviews, tutorials, and travel videos (at locations such as Burning Man)—and has developed other related websites like Flatbooks and HDR Spotting—the latter of which offers an ever-growing gallery of HDR images by photographers from across the world.

In 2011, Trey and his wife Tina made the decision to move their family of five from Austin, Texas, to Queenstown, New Zealand. They had visited the region before and had been struck not only by the amazing energy in the mountains, but also by the zen mentality of the people encountered, as well as the ‘amazing organic food’. They were also looking for a safe place to raise their young children, somewhere far from the political chaos of the western hemisphere.

Most recently, in 2013, Trey started Arcanum, a series of online and sometimes real-time master-apprentice HDR workshops. The aim, according to Trey, is to encourage people to meditate through photography. In other words, since the medium is one that can collapse past-present-and-future in a single glance, it’s a ‘sneaky way’ to encourage people to meditate. The more people

photograph, the more they meditate, the better it is for the world—or so Trey argues via Arcanum. In sum, photography can change the world for the better.

When prodded, Trey admits reluctantly that he is ‘woefully ignorant’ of other photographers. He prefers to look to painters instead, especially the Impressionists, as a sources of inspiration. It is a statement that reminds those of us knowledgeable about the history of photography of the ideological split that occurred in the late 19th century (which is to say simultaneous with the birth of Impressionism and the first Kodak camera) between those interested in the photographic medium as a trace of the real and, on the other hand, those interested in its possibility as a fine art medium. At the time, those interested in the latter (such as Gustave Le Grey and Oscar Reijlander) were exploring techniques as varied as composite prints (aka montages) and albumen processing (for a more painterly effect when printing), while those interested in ‘straight’ photography (like Peter Henry Emerson and, later, Edward Steichen) refused any sign of manipulation, idealizing the indexical nature of the photographic medium itself. In his mastery of the HDR photographic technique, Trey shows himself to be a direct descendant of the romantic photographers of the late 19th century and, as such, less of a futurist and more of a “warm-hearted, old-school gentleman explorer with really cool toys.”