

A shutter bugged by travel clichés

A dislike of convention inspired an artist's odyssey, writes **Joyce Hor-Chung Lau**

Sometimes, the best inspiration for creative work comes from seeing what you don't want to duplicate. French journalist and photographer Marc Lathuilliere uses the example of his grandparents' old travel photos.

"After their deaths, we found a shoebox packed with old travel photos," he says. "My grandfather was an adventurous traveller. My grandmother was a stiffer person, but she followed along like the good wife. There were all these photos of her in front of the Buddhas in Afghanistan that were blown up during the war, the Great Wall of China, the statue of Jesus in Rio de Janeiro. No matter how amazing the background, there was grandma in the exact same pose, the same smile, the same clothes most of the time."

The 34-year-old says that his goal is to create a kind of travel photography that is different, one that will "both play with and break the cliché of travel photos".

The first part of his project is Transkoreana, a series of about 30 colour photos he took during a 1,700km scooter trip from Seoul to Pusan. Everywhere he went, he took along a small toy motorcycle that he would hand to his subjects before taking quick snapshots of them. The toy allowed him to relate to the less-than-communicative rural Koreans, and the result is a quirky travelogue that doesn't take itself too seriously.

Lathuilliere is intimately acquainted with clichés. First, he worked as a travel writer, reporting for French magazine and newspaper editors with set preconceptions about the rest of the world, especially the East.

"In Europe, we have this Asian dream," he says. "All magazine editors want you to describe Vietnam as 'colonial', which means 'sophisticated and with beautiful old architecture'. If a travel photographer comes back from Thailand without the smiling girls in front of temples, the editors are unhappy. These clichés might be beautiful, but they are ultimately not satisfying to the writer, the photographer or the viewer."

Lathuilliere came across another type of cliché when he spent a year doing French-language radio spots for a Korean government-sponsored station to promote Korea to the outside world. "It was basically cultural propaganda. I was being force-fed these clichés about kimchee, totem poles, girls dancing in headdresses, the football stadium – the same few images they always put on tourist brochures.

"But I was seeing a different Korean reality. I was living in a housing project in the suburbs and commuting to work. I wanted to capture another Korea."

Finally, Lathuilliere was fed up – perhaps it was the article he had to edit that claimed kimchee could prevent Sars – and set off on his scooter, with his toy and a Nikon. "I wanted a game to play with people," he says. "Koreans don't speak French and most Koreans don't speak much English or are very shy about it. In one week, there was only one person who was willing to speak to me in English.

"Some older men, especially, would see me and my toy and immediately shake their heads to indicate 'no', assuming I spoke no



Marc Lathuilliere's desire to buck conformity led him to use an unusual prop in all his travel shots. Main photo: Antony Dickson

Korean. Two even threw the toy down on the ground." Lathuilliere obviously found other, more willing subjects. In Transkoreana, the motorcycle is photographed being held by a laughing seaweed picker, being sniffed by a dog, and sitting in the cupped hand of a nun. At one point, Lathuilliere even threw the toy up to a repairman sitting on power lines.

Transkoreana is less an art photography project than a journalistic one – even though Lathuilliere jokes that no French magazine editor would buy the photos. Along the way, he took notes of each person's name and job, conducted interviews with them and even recorded

sound bites. Lathuilliere chose the name Transkoreana because he felt he was transformed by his experiences in Korea.

"I used to take those clichéd travel photos myself," he says. "But I realised the problem is that clichés prevent communication because they do away with the individual. It means everyone is part of a collective. All Koreans are like this, or all French people wear high fashion. In this project, I wanted to turn each of these people into individuals."

Transkoreana, The Economist Gallery, The Fringe Club, 2 Lower Albert Rd, Central. May 5-15. The exhibition is part of Le French May