Around the World in 360°

Tito Dupret has a mission: To photograph great monuments in the round, preserving them virtually. Pico Iyer reports on how it's developing.
sometimes I wander amid white-globed lanterns in the narrow lanes of Gion, the old geisha quarter of Kyoto, and feel I could be in the twelfth century. Dusk falls; the shrines light up, and maiko or apprentice geisha slip out of a door and into the dark. From the windows of teahouses come the sounds of koto music. Then I abruptly pulled out of the dream by the blast of pachinko parlors and the neon flash of bars on the other side of Shijo Street. The hills to the northeastern of Japan’s ancient capital are obscured now by high-rises, and tens of thousands of old wooden houses have been razed, replaced with concrete in the last few years. Were it not for preservationists, the city might resemble an Old Kyoto theme park.

It was with these losses in mind that UNESCO designated seventeen monuments around Kyoto World Heritage Sites in 1994, the year of the city’s twelve-hundredth birthday. The rock garden at Ryoanji, the golden temple of Kinkakuji, the hillside Kiyomizu temple above Gion, now all have a measure of protection from the pressures of forward motion. Yet everywhere our global cultural legacy can feel like an heirloom in the hands of a child racing across a slippery floor . . . and centuries disappear in an instant. The beauty of our age is that we can go

How It Works
To re-create the experience of visiting a location, photographer Tim Dupret follows a process that, though not complicated, is certainly painstaking. With his camera resting on a monopod, he captures the visuals that excite him. Once he’s rounded out his take with shots from above, below, and all around, Dupret connects the frames into a single, continuous, enveloping image, seemingly recorded all at one time.

To view Dupret’s work, logon to www.world-heritage-tour.org.
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TITO DUPRET, A THIRTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD BELGIAN who has been traveling since his teens, remembers going to the magnificent rock-cut churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia, to make a documentary video, and wondering how such majesty could withstand the chaos and poverty around it. When he heard about the Taliban’s 2001 bombing of the great Buddha at Bamyan, Afghanistan, he decided that he “was unable to continue my wise and comfortable little life in Belgium anymore.” Realizing that it was up to him—to all of us—to do what he could to preserve the great monuments of the world before time, acts of God, or human caprice could destroy them, he took to the road on a project that could occupy the rest of his life: Creating interactive panoramic images of all the World Heritage Sites designated by UNESCO.

When Dupret began, three years ago, technology allowed online viewers to access cylindrical panoramas, which they could juggle left and right so as to get a living sense of, say, the Piazza San Marco from Manhattan’s St. Mark’s Place. But technology has advanced to such a point that he now puts together spherical panoramas which allow the viewer to feel as if he or she is standing in that temple or in Hoa An, Vietnam, turning to see it in the round, from every angle, and in absolute silence. His images—viewable on his Web site (www.world-heritage-tour.org)—are, he says, “a brick on the wall of global information, to serve students, researchers, and people unable to travel on their own for whatever reason.”

The way Dupret works is simple: He carries a backpack containing a laptop, a digital camera, and a monopod and visits the sites dressed casually, like a tourist. He spends up to a week at each (even that is not enough, he says), taking twenty-eight pictures all around, plus one up and one down, and then spends a day or two stitching them into a panorama that circles back on itself and scopes up and down. The number of World Heritage Sites increases constantly, even as Dupret covers monuments: At press time there were 754, up from 644 when he began. But being like Zeno’s arrow—never fully arriving at its target—is part of the plan’s beauty: The more sites are marked off, the better for preservation all around. “I am fully aware that my task is impossible,” he says, “but that’s not a reason not to do it.”

UNESCO makes every effort to protect these places, but the funding for World Heritage Sites totals only four million dollars annually—for the Statue of Liberty, Quebec’s Old Town, and all the other locales deemed worthy. Once a site makes the World Heritage list, it becomes—so the theory goes—part of the birchright, and the responsibility, of us all, which means that if an earthquake damages, say, the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, India, the international community can (and does) come to the rescue, with funds and expert guidance.

But none of this fully protects any monument from nature, history, or politics. Angkor, for example, is on a separate World Heritage in Danger list; even if it withstands a recent plague of tourists, it could still fall victim to convulsive local politics or to regional instability—one reason visitors are descending on it so eagerly. And Kyoto, spared the bombs of World War II, may yet succumb to runaway development. “I hope to encourage people to travel on their own,” says Dupret, “because nothing can replace one’s own experience.” For those who can’t, he gives us the world’s great monuments, to enjoy in peace, to leave in peace, and to explore, one hopes, for eternity.