# Documenting the Earth From Kites

If you love kites and are skilled at photography, how do
you put the two together to make a vocation? Nicolas Chorier, 37, of Montpellier, France, faced this question a few years ago. His answer was: aerial kite photography.

Chorier discovered there was a small but steady market for documentary photographs. Planners, architects, builders, beauracrats, tourist officials, even homeowners wanted shots of their sites or structures from the air. Besides being useful, aerial photographs from low altitude are often surprising and pleasing in the unexpected view they yield. They give a jog to conventional ways of looking.


Nicolas Chorier

Kites, Chorier discovered, had it all over noisy, expensive helicopters, which are in fact barred from low level flying by some French cities. Kites on the other hand are inexpensive, portable, easy to fly and take down. Above all, they are nonintrusive. They can also get really close up. And they can sit in the sky for hours. They have the advantage too over fussy, expensive balloons–another potential rival–because they can readily be flown in winds that will drive the balloon down from the sky.

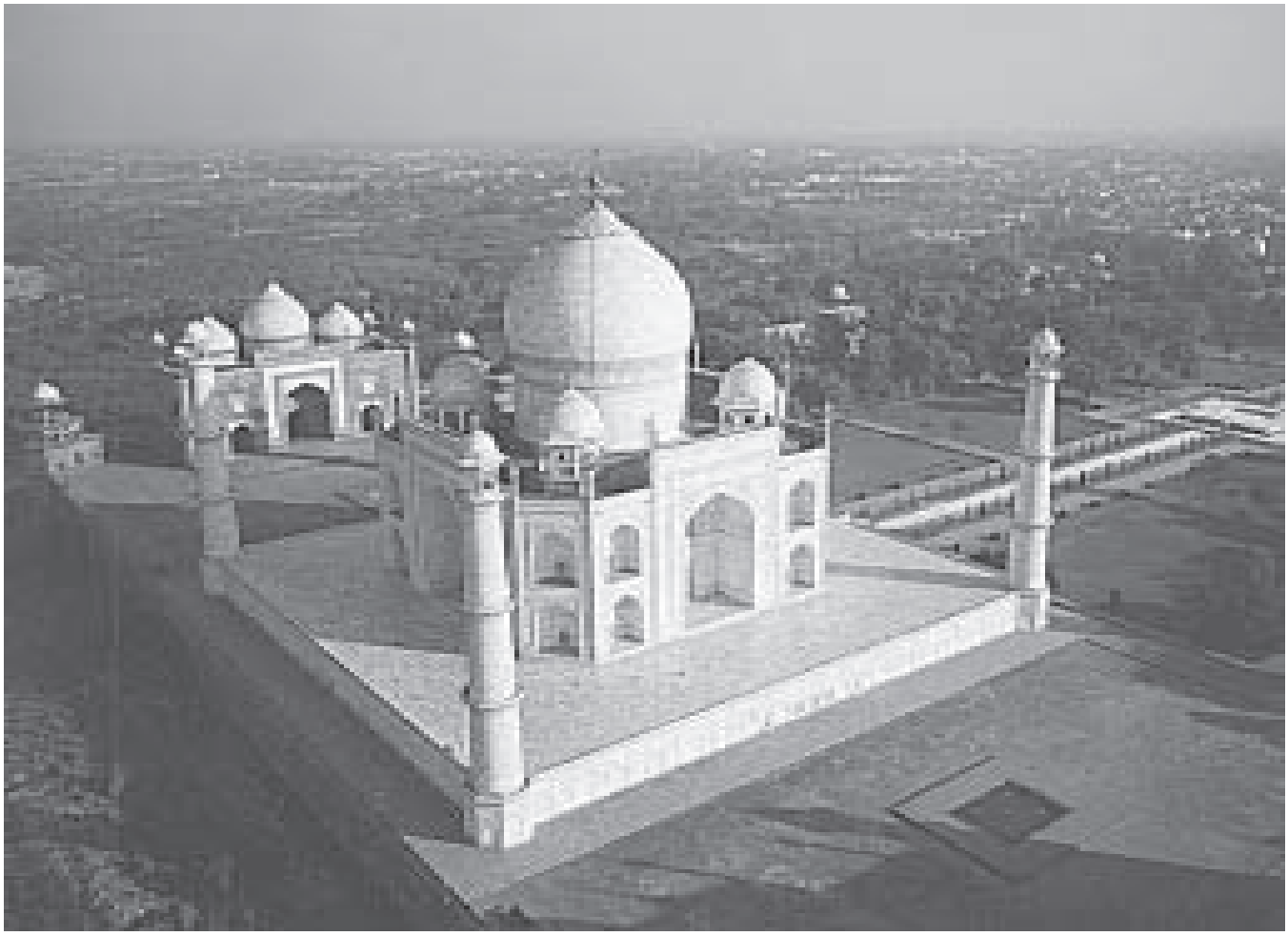
Early on, Chorier realized aerial kite photography involved just four basic parameters: weight limits, movment in the air, stability and the necessary remote control system. Everyone in the aerial photo field faced these problems. After solving the practical matters of getting pictures from the skies, Chorier sought to give himself an advantage. He wanted to branch out, go world-wide.

So he started experimenting and refining. First he decided to scale up his images. Many kite photographers use a 35 mm camera; Chorier went to the 120 mm (4.5 by 6 centimeter) size. He gets definition 3.7 times better. Chorier's camera of choice is a $2,000 lightweight polycarbonate Fuji GA645W with wide angle lens. "Excellent, perfect," is how he describes its performance. As his lifting platform, he settled on the six-sided Japanese rokkaku and the everyday delta as kites of choice. Both are stable, both do without bothersome tails.

In his search for new and money saving approaches, video monitoring soon came to the fore. Having a tiny video attached to his flash support, he could see exactly the picture he wanted on his small TV on the ground and shoot when things were correctly lined up, and not before or after. Real savings and control here.

By using a double line, loosely braided together, Chorier found he could eliminate hateful vibration. He also obtained protection against camera loss. A flight near a rooftop edge might, as an example, cause a single line to snag and cut it. But it would only slice one of the two Chorier lines. The chances of both lines being exposed to the same peril simultaneously are nil. Saving the flying rig is vital because substantial funds are involved.

The two lines are also useful when great stability is required, such as when shooting mosaics–a series of overlapping photos. Chorier separates the kevlar no-stretch lines and anchors them perhaps 30 yards apart, perpendicular to the wind. "The triangle doesn't move," he says. This stability aspect is often important. If a kite is used to monitor pollution, for example, it can be placed exactly over a smokestack and left to its photographic and related work for hours at a time.



The Taj Mahal in Agra, as dramatically photographed by Chorier.

Chorier made sure his rig was compatible with any type of camera, including all digital types. This gave him flexibility.

He has also taken on making videos. "Since sound rises, you can easily hear, and record, people talking 300 yards below. This capability could be used for surveillance, but I do not choose to use it this way," says Chorier. Videos are the way to go for money-making. Chorier plans to specialize in making them in the future.

Chorier has discovered that kites, in a good wind, can be so well controlled they can be made to slowly travel, or traverse, only a few feet above a target. This is a unique capability he has only begun to exploit.

Other possiblities for kite photography are the use of infrared film to document water use at night at irrigation projects and the use of the medium to count wild animals over a period of time without in any way disturbing them. Always inventive, Chorier is investigating the use of solar batteries to extend his aerial operations.

So far, Chorier has made a vocation of aerial kite photography by making mainly documentary shots in his home area, in the south of France. But he is thinking bigger. Projects ahead include documenting an important 15-year French experimental agricultural project in the Matto Grosso of Brazil, shooting archeological sites, photographing monuments such as the Taj Mahal in India in a way they have never been seen before by the public. (The first time he flew a kite over the Taj he was arrested, then he had an invitation to return and shoot away, courtesy of the Agra tourist bureau and of Ajay Prakash of Bombay, a travel agent and kite fan.)

Having come to the attention of the Drachen Foundation, the volatile Chorier has been commissioned to organize a touring school exhibition on aerial kite photography, to premiere at the Dieppe kite festival next fall in Normandy. He has also been entrusted to make a collection for Drachen of the world's best kite photography since Arthur Batut of France made the first shot from the air in the late 19th century. Ali Fujino, administrator of the Drachen Foundation, says simply: "Katsutaka Murooka, of Tokyo, and Nicolas Chorier are two of the best kite photographers I've seen so far." Thus the commissions.

Born in Nigeria where his father was a businessman, Chorier is self-educated and has had a go at woodworking, making furniture, and doing upholstery. He survived a shortish brush with hated military duty and a stint of nefarious activity in Morocco ("I was stupid but lucky," he says) before taking up first a career as a musician then as a theater technician. The latter role ended when Chorier fell 36 feet from a lift and ended up with14 broken bones.

Though all of this Chorier pursued his interest in photography and kites. At one point in the late 80's he had a stack of Flexifoils and skied on bare feet for miles in the sand and did jumps up to 40 feet long at a Mediterranean beach close to his home in Montpellier. Basically, if some kite stunt was dangerous, Chorier gave it a shot.

Another Chorier aerial photo: A Balinese festival, with giant bebean kites.

Chorier found his vocation when a local kite fancier hired him to document a collecting trip to several Asian countries. Chorier discovered a glorious world there and when the kite assignment was completed went back to an island in northeast Malaysia where he worked as a snorkeling instructor and scuba divemaster. He added to his collection of injuries in the latter capacity when he went too deep while suffering from a slight cold. The result was loss of hearing in one ear.

Always one to do the unusual and challenging, Chorier lived out everyone's Robinson Crusoe dream by having himself marooned on a lovely, tiny uninhabited island in Malaysia. He had only some rice, his clothes, scanty equipment such as a knife and fishing rig. As it happened, he managed to live some weeks of total bliss. "In fact," says Chorier, "passing fishermen gave me so many fish to eat I never had a problem with food. Only my poor financial condition eventually forced me to come home to France and find a job. But I'll never forget those blissful weeks alone on that tiny island." Chorier of course had his kites and cameras with him all the while and his aerial shots of white sand, cobalt sea and palm trees cause viewers to groan in envy.

"I don't want to photograph new tram lines in Montpellier," says Chorier. "I want to photograph lions in Africa." The next chapters in his questing life will predictably be less than humdrum.

—Ben Ruhe