

TELL THE STORY

The value of an image depends on how much you give it to say.

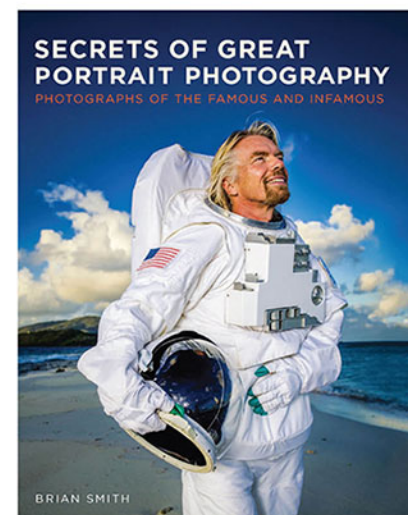
BY BRIAN SMITH

“Richard Branson...on Necker Island...in a spacesuit.” That pitch from *TIME* magazine photo editor Dietmar Liz-Lepiorz is as good a pitch as I’ve ever heard. But to be honest, he had me at Branson.

Branson is a photographer’s dream subject: He’s extremely media savvy, and he knows a great concept when he hears one. So when *TIME* suggested putting him in a spacesuit for a story about his new Virgin Galactic spacelights, he was immediately onboard. While Liz-Lepiorz was arranging to ship the suit to the Caribbean, I was off to Branson’s private island in the British Virgin Islands.

Once I landed on Necker Island, I headed out to scout a location. An environmental portrait on location is about the person and the place, so I always spend time searching out the most interesting place to shoot and getting to know the location beforehand. Necker Island had a lot of great locations, ranging from palm-lined tropical beaches to red-rock cliffs that looked like Mars. But my favorite was a little sandbar just off the island surrounded by nothing but crystal-blue Caribbean waters.

Richard Branson: Photographed on Necker Island for *TIME*



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After discovering that I wanted to shoot at sunrise, Branson leaned over to me at dinner and slyly said, “Sunrise is at 5:30 a.m., so you and I need to be at the dock at five.”

The next morning, we were all up before dawn boarding the boat. The crew included Branson’s boat captain, the island’s general manager, and my wife, Fazia, the stylist on most of my shoots. We landed on the sandbar just in time for Branson to don the spacesuit as the sun began to break the horizon. I shot from one knee so that Branson and his spacesuit rose heroically into the sky.

We shot for about 45 minutes starting at first light—the prettiest part of the day. The resulting portrait, shot using a Profoto Acute 600B strobe and early-morning daylight, blended the conceptual and environmental with a touch of the unexpected.

The sign of a great shoot is when your subjects are the ones asking you for more. After breakfast, Branson asked if I would take some pictures of him relaxing with his son and daughter at the main house.

Cover Every Angle

One of the keys to success for any magazine shoot is coming back with as many different shots as possible.

Even if the story is slated for only one page, photo editors want several options. If the story runs multiple pages, they’ll need enough variety to fill additional spreads. If it’s a big story, they may want yet another shot for the table of contents. And if the story makes the cover, they’ll need a totally different shot for inside.

Making celebrity shoots happen takes a lot of work on the part of the editors, so you don’t want to let them down. Bear in mind that when you’re shooting busy, high-profile people, there’s a huge balancing act between overstaying your welcome and getting everything you need. Prioritize your shots so that if the subject bails early, you at least get your main shot. It never hurts to remind your subjects that a great shoot can even save them time in the long run if other magazines relicense those images.

How You Get Paid

Making a living as a magazine photographer has become a bigger challenge every year. The key to making a go of it is retaining ownership of all your images.

Here are three main ways you can make money from editorial assignments:

| Assignment fees. Essentially, this is the guarantee to shoot the job. It’s generally paid as fee plus expenses, although some smaller publications will offer a flat fee for everything.

| Additional space usage. This normally comes into play if the story runs for multiple pages or lands on the cover. This is where all those extra shots can pay off.

| Relicensing fees. Most magazines have an exclusivity period, after which you can license to other publications. Such syndication fees are often what keeps you in business, so don’t give them up.

The week the Branson story ran, the signature image from this shoot was one of two shots mocked up for the cover of *TIME*. It ultimately lost out to another story, but ironically, that was the best thing that could have happened to me. *TIME* is one of the very few magazines to demand exclusivity for all assigned covers, so you can never use the cover shot or similar images in print again. The money I lost out on for the *TIME* cover came back to me more than ten times over because the photos have appeared in magazines from all over the globe—as well as on the cover of my book.