

You Are

THE ACCIDENTAL TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY OF L.A.'S MOST NOTABLE TOURIST

By William Sawalich | Photography By Martin Schall

Here



Martin Schall isn't a professional photographer. You probably can't learn from him how to photograph architecture, or how to take better travel photos, or even how to get published. Yet he does all these things amazingly well. The main thing you can learn from Schall is how to photograph what you love, for nothing but immense personal satisfaction.

Schall is an oil and gas engineer who photographs buildings for fun. He lives near Stuttgart, Germany, but his muse is the modern architecture of Los Angeles, Calif. He has traveled there, almost annually, for more than a decade, and he publishes his photographs online at you-are-here.com—a website he started expressly for this purpose. His portfolio of about 2,000 images is continually growing. *The Los Angeles Times* called it "the ultimate online collection of photos documenting the city." Schall just calls it a hobby for which Los Angeles is perfect.

"Today it's a mix of many objectives," he says of his photographic visits to L.A. "A lot about 'collecting' architects and their buildings; getting streets like Sunset Boulevard covered; seeing the latest buildings. Los Angeles is perfect for photography—great architecture, great light, wide streets. The city is practical for what I do because it's a modern city and a big city. There's always something new."

TIMING IT RIGHT

Schall's time in L.A. is always limited, so he makes the most of his chance to photograph it. Even so, he'll return again and again to the same spot, day after day or trip after trip, to ensure he has a shot exactly as he wants it.



"Because I can't wait for the perfect light all day," Schall says, "sometimes I come back two or three times to get a photo. I walk around until everything looks good to me. Last year, I just drove up and down the boulevards in the Valley and stopped wherever I found something interesting. But I stopped every mile."

The simplicity of Schall's technical approach lends itself to his modern subjects. His work is less about camera technique than deliberation and inspiration. Eighty percent of his shots end up on the website, and the fact that he loves what he's photographing shows in the end results.

"I'm so used to what I do," he says, "I don't spend time thinking about it. I don't press the button if I don't think I'll get a decent picture. I shoot pictures as if on a shooting range—hold my breath and press the button, a good way to prevent shaking. I sometimes use a tripod after sunset, but I usually use objects like parking meters, by night. I walk around until I find my perfect spot. If I compare old photos with the new photos of the same building, I sometimes wonder, 'But they're exactly the same.' I wait for up to 20 minutes to avoid cars—I don't like to have cars included, my weak point—or I come back on Sundays, which are always great for less traffic, especially downtown. If nothing works, I'll be back next year."

THE 21st CENTURY GALLERY

Schall was originally inspired to publish his photographs after seeing the work of other photographers online.

Whatever the subject, the Internet is Schall's favorite medium for displaying photography, and he encourages others to publish their work, too.

"Just do it," he says. "The web is in desperate need for content. It's easier when you start with a topic you love because it's like your second job—without an income. The gallery of my dreams has only screens on the wall and me, the 'artist,' brings in the USB memory stick. You can't get a bigger audience than the web! We live in the 21st century, and I'm very happy that way."

Though he has received acclaim for his photography of Los Angeles, Schall also showcases images from around the world on other sections of his site. Hundreds of pictures from his home continent reveal the same passion for modern architecture and exploration. It's the Los Angeles work, though, that has garnered most of the attention.

"For the Los Angeles part of you-are-here.com," Schall says, "I get nice e-mails every day. I help people to plan vacations and visits; I recommend things. For the Europe part, I got 10 e-mails in the last five years, mostly from academic professionals. One e-mail was hate mail from an architecture historian!"

MOTIVATION

"I don't have a goal," Schall explains. "Photography is like eating or breathing since I'm young. I always take a camera with me—even at offshore work or on oil tankers. At the age of 12, I started with a

big series of storage buildings in our local inland port. Then I did a lot of city scenes in my hometown, Stuttgart, over the years. I traveled to London and Paris to take photos in my early 20s. After the Wall came down in 1989, I traveled to Berlin a lot and took hundreds of black-and-white photos of the buildings in East Berlin. When I was in Iran and Egypt earlier this year, it was natural to go around and take photos on Fridays or in my free time until the plane took off."

Schall wants nothing beyond simply sharing his photographs—and these unique buildings—with an interested audience. He's happy with the balance he has achieved.

"I'm very happy with my accidental travel photography," Schall says. "I was on the first page of *The L.A. Times* without killing somebody; that's pretty good for a foreigner. Los Angeles will have something new for me to discover every year. If not, I'll have no problem to come only for the steaks." PC

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Martin Schall had hoped to return to Los Angeles in 2008, but oil-industry changes have increased his work obligations. He's unsure of his travel plans. Visit www.you-are-here.com to view his images.