



Artist Bio: Victor J Banta | Victor Banta Photography



# About the Photographer

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## Victor Arrives In Hell

Born in Ypsilanti Michigan in November 1958, Victor J. Banta first fell in love with the magic of photography in 1967, while at Greenfield Village with his parents. The highlight of the day was a demonstration of shooting a civil war canon ball into a large water filled wood barrel over 200 yards away. His father took a photograph just as the canon ball hit the barrel as it exploded, capturing that moment in time! From that moment forward, Victor was fascinated with photography.

Victor moved to Hell with his parents Bob (with one “O”) and Laurene (Rita) in the summer of 1969. As a 10 year old growing up on Hi-land Lake in Hell Michigan, Victor fell in love with the area and life on the water.

At age 14, he bought his first 35mm camera -- a Taron Rangefinder -- and developed an enthusiasm for photography and an interest in capturing people and events. In his sophomore year at Pinckney High School, Victor got his first photography job as the school’s news paper photographer (thank you Pat Tessmer, PHS News Staff advisor). Victor continued as the staff photographer until graduation in 1976.

## The Journey Begins

In the winter of 1977, Victor began expanding his understanding and passion for the art, taking a self-study photography course through the New York Institute of Photography with good friend Rick Schneider. After several vacations to Colorado with some of the *Boyz from Hell* (Tim Kurcz, Bob Ruppel, Rick Schneider, and Bob Voigt), Victor moved to the Denver area in the fall of 1979 to further explore the area. Immediately, he was inspired by the majestic beauty of the Rocky Mountains. At every opportunity, Victor could be found in the mountains hiking, skiing, and 4-wheeling in his Land Cruiser, always with camera in hand, shooting countless photographs of the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

## A Life Changing Moment

Working as a Fiat, Lancia, & Mazda mechanic at Buckingham Imports in Aurora Colorado, a photographic hiking accident on October 19, 1979 almost took his life. Falling 70 feet off a cliff, Victor suffered a broken back and other injuries. The whole episode caused Victor to re-think his life’s direction and career. Soon after the accident, on a Friday evening at Buckingham Imports before heading home for the weekend, Victor met Billie the Kid (man’s best friend).

Victor was just cleaning up and putting away tools for the weekend, when a salesman brought a dog with the look of an Irish setter mixed with Golden Retriever into the shop. He had found the dog running down Havana Boulevard, a five-lance city thoroughfare. The salesman couldn't keep the beautiful dog, as he lived in a small apartment.

Victor looked at the dog with his sad warm eyes and said "I have room for him, I have a house." As the words came out of Victor's mouth, the dog's eyes lit-up and his tale started wagging. He swooped down to pick-up a shop rag in his mouth, eager to play with Victor, as if to say "I understand what you're saying and I am happy about it!"

Thus began a relationship with an amazing animal, friend and companion. Their friendship spanned more than a decade of adventures while Victor focused on his education and obtained a bachelor and master's degree.

It was after the three-day Memorial weekend in 1980, his first long weekend since returning to work wrenching on cars, that Victor first experienced some relief from back pain. He realized that if he wanted to fully recover, he must end his career as an automotive mechanic. In July 1980, Victor had paid off his hospital debts, purchased another Olympus OM2n 35mm camera and lenses to replace the ones lost in the climbing accident, and quit his job as a mechanic.

## **On the Road**

Victor wasted no time putting his belongings into storage and setting out on a road trip that would immerse him in Mexican culture. The experience was the beginning of a life-long passion for travel, adventure and a desire to experience as many cultures as possible. Leaving Colorado in his Toyota Land Cruiser with Billie the Kid and girl friend Julänne White, his first international road trip began by first driving from Colorado east to visit friends and family in Michigan before heading southwest. The trio entered Mexico at Laredo, Texas, and explored the mountains and remote villages along the way to the Pacific coast near Mazatlan. After some time on

the desolate beaches north of Mazatlan, they traveled back north through Arizona.

In Phoenix, Julänne and Victor parted ways; she returned to Colorado, while Victor and Billie continued on to experience the majestic beauty of the Grand Canyon, a photo opportunity that is not to be missed.

Soon after returning to Colorado, Victor had the opportunity to head to California while learning to drive an 18-wheeler (thank you Bob Borjac (sp?) and Consolidated Productions). After several coast-to-coast trips driving big rigs for various performers (including magician Doug Henning, and musical legends Stevie Wonder, Elton John, The San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and others), he decided to move back to Michigan to prepare for the next phase of his life. Still recuperating from his broken back, Victor worked for Environmental Dynamics (since then acquired by Lotus) as an Electronic Technician while saving money so he could go back to school to get a degree in Electrical Engineering.

## **Tucson and the Desert**

In August 1981, Victor and Billie moved to Tucson to attend The University of Arizona, sadly leaving behind a new relationship with the most amazing woman and artist he has ever met...Margie Bornais (Sroka).

While at the U of A, Victor and Billie studied Photography as a Fine Art while obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering with additional studies in optics and planetary science. This was followed by a Master of Science degree in Electrical Engineering specializing in digital image processing, remote sensing and Photography as a Fine Art. In retrospect, the move to Arizona was paramount in his recuperation:

the temperate climate and desert beauty provided many opportunities to be outside physically active exploring and photographing the Sonoran desert and mountains.

Early on during his time at the U of A, Victor discovered the Center for Creative Photography. The Center is home to the national archives of Ansel Adams and many other photography Masters and pioneers in photography. Over the years at the U of A, there were many trips to the Center for Creative Photography to view original photographic prints. Ansel's photographs amplified Victor's curiosity in Large Format photography, but it was not until graduate school that Victor purchased a Nagaoka 4x5 inch field camera. The years of traveling with a 4x5 camera changed the way he looked at photography, easily investing one to two hours for a single exposure.

## NASA Calling

In 1984, Victor received an incredible research opportunity. Dr. Philip Russell of NASA at Ames Research Center contacted Dr. John Reagan, Victor's advisor and employer in Atmospheric Research (Dr. Reagan now holds the distinguished honor of past department head for the Electrical and Computer Engineering department at the University of Arizona). Dr. Russell was looking for a graduate student to work on an airborne atmospheric research instrument. Dr. Reagan offered that he did not have a graduate student that met his qualifications, but he knew a talented undergraduate student (Victor) who was perfect for the position. In May of 1984, Victor and Billie packed up the Land Cruiser and their 10 foot camp trailer and moved to the San Francisco Bay area to work with NASA.

During this time, Victor and Billie enjoyed bicycle touring, having just designed and built the "Billie Buggy," a two wheeled

trailer that allowed 70-pound Billie to accompany Victor on his bike trips. Victor believes that "bicycling is the perfect speed to take in the beauty of an area."

Their maiden bicycle tour was up the northern California coast from San Francisco to Fort Bragg and back again, camping on ocean cliffs, in oak groves and coastal redwoods while stopping



along the way to photograph the beauty. This was the first of many bicycle tours Billie and Victor took together, logging several

thousand miles while bicycling the entire California coast, the mountains near Lake Tahoe, and the southern Arizona desert.



Victor on Galileo II in Recife Brasil. 1985

While working with NASA on the Airborne Tracking Sunphotometer, Victor was responsible for writing the operating system software for the atmospheric research project. This included the global positioning calculations to track the Sun's position while in flight. These positioning calculations were achieved by calculating the Earth's position with respect to the Sun and knowing the aircraft's position above the Earth by interfacing with the aircraft's global positioning and navigation system. To validate the instrument, Victor spent time calibrating the Sunphotometer on several mountain tops including Mt. Hamilton California, Mt. Lemon Arizona, and Mauna Loa Hawaii as well as flying on several airborne missions

including a two week mission to Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Brasil.

That NASA research mission to Central and South America heightened Victor's appreciation and curiosity of Latin and Brazilian culture. Upon returning from that airborne mission, Victor promised himself to return to Brasil to explore it further.

## Southern Exposure

After completing his Master's degree, Victor set out to fulfill that personal promise and return to Brasil, planning a one-year photographic travel adventure through Central and South America. After an attempt at funding the journey with National Geographic magazine in Washington, D.C. failed, funding came as a generous \$4,000 gift from his parents.

Active in the Rain Forest Alliance at the University of Arizona, Victor's network of contact's extended to include several environmental researchers in Costa Rica and Brasil as well as a connection with the Tucson-Santo Domingo Nicaragua Sister City Project. While Victor was planning his adventure south of the border, the Sister City Project was also planning a trip to Nicaragua transporting much needed food, clothing, and medical supplies by bus. Victor signed on as photographer and mechanic for the one-month adventure with five other volunteers. The 2600 mile journey (one-way) took them east to Texas where they entered Mexico at Laredo, Texas. The Sister City bus traveled through Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras and finally they were welcomed into Nicaragua by cheers from military personnel situated in fox holes along the road to Managua, Nicaragua. The Sister City project was a wonderful lesson and example of the value of humanitarian aid.

## Setting Sail

After photographically documenting the Sister City Project in Santo Domingo, Victor continued on his journey exploring the Nicaraguan culture. Re-uniting at a Hospedaje in Managua with Sister City travel companion Joel Paris --who had been volunteering with “*Bicicletas Si, Bombas No*” (Bikes not Bombs) -- the *amigos* heard about a sailing ship looking for crew in a remote fishing village San Juan

del Sur, on the Southern Nicaraguan Pacific coast. After arriving in San Juan del Sur, the ship was spotted anchored off shore. The next morning Victor swam out to the ship *Hermanos e Hermanas*, a 45-foot square rigger, to introduce himself to the captain. On the spot Captain Dudley decided that anyone that would swim out to the ship could be trusted and was worthy as first mate. Thus commenced the next chapter in the adventure; sailing to Costa Rica. Sailing along the coasts of Nicaragua and Costa Rica provided amazing views and photographic opportunities that could only be seen from the ocean. Highlights included swimming through a school of jelly fish, sailing through a rocky inward passage while shooting photos from the top of the mast, and rowing the sailboat’s dingy at night through a school of small flying fish in phosphorescent waters.



Victor at hotel in small fishing village in Nicaragua. 1989

After the sailing adventure, Victor explored Costa Rica by land, discovering wonderful sleepy fishing villages such as Puerto Viejo. Next, Victor traveled by bus to Panama City, Panama, where he took a flight to Bogotá, Columbia. Stories from fellow travelers of civil unrest and rioting prevented Victor from visiting Venezuela and the amazing Angle Falls. Instead, Victor enjoyed the music and culture of Bogotá and the lush green mountains with isolated burial tombs. This was followed by moving South to Quito, Ecuador to further improve his Spanish skills and explore the amazing outdoor

Indian markets in and around Otavalo. After two months in Ecuador, the time had come to move on to Brasil.

Through suggestions from fellow travelers Loraine Dodd & company and guidance from the South American Handbook, Victor returned to Bogotá, where he caught a small aircraft to Leticia, Columbia, a small village on the Amazon River at the borders of Columbia, Peru, and Brasil. The three day and three night boat trip to Manaus Brasil was fascinating, often stopping at all hours of the night in the middle of the Amazon where not a single light could be seen. Out of the night, a dugout canoe would paddle loaded with produce such as bananas. The produce was exchanged for supplies from the industrialized world. Two months were spent with Manaus as a home base allowing more exploration of this region of the Amazon Rain Forest. Next, Victor headed down the Amazon River



Victor in the Amazon rain forest. 1989

to Belem and then to the North East coast of Brasil. He spent the next 4 months visiting villages and towns along the way, some only accessible by 4-wheel drive truck. Highlights included a two week stay in Puerto Seguro to study the Lambada dance. Learning Portuguese while in Brasil was easy due to the fact that Brazilian's are curious and very friendly offering Victor endless opportunities to practice Portuguese.

All told, during his one year travel adventure, Victor visited ten countries in Central and South America while shooting over 2500 color slides and B&W images. The environmental and humanitarian networks provided wonderful opportunities to visit research reserves in several locations: a remote field study camp in the South of Costa Rica, a live-aboard research boat on the Amazon and Negra rivers, a flight in a Cessna aerial mapping airplane over the Amazon near Belem, and a week out in a deforested region of the Amazon Rain Forest. Six hours outside of Manaus, the field study camp was

situated on one of the forest islands that was connected to other islands with a forested corridor allowing animal travel. Victor gave several slide shows and lectures to wonderful groups such as the Rain Forest Alliance and the Tucson-Santo Domingo Nicaragua Sister City Project.

## Returning Home to Hell

In 1990, after his return to Tucson, Victor met his soon-to-be wife Patti Cameron. In 1992 they started a family, giving birth to the most amazing daughter Alexandra (Aly) Victoria Cameron-Banta.

During this time, in 1991

Victor started a photography studio in Tucson. Victor kept busy with fashion photography, movie stills, and product photography. He could also be found shooting golf tournaments at the many beautiful golf courses in southern Arizona.

In 1997, a business opportunity with Dexter Research Center brought Victor and family back to Michigan and a return to Victor's home town of Hell, where Victor and Aly reside today.



Victor and his 4x5 field camera in his Tucson studio. 1991.

## From Hell to Haiti

More recently in 2010, Victor again answered the call to assist in a humanitarian effort. Just three weeks after the devastating earthquake destroyed Haiti and injured hundreds of thousands of people, Victor joined good friend Nancy Malone's first response team to assess the need for physical therapists in Haiti. Although Victor volunteered as a Photographer, once the team of 5 reached the MASH style hospital in the mountains near Port Au Prince, Victor soon put his cameras aside to assist the physical therapists. This was a very intense yet very rewarding adventure.



Tiffani Bacon and Victor assist a 14 year old Haitian boy “walk” for the first time in his full cast from the waist down. 2010

Over the years, Victor has continued to define his style blending his appreciation of fashion with his love for nature. His book *“Life in Hell: Nature’s Beauty”* was inspired by the beauty of the surroundings of the place Victor calls home. We hope you enjoy

Victor’s art as much as Victor enjoys his Life in Hell.

Victor Banta is available for photography assignments worldwide. An experienced photographer and traveler, Victor has photographed the people and their cultures in more than 35 countries including countries in Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Asia and North America.

Please visit Victor Banta Photography on the web; browse, enjoy, share, and feel free to convey your thoughts and comments.

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