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SUBHEADLINE: Lord Patrick Lichfield is one of the world's foremost photographers _ snapping subjects ranging from the British royal family to supermodels and celebrities _ but his most recent project finds him capturing the essence of Mandarin Oriental hotels

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Lord Patrick Lichfield is one of the happiest men on earth. He has all that he could wish for: wealth, good health, prominence, fame, a loving family with three children, a string of properties; a flat in London, the family-owned splendid Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire, a residence on the tiny Caribbean island of Mustique, and above all a ``job I wouldn't swap for anything in the world".

Meet with him and talk about his passion for photography and you will be able to perceive those rays of happiness and fulfilment and with him see beyond little everyday occurrences and look towards far-reaching goals.

The second cousin of Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain, son of Viscount Anson and Princess Anne of Denmark, Thomas Patrick John Anson, 5th Earl of Lichfield, was educated at Harrow and Sandhurst. He served as a lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards before becoming known as the Royal Photographer, the official photographer of Great Britain's Royal Family _ the man allowed to wear jeans around the palace.

And this is also the man who secured the much coveted job of photographing the ``100 Most Beautiful Women in the World" in the early 1980s _ a task he will take up again soon with those same beauties 20 years later. Lord Lichfield is also famous for his tasteful nudes for the Unipart calendars and male sport celebrities as part as a male cancer awareness campaign.

Lord Lichfield was in Bangkok recently i as part of his assignment as photographer for the recent \$5 million (215 million baht) advertising campaign for the Mandarin Oriental Hotels Group promoting celebrity guests. Lord Lichfield was to take photographs of the award-winning actor Sir Peter Ustinov, who was to join the lavish 125th anniversary celebrations of the Oriental Bangkok. But because of problems with his health, Ustinov was unable to attend.

This hitch gave Lord Lichfield a rare opportunity to experience a bit of peace and even idleness in the greatest surroundings possible: a Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

``If I wasn't a photographer, I would have been a hotelier," said Lord Lichfield, explaining how intertwined these two domains are for him _ having taken his first shots for the hotel business of the daughter of the chairman of the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park hotel, the group's London flagship which has recently been extensively revamped.

``There are so many things I love to do, but there is not enough time to do them all. One of the most wonderful things about my job is it takes me to different places, and consequently hotels. I love hotels so much," Lord Lichfield commented, inexhaustible in his praise for the Mandarin Group.

“Working for the group's advertising campaign was an extraordinary job,” he said. He photographed top celebrities such as Whoopie Goldberg, Michelle Yeoh, Jerry Hall, Martin Sheen, Jane Seymour, Vanessa Mae, Minnie Driver ... all fans of the luxurious hotel group.

What enamoured the top photographer the most is the fact that this particular assignment combined two of Lord Lichfield's lifetime passions; travelling and taking photographs. “I rarely go anywhere without my camera. I feel naked without it,” he confessed.

“It is wrong to think I have a wonderfully easy life made of travelling, beautiful hotels and pretty girls. Although it is all of that, it's very hard too,” he said, wearing a beaming smile and a lavender-blue short sleeve polo shirt, revealing a sea horse tattoo.

If his enviable lifestyle is indeed tough sometimes, it is because Lord Lichfield takes his profession extremely seriously, always aiming for perfection.

The whole brood of 18-year-old fashion models who have experienced his firmness and strictness would not disagree. “I make them work very hard because they are paid so much. They hate me!” said Lord Lichfield, referring to the energetic regimen he imposes during shoots; up at 4 am, make-up and hair at 5, start shooting at 6 ... “You may think I am cruel but I don't think it matters. My job is to come up with good pictures,” he said with a smile.

And in order to do so, the veteran photographer is, of course, allied with the most advanced technology.

“The reason I am so enthusiastic about my job is because it keeps on changing. We are now using digital equipment. That gives us a new dimension and indeed a new enthusiasm for the work. Otherwise, like fashion, visual fashion that is, photography tends to repeat itself. Everything goes in cycles; sometimes you think someone is coming up with a new idea but go back 40 or 50 years and you may find the same thing. That is why technological advancement is so good; it brings something really new. It is a new world and a new way of looking at things,” he said.

“Sometimes the most work is done after the click. We can introduce things that weren't there, take some things out. Perhaps it makes us more lazy, but I am not sure we can call this cheating. On the contrary it gives more room for artistic creation. You can definitely say with digital equipment that photography is an art form rather than just a craft.”

Lord Lichfield looks back at his 40-year-long career with amusement, resigning himself to facts such as “the chances of things going wrong are increased by the importance of the occasion” and the fact that “agents are usually more difficult to deal with than the celebrities they represent”.

He's had a few quirks of fate and some “terrible moments”. He recalled the “Indian episode”, a series of pictures to be taken of Rajiv Gandhi just six weeks after the assassination of his mother Indira in 1984, when security around the family was at its peak.

“The security was fantastic. We were checked, double-checked, cameras opened, cameras closed. When we were finally in the lobby of the hotel, just about to enter to take pictures of the prime minister, my assistant shouts, ‘What time are we shooting the Prime Minister?’ You could forget about taking his pictures! They didn't realise that ‘shooting’ meant clicking. That is what I really call a bad day,” he said with a laugh.

Another memorable incident was during the huge media spectacle of the wedding of Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles in 1981 for which Lord Lichfield was the official photographer.

``When we were about to go in the church, suddenly someone asked, `How long is Lady Diana's train?' Nobody actually knew, and I had to do a group picture at Buckingham Palace and I had to know the details of the dress to work out arrangements for the photos. So I had to stay back at the Palace when everybody was at the wedding just to watch her get out of the carriage to work out how long it was! But actually, when she came back for the picture at Buckingham Palace, she unzipped her dress train ... So I had missed the wedding for nothing!

``The occasion always plays a part. Nothing will go wrong if I take pictures of my sister, but if I take pictures of the Queen of England, my camera will explode."

While drawing examples from his memory, Lord Lichfield revealed a few of his secrets of success. ``I have no recipe to deal with crises, and life is precisely full of crises. But to me the best rule is to be flexible and adaptable."

When it comes to taking pictures, Lord Lichfield uses a laugh to dissolve tensions and discomfort, searching for the ``tiniest little thing" he may have in common with his subject.

``I read a lot, conscientiously do my homework, before meeting someone, making sure that if it's a movie star, for example, I see at least his three latest releases. You cannot expect your subjects to do all the giving, you have to do some yourself," he said.

``Timing is so crucial in life, in everything you do. You can miss opportunities at the same time as you get them. Photography has so much to do with timing. God may produce the right cloud at the right moment, which will make the difference. Everything conspiring together can make a perfect picture, a picture that will last in my consciousness, which remains fresh."

He said that out of the four million or so pictures he has taken, he would stamp only a mere 40 as real sources of pride.

``My aim is to leave something behind for people to see, how things were in my lifetime.

``My work is factual and straightforward. I don't aim to impart a message. Messages tend to get mixed up!"