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Living Inspiration

Erin Sullivan '12



Purchase College
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Erin Sullivan

Spend a few minutes scrolling through **Erin Sullivan's '12** Instagram feed and you'll find a stream of views from around the globe that are stunning enough to inspire even the most travel-averse to consider packing a bag.

The travel photographer, writer, and adventure guide has gained a significant social media following of photography enthusiasts, world travelers, and those just searching for a little encouragement. Imparting words of wisdom, comfort, humor, and brutal honesty about what it means to be a travel photographer, she hopes her posts inspire people—to step out of their comfort zones, become better travelers, or even pursue their life's purpose. What started more than four years ago as a way to document and share her adventures has evolved into a powerful platform. Adopting the online moniker Erin Outdoors, Sullivan (BALA, visual arts and environmental studies) advocates for a more ethical travel photography industry and sets an example for traveling with intention.

Back Country Challenge

Much of Sullivan's appeal derives from irrefutable credentials. Early in her journey she took a big leap outside her own comfort zone: she tested herself at NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) in the summer after her sophomore year at Purchase. She arrived for 30 days of backpacking in the wilderness of Wyoming with confidence, but left humbled. The trip was formative, challenging her in ways far beyond her preparation or imagination. "The things that ruin us, the things that crumble our perceptions of ourselves, the things that have us looking up at a star-filled sky asking, 'Why am I doing this?'—those are the things that spark who we were meant to be," she writes in a blog post about the experience several years later.

Wanderlust Wins

NOLS may have knocked her down a bit, but wanderlust won in the end. After an extremely winding path through traveling, working odd jobs around the world, and leading adventure trips, she learned to be open to new experiences and more comfortable with uncertainty. The journey itself, with all its beautiful and ugly truths, became her muse. She's managed to carve a unique path that merges her passions for travel photography and creative writing with a generosity of



"I am a traveling photographer and writer who believes that images and words have the power to inspire meaningful change."

erinoutdoors.com



Photo: Ari-Anwatkins @alongwithari



She practices what she preaches. Sullivan had been working with a school in Kenya for children with special needs to create storytelling images. The nonprofit is also a community development organization that empowers women, specifically the mothers of the school's students.

Sullivan photographed the women to illustrate their stories. She explains how she's careful to create reverential portraits to present her subjects as empowered. She interacts with them first and takes her camera out only when they're comfortable.

"A lot of time, when it comes to portraits of people anywhere in the world, often indigenous people or folks who may live in developing countries, the stories can be oversimplified," she says. "I want to convey a rich, deep, complicated story of human life, of human everything, that everyone has."



Open to What's Next

Sullivan hopes to write a book and maybe start a podcast someday. She's remaining open to the possibilities. "It's just about paying attention to what the bigger picture is and taking the necessary

steps to get there." This strategy may have its roots at Purchase; she recalls fondly the unconventional career approach promoted by her advisors. "I think the biggest thing that stuck with me is the encouragement from

my advisors to almost break the rules. Carol Bankerd, George Kraemer, and Lee Schlesinger all encouraged me in different ways to swim upstream and to follow a path that maybe wasn't already there, or to create my own."

—Kristi McKee

spirit to become a trustworthy blogger and social media influencer. Sullivan's credibility as an artist and traveler doesn't go unnoticed. In April 2017, she joined the Sony Alpha Imaging Collective, "an elite group of the finest creatives carefully selected for their diverse styles, expertise, and artistic charisma."

The Connection is Everything

While social media is a necessary channel in her line of work, the accumulation of fans and followers is not what keeps Sullivan going. It's those moments when she connects with her audience that make it worthwhile.

"I realized I was reaching people that I didn't even know, and that by being open and vulnerable about my journey I could help somebody." The feedback is sometimes humbling.

"If I can help somebody feel seen, or help somebody's day in some way, or give them the push that they needed, that's really important to me."

Leading teenagers on adventure travel trips taught her how the soft skills of listening, leading, and finding words of



encouragement could make a difference. "I loved the personal development aspect and the way that people would grow on those trips," she says. Personal growth is a big part of her own Erin Outdoors branded adventure trips to Greece she now leads.

Intentional Travel

In a recent post, Sullivan lists a few steps that anyone can take to become what she believes are "better travelers," including learning the language, buying locally, and asking permission before taking photos. "Human beings are not museum exhibits. If you'd like to take a photo of someone, just ask them, and respect their answer, whatever it is," she writes.

She'd also like to use the platform she's created to have an impact on the travel photography industry she's part of. "I'm working towards making that industry more intentional and thoughtful," she says. "We need to think about our impact on the planet; we need to think about equity and about helping people to tell their own stories rather than appropriating others. I think that travel media has a lot of growing to do and I look forward to being a part of that."

"The pics hook us, but the story makes us care... enjoy the journey!! We are!"

Comment from @erinoutdoors Instagram post



Photos: Erin Sullivan