



PHOTOGRAPHING FRANCE

BY VARINA PATEL

eBOOKS
VARINA & JAY PATEL

A family trip is a daunting proposal by any standards – but consider a trip abroad... for more than two months... with four small children... on a very tight budget. Intelligent parents would cringe at the thought, and lock themselves away for a few weeks in order to recover from the very idea. But with a sense of adventure, a willingness to be flexible, and some careful planning, we were able to make it work.



Greg and I felt that our children would benefit enormously from a trip to a foreign country. Though they would miss six full weeks in the classroom, they would gain an understanding of geography, language, and culture that no textbook could convey. Children learn best by doing – so immersing them in the culture, and letting them discover it themselves was absolutely invaluable. And of course, a longer stay meant more opportunities for photography.

For me, visiting France was a phenomenal experience. When we arrived in late April, the fields were bright green, the sky was a stunning blue, and the waterfalls were at their best. Perhaps most importantly, those areas that would be teeming with tourists in just a few months time were nearly deserted. By late July, the beautiful mossy banks of the river at Baume les Messieurs had been trampled, and the authorities at the Cascades du Hérisson were charging a fee for parking. I'm glad I got my photographs when I did.



*Who says Dandelions
are weeds?*

We stayed in a tiny village called Leuye. (Pronounced “Loy-uh”.) Twenty-three French citizens shared this beautiful, quiet hamlet – at least, it was quiet until “les Américains” arrived with all their children. The peaceful streets and woodlands became our playground, and the sheep and cows became our closest friends.

The kids caught toads, lizards, and salamanders every day. These unfortunate creatures were kept temporarily in a pot which I called “la Chambre de la Mort” (The Chamber of Death).” Anna (aged 4 at the time) insisted that one tiny toad was alive when all evidence suggested otherwise. I suspect that being tossed across the driveway a few dozen times really was pretty exhausting for “Toady” – so it is *possible* that the little thing was “just sleeping”. The kids said they were teaching him to jump... I wish I’d realized what they were throwing a bit sooner. Poor little guy!



My kids are
“rock-huggers.”

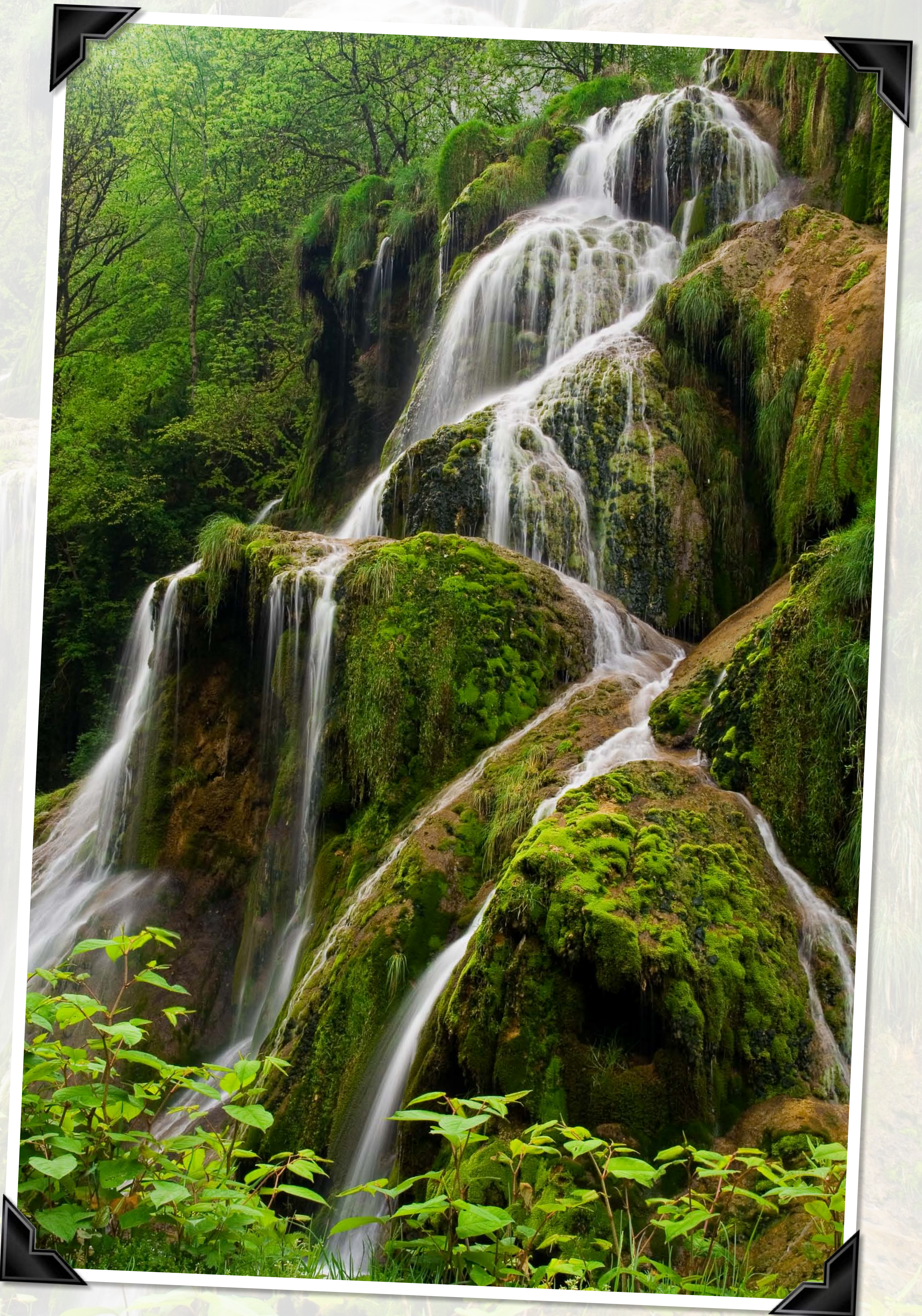


After spending a few days settling in to our new home and exploring the area, we began taking frequent day trips to nearby points of interest. On a stormy day in April, we visited the Lac du Annecy. I balanced precariously and attempted to steady my tripod on the slippery stones while the children played in the sand behind me.

The highlight of our first visit to the Baume les Messieurs falls and caves was a sudden and intense rainstorm. The children and their dad escaped the rainfall under giant rocks near the source of the river, and I hid in a moss-carpeted cave. The dripping inside the cave was as heavy as the rainfall outside, but I was happy to try a few cave shots while waiting out the storm. None of those shots were particularly appealing in the end – it’s hard to set up a shot in the dark while trying to protect a lens from heavy drops of rain – but I wouldn’t dream of complaining. Thirty minutes later, I realized that while it was still “raining” inside the cave, the storm outside had moved on. So back into the river I went, getting odd looks from the other tourists. I suppose it’s a *little* strange to put your rain jacket on the camera rather than yourself. I don’t think I’ve ever been wetter – but the camera was dry, and that’s what matters, right?

I did get the shots I came for, and the downpour left the mosses and spring growth looking fresh and green.

*Rich greens after
the rain.*



Some people consider stormy weather to be the ruination of a perfectly good vacation, but I couldn't be happier when storms blow through. We came at the right time of year, and I was lucky to get a multitude of awe-inspiring storms. As we drove through the countryside at the end of April, imposing storm clouds began to roll in.



Hooray for perfect weather!



We stopped the car and I took a few shots of the sky (in case I didn't get the shot I really wanted) - then I jumped back in and we headed for a church. Any church. Every tiny village has one – and they are all old and beautiful. Ten minutes later, we passed through the tiny village of Vevy. I climbed over a barbed wire fence, crossed someone's lovely, grassy field (*Merci, Monsieur de Vevy!*), and took my shots. Although I rarely title my photographs until they are downloaded from my camera and processed, “The Wrath of God” had a title before I even found the church.

After the kids were in bed, and while their dad worked at his computer, I often spent the evening hours driving from one village to another looking for appealing locations. If the light was right, I'd stop the car on the side of the road and take a shot - and if the skies were uncooperative, I would mark the spot on a map, make a few notes in my little book, and return when the conditions were more favorable. Visiting tourist destinations can be rewarding, but finding a gem in the middle of nowhere as the sun sets over the hills is truly exciting.

*"La vache" is wondering
what the heck I'm doing.*



In late May, Jay (just a good friend at the time) arrived in France for a short visit. He joined us for day trips with the children and they taught him a bit of essential French – the phrase *“beaucoup de vaches”* (meaning “many cows”) proved useful on a daily basis. Jay couldn’t ask for bread at the bakery or request twenty liters of gasoline, but he could point out the cows. And what could possibly be more important than that?

In between day-trips with the kids, Jay and I were able to spend a few days photographing some of the strikingly beautiful castles of the Loire Valley. The weather was extremely kind to us – and the skies were glorious.

The little country house I plan to buy when I retire.



Although we would have liked to spend more time photographing the Loire Valley, it was necessary to limit our trip to a long weekend. In four days, we photographed several enchanting locations - including the castles at Chambord (above), Chenonceau (left), and Cheverny (page 2).

Traveling with the children once again, Jay and I visited the Lac de Paladru. The kids played in the sand and made friends with the water birds. The deep turquoise water of the lake provided a dramatic backdrop, perfect for snapshots.



They wanted to bring the swan home with us!

On the last day of Jay's visit we left the kids with their dad, and spent a day hiking the trails along the Ain River at the Cascades du Hérisson. Thirty-one beautiful waterfalls line the trail, and we photographed nearly all of them. We spent a lot of time standing in water up to our knees waiting for tourists to move out of the frame, but the trip was more than worth the effort.

Greg and I spent our final day in France driving across the countryside with the children. We were headed for Paris – six hours from Leuye. After several hours in the car, Greg pointed to a city on the map. “I think there’s a castle here,” he said, and suggested we stop and let the kids get some exercise. The castle turned out to be the largest we’d seen during our stay. The children watched baby swans swimming in the fountain and chased their dad through the garden labyrinth, while I searched for the perfect shot. Whimsical clouds and a Fairy Tale castle made for a fantastic finale to our French adventures.

Our beautiful, temporary home in Leuye.



Traveling with the kids was challenging, but flexibility and a sense of humor kept us going. I suspect that the wonderful villagers of Leuye weren’t too sad to see us go. The return of serenity must have been a relief after 9 long weeks. The people of France were exceedingly kind to us – and if they thought it strange to see a young woman with a tripod standing on top of a minivan in the early morning light, they were quite kind about it. I really have no idea what they thought of me – my grasp of the French language is rudimentary at best. I like to think they were stunned by my passion and dedication... but it’s more likely they were simply concerned that I might be scaring the chickens.



Château de Joux
© Varina Patel



Château de Cheverny
© Varina Patel



Playing in the River
© Varina Patel



Near Leuye
© Varina Patel



Dandelions
© Varina Patel



Rock Huggers
© Varina Patel



Lac d' Annecy
© Varina Patel



Baume-les-Messieurs
© Varina Patel



Storm and Glory
© Varina Patel

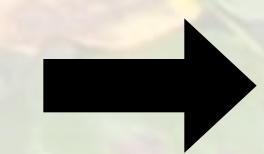


The Wrath of God
© Varina Patel



Cottage in Gizia
© Varina Patel

More Thumbnails



More Thumbnails



La Vache
© Varina Patel



Château de Chenonceau
© Varina Patel



Château de Chambord
© Varina Patel



Grand Saut
© Varina Patel



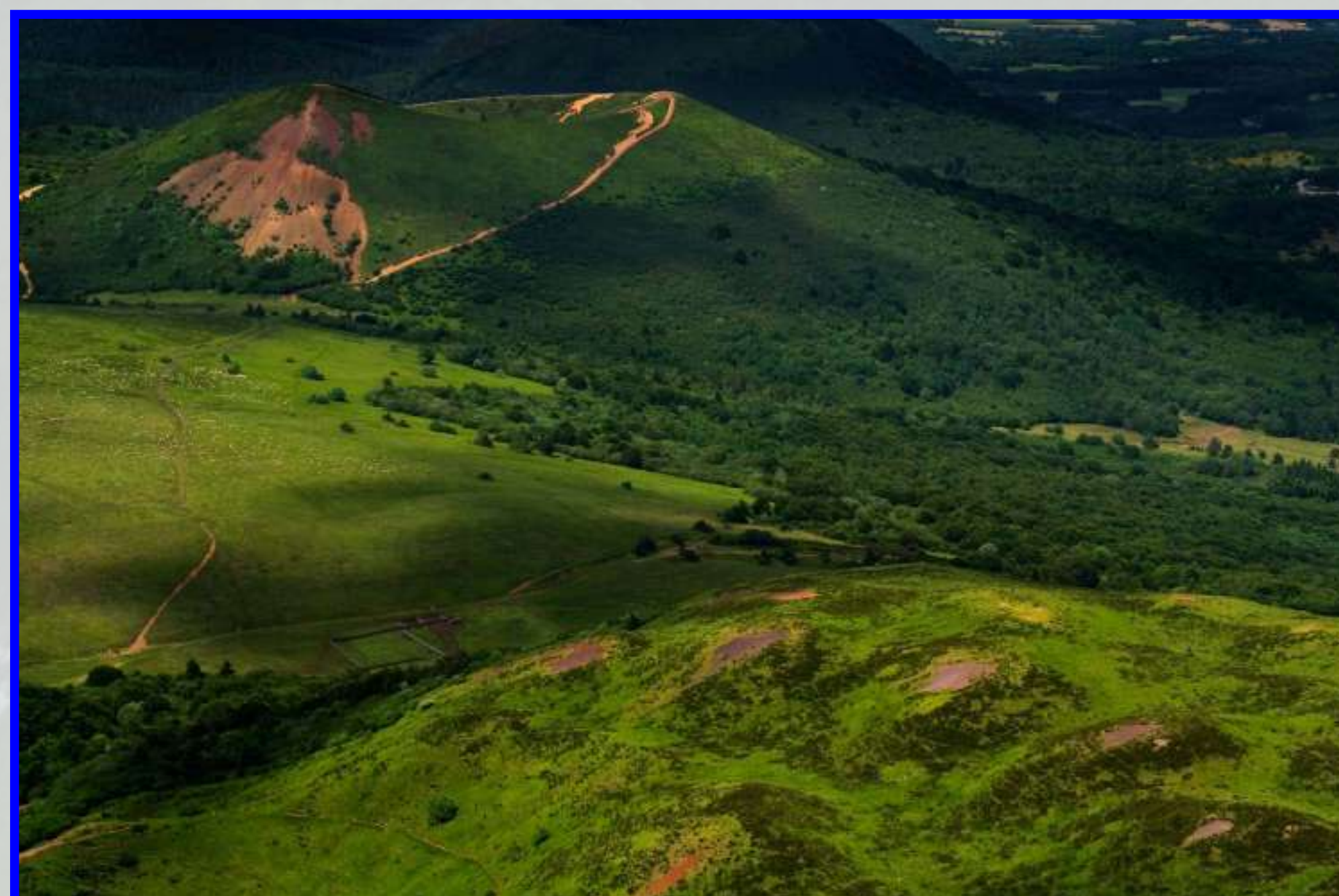
The Girls and the Swan
© Varina Patel



Home Away from Home
© Varina Patel



Château de Fontainebleau
© Varina Patel



Volcans d'Auvergne
© Varina Patel

*I apologize for any incorrect translations...
I did TRY to learn to speak French!*



Another big storm was rolling in , and we had to leave just moments after I took this shot.

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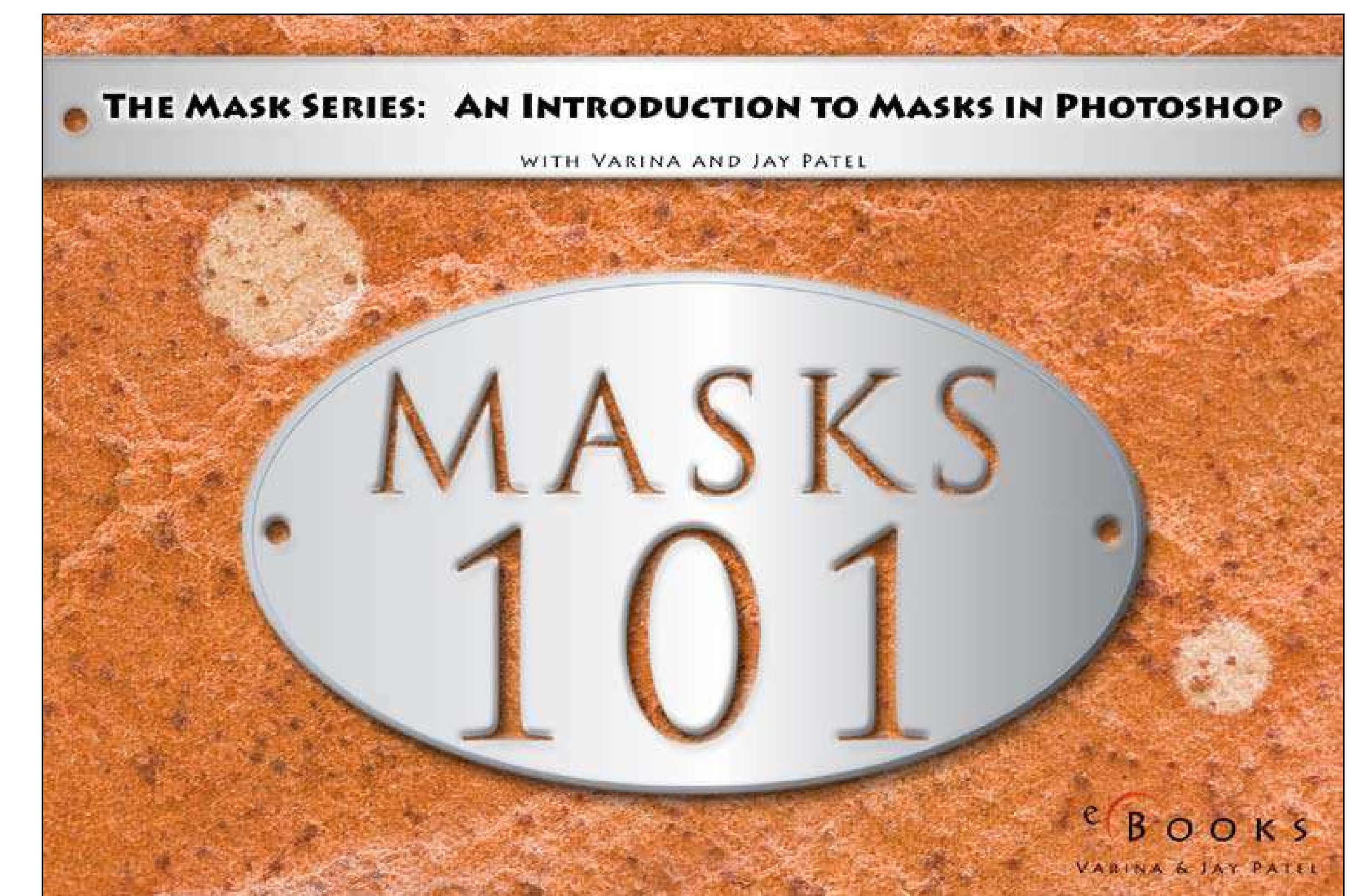
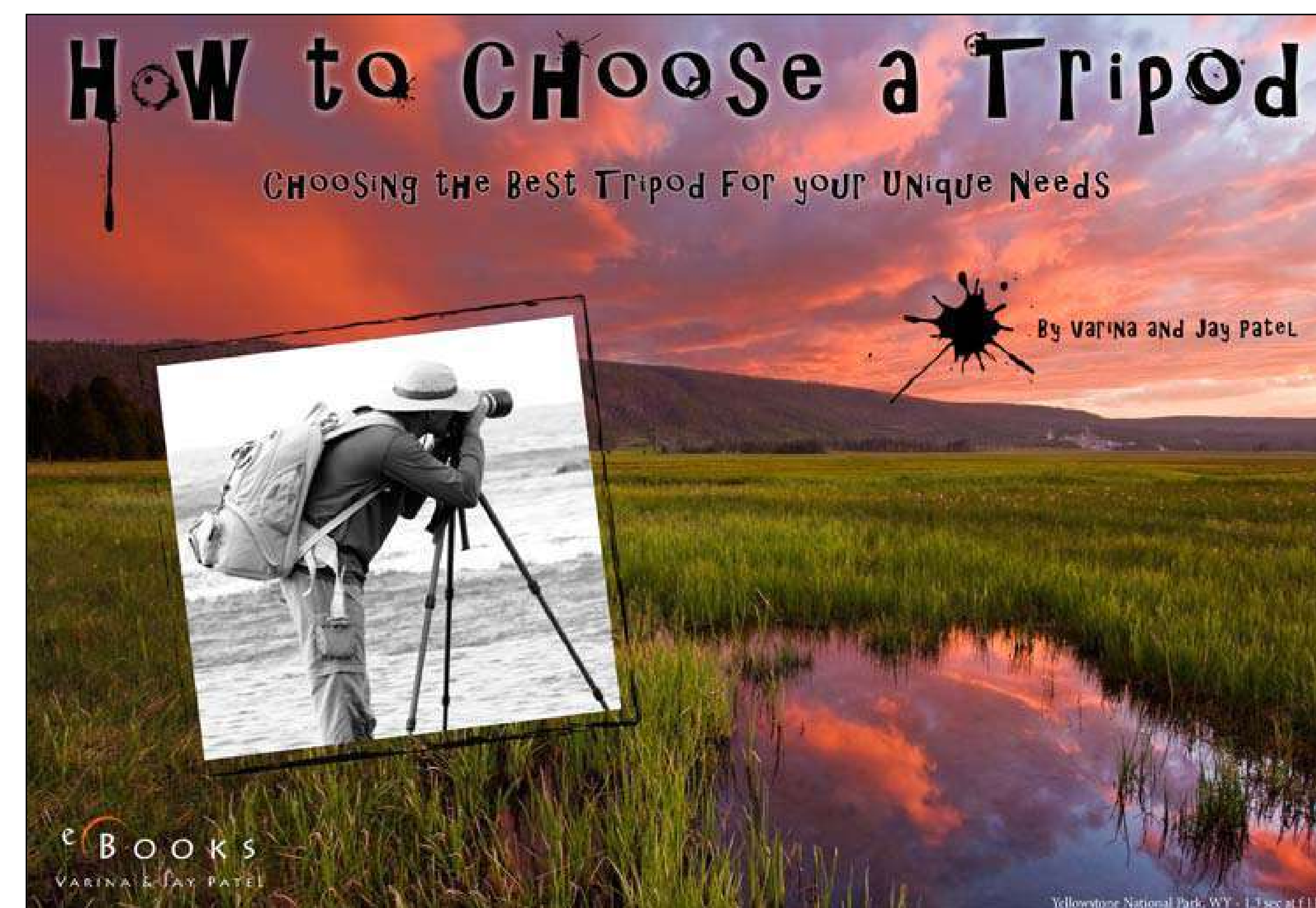
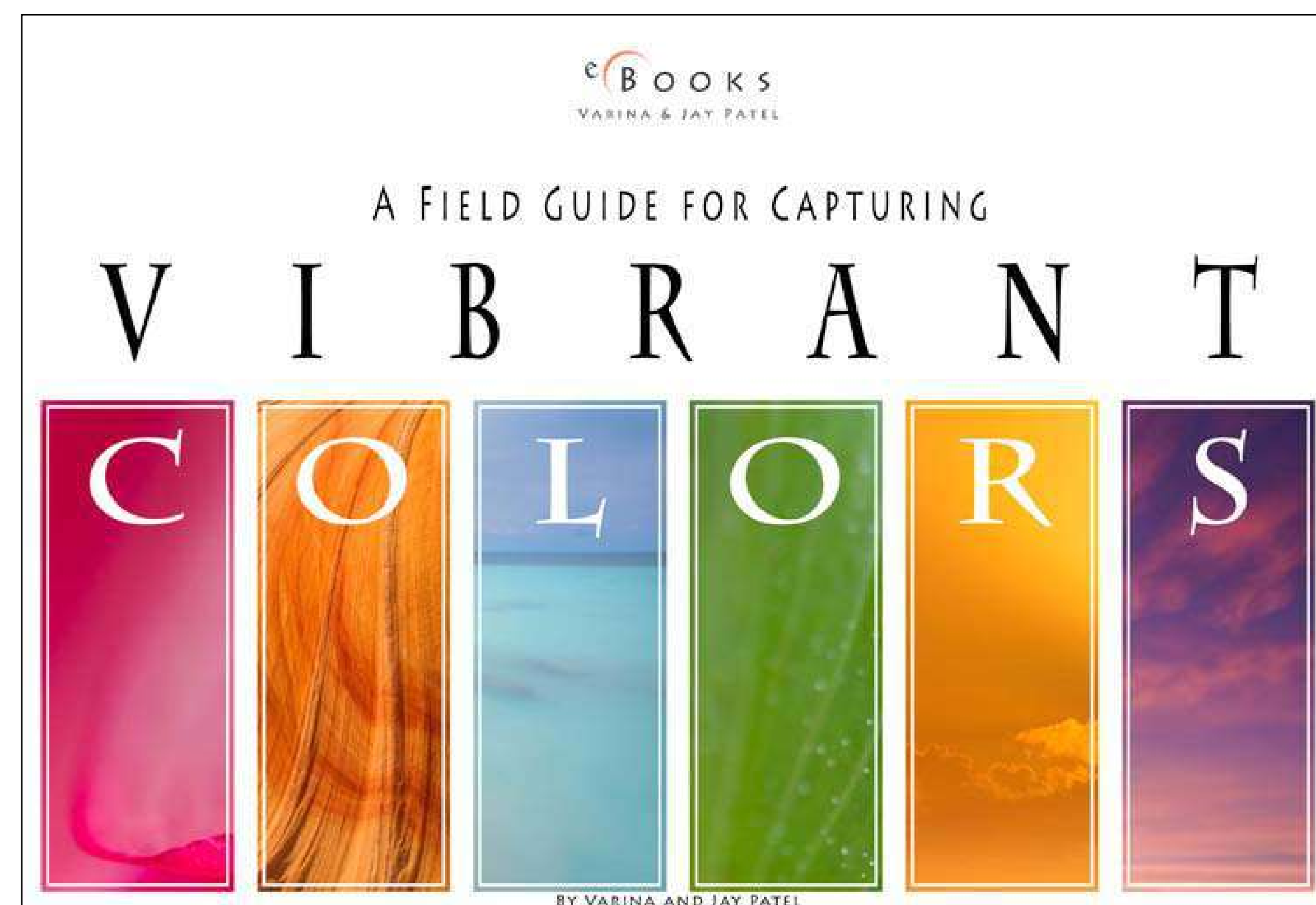
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VARINA PATEL

Landscape photography is demanding. It is not unusual to climb a steep trail and wait several hours for sunset – despite intense heat or numbing cold – only to climb back down in the dark without getting the shot because the light wasn't right. Varina is more than willing to return to a location many times if necessary. She doesn't mind cold hands, wet feet, muddy clothes, or aching muscles – if in the end, the photograph makes an impression. She loves hiking long trails through wilderness, crossing rivers on slippery stones, and climbing sand dunes by the light of the moon. Varina thrives on rising before the sun in order to capture those first rays of sun on the mountain, and she is irresistibly drawn to the challenge of finding the right light, in the right place, at the right time.

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