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SNAP HAPPY



Sarah Laing heads to Las Vegas to learn to shoot like legendary photog Slim Aarons.

THE INSPO
Two of Slim Aarons' photo books, *La Dolce Vita* and *Once Upon a Time* (top and above, from \$98 each, at Indigo, chapters.indigo.ca)

i'm sure there are many versions of a trip to Vegas that involve bikinis, swanky pool cabanas and high-end cameras, but mine, I assure you, is the kind of tale that is less “what happens here, stays here” and more “this could turn into the most beautiful coffee-table book.”

In fact, lush, glossy spreads of people living *la dolce vita* are the entire reason I'm here, Leica camera in hand, crouched in front of a model who's shivering a little on an unseasonably cold Nevada morning, her face shaded by a wide-brimmed sun hat.

“I would angle that reflector a little higher so you can get some light into her eyes,” advises a voice behind me.

“How about this potted plant for the table next to her?” says another voice. “This is just like when I was grabbing props for Dad!”

These two (helpful and encouraging) voices are a constant soundtrack to my three days spent “shooting like Slim,” an immersive, intense-as-you-make-it vacation workshop offered by Exclusive Resorts. The first voice belongs to Tom A. Smith, a photographer and instructor from the Leica Akademie, the teaching arm of the German camera brand, and the other is that of Mary Aarons, daughter of (and one-time assistant to) legendary snapper Slim Aarons.

This mini-break—part of a growing trend of “learning” holidays, in which your time is spent, say, taking surfing lessons or improving your guitar or photography skills—feels a lot like what going on an actual shoot with Aarons might have been like, back when the late photog was shooting the glamorous, the wealthy and the aristocratic of Europe and America in the '50s, '60s and '70s.

Aarons made his name doing what he described as snapping “attractive people doing ▷

THE TRIP This is one of many photography-themed “Destinations in Focus” trips offered by Exclusive Resorts, a luxury vacation club that has partnered with Leica. The apartment-style suite I stayed in at the Vdara Hotel (which has a fully equipped kitchen, should one ever tire of Vegas' world-class dining) is one of over 400 private residences (found everywhere from Italy to the West Indies) available to members. It's a bit like having a (very lovely) turnkey flat in Paris, Costa Rica or NYC that's yours for a few days or weeks a year but without all the hassle of, like, actually owning it. Plus, there's the added benefit of an “ambassador” who acts like your personal concierge.



Slim Aarons' famous *Poolside Gossip* (far left); two of the Aarons-inspired photos the writer took by the Vdara Hotel pool in Las Vegas (left and below left)



attractive things in attractive places.” (Think Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart laughing together or tanned white-clad society having drinks on a terrace.) Today’s lesson—working with a professional model by the pool at the ritzy Vdara Hotel to recreate the set-up of Aarons’ most famous picture, *Poolside Gossip*—feels like it more than fulfills that brief. The iconic image, a classic that shows two elegant society ladies by the pool, their chairs facing each other in perfect symmetry against the backdrop of a modernist home in Palm Springs, is celebrating its 45th anniversary this year.

Like so much of Aarons’ work, there’s an effortless ease to the image—as if he’d been lounging on a recliner behind them, picked up his point-and-shoot and casually snapped them unawares. As I learn from Mary and Tom, however, this was never the case.

“Dad would send me on prop-finding missions when I assisted him,” says Mary, who now works in book publishing and lives in Massachusetts, adding that he hated candids. Every Slim “set-up” was meticulously planned, right down to the hair on his subjects’ heads.

“Dad detested centre parts on women,” recalls Mary. “He would always make them change to a side part—even me!” (Side note: Tom adds that if you want to find people’s “good side,” it’s usually the side they part their hair on.)

That level of care and attention—always taking the time to frame the shot and get it right—is probably my biggest takeaway from the course, much to the exasperation of the friends I tested it out during a recent trip to New York. It was actually in trying out my new skills on real people (who, understandably, tensed up when I started stage-managing them at Shake Shack) that I appreciated the real magic of Slim Aarons.

When I ask Mary how her dad made everyone look so chill, she explains that there was no tension because he would often arrive solo or maybe with one assistant. “It wasn’t a road show,” she says. “While working on the *mise en scène*, he would chat away and swap tales. Everyone was having fun, which resulted in very happy and natural photographs.”

I have to admit that there is a tiny bit of tension on this set, thanks to an uncooperative and gusty desert wind, which has blown the model’s scarlet hat off her head and into the pool—just as I press the shutter. About to call the shot a disaster, I take a peek at the display screen of my camera and see that in that image—the model’s surprised laugh, her arm flung back over her head—I have finally managed to capture the spark of a classic relaxed and happy Slim photo. Success!

The best part? That poolside shot (once edited, cropped and retouched, as we learned to do later in the day) is something I’ll keep forever...which is more than I can say for the handful of dollar bills I lost playing the penny slots at the Cosmopolitan later that day. □

SNAPS FROM MY FATHER

Mary Aarons says she hears her dad’s voice every time she takes a photograph. Here are some of the tips running through her head.

1

Never shoot upward.

“That equals double chins and odd shadows!”

2

Take the time to frame it right.

“Don’t make folks standing in front of the Eiffel Tower (or any other landmark) look tiny. Bring them forward so that you have them framed correctly and your landmark will look spectacular in the background. Tiny people and tiny landmark equal a crappy shot.”

3

Tell a story. “My dad and I used to look at art together, and he would point out the talent the best artists had for presenting a scene. He was doing with a camera what the great masters did with a paintbrush.”

4

Add colour. “My dad always had a pop of red in his pictures—he actually carried around a red silk square leftover from the lining of a bespoke blazer for this purpose.”