

American Photography's

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American Photography Open 2022: Meet Grand Prize Winner Mauro De Bettio

By David Schonauer Wednesday October 26, 2022

*Above: Mauro De Bettio's "Gentleman of Kibera"*

You've met this year's 10 finalists. Today we introduce the grand prize winner of the American Photography Open 2022 competition, [Mauro De Bettio](#). His winning image, "Gentlemen of Kibera," is a portrait of a snappily-dressed resident of Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya, where De Bettio has been working on documentary projects for several years.

He made the photograph in July of 2021, after meeting the man known locally as "Baqteria"—a model, tailor, actor, mentor, stuntman and "Kibera model of the year 2020."

"While in Kibera, I would see these fantastic people, just walking around, wearing such stylish and colorful suits. And, of course, I couldn't miss the opportunity to portray at least one of them," he says.

Our judges cited the photograph's color, composition and overall charm. "For me it is always an emotion, a joy and huge fun to work in Kibera," says De Bettio. "In that place I feel like I'm home. The colors, the music, the smells and especially the welcome and the smiles of all the people who know me and who know that, through the photography and the message I bring with it, I try to do good for their community."

De Bettio, who was born in a small village in the Italian Alps and now is based in Barcelona, Spain, began visiting the Kibera slum in 2012. "Seeing me on the street with a camera around my neck, a girl asked if I would give photography lessons in her school. I obviously accepted," he recalls. "My love for that place and those people started on that day."

According to a 2009 census, Kibera is home to some 170,000 people, though other sources suggest its population may range from 500,000 to over 1,000,000. De Bettio's involvement with Kibera goes well beyond photography. For two years, he has also been working with the Malaika Foundation, an organization he helped start that is dedicated to helping orphaned children in Nairobi, Kenya.

"Because I was working on a long-term project in Kenya, I spent a couple of months in the capitol Nairobi. I obviously knew of the existence of people living on the street, but I had never realized that there were so many, and so young. I began to meet some of them, to talk to them, and to share hot meals with them. At that moment I gave up on the photo project I was there for," he says. "I eventually decided to create [Malaika Foundation](#), which, thanks to the help of some donors, distributes 150 meals a week, as well as medical care and moral support."

De Bettio is also publishing a new book, titled [40 Seasons of Humanity](#), documenting what he calls a "journey" that he began a decade ago. "During this journey, which pushed me to different remote corners of the planet, I met and photographed people of distinct cultures, characters and dogmas, who opened a window on their stories," he says. "Some of these people are often defined on the margins—minorities that are easy to ignore or whose existence we simply do not know. I allowed myself to reach and explore their worlds and found an infinite beauty of diversity through the face of a humanity cadenced in 40 seasons."

De Bettio explains more about the project in the video above.

On top of his other work, De Bettio organizes [photo tours](#) to locations including Bangladesh, Kenya and Ethiopia. "A lot of time has been invested in researching the best areas, villages, landscapes and populations to ensure my clients have the best experience these places can offer," he notes at his website.

As this year's grand prize winner, De Bettio receives [\\$5,000](#), a Tamron 35-150mm F/2-2.8 Di III VXD (Model A058 for Sony mirrorless, \$1899 value) - as well as a SanDisk 1 TB Extreme Pro Portable SSD, a PhotoShelter 2-year Pro account and a 2-hour business consultation with The Photo Closer.

We'd like to take this chance to congratulate to all [our finalists](#), as well as Svetlin Yosifov, winner of this year's [SanDisk Share Your World competition](#). And we'd like to thank everyone who entered this year's competition. With entries from all around the globe, we were offered glimpses of landscapes, night skies, wildlife, home life, and, as Mauro De Bettio puts it, the "infinite beauty of diversity" our planet has to offer.