

The expedition team from *Lost Worlds* in the Mulu Clearwater cave system

RYAN ATKINSON

## THREE TYPES OF FUN: IN, UNDER AND ON THE EDGE

GTC and IAWF member **Ryan Atkinson** specialises in shooting in some of the most challenging environments on earth. Recently awarded a GTC Award for Excellence for his work on *Expedition Volcano* with DoP Will Edwards, Ryan shares some experiences and top tips for filming in the depths of the jungle canopy, underground in caves and on cliffs and mountains. He also includes notes from his field diaries (actually a top tip in itself – to keep a journal on your shoots)!

**Y**ou've probably heard of the three types of fun often used to describe outdoor experiences: Type one is immediate fun; Type two is less fun during the event but you look back and remember it as being a blast; and Type three fun... well, let's just say it only becomes fun a couple of months later, usually over some beers and through a hazy memory. My career has revolved almost exclusively around Type three experiences, many of which have involved caves, mountains, rainforests – and sometimes a mix of all three.

It takes more than just stubbornness, willpower and a proven tolerance for tropical nasties to shoot in extreme environments, so when Zerb approached me, I thought it was high time to get over my Type 16 memories of last year's scorpion sting and subsequent Medevac, to delve into the ins and outs of what it takes to be a specialist expedition cameraperson.

Expedition camerawork is tough; there are no two ways about it. To paraphrase the words of world-renowned cameraman (and GTC/IAWF member) Doug Allen: If underpaid, dangerous, hard graft, long hours, hazardous,

lonely and often frustrating work with a bunch of smelly, grumpy nutcases in savage arenas full of things that want to eat and/or kill you sounds like your cup of tea, then there is no better job in the world! And it's very true. I've had the privilege of filming in some of the most challenging and hostile locations on Earth: from the oxygen-starved air of the Andes for *Planet Earth II*, to the sulphurous pits of a volcano in one of the world's most restive national parks on *Expedition Volcano*, all the way to the skin-eating humidity of the Bornean jungles. I often return with a certain feeling of broken-ness, a feeling I'm sure many of you are familiar with... and yet, something still keeps me going back for more. Without a 5-star hotel or business class flight in sight, what is it that motivates expedition camerapeople to push themselves further and further in these extremes? And what are some top tips for keeping your gear and body going when everything else is working in the opposite direction? I could probably write a whole book to cover all of this, but for the purposes of this article, I'll keep it to the three big Cs: Cliffs, Caves and under the Canopy.

### Into the jungle

Let's begin in one of the most exhaustively challenging and yet thoroughly enjoyable biomes on the planet, the tropical rainforest. Every location comes with its unique challenges, but none more so than the humidity and heat of a jungle. The environment and toll it takes on equipment is just one of the many difficulties, with the often dense understory making movement and clean shots near impossible. The impenetrable canopy lets through tiny spots of equatorial sunlight onto the murky forest floor, meaning dealing with specular highlights becomes an ever-present frustration. But, if you can get past the condensation wars and harsh contrast, you're treated to a visual feast of shadow and detail. After all, the moving image is about bringing life to the screen and nowhere is this more apparent than in the juxtapositions of the tropical jungle. It's well worth persevering.

### Canopies: Tools of the trade

Think latitude, latitude, latitude! And, of course, a certain amount of weather-sealing too. Once things get wet, they stay wet. Sadly, some of the best cameras on the market for dealing with the huge dynamic range are also some of the most susceptible to moisture. But in the tropics, the trusty old Sony F55 workhorse has never failed me yet. With its versatility in frame rates, codecs and gamma curves, there's a setting for just about every situation and the weather-sealing is pretty impenetrable too. As with any situation, the content will, to an extent, dictate the camera. But keep latitude and weather-sealing in mind and you won't go far wrong.

### Canopies: Top tips

Be sure to bring a plethora of consumables. Massive tarpaulins are great when you encounter the inevitable tropical downpour and an unending supply of silica gel and Ziploc® bags will help tackle the already lost battle against humidity. Remember to split these up into smaller sealed packets of two or three gels before you leave, as one huge bag is useless – as soon as you open it to reach for a couple of sachets, the intensely humid air will leave the whole lot compromised. If you're lucky enough to be staying in accommodation with air-conditioning... just don't. Ignore me and you'll soon find out why.

Throw the photography rule book out the window. Forget golden hour and aim for high overcast; this will give the best and most manageable light under the canopy. If you're lucky enough to be above the canopy, then be ready for the 20 minutes after the sun first hits, or immediately after any afternoon downpour, as you might just catch that most enviable shot of mist rising in ethereal layers above the trees.

### Field Diary: Sarawak, Borneo

28 February 2018

The last two days have been beyond tough. It seems like a lifetime ago that we trekked into Camp 5 and spent a couple of hours lazily snoozing in our hammocks by the river. The trek in took us just 1hr 45mins, well under the

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Every location comes with its unique challenges, but none more so than the humidity and heat of a jungle.



Committing to the shot: taking production stills waist deep in a rainforest river in Mulu, Borneo

tourist time of 3 hours, despite heavy loads. The climb up to the Pinnacles was tough. As soon as we left the riverbed, it was the familiar near vertical scrambling most of the way. It felt a lot easier than last week's recce, but with the added weight of the drone it took us almost 6 hours to reach the top. No chance of using the Peli, so we stashed the drone inside my sleeping bag and double-bagged it in poly, strapping the whole thing to the fixer's back. Tourists are not allowed to do this climb in the rain... it's too dangerous. For us, it was torrential all the way to the top, but the rain offered no let-up from the heat. A vertical km in just 2km of trekking made sure I was soaked to the skin well before the rain even started. I learned from last week's mistake and opted to pitch my hammock above the 10m drop this time, avoiding the upsplash off the rocks and keeping dry, although my tarp got ripped off in the early hours... so not dry any more. Woke this morning however to clear skies. We set the drone on the only square metre of flat ground at the summit and waited for light. Worth every single scrap of effort – we had about an hour of gorgeous light and drifting mist hitting the Pinnacles before the rain set in again. Such unbelievable textures – it looked like something out of *Jurassic Park*. 48 hours of effort for one hour of filming. Worth every second.



Lost Worlds: cave guide Andy Eavis leads the presenters deep into unexplored cave passages in the Clearwater System

## Out of sight, out of mind

Caves. What can I say? Dark, smelly, hotter than you'd imagine, uncomfortable and colourless – and did I mention dark? I fondly remember a particular shoot in the Mulu Clearwater cave system in Malaysia, spending the best part of a week underground for Discovery Channel. At the end of the shoot our guide pitched the idea of making an entire series on caves. We politely declined.

Yet, as tough and uncomfortable as these places are, with all the obvious difficulties of squeezing into impossibly awkward spots not exactly designed for clunky camera equipment (let alone the people operating it), there's something inexplicably intoxicating about shoots underground. With the cathedral-like caverns and perfectly clear underwater streams, you're filming in a never-ending interplay between artificial light sources and shadows darker than anything imaginable. Perhaps it's the thrill of exploration (I remember our guide once pointing out that more people had walked on the moon than in that particular cave passage), or maybe it's just the thrill of that first breath of fresh and mobile air as you surface from days spent in an underground labyrinth. Whatever it is, they are magical places.

## Caves: Tools of the trade

Did I mention that caves are dark? Painting with light underground is an art-form of its own, perfected by only a few. I certainly don't count myself amongst these, but if you want to see a real master at work, then look at National Geographic photographer Robbie Shone's pictures. I prefer natural light at all costs – but light you will, as light you must. Gone are the days of hefty generators pumping in light and tungsten bulbs smashing at the graze of a stalactite. Nowadays, there are numerous high-powered, battery-juiced lighting options available. Personally, I like to use a mix of light panels and sources designed for emergency services. Peli and other brands make a fantastic line of 'scene lighting', most of which can run off a car battery. Mix these with a few ultra-powerful LED lenser torches for the authentic feel of underground exploration, and you've got a winning combination to bring to life the murkiest of depths.

## Caves: Top tips

Don't be afraid of focal length. Naturally, when filming in a confined space, we all immediately tend to think wide-angle lenses – but carefully considered close-up

detail and crushed depth of field can add a suitably claustrophobic element to the shot. Wide angles will show off the cave in all its glory, but get in close and the relationship of your subject to the oppressive rock face can really draw the audience into the frame and emotion of the moment.

Oh, and don't forget to bring wet wipes. As many as you can fit in your pack. Let's just say that in caves, it's best to leave your dignity at the entrance.

## Field Diary: Caving in Mulu

20 June 2014

We've just resurfaced from six days underground. I say six days... I think it was six days. I've actually lost count. I feel drained, and I have cave mud in places I didn't know existed, but it was an amazing experience. I'm not in a hurry to repeat it but we've seen some incredible things. We entered via boat through Cave of The Winds, pack-rafting down the underground Clearwater river to link into the main cave system. A half day of squeezing through the most unimaginably small gaps with all of our camera gear, and filming a few close encounters with cave racers on the way. We travelled the 300 or 400 metres further underground into the area around the Secret Garden, an immense sinkhole, where an underground forest has developed, a place of illogically tall and slim trees, all trying to reach the sunlight above. Sunlight. I never realised until I didn't see it at all for so long, how much it influences a person. We all went a bit crazy and I'm not sure we'd have got through it without our medic and camp manager Grant keeping check on our times to sleep and eat/drink etc. We had an army of porters making an eight-hour round trip every day to resupply us with water so that we could keep filming. When we eventually resurfaced, it was in the midst of a tropical downpour. We all promptly stripped down and jumped in the river. Terrence, our fixer, appeared from behind the rock with a crate of beer he'd stashed there on our way in. I'm glad it's over – but I'd go back tomorrow.



Filming professional climber Gilly MacArthur in the slate quarries of North Wales

## Cliffs

I've saved the best until last. Well, the best in my opinion, as I spent a lifetime before camerawork playing in the mountains. I studied documentary photography and from that basically broke into adventure camerawork as a means of exploring mountains. It follows that as soon as anyone mentions mountains, cliffs, ropes, skis, or any combination of the above, I jump. Not literally, of course... but there's something about the perspective and layering of a mountain landscape that just isn't available anywhere else on Earth: the quality of light at high altitudes, with its blues and glowing pinks; the perspective and parallax shift of foreground subjects tracking against background crags; the feeling of vertigo as the camera draws the viewer over the edge of the precipice and into the unknown – magical.

## Cliffs: Tools of the trade

Lightweight. Useable. Practical. Unfortunately, some of the most spectacular cameras on the market are just not built for working on ropes. There's something terrifyingly unnerving about a £30,000 RED rig swinging in the wind as you struggle on a crumbling rock face. And the number of additional bolt-ons needed to make some cameras useable just makes them impractical on cliff faces. Often smaller weight and simpler options are just as good as REDs in this environment. Two of my favourites at present are the Sony FS5 and the Canon C200. The capabilities of such cameras at their low price points, plus small size and increasingly good image quality, make them ideal for working on ropes.

It's rare in these situations to have the luxury of a sound recordist, so I'm often required to monitor my own audio. Cue a specially modified climbing helmet with



Canon 5D Mk3 timelapse camera after a night outside in -40 in the Norwegian Arctic

a pair of HD25s torn apart and bolted to the sides of the helmet on swivel mounts. Not very good for street cred, but it does beat getting a regular pair of headphones tangled up in your descender.

## Cliffs: Top tips

A good 5" ultra-bright daylight-viewable monitor, securely bolted onto the side of the camera with a moveable Noga-style arm, avoids the awkward ballet moves required to use a viewfinder while swinging and strutting around the rockface. It takes a certain level of acrobatics to find your angles, especially when working with unpredictable contributors, so anything you can do to make your rig as flexible and useable as possible is a big win.

On the less technical side, a skateboard attached to your line with an ascender device and some adjustable lengths of cord can make for a far more comfortable filming platform than three thin strands of nylon webbing digging into your thighs and hips.



In the bottom of a crevasse next to a meltwater river in the French Alps



Faroe Islanders risk everything during their traditional harvest of fulmar eggs collected from the islands' vertiginous cliff faces

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**Field Diary: Faroe Islands**

**18 May 2017**

Today was the day. After three days of yomping around the hills to recce locations and practically having a heart attack thinking about abseiling over the side of some of the biggest cliffs I've ever seen, we went for it. Difficult to know the exact height but we reckoned at least 500m or so, with a straight drop below into the sea. I and Tim, who is looking after the rigging and watching my back, left ahead of the rest of the crew to set up. A couple of ground bars and three lines off the edge, one for each of us and one as a shared backup. It rained all morning, which gave us pause for thought. Last night, egg man Harry mentioned that they don't go in the rain, as it's too slippy – and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was secretly hoping it would be called off. But they decided to go ahead. Harry doesn't speak English but we saw him admiring our rope access setups and looking terrified. Our translator soon told us that apparently he didn't trust all the metalwork and our thin 10mm ropes at all. He'd rather go over on a 50-year-old fishing rope with a woollen handmade harness and 10 blokes holding the other end. The first cliff went great. With the fog blowing around us and fulmars throwing up from every crevice, it was pretty atmospheric. The camera was awkward. Production wanted me to use a C300 but they can be a bit clunky for cliff work and I had to take it down inside a bag to stop it getting damaged. Tim was super-helpful, grabbing the back of my harness and helping me twist into some awkward positions to get the shots. I went onto a traverse line on the ledge so I could move around more easily. Harry, being Harry, just untied and trotted around me gathering the loot. Nutter. The second cliff was much bigger. I got half way down but Tim and I both agreed to call it off. It was a real shame not to get more footage but it was too loose and, in hindsight, the line we picked was way too dangerous to be worth the risk. Back home for tea and translucent fulmar eggs.

**19 May 2017**

Note to self: Never eat another fulmar egg.



**Fact File**

IAWF and GTC member **Ryan Atkinson** is a specialist adventure, travel and wildlife cameraman and aerial photographer.

In the past couple of years he's worked on major shows such as *Planet Earth II*, *Earth's Natural Wonders* and *Expedition Volcano*. His most recent shoot saw him spend a significant amount of this past winter working in the Rockies across Canada and North America, filming for a BBC special on the science of avalanches, due out later this year. He's currently working on projects across the world for the BBC, National Geographic and PBS. You can contact Ryan on [ryanatkinsoncam@gmail.com](mailto:ryanatkinsoncam@gmail.com)



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