

# Around the world with David Beckham... and an ALEXA Mini

When GTC sponsors ARRI announced the ALEXA Mini at BVE last year, it immediately seemed that this would be a useful addition to the already popular ALEXA family. We were eager to get our hands on one to review – but there was no chance as they were all quickly put to work. So, a year on, we thought we would find out how it is faring in the field and what uses it is being put to. We found enthusiastic users working across the board – on a challenging documentary shoot, a largely handheld drama and for aerial work. In this first of three contributions from ‘Mini-users’, DoP **Neil Harvey** explains how the lightweight, compact camera was perfect for keeping up with David Beckham as he circumnavigated the globe to play a football match in every continent in consecutive days.



The ALEXA Mini bagged up for rain at Old Trafford

JACKIE HUCKERSON

I was first approached about filming the David Beckham adventure *For The Love of the Game* for BBC1 back in the early summer of 2015. It was an ambitious project: fly David Beckham to seven continents around the world in seven days (we did it in nine in the end) to play seven games of football and, in so doing, demonstrate the global appeal of the beautiful game and how in some places it significantly changes some people's lives for the better. After playing in Australasia, Asia, Africa, South America, the Antarctic and North America, the filming would end up at Old Trafford (Europe), where he would play the final game and raise money for the charity UNICEF. I was immediately excited about shooting this on my ARRI AMIRA. It felt right because when I had shot a previous adventure with David Beckham, in the Amazon in February 2014 (see *Zerb 80*, Autumn 2014), there had not been a production model of the AMIRA in existence. This was the camera I had always wanted for shoots like this – an ergonomic documentary-style camera using the industry-acclaimed ARRI ALEXA sensor.

## The Mini comes onboard

In the planning of this new project we decided to take a couple of ALEXA Minis with us for drone work, for rigging on vehicles in tight places and for use on image-stabilising systems. It was only when I went to test the ALEXA Mini at ARRI in London, courtesy of Milan Krsljanin, Director of Business Development at ARRI UK, it quickly became apparent that not only would this camera be an excellent choice for the drone and image-stabilising work but it clearly presented another option as a main camera. On this shoot I would be filming in a lot of tight spots and needed to be highly mobile. I was immediately impressed with the size and weight of the ALEXA Mini and, in no time at all, my first-rate assistant cameraman (AC) for the shoot, Ariel Grandoli, had reconfigured the camera from a rather square block into something that started to look like a camera you could handle on your shoulder.

The ALEXA Mini came with a viewfinder and a shoulder pad attached on the base. We placed a set of 15mm bars at the base of the camera that extended forward and to the rear of the body. This allowed us to place a V-Lok power system plate at the back and a set of Ronford Bull Bar handles at the front. We used an LMB25 clip-on matte box to keep the weight down and a Teradek wireless monitor system enabled us to send pictures to the director's monitor. The result when bringing the camera onto the shoulder was a very lightweight and ergonomic camera that also delivered fantastic pictures. I was hooked! I decided on the spot that the ALEXA Mini would be my 'A' camera on this fast-moving, predominantly handheld shoot. The ALEXA Mini in this configuration weighed less than the AMIRA and was balanced very nicely given that I was going to be shooting mostly on Zeiss SuperSpeed Mk II prime lenses. This allowed me to have a pretty low-profile camera both in weight and size, such an asset given the nature of the shoot, which would involve filming in vehicles of all shapes and sizes (mini vans, pickups, tuktuks, 4x4 vehicles), inside a private jet and the cramped stowage area of a Russian cargo plane, and in and out of buildings with small rooms and tight spaces.

## Vintage primes and the ALEXA sensor

We were cleared by BBC1 in pre-production to shoot an aspect ratio of ARRI 2.39, which we felt would add to the cinematic feel of the piece combined with using the vintage prime lenses. These Zeiss primes were previously used on



ALEXA Mini in documentary mode with 15mm bars, V-Lok battery, moose bars, SuperSpeed lens, LMB25 matte box, timecoded Lockit Box and audio receiver for guide track

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movies such as *Out of Africa*, *Raging Bull* and *City of God*, so essentially I knew this was glass that would give a wonderful aesthetic tone, particularly in terms of the way the focus falls away nicely with a gentle softness, especially when combined with the ALEXA sensor. With a stop of T1.3 and the wonderful latitude of this sensor, I felt it would be hard to get caught out filming with available light in a broad range of environments, be it exterior or interior, day or night.

## All sorts of environment

This shoot would be a real test for any camera. We started in the pounding rain of the rainforests of Papua New Guinea, with plenty of humidity, before travelling straight on to the high-altitude dusty environment of Katmandu in Nepal. In no time we were then in the deserts of Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, once again a very dusty environment, with the camera being thrown around in a 4x4 on desert roads in 30 degrees of heat. Next, it was Buenos Aires in South

The ALEXA Mini – a rather square box with a lens on the front and a great sensor inside – that is until all the accessories are added





America, which presented no particular challenges in terms of temperature or climate, but landing in the Antarctic was a different story with a windy -25 degrees Celsius; the ALEXA Mini coped with no problems at all. Next stop was Miami, so back to humidity – but, once again, no big deal for the camera. Finally, Manchester did its very best to penetrate the body and viewfinder with some teeming November rain but again all was well.

I have to say I loved shooting with the ALEXA Mini in this setup. It was lightweight and functioned wonderfully. In terms of pros and cons, arguably only having one card slot might be considered a downside, but given that we were shooting 4444 HD, we had 41 minutes per 120GB card, which was plenty of shooting time not to be worrying about switching out cards and, truthfully, it was quite nice never having that concern of mixing up cards. We couldn't fit on the option of a quick release plate with the shoulder pad so it did mean that switching from handheld filming to shooting on the tripod took a little more time.

One other point is that the ALEXA Mini is not really designed with a great deal of sound options on board but this was not a problem on this shoot as the team was very happy for us to commit to shooting separate sound. Our excellent sound recordist Freddie Clare attached a timecode Lockit box to the side of the camera and that was job done. At one point, as we headed to the Antarctic, there was only room on the Russian cargo plane for four team members: David, his friend David Gardner, the ever-adventurous producer for Big Planet Productions Russ Malkin, and myself; for this trip Freddie managed to place a top mic on the Mini for the option of another sound track.

## Matching with AMIRA images

My fellow DoP Johann Perry was also very pleased with the performance of the ALEXA Mini assigned to him. While he chose to shoot most of his documentary material with the AMIRA, he did have his Mini rigged on a Letus Stabiliser, which – with the assistance of top AC Adam Feeney – he could switch to very quickly in order to capture very nice Steadicam-like tracking shots. The shoot was set up in such a way that I would travel with David Beckham on the private jet with the ALEXA Mini and SuperSpeed prime lenses and pretty much stick to him like glue, while, on the ground in each continent, a crew with an AMIRA with mostly zoom lenses would be in readiness to capture the images that would complete the sequences, given that there was no



The AMIRA complemented the Mini very well in the Antarctic

time for repeat action. It was important that the footage from the AMIRAs and Minis cut together perfectly. The super-experienced DoP, GTC member Graham Maunder and excellent DoP Edward Lindsey were both shooting on AMIRAs and the footage from all these cameras matched seamlessly with the Minis as the shoot unfolded. Ariel also operated the AMIRA in Papua New Guinea. Due to the limitations on the number of crew that could fly to the Antarctic, I found myself shooting on both the ALEXA Mini and the AMIRA. I would switch between running around handheld on the Mini and shooting with the AMIRA on a tripod from the touchline of the makeshift football pitch, using a Canon F2.8 300mm lens at 100fps for nice slow-motion action shots.

We had decided in pre-production that it would be good to give the look of each continent a different feel visually and so set a different LUT for each continent. This was not 'baked in' as such but attached as meta data. Given that this was going to be such a fast turn-around in the edit (three and a half weeks) and I wasn't necessarily going to be able to attend the grade, I wanted the producers to live with the 'looks' during the offline. While they were perhaps a little extreme for this it meant that by the time we got to the grade everyone was in agreement with how we had planned the overall feel of each continent in the grade. As it happened, I did manage to attend the grade with the great colourist Vicki Matchit at Envy, and the ALEXA sensors really lived up to expectations with both the Minis and the AMIRAs matching perfectly.

The final film was a ratings hit for BBC1 and the national press praised the "sumptuous images"; it really was a great team effort. The ALEXA Mini proved that it can be used as a lightweight ergonomic documentary-style camera and worked wonderfully in this setup – I loved it.

AC Ariel Grandoli with the AMIRA (l) and Neil Harvey with the ALEXA Mini (r) with Papua New Guinea tribesman



## Fact File

GTC member Neil Harvey has worked on a broad range of documentary subjects for television and cinema, spanning war zones to boy bands, history films to comedy and music. He has won several awards for his work including Outstanding Achievement in Craft from the Royal Television Society and has been nominated for the BAFTA Factual Photography Craft Award and Royal Television Society's Factual Photography Award.

See more about DoP Neil Harvey's work at: [www.neilharvey.uk.com](http://www.neilharvey.uk.com)