

The long and winding road trips: filming Top Gear and The Grand Tour

The BBC's *Top Gear* and Amazon Prime's *The Grand Tour* arguably sit in joint pole position in the line-up of TV motoring shows. Keeping up with the high octane antics of mischievous presenters on budget-busting road trips and set pieces requires a particular kind of team dynamic from a small band of highly skilled camera crew. DoP **Ben Joiner** tells us how his many years on the road with both shows have taught him that inexhaustible flexibility, fast-thinking problem-solving and supportive collaboration with the fantastic camera teams provide the key to keeping one step ahead of the action.



Ben Joiner, with director Gavin Whitehead (left) and sound supervisor Russell Edwards (right) film Neil Armstrong's iconic Corvette near Cape Canaveral in Florida for *The Grand Tour* Series 3 in 2018

ELLIS O'BRIEN

The crew of *The Grand Tour* cover James May as he salinates fresh water for his fish at the roadside in Mozambique

Ben filming an advert for Ferrari on location in Spain

So, it turns out I was very lucky that the secondary school I attended as a child was one of the first in the UK to teach Film Studies, because that is where it all began for me. When I was 15 years old, I wanted to be either a record producer or a film director. Being a terrible musician meant the first option quickly went out the window so, with my second choice in mind, I enrolled on my school's new film course. When it came to university, I again chose to study Film before then heading off to film school in Vancouver, still determined to become a director. However, I soon developed a love for camera and lighting, as I found them to be not only creatively very rewarding but also roles that seemed to encounter less hassle and compromise than that faced by directors. Back then, we learned on Super 16 film and I particularly liked the sound of the magazine whirring next to my ear, as well as the reverence and discipline that surrounded the filming process. It was all very seductive and rather addictive.

After leaving film school I came back to the UK in the late 1990s and started to work my way up through the camera department, starting as a camera runner before progressing to clapper loader, then focus puller. This was mainly in the music video industry, which was booming in London at the time; it was a fantastic period to be working in that sector. Sure, it involved crazy, long hours but I was surrounded by creative and ambitious people, and the opportunities were there to experiment as a fledgling DoP, to try out techniques and equipment in a genre that had no real rules – things just had to look cool and slick, and tell the story with images, whatever that story was. If you wanted to shoot a whole promo solely on an Optex 8mm lens, then you could. If you wanted to edge fog the film deliberately, you could. It was the perfect environment in which to learn, to make mistakes and, hopefully, to improve as a DoP.

Reinventing the wheel

First aired in 1977, *Top Gear* started as a rather straight-laced format until Jeremy Clarkson joined in 1988, bringing an edgy irreverence to the show. This saw the show's audience figures and popularity take off, with *Top Gear* riding high for a decade until Jeremy left in 1998. Subsequently, the programme went into limbo for 2 to 3 years, but producer Andy Wilman as well as Jeremy were determined to completely reinvent it and create a new-look show.

I think Andy and Jeremy deserve all the credit for providing the initial 'jet fuel' that was required for the relaunch in 2002. They were ultimately the vision and driving force behind it and I think that vision filtered all the way down through production, producers, directors, camera and sound teams, and into post-production. I think the show was blessed with some really creative and inventive people who knew how to

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we had a tiny crew: just me, a sound recordist, camera assistant and Nigel directing. So, that was four of us plus Richard, three hero cars and a van of equipment. I remember how, at one point during that shoot, we left a £60,000 Mercedes parked with the key in the ignition, completely unattended, for about two hours in a not great neighbourhood in East London... If our Merc had disappeared, that could very well have been my first and last shoot with the show! I'm not sure any of us at the time really sensed quite how big *Top Gear* would go on to become.

Shifting up a gear

I hadn't really shot much car footage before, so it was pretty much a case of learning on the job. I found myself drawing on my music promo background as we just tried our best to make the cars look cool, or we'd maybe throw in some time lapses or use heavy grads to darken the skies in camera, etc. Slowly but surely, a visual language for the show evolved between myself and the other DoPs. One of us would shoot a film using a certain camera technique or style and we would be like, "Wow, that's cool! What can we do next time to make it even better?"

We were so lucky that the show was pretty maverick and there were no real rules. The shoots came thick and fast, and there was a lot of creative freedom to just go out and try stuff. We weren't consciously trying to create a specific '*Top Gear* look' but we all kind of pushed each other along during the first two or three series and so, gradually, this visual lexicon started to emerge, at the same time as the chemistry between the presenters was evolving and deepening. Once we became aware of this synergy, we realised, "Ahh, we're onto something here." Finally we knew the identity of the show and how it should look.

It was a real team effort creatively from the outset. We would shoot stuff in a certain way – perhaps using heavy grads, huge amounts of shutter, whip pans into and out of scenes. This would influence the editors who would bring their craft and style to a film, which, in turn, would then re-influence the camera teams and directors with what could be done. I remember I had a secret setup card for the Sony DigiBeta cameras we were using at the time, which I called the 'Crazy Card'; on it, I had stored camera settings that were all off the scale and illegal in broadcast technical terms. This gave the image almost a reversal film look but, as it was permanently burnt-in, there was no chance of salvaging it in post, so you had to be brave – but we got some great results with it! Pretty soon, the visual grammar of what a *Top Gear* film should be was set and luckily it all seemed to resonate with our audience.

achieve a lot on a limited budget; they were prepared to push the boundaries and do crazy stuff and, some might say, take risks that perhaps other productions would shy away from. I think it's fair to say we were pretty ambitious both in endeavour and visually.

Bold moves

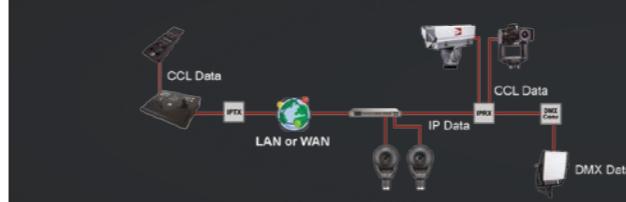
I was very lucky with my introduction to *Top Gear*. I had been shooting music promos with director Nigel Simpkiss who, in 2002, sent a one-line email to Andy at the newly created *Top Gear* office, which simply said, "*I understand you are trying to reinvent the car show... you won't be able to do it without me!*". I think Mr Wilman appreciated the bravado and brought Nigel on board, who then kindly asked me if I would shoot a couple of the early films with him.

When I think back to my first shoot with Richard Hammond,



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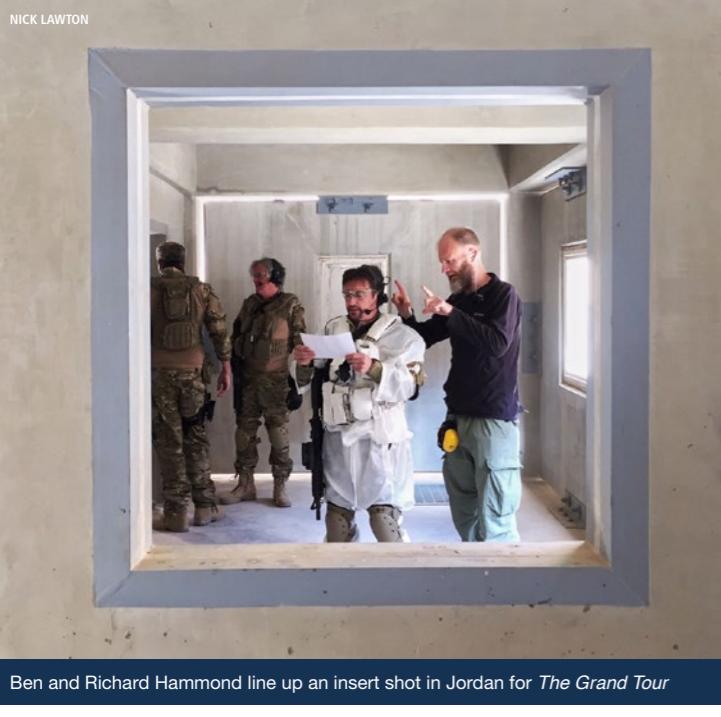
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Ben and Richard Hammond line up an insert shot in Jordan for *The Grand Tour*

Best-laid plans

A typical shoot day on *The Grand Tour* is scheduled to be about 12–13 hours long, although we often go way longer, especially on the specials (the big three-header journey films). The days get long whenever a presenter's car breaks down or a certain story thread needs to be followed, but it is ultimately all part of the adventure. We are usually camping somewhere remote so, if a crew or presenter's car is struggling, then we stick together and cover it as part of the story. We generate a lot of footage this way, but as we never really know the whole chain of events or where the story may lead, we have to cover everything for the audience.

Between three and five months of pre-production and planning normally goes into the big specials. As part of this, the producers and director will often do a dry run of the entire proposed journey, mainly just to see if it's even feasible to do in the cars, boats or whatever vehicles have been chosen for that shoot. They then report back to Jeremy and Andy W so that a plan can be hatched as to how the journey might work on camera and to outline the themes to explore and the story they want to tell.

From a DoP's point of view, we try to keep things simple and easily repairable in the field. We tend to take three duplicate camera packages to cover presenter scenes, a fourth channel that becomes our main tracking vehicle camera and then, usually, a spare camera body as well. There will also be specialist items, such as specific lenses and camera housings for when working around water, but generally we like to keep things simple. There is good redundancy across the unit and we adopt a flexible approach where lenses and kit can be interchangeable and shared between us, based on what each camera team is tasked with on the day.

When the going gets tough

The shoots can get very gruelling, especially if we are doing long days, camping in the wild, then getting up and doing it again back to back. It's the crew that gets you through that, as we are all very close and it really is a very supportive environment. Everybody accepts there will be up days and down days; so when you need space you get it, it just might be in the boot of a Land Cruiser! Pretty much everyone on the crew has been with *The Grand Tour* since the start in 2015 and a lot of us were with *Top Gear* for years before that, so we all know when to back off.

It can also be incredibly frustrating at times, because there are many moments when you think, "If we could just clock this scene 90 degrees, we could get that epic background in shot or that amazing light over there" – and yet you know that's not going to happen. But this chaos and unpredictability give the shows a certain energy and charm that they just wouldn't have if we planned too much. I think we are pretty much always on the edge of our comfort zone, but that's a very creative place to exist from a camera point of view.

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Anything can happen

The way a *Grand Tour* shoot works is that, essentially, we

know that if you put those three guys in an extreme situation with three characterful vehicles, then stuff will just eventually happen to them. Things will break, catch fire, roll over, sink even. And then there's the presenters themselves, who will start to sabotage each other – which often backfires or inspires revenge. I don't think the producers consciously set things up but obviously the scenarios the guys are placed into are designed to enable appropriate chaos; the show is way less set up than people think. Obviously, there has to be some plan in place with expected scenarios laid out but, for the vast majority of the time, the presenters are working it out as they go along.

When we went to Bolivia with *Top Gear*, for example, the script was literally four A4 pages of possible scenarios with notes like "*the cars are delivered by raft... chaos getting the cars off the raft... they drive up to altitude*". It really can be that basic. From a camera point of view, we know very little in advance, so that leads to a certain energy in the camerawork and how we frame things. It's very instinctual and reactive most of the time as we genuinely don't know what's coming next.

Another example was in Mongolia on *The Grand Tour*, where the guys were dropped in the middle of the wilderness where they had to build the car 'Jon' so they could drive themselves back to civilisation. Although there was a mechanic on hand to assist if needed, the three did actually build the car and navigate their own way. As a unit, we knew the general direction to travel in but the presenters were very much encountering the various scenarios, such as the river crossing, for real as they happened. We just had to film it the best we could, while keeping it all feeling spontaneous (which it was for us most of the time, considering we often barely had time for a quick huddle to work out the camera coverage on the fly).

As easy as ABC...

By and large we travel in a front and rear convoy. We will have a tracking vehicle travelling with the presenters' cars all the time to capture any calamities that happen along the way. This tends to be me in Tracker A, but B and C camera vehicles will be rigged ready to go into tracking mode at a moment's notice should the presenters split up, or if a tracking car breaks down, as happened in Azerbaijan and Colombia.

When we roll to a stop, or Jeremy decides he wants to do a scene outside the car – such as a breakdown in a developing situation – I will hold a wide shot until I sense the other two



Dealing with dust in the back of the tracking vehicle during the filming of *The Grand Tour Namibia Special* in 2016

camera ops arriving beside me. They both cross-shoot from whichever side they land on and that way we can be relatively confident we are capturing all three presenters' antics. It obviously goes wrong all the time; maybe something catches fire in the background, C camera will find themselves on the wrong side of a river or, as happened in Mongolia, a wheel sheared clean off C camera's car. On those occasions, well, then A and B cameras are on their own!

So, it's chaos at times and after a scene we'll have a huddle to recap what each camera got, to make sure we've covered it. Everyone wears covert ear buds for the Motorola radios, so we often whisper to each other with what we are covering as a scene develops. With Jeremy, you are unlikely to get a second take of anything and it's a testament to the camera ops, who are all very experienced DoPs in their own right, that we capture what we do.

The right gear

As I have said, we tend to try to keep things pretty simple to keep flexible. We shoot on ARRI AMIRA and ALEXA Minis, mainly with zooms to keep up with the presenters' antics, but then, if we are doing a beauty film or a more static studio sequence, we might get in a set of primes or specialist items,



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Getting ready to shoot with the Polaris Ultimate Arm Snow Cat in Colorado for *The Grand Tour*

such as a Laowa probe lens, crane or gimbal. Our workhorse lens has been the Canon CN7, along with the Tokina 11–16mm, TLS Morpheus and Canon CN20 (or ‘elephant gun’ as it’s affectionately known!).

In terms of visual style, all the camera teams have been with the show for a long time and are well-versed in the visual language and style of the show. For example, we all know what shutter angles we want to be on for certain scenes, and which filters and white balances are preferred as we travel from day to night to keep headlights looking consistent. This means that, when we inevitably get separated on the road and then later regroup, we are all on the same page. It’s not uncommon to hear camera settings being fired across long-range walkie-talkie conversations to keep things consistent across the unit.

The camera and sound team on an average *The Grand Tour* shoot tends to comprise about 12–15 people. Each camera has a three-person team (operator, assistant and sound) and we also have a minicam team, also usually three people, one to look after each presenter hero vehicle. Lec Park and Andy Crawford-Pilling will often take on drone duties on top of their minicam roles. Those guys tend to do the most gruelling days as they do run-and-gun all day on the drone and then have to stay across the minicams in the cars, the footage from which provides at least 50–60% of an average film – so they really have their work cut out.

Data day life

When *The Grand Tour* began and we made the jump to 4K, it was a huge challenge, just in terms of the sheer amount of data that is generated on a travelling show which essentially consists mostly of actuality. With three or four main camera units and minicams running for the majority of, say, a 10-day shoot, it’s not uncommon for us to come back with 60–80TB

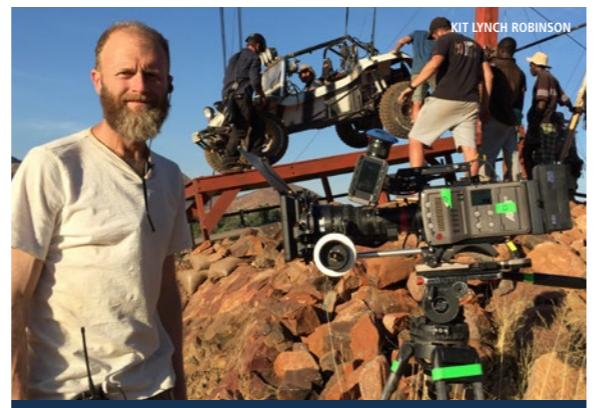
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of data and the DITs have always done an amazing job of keeping across it all in extreme environments.

As a result, we usually have three DITs on all the shoots where all three presenters are present. Joe Jamieson leads that team, which operates bespoke DIT workstations that can keep operating in the crew vehicles as the shooting convoy rolls along, as well as keeping up with the constant workflow and turnover of cards whilst on the move. We can fly to anywhere in the world with these compact kits.

On *The Grand Tour*, we stick to a very robust, yet simple, workflow on location, using just a couple of basic LUTs created by myself and Joe, so that we can keep an eye on quality and make suggestions to the colourists for eventual grading. We also have an archive of frame grabs that the directors and I can access so we can keep across the scenes that have been shot and what angles have been captured, because very often things happen so fast or the crew is so spread out along a road, that providing live monitoring of everything being shot is impossible.



Ben and the crew about to shoot the ending of *The Grand Tour Namibia Special* in 2016

A grand vision

One of the really liberating things about shifting across to the Amazon platform and the creation of *The Grand Tour* is that it allowed us all to start thinking on a bigger scale. We had always been ambitious visually and with the scope of the journeys, but now we had the budget for Russian Arm tracking vehicles and certain specialist lenses as and when we thought these would enhance the storytelling – and this definitely expanded what we could achieve visually and put up on screen. Also, to be fair to Chump Productions, Amazon gave them a big budget and they really threw the money at the screen, especially on the first series of *The Grand Tour*. I think the opening sequence of Episode 1 really showed that intent as well as what they were aiming for in terms of scale ([youtube.com/watch?v=5c2tA1jfQOs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5c2tA1jfQOs)).

I think no matter what level of budget you have, you always hit that budget. Even with a big budget, you’re never way under, more usually over, as I find the ambition as well as the viewers’ expectations always expand to the size of the budget. In this regard, we haven’t really changed that much from the *Top Gear* days in that we aim to keep it simple and efficient, always trying to get the most on screen from what we have.

Broadening horizons

Working on *Top Gear* and *The Grand Tour* has been a hugely rewarding experience. I think, as a crew, we are incredibly fortunate to get to go to such amazing locations and then

have some pretty extreme adventures while we are there. There aren’t many shows with the opportunity to travel so widely and have such intense experiences, like driving on sea ice to the magnetic North Pole for *Top Gear*, which is still probably the most challenging shoot I’ve ever done, or the trip to the Skeleton Coast in Namibia for *The Grand Tour*, which was just an incredible adventure.

There are moments when we stop and remind each other just to look around and take it all in. I think the events of 2020 and in particular the fact that I’ve not travelled anywhere near as much, has meant it’s really hit home how lucky we are – and I do miss the world! There’s also the camaraderie of working with local crews and fixers, and meeting people in the middle of nowhere, which I miss a lot too.

When I started out as a DoP, I was desperate to get into drama; I still enjoy filming narrative as a discipline and I often wonder how different things would have been if I had not fallen into a car show 18 years ago. That said, I’m really grateful that I did. It’s been an incredible, crazy adventure. 2020 has been a great time to reflect on where I am with my career and what I want to do next. I still enjoy making automotive films and have recently directed several for Ferrari, which is an avenue I definitely want to continue to explore. The workload as a director/DoP is huge but in some ways it’s really efficient because you are taking one conversation channel out of the process; you put the camera exactly where you want and can tell the story very much from your own eye, so I am enjoying this new experience a lot. I’d also love to rekindle my drama/narrative camera work and shoot another feature-length drama, to tell a different story with images.

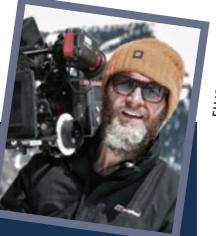
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Ben Joiner is a UK-based DoP with 22 years experience across many genres, including: over 13 years as a principal DoP on 132 episodes of the Emmy award-winning *Top Gear* (also nominated for a BAFTA Craft Award in 2013), then 38 episodes over 4 series of *The Grand Tour* for Amazon Studios; documentaries for the BBC, Nat Geo and Discovery; commercials for agencies Redwood, TBWA, AMV/BBDO, CHI, Saatchis and JWT, for clients including Ferrari, Aston Martin, Land Rover, Mercedes, Lexus, Cadillac, Nissan and Polaris. Ben has directed four commercial projects for Ferrari.

Outside of his documentary work, Ben has numerous drama credits as DoP, including the BAFTA-nominated children’s drama *Behind Closed Doors* (2003) and *Thunder Road* (2001), both for the BBC. His B-unit DoP credits include the 2009 remake of *The Day of the Triffids* and the internationally successful TV miniseries *The Summit* (2008).

Ben has been self-represented throughout his career, forging loyal and longstanding creative relationships with fellow crew and clients on his continuing journey as a cinematographer. In February 2020, he was invited to membership of the American Society of Cinematographers, ASC.

To see more of Ben’s work, and to contact him:
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