



David Beckham with biker friend Derek (l) and director Anthony Mandler (r)



Neil discussing shots with the director Anthony Mandler

# INTO THE UNKNOWN WITH DAVID BECKHAM AND THREE RED DRAGONS

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY FREDDIE CLAIRE

Just before the start of the World Cup from Brazil, a high-profile documentary aired on BBC1, in which David Beckham travelled deep into the Amazon jungle to experience the freedom denied him throughout his time as a professional footballer. Riding on a motorbike, sleeping in the jungle in a hammock and meeting the Yanomami tribe would make for an unpredictable shoot full of twists and turns, all of which must be captured by DoP Neil Harvey and director Anthony Mandler. The first decision was which camera to go with in order to achieve the cinematic image quality required, while also withstanding gruelling shooting conditions and not compromising the spontaneity.

As I trudged through rainy Soho one February evening to meet up with LA-based director Anthony Mandler to discuss our upcoming documentary shoot for *David Beckham Into The Unknown*, I ran through a short checklist in my mind. I'd heard that Anthony was a big fan of the RED Epic but I have to admit it would not necessarily have been my first choice of camera to embark on an action-packed adventure in the Amazon jungle – an adventure that would involve filming from canoes, boats and motorbikes, while camping in a hammock... and to cap it all this would be the rainy season.

## RED or dead

Not that I don't love the RED Epic, I do. The image quality is second to none and the '6K' Dragon sensor has cemented its game-changer status. Nor would this be the first time I had embarked on an expedition with a RED Epic, but on this shoot I knew we would be pushing whatever camera we ended up taking very hard. This was going to be a tropical environment, with very high humidity, in the rainy season, and the shoot would involve a fast-moving unfolding narrative with no opportunity for retakes but plenty of potential for getting drenched and covered in mud. There was also the issue of the

famous Epic-M fan noise given that we would be shooting sync sound in an extremely hot environment. So, as much as I love the Epic, in short, I wondered if it would be reliable and ergonomic enough to ensure capturing the emotional journey of David Beckham getting away from it all (albeit with a film crew) as he ventured deep into the Amazon jungle with all its astonishing wildlife, fascinating tribes and unique challenges.

Anthony and I were in agreement from the start that we would aim as high as possible in terms of image quality while also taking all possible steps to avoid any compromise of the authenticity of David's experience due to technical holdups. Of course, even with high expectations and high-profile projects, there are still budgetary considerations, but I was glad to find I was fully supported by Executive Producer Michele Kurland and Producer Wendie Ottewill as we sat down to put the kit list together. It was agreed to go ahead with the (at the time) new RED Dragon, which was in scarce supply.



Sound crew Peter Lee and Freddie Claire

So, it was finally agreed we would take three RED Epics, a load of batteries and masses of SSD cards. Anthony always likes to have access to a camera body in stripped-down lightweight mode that he can pick up and shoot with himself (the 'B' camera), while I would use a more conventionally configured RED that would sit on my shoulder in a traditional shooting mode (the 'A' camera). The third camera would be dedicated to a MōVI rig. I admit that for a shoot like this I was very relieved to have a backup camera and then a second backup should either of the first two go down. Now, this might seem like borderline paranoia but I figured that we would have to be really unlucky to lose more than two cameras and that I would be pretty happy ending up with at least one fully functioning camera over the finish line, even if this meant having to rob spare parts from the first two. I now feel quite contrite as I write this; I needn't have worried as all three REDs performed superbly right through the shoot, in fair weather and foul.

Thanks must be paid to Jarred Land (President of RED) and his team in Los Angeles, who really pulled out all the stops to get us three Epic Dragons (two with carbon-fibre bodies) that weren't even in existence when we first put our kit list together. The weight saving of the carbon-fibre bodies was a real bonus on the larger handheld camera configuration and even more so with the MōVI rig. We really couldn't have done this without Jarred and his team, who went above and beyond to get us everything we needed and were very available for advice and support as we were prepping out of the UK for this shoot. Special mention

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Filming boat to boat on the Amazon river



Neil with the 'A' camera configuration and Yanomami tribesman

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must also go to Sam and the guys at RED Europe at Pinewood.

In addition to our RED kit it was decided to take a bunch of GoPros (12 in total). Knowing we were going to be shooting a fair bit on motorbikes, this was a no-brainer.

### Warmth and emotion

Anthony was keen that the film should achieve a reflective quality and warmth that would enhance the emotion of observing David as he reflected on moving forward into the next phase of his life after retiring from his career as a world-class international professional footballer. We were to have a ringside seat as he got to spread his wings. Anthony is a close friend of David and joining them for the adventure would be another couple of mates – bike enthusiast Derek (from Los

Angeles) and another David, one of his oldest friends, who hates snakes and had never been on a motorbike!

Having decided on the camera, we then discussed lenses and Anthony asked me to test a selection of vintage primes. We agreed that we wanted a warm, soft feel to the images that would enhance the reflective mood of the film. So, one chilly morning in some woods near Berkhamstead (hardly similar conditions to the Amazon!) we tried out a range of Cooke Panchros, Super Baltars, Zeiss Super speeds and Canon K35s. After a test grade at Envy, we decided on the Cooke Panchros. These gave a lovely warm feel and I loved the flare... not that I was going to find as much sunshine as I would have liked in the Amazon in the rainy season.

### The camera team

I was blessed in being able to assemble an amazing team to pull off this shoot. My AC Ariel Grandoli is simply the best in the business. He is the only person I have ever heard of who actually enjoyed his national service in the Italian parachute regiment so much that he went back for another year! It is this military work ethic that makes him an ideal compadre in the hard-going jungle environment.

Meanwhile, Geoffrey Sentamu, my former AC but now an up-and-coming DoP in his own right, and DoP Mark Nutkins, who couldn't resist the chance to get his boots muddy in the Amazon, both kindly stepped up to man the new Freely MÖVI rig and the multitude of GoPros, supporting Ariel with the sea of kit and also serving as a second unit when required. Last but not least we must not forget DIT extraordinaire Alan Andrade who not only managed to drag his generator and DIT station to many a remote corner but was also able to put

his fluent Portuguese to use enabling seamless coordination with our Brazilian support team.

### First stop Rio

As soon as we landed in Brazil we immediately hit the ground running with me filming David with a Canon 5D Mk III as he walked off the aeroplane into baggage reclaim, through immigration and towards the first clamouring paparazzi. The next morning found us once again up and running, this time with the larger of the REDs secured to the back of a pickup on a tripod, following David and his mates weaving through the traffic of Rio. As I had predicted, it quickly became clear we were going to be severely out-horsepowered and manouvered by the Triumph motorbikes. The only solution was somehow to get ourselves onto two wheels as well. As we headed into the Vidigal favela, I spotted two motorbike taxis, a common sight in Rio. In a flash, Ariel and I had disembarked from the pickup and commandeered two of these bikes, pretty much shouting "Follow that famous ex-footballer!" The second RED 'B' camera in stripped-down mode with Cooke Panchro 32mm worked very well, using the LCD screen for framing while supporting the camera in my arms. How Ariel always had a camera waiting for me fully loaded never ceased to amaze me.

All of this was a heads up for how this shoot was going to evolve – whatever plans had been made were likely to change. Whenever the guys decided to take off, we would have to follow – and in fact not just follow, but somehow try to anticipate and get ahead. Now, this presented some considerable challenges for the camera team, but let's not also forget the headaches for the support echelon and the teams organising the camps and river transportation. It has to be said that top-drawer producer Wendie had her work cut out, yet amazingly she always seemed to manage to replan and somehow make things even better while still keeping a smile on her face. This became the spirit of the shoot.

### Manaus

Landing in Manaus, it was immediately obvious the rainy season was in full flow. The next morning I started shooting by jumping on the back of a 1200cc motorbike. Ariel handed me a small knapsack containing half a dozen REDvolt batteries and a handful of hard drives, which would keep me going for a while in the event the riders went AWOL from the rest of the crew for any amount of time. Now we were in business and I soon developed a clear communication method of hand signals with the guys on the motorbikes, which meant we managed some great 'homage to Easy Rider' shots, albeit fighting the wind and rain. At least it wasn't cold in the

equatorial climate and the mosquitos couldn't keep up. At one point I zipped ahead to jump into a helicopter waiting at a remote village football pitch. Mark Nutkins had prepped this the evening before, mounting an F55 camera with Fujinon Cabrio 19–90mm on the nose. I hopped in, buckled up, was handed a Preston follow-focus and hot-head controller, and just managed to get airborne in time to chase the bikes as they headed deeper into the Amazon jungle where soon the roads would run out.

### Up river

The next few days included a mixture of filming on canoes and boats. We worked hard to keep the number of crew members around David to a minimum while at the same time keeping up a well-organised system of battery resupply and SSD cards from the support team.

The canoes were full of water leaks and pretty unstable but we still managed to capture the peaceful journey. Occasionally spotting a fallen tree across the water as a good vantage point, we would paddle hard to get ahead and scramble up in time to shoot an up-and-past of the hero boat (constantly aware of the wildlife, mostly piranha, spiders and ants, who were always on the lookout for a tasty snack).

Then we relocated to a larger riverboat, which would become home for a few more days, slinging our hammocks side by side above our camera cases (sometimes rather too close to the snorers!). Some of my favourite moments on this trip were waking at sunrise on that boat motoring up a tributary of the Amazon and joining Ariel for a coffee as we prepped our cameras for the day ahead. David was an early

riser too and it was nice to enjoy the peace and tranquility together before the day's work began in earnest.

### Back on the road

After the comparative calm of the river journey, it was back onto the bikes and some rather poor roads to reach an airstrip a few days away, from which we could charter a few small aircraft to take us to the remote Yanomami tribe.

There was a wonderful moment deep in the Amazon on an appalling muddy track used by loggers and not really fit for motorbikes when David's bike chain came off. There was a great scene of David leaning against his lame bike, the light fading, only one of his mates there, and myself with the lightweight RED Epic 'B' camera. He reflected that, for the first time in what seemed a very long while, he had no particular place to be at any particular time. Shooting on the 32mm Cooke, wide open in the fading light, the scene looked great. I must add also that our sound recordist extraordinaire Freddie Claire would somehow always manage to appear whenever there was a poignant scene with important dialogue. To this day I will never know how he did this. We also must not forget top-drawer sound recordist Peter Lee who collaborated with Freddie to keep the mics and recorders going through fair weather and foul.

Having the GoPros on the bikes paid off for a dramatic shot of Anthony's bike spinning out of control. Geoffrey and Mark covered this scene as Ariel, Freddie, Wendie

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## 'A' camera set-up

### RED Epic Dragon

- Carbon-fibre body with a +1 adaptor module at the back for both EVF and top monitor.
- Quad Pro Battery module which allowed an extra four REDvolt batteries to be attached to the camera as well as the V-Lock adaptor as a main power supplier.
- REDvolt batteries helped keep the camera running or in standby at all times in the event the V-lock went down.
- The Quad Pro Battery Module also helped create better balance and good shoulder support for shooting handheld.
- The Red Clutch system was dismantled, keeping the shoulder pad screwed onto the back of the DSMC quick release. At the front of the same plate was a DSMC 15mm adaptor with a set of carbon-fibre 15mm bars, ARRI FF4 follow focus, standard set of handheld grips and LMB5 clip-on matte box.
- The V-Lock battery plate was originally from a battery belt clip. We took this apart and fixed it onto a small support plate that we had designed and screwed to the back of the shoulder pad.
- A small Lock-it box and radio mic recover were added to the side of the camera for sound.



### With the Yanomami

After 10 days, we reached one of the most remote tribes on the planet, the Yanomami. One evening here the RED really excelled. The tribal chief, painted head to toe in black and with a full moon rising behind him, explained that the arrival of any road in their land would be the precursor to the death of their traditions and way of life. With an Ice Light supplementing the camp firelight, the Dragon sensor captured the poignant scene quite wonderfully. The speech was spontaneous and yet very important to the film, summing up how, on the one hand, David's freedom was enabled by roads and the anonymity of riding a motorbike, while, on the other, for this tribe the arrival of a road would threaten the demise of their very way of life.

The next day David found himself having to explain the offside rule to the tribal chief, who not only didn't have a clue who David Beckham was but – bizarrely, in this most football-mad of nations – had never even heard of the game! This was the culmination of the journey and, despite the rigours of the shoot, all three RED cameras had survived the knocks and tumbles plus the torrential rain, and were in full working order to capture these magical surreal moments.

In short, the RED Epic Dragon cameras were a joy to work with and they really stood the test of being hauled through the Amazon, sometimes at great speed and often in torrential rain. If asked, I wouldn't hesitate to do it all again with the same cameras... but it would be nice if it was in the dry season to capture a bit more of that lovely Cooke Panchro flare in the sunshine!

## 'B' camera set-up

Epic Brain with top 5" LCD monitor, side handle grip (which carries one REDvolt) and a Red Outrigger handle attached at the bottom of the camera.



and I were already on route to the location of the remote Yanomami tribe in preparation for David's arrival there.

For this shoot, Anthony had created the mantra: 'No tripods and no zoom lenses' – but in truth there was little time for the former anyway. As for 'no zooms', I was very happy to be committed to shooting on the Cooke Panchro primes. We mostly shot wide open at f2.3 with Ariel sliding in ND filters on the fly.

With our on-screen director also caught up in the adventure of riding himself, I was pretty much free to shoot as I liked, and Ariel and I got into a rhythm of keeping a Cooke 32mm on the 'B' camera and a 75mm on the 'A' camera. I simply switched between cameras as the scene developed since this was faster than changing a lens. This was, of course, a luxury that most shoots can't afford but it worked very well for us.

## Fact File

Neil Harvey is a BAFTA-nominated documentary cameraman who has worked on a range of programmes from *Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain* series to being embedded with troops in Iraq for *Life and Death in the War Zone*. When not clinging for dear life to David Beckham's coat tails in the Amazon, he might be found working on projects as varied as Morgan Spurlock's documentary movie *One Direction: This Is Us* and Biban Kidran's *In Real Life*. Current projects include *Tsunami 10 Years On*. While documentary remains his first and enduring love he also enjoys shooting the occasional drama.

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

See more about sound recordist and photographer Freddie Claire's work: [www.freddieclaire.com](http://www.freddieclaire.com)