

Michael Clark wanted to climb mountains and ride bikes and take pictures, so just a year out of college, he left the physics lab and followed his passion. Fifteen years later, here he is, one of the best adventure-sports photographers working today—a master of that passion.

“Pretty much everything I do is driven by my passion,” he says. “I’m extremely passionate about my work and the sports that I participate in. My passion for rock climbing is what brought me into shooting adventure sports. That passion explains a lot, including why I left physics and why I work so hard.”

Clark began his career as a climbing photographer, but quickly realized that, in order to survive, he’d need to diversify. So he expanded his subjects: cycling, surfing, BASE jumping—you name it, he shoots it.

Aside from a passion that fuels a killer work ethic and his easygoing can-do attitude, there are two main reasons why Clark is busier than ever in this down economy. First is his affinity for athletics. A born climber, his skills earn him assignments regularly—as when he photographed a story about a rescue helicopter team for *Men’s Fitness*.

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Master Of

ADVENTURE

From his New Mexico base of operations, **Michael Clark** is a global photographer whose clients have him chasing swells, climbing mountains and braving the elements. In a down economy, Clark is having a banner year.

By William Sawalich >> Photography By Michael Clark

because of the skills I have to get into place,” Clark says. “I had to hang off the bottom of a helicopter—I was doing all kinds of crazy stuff. We did a cliff rescue, and I’m hanging off the cliff, I’m hanging underneath the helicopter, I’m in the ocean as it picks me up... That was a fun assignment where climbing skills definitely came in handy. It’s not every photographer that wants to hang 100 feet under a helicopter and fly around. Every job has my skill set as a photographer and an athlete as part of it.”

Adventure photography sounds like a lot more fun than a desk job, but can it be as fun as it looks?

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it fun,” says Clark, “and it’s definitely work. It depends, assignment to assignment. The Patagonia race is miserable, but you’re in one of the most incredible places on the planet, so it’s hard not to call it ‘fun’ on some level. You’re just destroyed by the time it’s over. It’s hellacious just being there, much less trying to take pictures while things are going on. A lot of

To convey the drama and intensity of action sports, you have to get up close. Part of Michael Clark’s success comes from knowing just where to be to capture critical moments of action. **LEFT:** Shooting the action deep in the curl of the legendary Tahiti surf break, Teahupo’o. **ABOVE:** A rock climber in Mallorca, Spain, dangles above the deep blue sea.



assignments are insanely hard work.

"I'm not actually climbing when I go out to shoot climbing," Clark continues. "I might be climbing, but it's just to get into position. And climbing photography is way more work than almost any other sport because you're carrying upwards of 100 pounds of gear. The ropes weigh 10 pounds, and you may need multiple ropes, and you need this and you need that, and camera gear on top of that... You might be hiking for four hours with that load."

It takes a lot of effort just getting into place to make an adventure photograph, but hard work is no problem. Just getting work is itself a lot of work. That's

Clark's other fundamental expertise.

"I would say that my success as a photographer is definitely directly related to the effort I put into my profession," he says. "Passion, and the energy created therein, is definitely an important part of my work. I work my buns off. That's something I learned early on, something instilled in me by my parents. You've got to work harder, be more efficient and have more creative work than anybody else out there if you want to make it. I'm not sure my images are more creative than anybody else out there, but the other two, I'm definitely in the mix."

Adds Clark, "I'm not sure how

anyone actually makes it in this profession if they sit back and wait for work to come their way. All of my marketing efforts are targeted and reach a number of different markets. And the newsletter, in particular, has proven to be very effective."

The newsletter is Clark's crowning marketing achievement. He does what so many pros do—blogging and tweeting and emailing and calling—but it's his newsletter that sets him apart. With the dense PDF that looks more like a real magazine than a flimsy flyer, prospective clients remember him.

"There are more photographers trying to make a living right now than

Clark is a multifaceted photographer. He's comfortable capturing yoga against the dramatic skies above White Sands, New Mexico (below), Red Bull Air Force Team members BASE jumping off a cliff in southwestern Utah (right) or a portrait of Nicolas Danan just after a free dive (below, right).



Master Of ADVENTURE



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"PASSION, AND THE ENERGY CREATED THEREIN, IS DEFINITELY AN IMPORTANT PART OF MY WORK. I WORK MY BUNS OFF. THAT'S SOMETHING I LEARNED EARLY ON, SOMETHING INSTILLED IN ME BY MY PARENTS. YOU'VE GOT TO WORK HARDER, BE MORE EFFICIENT AND HAVE MORE CREATIVE WORK THAN ANYBODY ELSE OUT THERE IF YOU WANT TO MAKE IT."



there ever have been before,” Clark says. “There are literally hundreds of new photographers entering the field every day. So to set yourself apart from the pack, you not only have to create excellent images, but you also have to promote yourself in a manner where clients can actually find you—and remember your work.”

Marketing lands Clark new assign-

ments from new clients, including adventure sports that he’s never tried. Some of them he never will.

“Red Bull is one of my favorite clients to shoot for,” he says, “and they’ve chosen me as one of their guys in North America to shoot athletes where they want to push the envelope and do something that has never been done before. The last thing I did for them was paragliding.

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Talking to the art director, I suggested we strobe some paragliding. It had never been done because everything is in the air. So we did it. We found a location where they could fly next to a ridge and got some images that were unlike anything else out there.

“The wingsuit BASE jumpers,” Clark continues, “there were three guys, they jumped three times, and I had one second each time. I’m not a BASE jumper. That’s one of the world’s most dangerous activities, by far. And these guys have 17,000 jumps each. They’re basically the best BASE jumpers in the world. The art buyer is there, they’ve spent \$30,000 or \$40,000 to get things in place, and I had nine seconds for that entire photo shoot. They had to get air under their wings within five seconds or they’d crash into a ledge, and then they immediately had to make a left turn. They’re doing, like, 150 mph within five seconds. Due to the technical nature of it, they only did it three times each for three jumpers—one second each jump before they’re just a dot in the canyon. I had two cameras wirelessly set up so that every time I shot at 9 fps, I was getting three times as many pictures.”

Clark certainly appreciates an adventure, but there’s no way he was jumping off a cliff. He knows from personal experience—hanging by a literal thread over a canyon floor—that cheating death is no fun. It’s simply terrifying.

“I was fairly nervous,” he says, “and still am every time I get on a rope. I’ve fallen into quicksand, been hit by a giant boulder falling off a cliff that could have ripped my upper torso in half, but glanced off my back somehow... I’ve probably had six or seven of my nine lives used up, but that’s just part of it. It could happen walking down the sidewalk.”

Asks Clark, “Have I pushed the envelope? Not me. If somebody dies, it kind of negates the fun factor. You gotta know what you’re doing, 100 percent. DPP

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