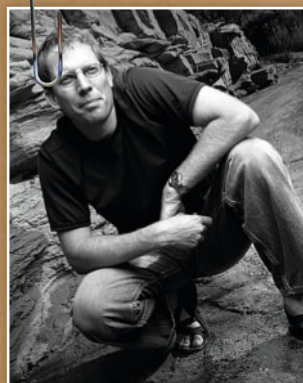




01 Roman Bascuñana
Roman Bascuñana – one of the climbing guides who set up the ropes – ascending the fixed ropes near checkpoint three above Lake Anibal Pinto during the 2009 race. Michael Clark will usually take just one camera and lens on the climbs, and ask someone to bring his remaining gear to the next checkpoint



Eric Barth

MISSION FACTFILE

Who: Michael Clark, professional adventure photographer and former mountaineering photographer.

What: To tell a complete story of the endurance required to complete the world's toughest race in one of the most remote regions on the planet.

Where: Patagonia, Chile, South America

Kit List: Nikon D700, Nikon D300S, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, Nikon AF-S 24-70mm f/2.8G ED, Nikon AF-S 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR, Nikon AF-S Teleconverter TC-14E II, Gitzo 1340 and GT2541 tripods, Kirk BH-1 and BH-3 ballheads, Pocket Wizard Plus transmitters and receivers.

More info at: www.michaelclarkphoto.com

The world's toughest race

He's survived quicksand, hypothermia and icy glacial water. **Michael Clark** reveals how he shoots the Wenger Patagonia Expedition Race

Just how tough is this expedition race – and what does it involve?
In 2009, the team that won slept for an average of an hour a day over the six and a half days it took them to complete the course! So it's pretty intense. You get teams of four people, and each team is required to have at least one woman. These teams race across a stretch of remote terrain in Patagonia about 600 kilometres long, which takes about ten days on average to complete. The race is broken up into sections consisting of trekking, sea kayaking, mountain biking and climbing.

It's non-stop. You don't get breaks, not even to sleep. So it's up to each team to decide how much, if at all, they want to sleep. Usually, a group won't sleep any more than an hour a day. It's not so much how you cover ground, but when you do it. And because this is probably the most remote region on earth after Antarctica, there are no trails or roads. You have to use all your orientation skills to keep up.

I'm not an actual racer, so I don't complete the whole course. I'm part of the

media crew, so I will follow teams on certain sections – usually the mountain climbing because I have a lot of experience with that – but I've done them all in my years of going down there to cover the event. My goal is to tell a complete story of the race, and you can't do that without going where they're going. But as tough as my job is, I'm not going through the same ordeal.

How much equipment do you take?

I travel light. You have to carry minimal camera gear and less than 20 pounds (1.4 stone) on your back if you want any hope of staying with teams for even just a few hours. So no huge lenses for me.

I take two SLRs, the Nikon D700 and D300S. And then just a few lenses – mainly the 24-70mm and 70-200mm. When I'm out in the back country I'll only take one camera and the 24-70mm. The D700 is my favourite because it's full frame and I can get wide. But I shoot all over the map – wide and close-up. If the sea is rough you can't get close to the competitors during the kayaking, so I'll move back and shoot telephoto.

01



02 Team Helly Hansen

Prunesco

Nicola MacLeod and Bruce Duncan of Team Helly Hansen Prunesco paddling their way to victory in stage 15 of the 2010 competition off the Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego in southern Chile. Sometimes swells can reach two metres in these cold waters

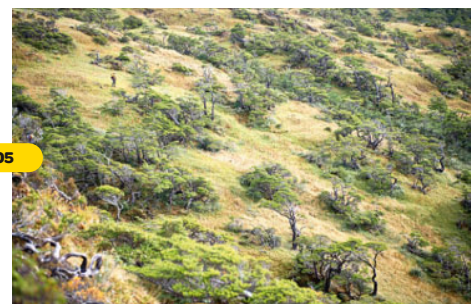
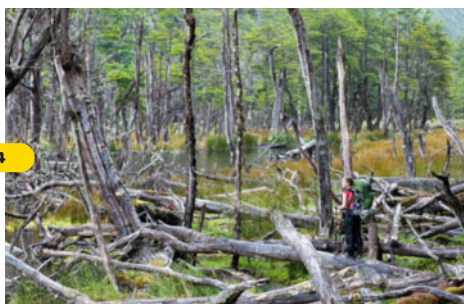
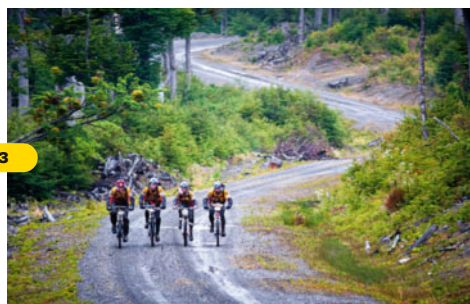
03 Team Helly Hansen

Prunesco

Team Helly Hansen Prunesco mountain biking during the fifth stage of the 2009 competition. One of the only sections with a marked path, the route nevertheless crosses through steep country, requiring tremendous endurance

04 Lydia McDonald

Lydia McDonald hiking trail-less terrain through a beaver pond in the Valley of Death in the Darwin Range during the 2008 race. Any attempts to mark a trail in this region is quickly covered by vegetation



How do you keep yourself focused when going through so much physical exertion?

There are plenty of times you think, 'I don't want to be here. I want to be in the hotel.' But because the racers are going through hell and you can see that on their faces, you remember that you've had food and sleep, and it puts everything in perspective. You're getting paid to do a job. There's also a lot of down time at the end of a race section.

The worst parts are when you're trekking because there's no down time. Because you're running ahead of or hanging back from one of the teams, you have to figure out where you are yourself, which can be distracting. Add sideways rain to the mix, and it's really tough!

One of the things you quickly learn is that you can only get what you can get. This can be frustrating, but it's the reality. New photographers will think they've got a few good shots from one section, but need to get back into the action. The reality is you can't be in the action all the time. It's impossible to stay with the racers at all times and be in a physical and mental state to get good shots.

"The quicksand had locked on to me like concrete. I nearly tore my shoulder out of its socket trying to get out. Luckily, I was able to dig and push myself free"

How do you take a picture while hanging from a vertical cliff face?

I started out as a rock-climbing photographer, so I'm used to hanging from a rope. When the teams are scaling the cliffs we use mechanical ascenders, which lock and stop you sliding down. Because of this I can let go and shoot with two hands. I've also got what are like little step ladders clipped on to my feet, which you can use to stabilise yourself. I've also got an advantage in this area, too, because the people doing the race aren't usually as skilled as I am at rock climbing. They're slower up the cliff, which means I have more time to photograph them.

How do you keep your equipment safe in these extreme conditions?

It's tough, but I'm lucky that I've only destroyed a camera and two lenses so far.

That was in 2009 when I fell into the ocean during the kayaking section. Fortunately, I had insurance. But apart from that I've had good luck because I use pro bodies, which are well sealed and can deal with a fair amount of rain. I also use a plastic camera and lens cover when it's raining sideways.

How do you get close to the action, but stay out of everyone's way?

It's not as big an issue as you might think. If they're biking, you can stay back, then accelerate and take a photo and drop back again. Usually, you're in the back of a jeep for this section. During the kayaking, if the sea is calm you can get very close to people without interfering. It's the same with climbing. The only times where your presence can be an issue is when groups are having tense discussions about what to do



next. You might feel in the way, or worse you might have advice to offer, but know you can't. Fortunately, everyone's upfront, and will tell you if you're getting in the way!

What's been your toughest experience of the race so far?

Back in my first year, there was a river that required a death-defying effort to cross. I'm six foot three, and ended up chest-deep in ice-cold glacial water that was moving very fast. In literally a second, you can't feel any of your appendages. And because the current was so strong you could die very quickly if you got carried away. But there have been other scary moments, too, such as falling into quicksand in the aptly named Valley of Death. I was following a team, but they weren't able to dig me out. The quicksand had locked on to me like concrete. I nearly tore my shoulder out of its socket trying to get free. Luckily, I was able to dig and push myself out, but it took me 35 minutes. Then in 2010, my last race, I suffered hypothermia during the kayaking section and had to be rescued by the Chilean navy. On average I'll lose about 10 to 15 pounds covering this race, and I'm quite slim to begin with. You come back starving and freezing. I wonder why I do it sometimes! 📷

07



05 Lone competitor

A lone member of Team Spirit Canada trekking near the end of the 2009 race. This can be the most gruelling section for racers and photographers, with sideways rain, mud and thick vegetation to contend with

06 Lydia McDonald

Lydia McDonald trekking below the spires of Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chile. Competitors rarely eat or sleep in their quest to win the race, and must get used to living off adrenaline and energy bars

07 Angel Espana

Local fisherman Espana helped to rescue Michael Clark after he succumbed to hypothermia during the 2009 race. Espana is shown here diving for sea urchins and king crabs to sustain the frozen photographer

08



08 Team Spirit Canada

Team Spirit Canada navigating its way through the 120-kilometre trekking section on the southern edge of the Brunswick Peninsula during the final stage of the 2009 Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race. In recent years, most serious injuries have occurred in this trekking section