



Elaina Arenz-Smith on Habenero on the Outrage Wall in El Potrero Chico, Hidalgo, Mexico. FS, 80-200mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor

# RE THE Ground

MICHAEL CLARK



Greg Child



Tell Michael Clark that he's got a dream job, and his response might surprise you. "Do you realize that I sit in front of the computer 50 percent of the time?" he asks. "And that I shoot maybe 15 percent of the time I'm in the field?" The rest, he says, is carrying 120-pound packs 3,000 feet up the back side of El Capitan, or spending up to three days scouting locations and rigging ropes so he can be in position when the climbers arrive.

Michael won't glamorize or romanticize what he does. It's tough work that demands preparation. And it's a business, one that often finds him holed up in his home office, dealing with clients, sorting and labeling images and sending out invoices.

But he's not about to trade it in. "I get to see top athletes perform at incredible levels and do amazing things," he says. "They're so far out there, it's a thrill just to watch them. And I get to record them in pictures that I hope will inspire others and even help the athletes in their careers."

Michael's photography of outdoor adventure sports—including rock and ice climbing, mountaineering, kayaking and mountain biking—results in images for stock sales as well as editorial assignments for magazines and commercial assignments for clothing and gear manufacturers. "Often I photograph sponsored athletes, and every time they get press it helps them in their careers," he says. "As a photographer I'm always taking from people, and I really try to give back to them through the pictures."

below, left to right  
Gabriela Baumeister at the Original Meat Wall in Indian Creek, Utah.  
D2x, 28-70mm f/2.8 ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor

Kurt Smith in Tuolumne Meadows, Yosemite National Park, California.  
F5, 80-200mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor

opposite page, clockwise from top left  
Andy Lyons bracing himself while kayaking on the Racecourse on the Rio Grande River near Taos, New Mexico.  
D2x, 80-200mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor

Scott Barady dropping over a small waterfall on the Santa Cruz River north of Santa Fe, New Mexico.  
F5, 80-200mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor

Atom Crawford doing cartwheels on the Racecourse.  
F5, 80-200mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor



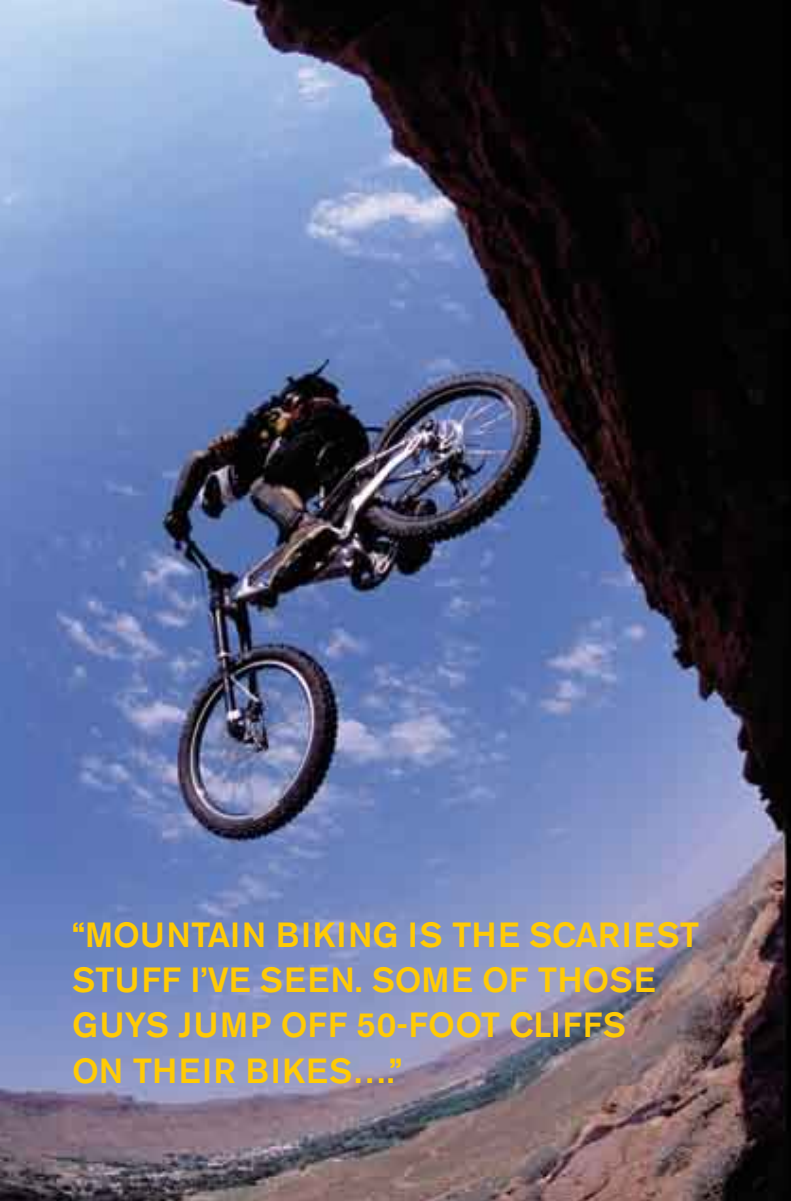




**“I GET TO SEE TOP ATHLETES PERFORM AT INCREDIBLE LEVELS....  
THEY’RE SO FAR OUT THERE, IT’S A THRILL JUST TO WATCH THEM.”**

Chris Sharma in the Tarantino Cave  
at Cala Barcos, Mallorca, Spain.  
F5, 17-35mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor





**"MOUNTAIN BIKING IS THE SCARIEST STUFF I'VE SEEN. SOME OF THOSE GUYS JUMP OFF 50-FOOT CLIFFS ON THEIR BIKES...."**

clockwise, from above  
Ryon Reed jumping, Moab, Utah.  
F5, 16mm f/2.8D AF Fisheye-Nikkor

Ed Strang free-riding at a BMX (bicycle motocross) park near Santa Fe, New Mexico.  
D2x, 17-35mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S Zoom-Nikkor

Ryon Reed taking the roundabout at Bartlett Wash, near Moab, Utah.  
F5, 16mm f/2.8D AF Fisheye-Nikkor

Michael mounted the camera on the bike's seat post for this rider's eye view of the Red Dot trail, near Los Alamos, New Mexico.  
N90s, 16mm f/2.8D AF Fisheye-Nikkor

Michael's passion for photography stems from junior high school, but he set aside his dream of being a pro photographer when he started college. Then, in his last semester, he took a rock climbing course. Soon climbing became an obsession. "It was climbing that brought me back to photography, at first to record the amazing places I traveled to and later to inspire others," Michael writes at his website, [www.michaelclarkphoto.com](http://www.michaelclarkphoto.com). Soon his pictures began to sell, and he never looked back.

Michael says that climbing is the safest sport he photographs. "Mountain biking is the scariest stuff I've ever seen. Some of those guys jump off 50-foot cliffs on their bikes, and that's...well, for them it's not crazy, but for the rest of us...?" He considers kayaking the most dangerous sport for the athletes. "On six of my last eight kayaking shoots, somebody's come pretty close to dying. One guy spent 12 minutes under the water; he was able to get one nostril above the water for a time, then pull himself upright."

For those who aspire to take the kind of pictures Michael takes, he'll first remind you of the 120-pound packs and 3,000 feet of an El Capitan climb; then, if you're still interested, he'll tell you that it all starts with knowing the sport. "You don't have to know everything, but you should know it pretty well, especially if it's a dangerous sport. With climbing, you have to keep yourself and the others safe. For mountain biking and kayaking, you'll be standing on the ground, so it's mostly a matter of finding the interesting angle."

He advises previsualization of the pictures. "I even draw little pictures of what I want to get, and then I take them with me and say to the athletes, 'Okay, let's see if we can set up this image.' I always include them and get their opinion, whether they see the drawing or not. Half the time it's, 'No, that's not going to work,' but sometimes they come up with their own crazy ideas."

For kayaking, Michael is very clear: "It's seriously a matter of having a camera with amazing autofocus. Kayaking is probably the most incredible test of autofocus I've ever seen. The kayakers are not moving linearly; they're moving in every direction, at random. Kayaking was the first thing I photographed when I got my D2x, and I was blown away. Of 300 images, I had only three out of focus. I thought, okay, I like this camera."

Digital, he's found, is a big advantage overall. "Knowing I got the picture not only helps me, it's also important to the athletes. If those guys are jumping off cliffs all day, they like to hear me say, 'Okay, stop, we got it. We're outta here.'"

Digital also sparks ideas. "I can really get the athletes involved in the shoot when I can show them the images. It's like, 'Look at what we're getting.' And then they get excited and it's, 'Okay, let's try this.' The next thing you know you've got an image you never would have thought of or tried."



## WHAT IT TAKES

That's Michael, in position to photograph climber Kurt Smith, and to be photographed by Alain Denis. Alain says the setting—La Infamia, the Outrage Wall of El Potrero Chico in Hidalgo, Mexico—was a perfect spot for him to capture not only climbers but also an adventure photographer at work. Unlike Michael, Alain was on solid ground when he took the photo, in 2001, with an F5 and an 80-200mm f/2.8 AF Zoom-Nikkor.

Alain Denis/Courtesy Outdoor Photographer

