

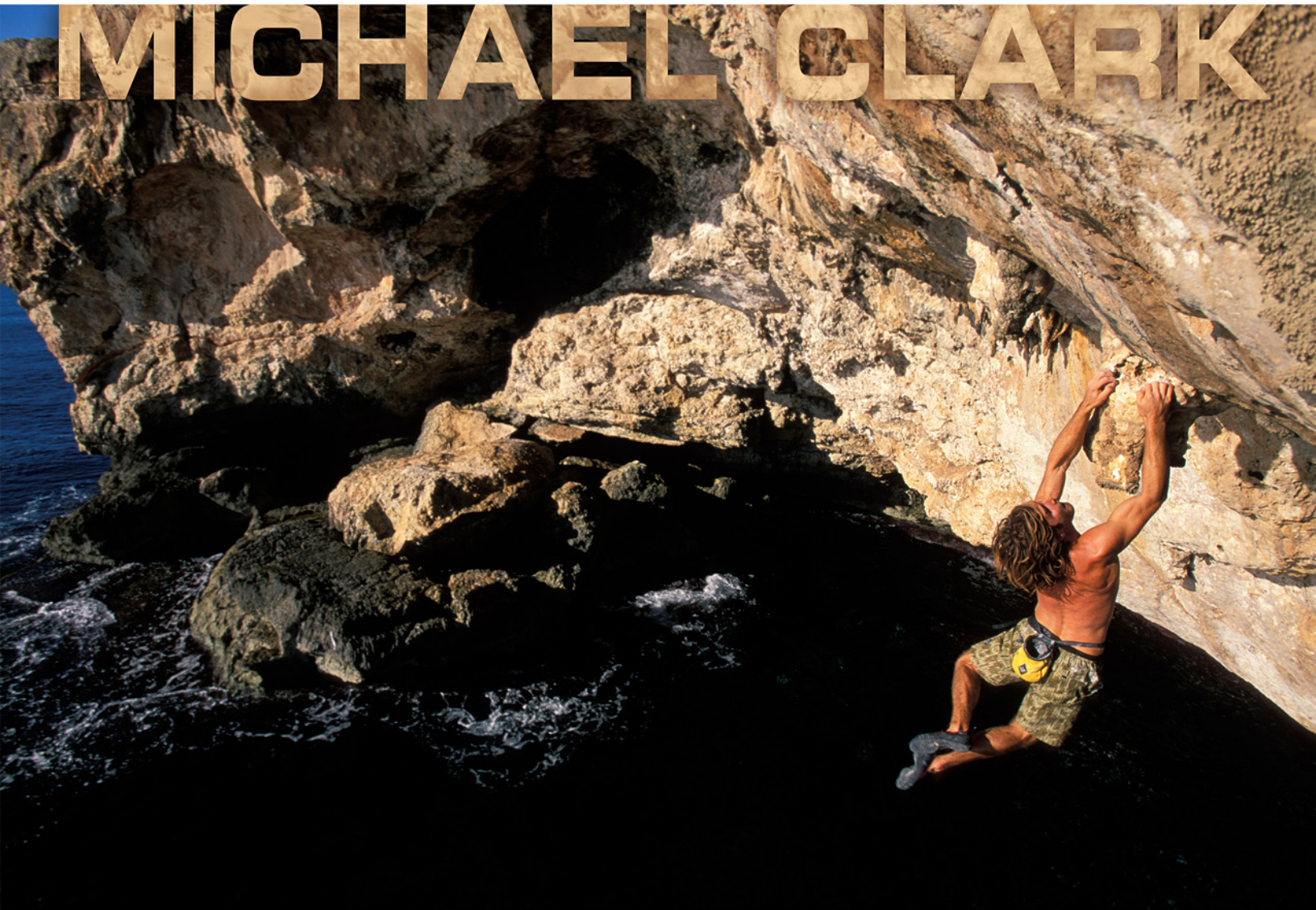


A LARK PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK

D I G I T A L
MASTERS

ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHY

MICHAEL CLARK



CAPTURING THE WORLD OF OUTDOOR SPORTS



digital masters: adventure photography

capturing the world of outdoor sports

Michael Clark



LARK BOOKS

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The great American author Ernest Hemingway once wrote, “There are only three sports: bullfighting, motor racing, and mountaineering; all the rest are merely games.” The gist of his statement is that these three sports were the only ones in his day where the individual was risking life and limb, while all other sports were just games because the possibility of death or dismemberment was non-existent. Today, adventure sports continue that tradition of risk and reward. Adventure athletes often put it all on the line as they grapple with their fear, ambition, and the hope of success. As an adventure photographer, you are there to document and share these spectacular moments by creating images that translate the adventure lifestyle.

Suffice it to say, adventure sports in general are risky business. In the fifteen or more years I have been rock climbing, mountaineering, kayaking, mountain biking, and trekking around the globe, I have had plenty of close encounters I was lucky to survive. But my time in the outdoors also inspires my life and creativity. Through my images and words, I hope to share my passion and relate just how phenomenal the rewards of photographing these sports can be. Adventure sports teach self-reliance, confidence, responsibility, and good judgment. Without the confidence I gained from rock climbing and mountaineering, I would have never had the wherewithal to start a career as an adventure photographer. It is precisely because of my involvement in these sports that I am able to tromp through uncharted corners of the globe, have an outlet for my creative energy, and work with world-class athletes at the height of their sport. Adventure photography allows me to explore the world in a way I never would have otherwise; when I am behind the camera, my curiosity kicks in and enriches my interactions with the people and places I visit.

Being both challenged and inspired is what adventure photography is all about. If you are reading this book, I am willing to bet that adventure is what gets you excited and you are up to the challenge of creating images that convey your passion for the outdoors. When I teach workshops, my goal is to download as much information as possible from my brain to the students. In this book, my goal is the same. I want to give you as much information as I possibly can on every aspect of photographing adventure sports, including all of the little tidbits that are not obvious. We’ll discuss the photographic equipment I use and recommend, both in the equipment chapter and when we discuss each adventure sport individually. In addition to how I use that gear, I’ll also describe how I approach each sport and how I carry the equipment. While the latter might seem like a small detail, how to carry and protect your gear varies greatly depending on the sport. I’ll forewarn you that I am a gear head. Like many photographers, I love talking about megapixels, high ISO noise, sensor resolution, chromatic aberration and all that gobbly-gook—but in the end, cameras are just tools for capturing your vision. The suggestions I make about equipment can be considered a solid starting point for gathering your own gear; as your experience grows you’ll learn what works and what doesn’t work for your style of photography.

My own journey into photography first began in junior high, but it was on a trip to France in 1995 that I first thought I could make it a career. I was photographing Toni Lamprecht, a world class German climber, in Buoux, France. He was virtually unknown in the United States at the time and the images I shot of him climbing cutting edge routes were newsworthy back in the U.S. When I returned home, my first three submissions were published in *Outdoor Photographer*, *Climbing*, and *Rock and Ice* magazines. From that point on, I was hooked and worked as often and as hard as I could to make climbing photography, and later adventure photography, a full-time career. It took about three years before I was able to go full-time, and I consider myself extremely blessed to have found such a fulfilling career, and to now be able to share the knowledge I have gained over the last fifteen-plus years.

When I first started out, I would have paid almost anything for a how-to book on adventure sports photography. Over the years I learned through my own obsession, hard work, and a lot of trial and error about the important aspects of this genre like equipment, positioning, natural and artificial lighting, business practices and marketing strategies, and much more. Consider this book a compilation of my experience and hard work that can save you the time and frustration of figuring it all out on your own. My goal is that the information gathered here leads you down a path of adventurous living and inspiration in the outdoors that lasts a lifetime, and that you learn the technical skills that will help take your photography to the next level.



1. Apple MacBook Pro computer 2. Western Digital 320 GB Firewire/USB 2.0 Hard drive 3. Cord for Camera Battery Charger 4. Nikon camera battery chargers 5. Nikon EN-EL3 batteries for my full frame and APS Nikon cameras. Note that it is nice that both cameras share the same battery 6. Nikon D700 camera and MB-D10 battery grip which allows both of my cameras to shoot at 8 fps 7. Nikon D300 camera 8. Cell phone 9. Air blower for cleaning cameras, lenses, and sensor 10. Sandisk Firewire 800 card reader 11. AA Battery charger for rechargeable batteries (14) 12. Voice recorder for interviews and notes 13. Nikon D700 camera 14. Rechargeable AA batteries 15. Nikon SB-800 flash units with diffuser domes 16. Nikon EN-EL4a rechargeable battery for MB-D10 battery grip 17. Balance Smarter white balance exposure disc, which is used to set custom white balance settings 18. Walkie-Talkies 19. Cliff bar 20. Moleskine notebook 21. Headlamp 22. Nikon 10.5mm F/2.8 AF-DX lens 23. Nikon 85mm f/1.8 AFD lens 24. Minolta IV-F light and flash meter 25. Nikon 24mm f/2.8 AFD lens 26. Nikon AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8 lens 27. Nikon AF-S 24-70mm f/2.8 lens

28. Visible Dust Brushes for Cleaning digital sensors 29. Connection and charging cords for Epson P-2000 30. Epson P-2000 Storage device 31. Extra batteries for Epson P-2000 32. Think Tank Memory Card wallet 33. Kirk Photo BH-1 ball head and Gitzo 1340 tripod 34. Lenspen and lens cleaning cloth 35. X-Rite ColorChecker color chart 36. Think Tank Memory Card wallet with SanDisk Extreme III and IV Compact Flash cards in 2, 4, and 8GB sizes 37. X-Rite i1 Display 2 monitor calibration device 38. Plug adapters for foreign countries and allen wrenches for removing arca-swiss tripod adapter plates 39. Bogen Monopod 40. Hasselblad 503CW medium format camera 41. Compass 42. Property and model releases 43. Batteries for Hasselblad motor drive grip 44. Pocket Wizard radio slaves for use with flash, strobes, and remote camera work 45. Nikon 300mm f/4.0 AFD lens 46. Nikon AF-S 70-200mm f/2.8 VR lens 47. Slik clamp head for mounting a camera on any cylindrical or square surface (e.g. a mountain bike) 48. Sharpie and pen for notes 49. Water bottle



Learning how and when to use artificial light to enhance your images is a key step in taking your photography to the next level. By artificial light, I mean any light source that is available other than the sun. Whether using shoe mounted flashes, battery-powered strobes, hot lights, or even just a headlamp, these lights can add drama and depth to an image when used effectively. Like other general topics touched on in this book, artificial lighting is highly nuanced; instead of getting into too much detail here, I'll leave it up to the reader to explore the technical aspects of lighting. There are quite a few excellent books, websites, and blogs out there that go into great detail about using these tools. One of the best is the Strobist blog at www.strobist.com, which includes tutorials covering everything from basic to advanced techniques for all types of flash photography. What we'll focus on here is when and where to introduce artificial light, the equipment options, and some basic lighting fundamentals.



The pilots of the Henry 1 Helicopter Search and Rescue unit in Santa Rosa, California, set up their night vision equipment before taking off on a call. This picture was taken using two Dyna-Lite Uni400jr mono-lights with red gels, a headlamp (pointed at the pilot's face from within), and available light from the instrument panel to capture the cockpit at night. I used intense gels to accentuate and amplify the existing blend of already saturated colors.

WHEN AND WHERE TO INTRODUCE ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

Deciding when and where to use artificial light will depend on many factors. First, you'll have to decide if the existing light quality isn't working for you. The following are common situations for when you might want to add artificial light: the existing light is dull, lacking contrast (as it often is on cloudy days), or the light is too dark to use a fast enough shutter speed to stop the action. Another situation where artificial light helps is in high-contrast conditions, such as in a forest at high noon. Flash can be used in this situation to balance out the dark shadows and the bright highlights under the forest canopy. Most often, you'll want to use artificial light to add drama and give the image more impact than it would have otherwise.

If you decide you want to improve or alter the existing light, you'll have to consider the power your artificial lights offer. Are you working with shoe mount flashes? If so, they have limited power, so you'll have to be in a shaded area or shooting outside at dusk, dawn, or in the twilight. However, these small flashes work well for adding just a kiss of light, called fill flash, any time of day. With fill flash, you generally have to be pretty close to your subject, usually around 4-10 feet (1.2-3 m) away. If you have stronger strobes that offer 1000 watt/seconds or more of power, then you'll be able to overpower daylight with no problem.

Note: It has become common to use the word "strobe" when referring to the larger studio-style lighting kits. The term strobe derives from "stroboscopic" lighting, which is a quickly pulsating light. Technically, "strobe" isn't an accurate term for studio lighting kits, but because its use has become so standard, I use it here to describe battery-operated power packs with flash heads.



This image is an example of using a headlamp to get the classic glowing tent shot. It was taken while on a backpacking trip in Canyonlands National Park, Utah. I walked up to the tent during the 30-second exposure, shined the light inside the tent for a second or two, and then continued past the camera to create both the glowing tent and the light streaks.

Before a shoot, I normally scout the location to figure out if I'll need to use strobes to get the images I want. Even if I haven't scouted the location, I can previsualize the effect I am going for and decide whether or not it is possible, or even worth it, to really go all out with artificial lighting. In my experience, it helps a great deal to have an assistant if you are going to use strobes because they weigh a ton when you consider all the extras (like flash heads, light stands, soft boxes, reflectors, etc.). It also takes some time to get everything set up and to dial in the light output for each strobe. Having an extra person available to hold onto the lights is also a good idea so your \$800 strobe head doesn't take a digger when the wind starts to blow.

In some situations, it isn't how much power you need, but how little. Usually with night shots and long exposures, lightpainting is the way to go. With this technique, you take a flashlight or headlamp and paint light onto your subject or through a surface, like a tent wall, while the camera's shutter is open. The camera records the light as it is "painted" onto your subject. It is very easy to control how much light is applied and where it falls with this technique. The "glowing tent" shot (above) is a classic outdoor trick that's best done with lightpainting. If you drop your shoe mount flash into a tent at night and fire it during a long exposure, you'll quickly find out the tent isn't glowing orange, but is white hot because the flash kicks out way too much light. In this situation, a headlamp or flashlight is the best way to go.



Mason Ho catches a solid wave at the famous surf break, Bonzai Pipeline, on the north shore of Oahu in Hawaii. I shot this image with a Nikkor 200-400mm f/4 zoom lens while standing on the beach.

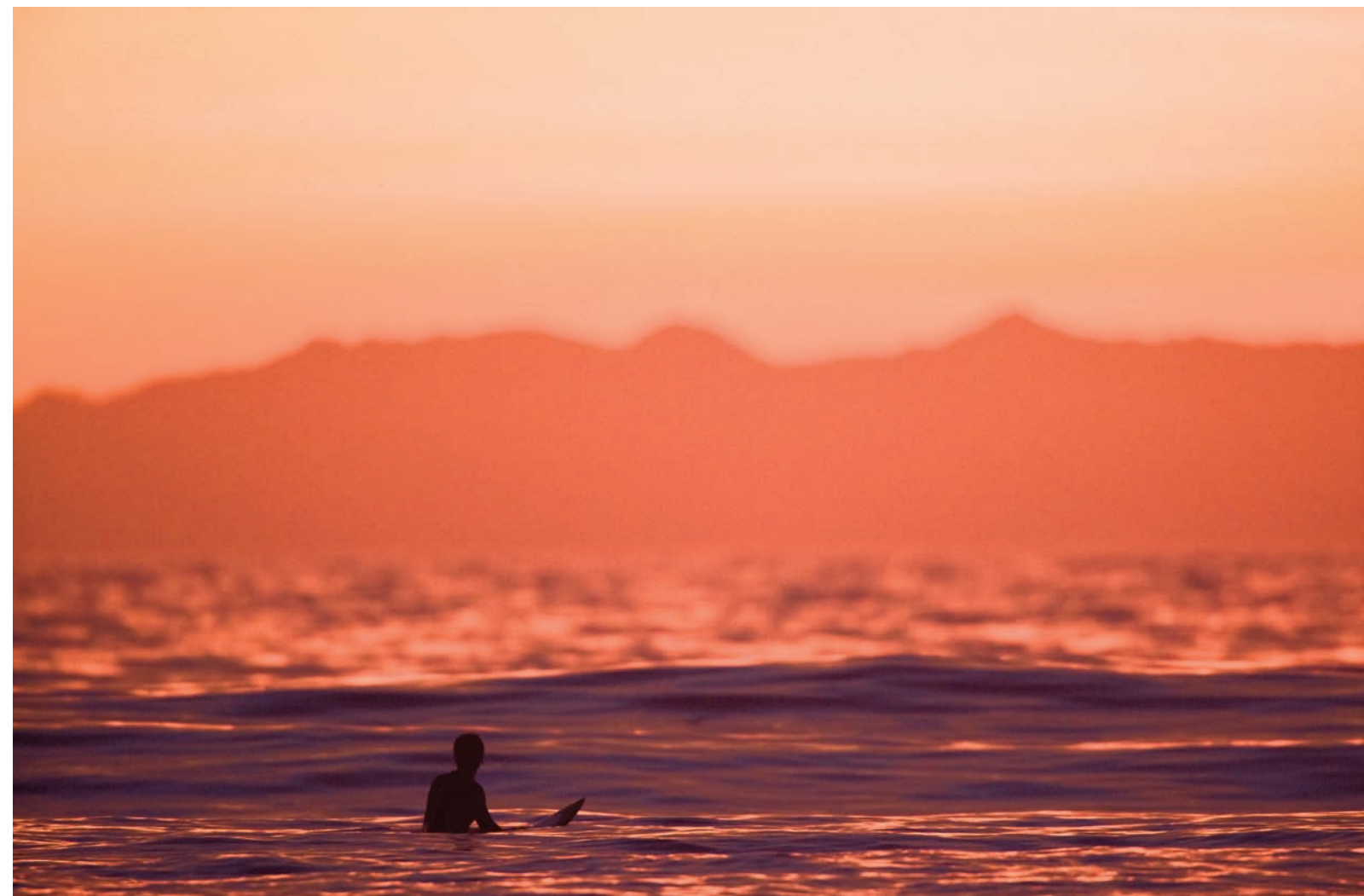
Water sports comprise a large portion of the adventure genre. In this chapter, we'll cover four of the main water sports: surfing, whitewater kayaking, sea kayaking, and scuba diving. Surfing is hands down one of the most visually appealing adventure sports. Seeing a surfer ride down a massive wave never ceases to be inspiring. I owe a special thanks to acclaimed surfing photographer Brian Biemann, who shared his insight and experience with me for this chapter. When it comes to fast-paced action and facing danger in the water, no other sport comes close to whitewater kayaking. Every time I shoot kayaking, my appreciation for the sport grows—as does my fear of it! By comparison, sea kayaking and scuba diving are fairly tame. Since most of my sea kayaking photography has been shot during adventure races, I gleaned a lot of insight on the sport from Mike Tittel, who specialized in sea kayaking photography at the start of his career. Finally, underwater photography is almost a genre unto itself; therefore, I enlisted another seasoned pro, Brett Seymour, and interviewed him for the section on scuba diving and underwater photography. Because of its popularity, let's start with surfing and then progress through the other water sports.

SURFING

Surfing is one of the most exhilarating adventure sports. The athleticism and skill on display by surfers pushing the boundaries of what is humanly possible on huge waves is a visual feast for any photographer. Throw in some beautiful surroundings and colorful sunsets and surfing images can be more artistic than many of the other outdoor genres, and they often offer a nice blend of lifestyle and action photography.

There are typically four ways to photograph surfing, and five if you count remote camera options. First, you can shoot from the beach or a nearby pier. Second, you can shoot from a boat or on a personal watercraft like a Jet Ski. Third, you can get in the water and shoot from inside the wave or under it. And fourth (if you have the resources), shooting from a helicopter can provide some great angles and is also an easy way to stay with the surfer as the waves move forward. The fifth option is to mount a camera on the surfboard, which is costly and difficult. Let's look into each of these five options more closely.

This image, shot after the sun had set, shows how the reflective properties of water effectively extend the sunset. The surfer was backlit while waiting for one last wave before packing it in at Oxnard Shores in California.



If you've made it this far into this book, the odds are good that you might be thinking about how to become a pro and make money from your adventure images. The life of a professional photographer may seem pretty glamorous from the outside—and every once in a while, it truly is. But the reality of being a professional adventure photographer is quite different than the perception. Don't worry, I'm not here to quash anyone's dreams—after all, I'm living mine. However, I think it's only fair to offer up a realistic view of what it means to make adventure photography a career. While the work is fulfilling and exciting at times, it also requires effort far above and beyond hanging out in wild locations and clicking the shutter button. Hauling 100-plus pound backpacks up the backside of big walls, chasing light that may or may not work with you, traveling non-stop, sleeping in airports, 90-hour work weeks, and being chained to a computer for days on end processing images are just a few of the less exciting aspects of this profession, not to mention the tough realities of owning your own business. But there are, of course, the plus sides—being your own boss, being able to choose (to some degree) where you focus your energy, and being there to witness the accomplishments of elite adventure athletes around the world. Just as with any other art or passion worth pursuing, adventure photography offers a mixed bag of physical and mental hardships along with moments of elation. So for the final two chapters of this book, I thought I'd give some insight into the profession and talk about the realities of working in this day and age as a professional adventure photographer.



Riptide warning signs at the famous surf break, Bonzai Pipeline, on the north shore of Oahu. It's certainly possible to make adventure photography a career, but it's good to be aware of the challenges ahead.

HARD WORK AND SERIOUS DEDICATION

If I were to distill adventure photography down to its basics, there is a correlation between how hard you work and the resulting quality of your images. When I say hard work, I mean going the extra mile to get to that tough-to-reach shooting position, arriving early, staying late, being obsessed, and being driven to learn how you can make your images better. A large part of this is physical. I call it the “sweat factor.” If the sweat factor is high, meaning you had to work your rear end off to get into position, then the odds are good you'll have some interesting images.

Being successful in this field requires a lot of dedication, and not just to the craft. Dedication is being able to deal with rejection, setbacks, and roadblocks and still have the ability to keep moving forward. As with many creative professions, photography is one where it helps to have thick skin. Even as a pro, your images will get rejected on a daily basis. If you want to be taken seriously as a pro photographer, you will have to stick around through the ups and downs and prove you are dependable and consistent. I am almost certain that editors look at how long you have been in the business as an indicator of your abilities. Shooting an assignment is hard, stressful work and editors want to know that you will come through for them. On assignments, you have to come back with “the shots” even when things don't go as planned; so having the ability to improvise and solve problems is a requirement beyond having decent photography skills.



Josh Ewing rappels off the very exposed Learning to Crawl (5.11) on the Bridger Jack Mesa in Indian Creek, Utah. After I shot this image I waited for the climbers to rappel the route and asked if they would sign model releases for me. They were happy to oblige and I sent them a few prints to say thanks.