

SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHER?

The images taken by Ben Sanford, Neil Silverwood, and Ben Jackson inspire the adventure photographers' audiences to follow them outdoors and prove that the Southern Hemisphere really does make for the perfect playground. However, in capturing alpine sunsets and limestone formations, the photogs put their bodies on the line to get the incredible shots

WORDS | ADRIAN HATWELL

BEN SANFORD, ASPIRING, SONY A7R II, CANON EF 16-35MM F/2.8L II USM LENS, 35MM, 1/60S, F/9, ISO 100

“I love the concept of capturing ordinary people doing incredible things,” he explains; “there’s definitely some saturated areas of photography, but I feel there are fewer people who will put their body on the line to get an incredible shot.”

With most forms of photography, there exists a necessary distance between photographer and subject; the artist shoots something while remaining apart from it. When it comes to adventure photography, though, that distance is eradicated. Adventure photographers don’t just shoot an adventure, they are on an adventure — in the thick of it, with every wild thrill and dangerous spill that entails.

For those who feel that adventure runs in their veins, we have spoken to some of the region’s most intrepid photographers to discover what it takes to put life and limb on the line for the rush of the shot.

THE HEIGHT OF ADVENTURE From on high, the world’s natural splendour unfurls at a scale and from a perspective that people are seldom privy to; to hit those heights, you need no small amount of skill, fitness, and fortitude. Just ask Ben Sanford, the young photographer from the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, who is sharing spectacular views from some of the highest peaks of Australia and Aotearoa.

“I love the concept of capturing ordinary people doing incredible things,” he explains. “There’s definitely some saturated areas of photography, but I feel [that] there are fewer people who will put their body on the line to get an incredible shot.”

Of course, there’s a difference between taking a calculated risk and being plain reckless. Ben has spent years cultivating his climbing and mountaineering skills and ensures that he keeps

just as fit as, if not fitter than, the athletes he is photographing. He is also fastidious about having both the right tools for the job and intimate knowledge of how they work.

“It’s not all fun and pretty pictures; it requires a lot of planning and effort. There’s much to consider when it comes to weather, gear, and staying safe,” he says.

Ben’s part-time adventuring — he also works as a photography assistant in Sydney and shoots more boring stuff to pay the bills — recently brought him to our shores to tackle the wild expanse of the Southern Alps, climbing four different summits in various regions of the range. One highlight of his trip was climbing Mount Malte Brun, which saw him ascending loose moraine, scree, soft snow, and loose rock ridges; descending glacial icefalls; and traversing long tracts of white ice. It was three days of hard slog, but the payoff was abundant.

“To me, mountaineering is the culmination of all climbing skills,” Ben tells us. “I am attracted to the alpine environment, as it’s so different; the views are incredible, and they make all the pain and suffering worth it.”

For this kind of journey, Ben carries a significant array of gear, while trying to keep his pack as light as possible. Though his full kit consists of Canon 5D Mark II and Sony A7R II bodies, a trusty lens trio (16–35mm, 24–70mm, and 70–200mm) and a tripod, flash, and wireless triggers, generally he’ll venture out with just a body, 16–35mm lens and tripod as the situation demands. However, the list of



NEIL SILVERWOOD, CANON EOS 5D MARK III, CANON EF 16–35MM F/2.8L II USM LENS, 26MM, 1/125S, F/3.2, ISO 400

non-photography gear can get much longer: ice axes, crampons, ropes, snow stakes, ice screws, dry bags, wetsuit, helmet, harness — and that's not to mention the basic sleeping and cooking kit.

“You need to know your capabilities and limitations, and also know your gear and its limits inside and out,” Ben warns. “You don't have time to waste fluffing around, or you will miss the shots and reduce what you can achieve in the time available.”

While the thought of amassing a big cache of specialist equipment will appeal to the gearheads out there, the photographer warns about getting overly precious with your toys. You are, after all, planning to take them to the ends of the earth.

“Understanding how to take care of your gear efficiently is key, but [so is] understanding that a photo can be worth more than the cost of replacing equipment,” Ben advises. “If you want to keep your gear perfect, stick to fashion and portraits.”

When asked for his advice to aspiring adventure photographers, Ben says that working as an assistant

for experienced professionals is possibly one of the best ways to not only improve your shooting — through the use of both natural and artificial lighting — but also your knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the business. Success in the industry is more than just making great images, he emphasizes.

WAY ON DOWN If up doesn't take your fancy, there's plenty of exploration to be done in the downward direction, too.

Neil Silverwood is one of the country's few dedicated cave photographers, spending days underground exploring subterranean tunnel systems. As with his mountaineering counterpart, what drives this photographer to explore is the chance to show people things in this world they've never seen before.

“I started out in cave photography by exploring deep cave systems in the South Island. We were the first people in these places,” Neil explains. “You would come out after a week underground, having had this incredible experience — being the first human being through some of these passages.”



BEN SANFORD, MT MALTE BRUN, SONY A7R II, CANON EF 16-35MM F/2.8L II USM LENS, 16MM, 1/250S, F/11, ISO 160



BEN SANFORD, ROBINSON CREEK, SONY A7R II, CANON EF 16-35MM F/2.8L II USM LENS, 16MM, 1/160S, F/4, ISO 1000

Neil was recently part of an excursion that unearthed what is currently the deepest known cave in the Southern Hemisphere — a 1200-metre-deep system lying between the Stormy Pot and Nettlebed caves of the Mount Arthur region. The descent took three days, and, thanks to the photographer, there are remarkable images to document the historic subterranean journey.

“You can’t just wander through a cave and take photos; it takes about an hour to get a shot,” Neil says of his process. “Most of the shots are preconceived; you imagine them before you ever take them.”

Since he works in absolute darkness, the photographer has to introduce all the light into the scene. He does this through the use of five electronic flash guns with built-in radio triggers, along with antique flash bulbs, which can kick out upwards of 10 times more light. The resultant images afford a surreal, exhilarating view of a landscape that could just as easily be out of this world.

Of course, such an inhospitable environment comes with its share of risks. In putting together a recent book, *Caves: Exploring New Zealand’s Subterranean Wilderness*, the photographer destroyed more than \$10K worth of equipment while navigating precarious

drops and constricting, wet conditions. It’s not just gear that can be imperilled; on a recent trip, a fellow caver had a fall and fractured both his tibia and fibula bones, with the former bursting through his skin.

“We tried to talk him into getting onto the stretcher, but he wouldn’t have a bar of it, because it would have taken us two or three days to get him out,” Neil recalls, “so he walked, limped, and crawled his way out of the cave.”

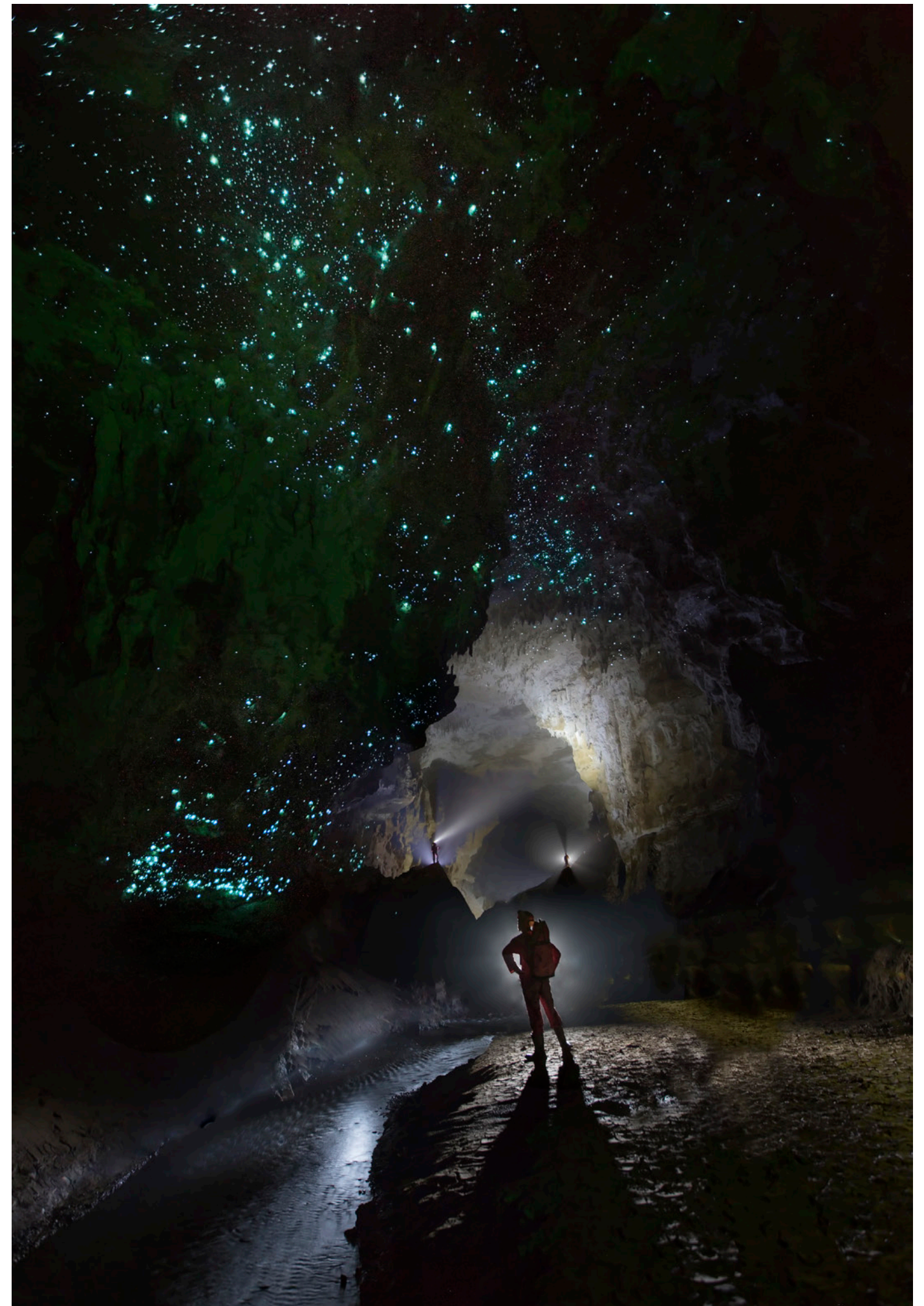
The photographer says that shooting adventures like this can open doors to places you’d never dream of getting access to — for instance, he recently shot a story about high-altitude skiing in Afghanistan — but it doesn’t come easy.

“I hope you like noodles, because it’s pretty hard to make money and survive if you’re photographing interesting, adventurous stories,” he advises. “You’re going to need to be really driven, and you’re going to need to take your camera out when it’s getting really rough — the bad times as well as the good.”

CASTING OFF A majority of our blue planet is given over to water, so it’s no great surprise that many of the most adventurous shooters are called to the depths. Ben Jackson is a qualified white-water



NEIL SILVERWOOD, CANON EOS 5D MARK III, CANON EF 16–35MM F/2.8L II USM LENS, 16MM, 4.5S, F/5.6, ISO 1000



NEIL SILVERWOOD, CANON EOS 5D MARK III, CANON EF 16–35MM F/2.8L II USM LENS, 17MM, 430S, F/2.8, ISO 1600

“After 100-plus trips in the polar regions, I’m still very motivated about visualizing and capturing images at each end of the planet,” Ben Jackson says; “challenges are plenty, but it’s always worth it”





BEN JACKSON. CANON EOS 5D MARK III, CANON EF 16-35MM F/4L IS USM LENS, 18MM, 1/160S, F/8, ISO 800

kayak instructor, heli-kayaking enthusiast, and polar-expedition leader, who, for more than 20 years, has been travelling the globe experiencing water in all its most extreme forms, camera in hand.

“After 100-plus trips in the polar regions, I’m still very motivated about visualizing and capturing images at each end of the planet,” he says. “Challenges are plenty, but it’s always worth it.”

The outdoors has always been a part of the photographer’s life, but it’s not just extreme adventuring that attracts him. Some of his wildest experiences have been a combination of travel, culture, and action. He cites a month-long exploratory white-water kayaking trip in the Indian Himalayas — time spent sleeping rough and exploring areas never seen by kayak — as his wildest trip to date.

“The language, culture, landscape, and white water were a step above anything else I’d ever experienced; it was the most intense month of my life, and we had plenty of adventure along the way,” Ben recalls. “From watching one of our team almost drown, to bribing our way out of a false arrest, to recovering the body of a deceased local, it was a powerful experience through and through.”

The difference between a travel photographer and an adventure photographer can sometimes come down to impulsiveness. On a kayaking trip to D’Urville Island in the Marlborough Sounds, the photographer climbed a huge rock outcrop to get a


wide shot of his party. In his enthusiasm, however, he had neglected to plan a way back down the loose terrain.


“I’d generally back myself in any situation, but here I was definitely treading a very fine line in getting back down without slipping or falling. By the time I had made it back to my kayak, I’d managed to destroy the only dry bag that would fit my camera — less than ideal for a five-day sea-kayaking trip.”


Ben’s many travels out to the frigid zones have led to their own share of perilous situations as well, usually by way of being pushed around and trapped by the forbidding ice environment. The diversity of landscapes Ben has experienced has served to highlight a key characteristic of a successful adventure photographer: willingness to make the most of any moment.

“Living and working in such dynamic environments mean you have to be opportunistic in many regards. If I see a good wildlife shot while I’m shooting landscape, I’ll take it, and vice versa,” he explains. “[With] some of my favourite shots, all the rules are broken.”

Follow the featured photographers’ adventures throughout New Zealand and abroad:

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