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## HDV captures thrills of Long Way Down

"The cameras mounted on bike helmets were vital because they allowed the boys to record their thoughts as they went along. There's a button on the handlebars they can push to activate the camera."

After 85 days and 15,000 miles, actors Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman completed their epic motorcycle expedition from John O'Groats to Cape Town at the beginning of August.

Along the route they endured sandstorms in Libya, flooded roads in Kenya, crossed 18 borders and survived infamous trouble spots in Sudan's Darfur region and Ethiopia – all whilst making a six-part documentary about their experiences for BBC Two.

Long Way Down executive producers are David Alexanian and Russ Malkin, who came up with the idea for the trip with McGregor and Boorman, and accompanied them on the way. They say the trip had many adventures, but everyone arrived home safely. But that's not to say there weren't mishaps on the way, Malkin says. The duo's previous experience shooting Long Way Round – a 20,000 mile trip from Northern Europe to Siberia, Alaska and New York in 2004 – taught them that what's bad for the team is good for the show.

"When Ewan or Charley come off their bikes — our first reaction is to rush up to them and say "did you film it" (the duo were kitted out with miniature cameras in their helmets) before asking "Oh, and are you OK?"."

If anything, Long Way Down has been a tougher test of Boorman and McGregor's biking abilities and the eight strong crew's support vehicles and camera equipment than its trans-Siberian predecessor. "Travelling through the Sudan and Northern Ethiopia or Western Tanzania, roads can be non-existent or quite horrific at best," says Alexanian.



### Camera team shoots HDV

The Long Way Down team includes three cameraman, including Claudio Von Planta equipped with an HVR-V1E mounted on the tank bag of his motorbike, as well as director of photography Jimmy Simak and Jim Foster, who shot mostly with the larger HVR-Z1E from the support vehicles, or a couple of HVR-A1Es. Sony Specialist dealer PEC Video provided Von Planta with his HVR-V1E, while another Sony Specialist dealer, WTS Broadcast, provided the rest.

Malkin admits he was particularly impressed by the durability of the HVR-Z1E and HVR-A1E on this trip. "We hit a major sandstorm for over 500 miles in Libya where you could only see 20 metres in front of you and every time you got the camera out to film, the HVR-Z1E got clogged up with dust. But we just blew it out the next day and it stayed fully operational. They have proved to be almost bullet proof."

The team took five different cameras including camcorders for McGregor and Boorman to record video diaries in their tents at night, reflecting on their latest experiences, as well as small bullet cameras mounted in the support vehicles – useful for surreptitiously recording any hold ups at border crossings.

According to Malkin, the cameras mounted in bike helmets were particularly useful. "They were vital because they allowed the boys to record their thoughts as they went along. There's a button on the handlebars they can push to activate the camera. They are able to keep their thoughts private or if they are talking to each other they can record the dialogue."

Quality audio was vital because the plan was not to use much voiceover in the edit. "Using real sound makes the show more real and honest," declares Malkin.

### Action and reaction

The production team had to continually remind McGregor and Boorman – worn out by a day's travelling – to keep doing their video diaries and for the other cameramen to keep shooting location material. "It's important to have all that footage, because the show wouldn't work without it. And it is even more important to film emotional reactions to situations as they happened. You can't add that sort of stuff in afterwards," insists Malkin, who estimates that with five people gathering material over three months, Long Way Down will generate around 1,200 hours of footage.

This of course meant that editing the series couldn't be left until the end. Aired on BBC Two in Autumn 2007, the edit started as soon as the first tapes made their way back to the show's London HQ, with assistant producer Liz Mercer co-ordinating rushes and a team of four offline editors from Soho-based edit house Evolutions doing rough cuts.

One of biggest worries was material going missing, admits Malkin, who helped devise a system for sending tapes back to London HQ via couriers, and for rough cuts to be returned to the team, so they

could view material on laptops.

"We also had the safety blanket of a hard drive digitising material as we went along, so that we had back up as we in case anything got lost."

Malkin estimates that about 40 per cent of the show has been shot HD. This suits the multiplatform production. Says Alexanian, "Every day seems more breathtaking than the last." Malkin adds, "With eight guys 24/7 with each other for three months, there's no doubt that we have fallen out at times. But at others, you remember 'hang on, this is a trip of a lifetime'."

#### **The benefits of HDV**

Cameraman Jim Foster used the full range of professional HDV camcorders. On a 15,000-mile trip across Africa, Sony dealers can be hard to find, so the Long Way Down team brought plenty of spare camcorders. But one of the team's biggest assets was cameraman Jim Foster. Says Russ Malkin, "Jim was great at fixing everything with his araldite and soldering kit."

"We always have back up," explains Foster, who doubled as the show's security advisor. "We carry two camcorders each. I have a Sony HVR-Z1E, an HVR-V1E and a couple of HVR-A1E's as back up. As long as they are all shooting on the same HDV format – we can chop and change them as we need."

All the camcorders had a job to do, he says. "The Sony HVR-Z1E has the best lens quality, but the Sony HVR-V1E is much smaller and better for carrying on a tank bag on a bike."

Along the way, Foster has performed running repairs. "A few bits and pieces have come astray with the constant vibration – connectors and power leads have had to be fixed, but not much has gone wrong with the actual cameras themselves," he says. "I'm still using the original Sony HVR-Z1E I started out with."

One of the biggest challenges was getting quality audio. "It's always difficult but you get used to the wind and try to compensate for it. At the end of the day, you have to go with what's in your natural environment – there's no scope for faking it."

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