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# Extreme Documentaries

By Debra Kaufman

## Coral Reef Adventure

MacGillivray Freeman Films' IMAX Coral Reef Adventure was shot at a death-defying 350 feet beneath the ocean's surface. Producer/director Greg MacGillivray notes that working with the heavier, bulkier IMAX camera requires a solid team. "First, you want to get the right people in front of the camera, the very best athletes who have done it time and time again and know their limitations," he notes. "Second is getting the right people to do the cinematography."

Natural history filmmaker Howard and Michele Hall were, respectively, director of underwater photography and production manager. The 110-pound camera was placed in a 200-pound underwater case that had been retrofitted to withstand the pressures of the deep descents. The 300+ pound package required specially equipped boats to be safely lifted into and out of the water, at shooting locations in Fiji, Great Barrier Reef and Tahiti. The team had to do twenty dives to a 350-foot depth within 20 days. "We were told by Navy dive experts that there was a very substantial chance that someone would get the bends, which is life-threatening," says Hall.

### In More Detail

Coral Reef Adventure meant taking the 110-pound IMAX camera to depths of 350 feet. Since existing underwater camera housing were only good to 140 feet, Howard Hall modified the housing by adding compressed air cylinders and pressure regulators to inject gas into the housing as the filmmakers descended, thus neutralizing the pressure.



**A 110-lb. camera was taken to 350 feet in Coral Reef Adventure.**

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**Director Greg MacGillivray on the set of Coral Reef Adventure.**

That's exactly what happened. Hall experienced numbness in his legs at 50 feet and immediately re-descended, spending three hours at 30 feet and thereby enacting a planned protocol for in-water recompression. Back on land, the symptoms returned by the end of the day. But the crew had planned for such a contingency, and Hall went through a series of recompression treatments over a three-day period for what turned out to be a very serious case of decompression sickness. "You tend to ignore the possibility that it's a bad thing," admits Hall. "It's a classic case of denial. If we hadn't been prepared for it, it very certainly could have been life-threatening."

### The Day My God Died

When Andy Levine decided to direct and produce a documentary on the trafficking of Nepali girls to Indian brothels, he knew he would have to somehow get inside one of these brothels to shoot footage. "As a filmmaker, it's critical to paint that picture," he says. "It doesn't make sense to me to do a film on any issue without showing footage." He teamed up with Witness, a program founded by Peter Gabriel, that puts cameras in the hands of activists to document human rights abuses around the world. They trained him to use a pinhole eyeglass spycamera, a piece of James Bond-like gear that set a tiny pinhole lens in a pair of eyeglasses. Wires from the eyeglasses went down a pair of crokeys and connected to a recording device strapped to his chest.



**The Day My God Died used eyeglass spycameras to document particular abuses.**

**The trafficking of Nepali girls to Indian brothels was documented using spy-camera equipment in The Day My God Died.**

#### In More Detail

To videotape inside the Indian brothels, Andy Levine was outfitted with a pinhole eyeglass spycamera by Witness, a program founded by Peter Gabriel, that puts cameras in the hands of activists to document human rights abuses around the world. The James Bond-like eyeglasses ran wires under his collar that connected to a recording device strapped to his chest.

To gain entry to the decrepit brothels in the Bombay red light district, Levine went through four or five locked gates, each one guarded. "Security is extremely tight, which is why these girls aren't able to escape," he explains. Once inside, he'd gather as much footage as possible, often asking to use the bathroom so he could film the cubbyholes where the girls lived. To mitigate the dangers that would arise if he were unmasked, Levine was accompanied by cinematographer Jurg Walther, Nepali co-producer Ravi Baral and several Indian men for security. Later, by teaming up with two anti-trafficking organizations, International Justice Mission and Maiti Nepal, Levine videotaped police raids of brothels housing young girls with his Sony PD100A.

His film, The Day My God Died, was recently shown at the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam.

### What Safety Precautions?

Independent filmmaker Bill Megalos has shot more than 30 documentaries in 20 countries for the BBC, PBS and Channel 4. "Most people wouldn't go to places I go," he says. That included the opportunity to go to Afghanistan last year for a documentary for the Asian Development Bank. Megalos and his crew arrived at the Kandahar Airport to find that the vehicle that was to take them to a celebratory opening of a new road was nowhere in sight. Megalos and his crew hitched a ride in a UN vehicle but, after the celebrations, found themselves abandoned in the middle of the desert. "No one can understand a word we're speaking and there's no reason why anyone should take care of us," he remembers. "I'm totally responsible for this crew, and we're entirely without resources." After some finagling, Megalos convinced the same UN driver to make some radio communications and hook up with locals. "I realize that sometimes I'm a little cavalier," says Megalos in retrospect. "The ability to be safe in these places has to do with how much preparation you do in advance."

Source: *Film & Video*

### In More Detail

When Bill Megalos went to Afghanistan, he brought a Sony Digital Betacam 790 because he felt that a native 16x9 aspect ratio was crucial to situating people in the landscape, though he also brought a Sony PD-150 as a back-up. For lighting, he brought a minimal kit: a Lowel Omni light and Lowel Tota light. "The lights are only for emergencies," says Megalos. "The idea is, as much as possible, to situate them in real lighting in the real environment."



**Independent filmmaker Bill Megalos in Afghanistan.**

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