

ADVENTURE

PHOTOGRAPHY

The wide-angle lens on my Olympus Tough waterproof camera enabled me to capture this peaceful scene in a lake in Montana. This is what filmmakers call an 'establishment shot'.

Words & photos: Michael Powers

"What makes for better music, or for better pictures, is simply a better human being, who either naturally evolves a more complete world view from life experience or gains it through understanding."

Galen Rowell

I stood once at a podium before a special group of disadvantaged young folks brought together by a Silicon Valley university, who were gathered there to hear me speak about my life as an 'adventure photographer'. I looked out over a sea of bored-looking faces and thought to myself, "I better come up with something good to capture the interest of these kids."

"A camera is like a magic carpet..." I began and saw with great relief that a few faces in the crowd lit up. *"... it can take you anywhere you want to go!"*

I started my slide show and began explaining how my work as a professional photographer enabled me to travel the world, gathering images for clients and publication. On the screen behind me, images appeared of sea kayaking in Antarctica and Tahiti, trekking in the Andes and face-to-face confrontations with stone age people when I paddled along the coast of Papua New Guinea. I embellish the pictures with a running commentary that I thought these young urban kids would relate to.

When the slide show ended, many hands shot up. The first question came from a diminutive Latina girl who asks about the diving knife she saw strapped to the front of my life vest in some of the sea kayaking pictures – and I replied with a stern face, *"Why, because of man-eating great white sharks, of course!"* and everybody laughed.

But the picture the kids loved the most was one of me with a bloody face, taken right after my

helmet was ripped off while bouncing upside down over a reef in my capsized kayak. I told them how after the accident my paddling companions to immediately order me back to the beach, convinced that in my condition I would be sure to attract any sharks that happened to be around.

DAMAGING OR DESTROYING

I assured them though, that striving to document my travels with still and video cameras have added greatly to my life. Still, adventure photography did not come with some risks. Especially shooting water sports meant damaging or destroying a lot of expensive camera equipment, especially before the evolvement of small waterproof sport cameras. And even waterproof cameras had to be securely tethered so not to be lost during capsize, which were bound to occur. The late Steve Sinclair of Force Ten fame, a pioneer of storm surf kayaking on the California coast, warned me once, *"Kayaking is not an on the water sport – it's an in the water sport!"*

'POV' is a term commonly used by adventure photographers and filmmakers. The "point of view" perspective was made famous in the first Rocky movie when the cameraman moved around the boxing ring filming the fight. It is only obtained when a shooter gets up close and personal with his subjects, seeming to even participate in the action that's being recorded. With water sports that generally means getting out in the water with your camera, swimming or shooting from another kayak, SUP or boogie board.

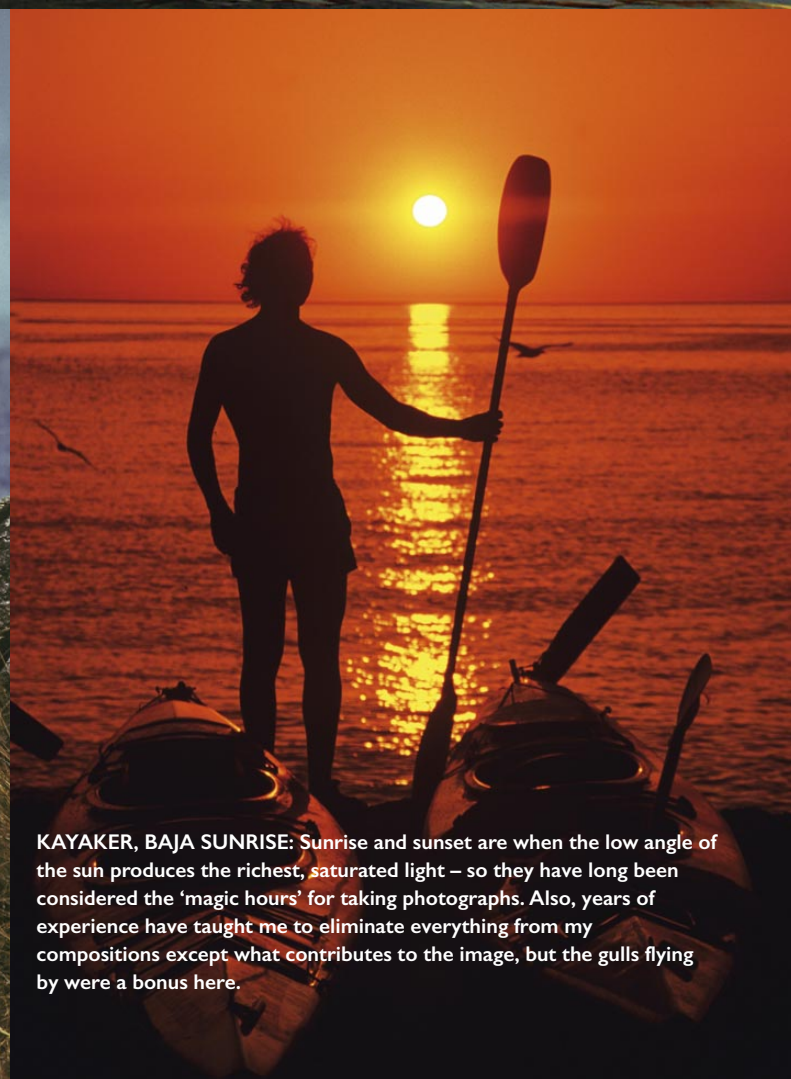
To capture this image I approached my fellow Tsunami Rangers as they backed up against sheer cliffs among breaking waves on the Oregon coast. Then I dropped my paddle and shot with my Olympus Tough waterproof camera tethered to the front of my life vest, which required split-second timing. The bow of my kayak, temporarily submerged in the wild water, is visible in the foreground.

After I got injured when bouncing over a partially submerged reef after capsizing in my kayak, I handed my waterproof camera to my paddling companion Misha Dynikov – who took the picture.



COSTA RICA, GIRL ON SUP: Just moments before sunset the light on the coast of Costa Rica grew amazingly warm, saturated and dramatic. I consider this a successful photograph because it adheres to the cardinal rule of good composition – LESS IS MORE. To get this perspective free from any distracting elements, I waded out into the warm tropical Golfo Dulce up to my shoulders with a waterproof Olympus Tough Camera.

GALEN ROWELL, PERU MOUNTAINS: Joining the great adventure photographer Galen Rowell on a photo safari through the Cordillera Blanca in northern Peru in 1995 provided a quantum leap forward in my career as an adventure photographer. I took this picture of him with a Leica X-U waterproof camera after we had climbed all day on an unnamed mountain peak high in the mountains.



KAYAKER, BAJA SUNRISE: Sunrise and sunset are when the low angle of the sun produces the richest, saturated light – so they have long been considered the ‘magic hours’ for taking photographs. Also, years of experience have taught me to eliminate everything from my compositions except what contributes to the image, but the gulls flying by were a bonus here.



ABOVE – KAYAKER WAVE: Split-second timing enabled fellow Tsunami Ranger Steven King to capture this image of Ranger Jim Kakuk punching through an oncoming wave, shooting with an Olympus Tough waterproof camera from his kayak. Photo by Steven King.

My mentor the great Galen Rowell was arguably the most successful adventure photographer of all time. I was fortunate once to be hired by an adventure travel company to go to Peru and document Rowell leading a group of other photographers on a photo safari through the spectacular Cordillera Blanca mountains.

It was not so much the camera techniques that Rowell employed that had such a profound effect on my image gathering skills... it was his mental attitude, the phenomenal way he focused his energy when shooting that enabled him to consistently capture exceptional photographs as we trekked through the mountains. Each time we entered an Indian village or came upon an exceptional mountain vista, he appeared to connect emotionally with the situation to create images that had real visceral quality. He called it, “*Seeing from the heart.*”



BAIDARKA SURFING: Photographing from land with a telephoto lens and a tripod enables you to compose carefully. When shooting action like this it is often good to expose several frames rapidly in succession and choose the best moment later when editing.



***SWIMMERS, WHALE SHARK:** My daughter Marika took this selfie with her waterproof camera as she led other swimmers on a snorkelling adventure off the Kona Coast of the big island in Hawaii. When the whale shark appeared suddenly behind her she held the camera out in front of her and shot quickly, but was fortunate to capture all the essential elements (and no superfluous information) in her composition, resulting in a remarkable photograph.



KAYAK DOUBLE NOSE STAND: To capture professional kayak guide Greg Berman giving a paddling novice the thrill of her lifetime, I shot from the beach with an 80mm telephoto lens set to focus automatically. My Canon SLR camera is capable of making repeated exposures in rapid succession, which further enabled me to capture the decisive moment in this fast-moving action shot.

KAYAKER ROCKY COAST: I shot with a waterproof camera tethered to the front of my life vest as we paddled along a rugged stretch of the northern California coast. I continually adjusted my position to best frame photograph fellow Tsunami Ranger Bonny Brill within the spectacular, always changing vista unfolding before us.

Rowell explained that a photograph was merely a static, two-dimensional replication of what we are perceived in the world around us. Motion, sound and the third dimension are immediately lost in the process. So for a photographic image to possess real power and impact, he believed, other qualities had to be present. Most important of all to him was strong composition.

LESS IS MORE

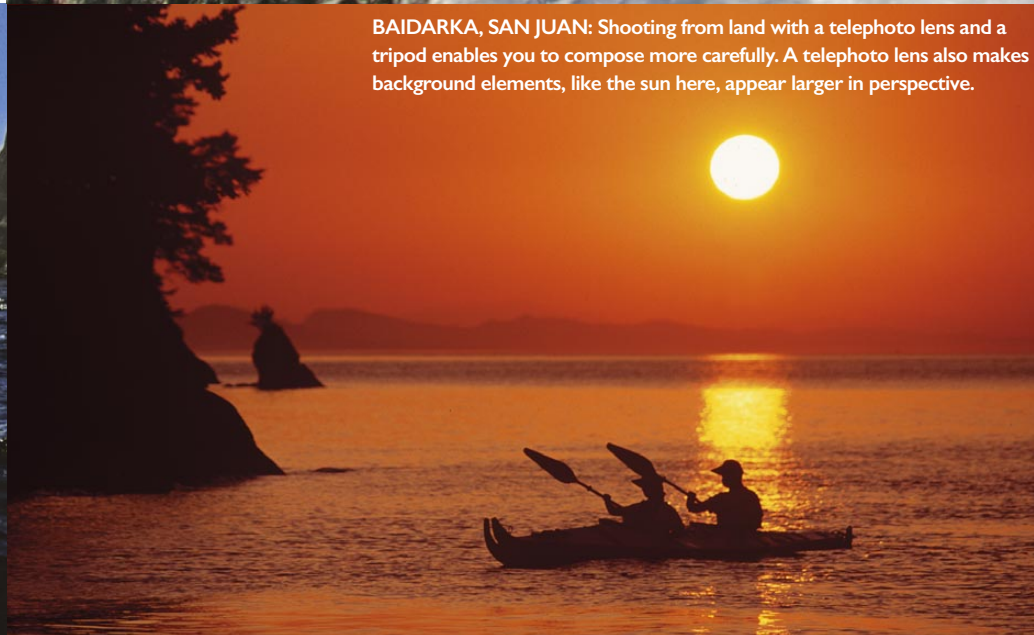
Rowell stated repeatedly that the most common shortcoming he found in most snapshot-type pictures was the random inclusion of unnecessary information. A strong, uncluttered composition was essential for a successful photograph, he said. This can only be achieved by carefully excluding all distracting elements from your composition before you press the shutter button – or diligently cropping them out with your digital tools on your computer screen.



KAYAKER'S DOUBLE SURF: To gain a powerful 'point of view' vantage point from which to photograph my friends punching through oncoming waves off the northern California coast, I swam out with my non-waterproof SLR camera in a water-tight case and climbed up on a rock that rose above the partially submerged reef they would attempt to paddle. Miraculously, both the camera and the paddlers survived the episode and we got the shot we wanted.



BAIDARKA, SAN JUAN: Shooting from land with a telephoto lens and a tripod enables you to compose more carefully. A telephoto lens also makes background elements, like the sun here, appear larger in perspective.



KAYAKER STORM SURF: Storm surf conditions greeted us when we arrived at La Push on the Olympic Peninsula in northwest Washington in mid-winter. I saw that photographing from my kayak would be very difficult, so I remained on the beach with my Canon SLR and a 300mm telephoto and shot fellow Tsunami Ranger Misha Dynnikov venturing out among the monster waves.





KAYAKERS, BAJA: Crossing the Sea of Cortez from the Baja Peninsula to some outlying islands on a rare windless day, we were treated to remarkable 'glassy sea' conditions. I shot with a wide-angle lens to record the magical reflections on the water surface surrounding our kayaks.



KAYAKS, SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND, ANTARCTICA: One day rather than join the other members of our sea kayaking team paddling, I chose to photograph them from a motor-driven Zodiac piloted by our Russian guide. The kayakers were approaching Drydalski Point on the southern end of South Georgia Island in Antarctica that day. A slightly higher angle of view and great mobility of shooting from a powerboat gave me a different perspective.



ABOVE – KAYAKER BREAKING SURF: Shooting from my kayak, I only had a split-second to drop my paddle and shoot before the oncoming wave broke over me and filmmaker Gordon Brown in the other boat. In shooting active water sports, it's essential to be ready and try to anticipate when decisive moments will occur.

A photographic image is invariably a combination of the energy of the subject and the cameraman. As Galen demonstrated to us in Peru, we could increase the impact of our pictures by bringing our power more fully to the process. Following a master image gatherer through the spectacular Cordillera Blanca, was a pivotal time in my evolution as a photographer.

Yet becoming a master image gatherer, like running a class IV rapid in a river or surfing a big wave successfully with your sea kayak, is a life-long learning experience... so good luck!



SHOUT OUTS

My favourite waterproof cameras for on and in-the-water shooting are the Leica X-U (us.leica-camera.com) and the Olympus Tough (usa.canon.com). I also find **Keen sport sandals** (keenfootwear.com) provide exceptional stability for moving around the rugged outdoor terrain surrounding many of the wild places where I paddle. My **MSR Hubba tent** (msrgear.com) stows easily in a kayak and has proven amazingly bombproof in storms. Another essential piece of equipment on expeditions is my **Casio Pathfinder watch**, with built-in compass and altitude functions (protek.casio.com).

Michael Powers is widely published and recognized internationally for his photography, writing, and participation in cause-related and adventure filmmaking expeditions. His most recent book is **WILD IN SPIRIT**, www.wildinspirit.com

ABOVE – KAYAKER MAVERICKS SURF ROCKS: Here I positioned my kayak so my subject lined up with the rocks and breaking waves behind him. Then I only had a split-second to drop my paddle and shoot before an oncoming reached me and my subject, filmmaker Steve Michelson in the other boat.



KAYAKERS, NORWAY, MIDNIGHT SUN: Following other kayakers as they paddled through the Vesteralen Islands off the coast of Norway up north of the Arctic Circle, I moved to line them up with the sky, made dramatic by the midnight sun. The decision to compose a shot either vertically or horizontally is often made quickly at the last moment.



KAYAK CAMP MONTANA LAKE: This is what filmmakers call an 'establishment shot', taken by my daughter Marika from higher up on a beach where we had camped on a lake in British Columbia.