

# An eye for adventure

Ever since he started his own business at 16, photographer and adventurer Chris Bray has always gone his own way. He tells us what makes him tick and what's next for this worldwide man of nature.

WORDS AMY RUSSELL PHOTOS CHRIS BRAY AND JESS TAUNTON

I'VE JUST ASKED Chris Bray a particularly difficult question. He's taking few a moments to consider his answer. I know he's thinking carefully as his serious blue eyes are focussed on the distance and his brow is furrowed. "What keeps me up at night?" he asks quizzically, clarifying my question. "The fear that I haven't reached my potential," he says, without a trace of humour.

I'm floored. This is not the answer I expected from the 29-year-old photographer whose fervent passion for life and adventure knows no bounds. Growing up sailing around the world on a yacht with his parents and older sister, it seems wanderlust is a Bray-inherited disposition. Although he studied electrical engineering at university, graduating in 2007, the expedition lifestyle was one the young nomad found impossible to resist: he ventured into the wilds of Tasmania on a 28-day hiking expedition in 2004 (earning Australian Geographic's Young Adventurer of the Year award); achieved a world-first traverse of Victoria Island in the Arctic Circle in 2008 with expedition partner Clark Carter (a trip that formed the basis of Chris's book, *The 1000 Hour Day*); and sailed across the Southern Ocean in 2007. Chris was the first photographer sent on an overseas assignment by AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC when he journeyed to PNG in 2009, and he trekked into the heart of Borneo's jungles in April of this year to find and photograph rare animals for *AG Outdoor*. Soon he will soon set sail on *Teleport* – a junk rig he and girlfriend Jess Taunton repaired – for part II of their attempt to steer the rig home from Canada, through the Arctic's Northwest Passage.\*

As a 'day job', the Australian Geographic Society trustee and chairman of the Australian and New Zealand contingent of the Explorer's Club runs photography tutorials across Australia with Jess, and wildlife photography safaris around the world – which brings us to our current locale: the dining hut



Never one to shy away from a challenge, Chris attempts to get the ancient, 8hp single-cylinder, hand-start diesel engine working aboard his junk rig, *Teleport*, in 2011.

at Rhino Watch Safari Camp, Kenya. I've joined Chris and Jess in Africa, and, for the life of me, I can't find a trace of the underachiever he fears he's become. "What else keeps me up at night? I still have nightmares about polar bears," he says with a laugh.

**I'm starting to suspect your bar for personal achievements is set a little higher than most. I mean, you started your first business – selling electronics – at 16! How did you get into photography?**

I got my first camera at seven but it was hard to save up for the film and have it developed. At school I couldn't afford to do a photography course and so I've never had proper tuition. I became interested when I went on my first big adventure to Tasmania, and AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC gave me \$2000 to buy

a great camera so I could document it properly. That got me hooked – I even sold a few photos to Tassie Tourism! Photographing my next trip to the Arctic was even more inspiring and demanding – I just kept learning. I realised that of all the ways I could make money from adventuring, photography was by far the one I enjoyed the most. I'd do it for free!

**With no tuition, how did you learn to take amazing shots?**

Through adventuring – on Victoria Island Clark and I could only keep a few photos each day. When you're in the middle of nowhere with a small hard drive and you have to limit the amount of photos you can keep, you're forced to learn how to cull; as soon as you learn to cull, you learn what to look for in a shot.



Captain of his own destiny, Chris helms *Teleport* out to sea from Halifax, Canada, in 2011, for her first ocean trial to determine if anything breaks when the junk rig is pushed to her limits.

Photographing wild African animals, such as this leopard – often the hardest cat to find in the game parks – is all in a day's work for photography safari guide Chris.



Chris journeyed to PNG in 2009, as the first photographer to be posted on assignment overseas by AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC.



Chris surprises an Adélie penguin in Antarctica, 2009, while acting as the official photographer for a cruise ship.



Chris, left, and expedition partner Clark Carter traversing Victoria Island, Canada, in 2008. The documentary film, *The Crossing*, which is based on their arctic adventure, will be released later this year.

**What excites you about wildlife photography?**

You never know what you're going to get and you can always get a better shot. In contrast to portrait photography where you can order the people around and set the lighting, wildlife is not under your control – there is a lot of luck involved, which has an element of excitement. I like photos that show the mood or the personality of the animal, which shows it doing something interesting or captures a unique moment.

**There is a lot of gear in your camera bag. Is all of that really necessary?**

People take amazing photos with their iPhone. It's about having an eye for what you're looking for when you're shooting. When people say they don't have 'the eye', they just need to be taught the basic composition rules. All this gear – like my 600mm telephoto lens – gives me more options and higher quality images, but it really just comes down to

practice. And of course, a bit of luck doesn't go astray, either!

**You've been lucky enough to find a partner in crime who shares your love of photography and adventure...**

I figured I either needed to find a girl who likes what I do and finds it interesting, but who isn't interested in doing it herself and who is happy to let me go away for a few months, or, be with someone – like Jess – who can share everything with me and we can do it all together. I couldn't imagine a better situation than what I have. I'm so lucky that Jess is passionate about the same things and that she can help run a business.

**Have you ever wished you had a normal life?**

Yes, on *Teleport*! On arctic hauling trips you always feel out of your depth when the plane flies away, but on Victoria Island Clark and I still felt we had a

**If I could suddenly quit and reappear back home, I'd have done that. . . on all of my trips. . . If you don't pay attention to everything that is going on, you'll quite possibly die and take someone else with you.**

grasp on the situation. There were times on *Teleport* where I felt we were completely at the mercy of the ocean or the weather. . . I've done a lot of sailing but this brought together all of the most dangerous elements I've ever experienced and it was the first time I was in charge of the boat. We encountered icebergs, which I had only read about how to deal with properly, and I'd never sailed anywhere where the chart only has one or two depth numbers on it. Much of the time we had no idea if we were about to run into something but we couldn't slow down because sailing is a race against time in the arctic

**How do you keep it together at times like this?**

There's no other option. That in itself is a pretty powerful motivator. If I could suddenly quit and reappear back home, I'd have done that at some stage on all of my trips. When sailing, the only other option is to give up and crawl down below, but you know if you do, things will get worse. If you don't

pay attention to everything that is going on, you'll quite possibly die and take someone else with you.

**Where is home to you?**

Wherever I feel safe. On the yacht in the middle of the ocean when the shit is hitting the fan, it doesn't feel like home, it feels like the worst place. But when everything dies down and we pull into a nice little anchorage and I have food, heaters, my girlfriend and everything is perfect, it's totally where I want to be. Home is wherever I have everything I need to be happy, which could be anywhere.

**What's next for the Chris Bray Empire?**

More safaris to new destinations, like Patagonia, and the next stage of *Teleport*. I'm also thinking about night safaris – you see things at night that you'd never see during the day. It would be great to equip a car with night-vision gear and drive around to all the different safari camps. It'd like to be able to mix

technology, and everything I learnt about it in engineering, with photography, and also some adventuring and wildlife, too.

**Not yet 30 and you've done so much – do you still get a buzz from adventuring?**

Absolutely – I like waking up and not knowing what's in store. That's the same if I'm running a safari or if I'm sailing a boat. It makes me feel more alive to know the day is mine to do with it what I want. In the office jobs I experienced, I could map out exactly what was going to happen before I lay back down again – I didn't want to live my life that way.

\*At the time of publication Chris and Jess had set sail on part II of their *Teleport* adventure. Follow their progress here: [www.yachtteleport.com](http://www.yachtteleport.com)

Find out more about Chris's photography tutorials and wildlife safaris at: [www.chrisbray.net](http://www.chrisbray.net)