

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

National Geographic photographer GORDON WILTSIE knows how to survive. A keen outdoorsman and climber from a young age, he has photographed some of the world's most inhospitable places despite being colour blind. Here he discusses his career and the future of adventure photography. By SEAN SAMUELS.

BECOMING A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER IS A CHILDHOOD DREAM

shared by many people. The reality is that only a few grow up to see the dream come true. These individuals usually share the same personality traits, including obsession, passion and determination. They have all forsaken the common understanding of stability, and were experts in their chosen fields long before a commission from the magazine was even a consideration. They have persevered alone and known when to accept help along the way. Yet for all their similarities each photographer has forged their own path to success and no two stories are alike. In the case of Gordon Wiltsie, the journey began at birth.

At less than six weeks old, Gordon was carried high into the mountains of California by his parents. His father was studying high altitude physiology in rodents and was working at 11,000ft at a research laboratory in Bishop in the White Mountains. The region was a magnet for climbers and artists. The landscape master Ansel Adams created some of his greatest images in the area in which Gordon grew up. A life outdoors was inevitable and it was not long before he was accompanying his parents on canoe trips in Ontario, Canada, a period he recalls with mixed emotions.

"It was a miserable time. This was pre-Gore-Tex, pre-wool and just awful. I remember we made one trip into British Columbia with just one leaky cotton tent. I learned how to suffer from an early age, but as I got older I learned to cope better. Good down sleeping bags and synthetic fabrics were some time off, but we were never out there that long and my father wasn't a fool. He was an outdoorsman and could light a fire in all conditions, which I quickly learned how to do as well. What surprised me was that I didn't reject this way of life there and then."

Gordon grew up outside a ski centre and started skiing and hiking from a young age. He began climbing at 17. At school he was interested in mathematics and science and his goal was to become an Air Force fighter pilot. Unfortunately, the discovery he was red-green colour blind quickly put an end to that ambition. ▶

BIOGRAPHY

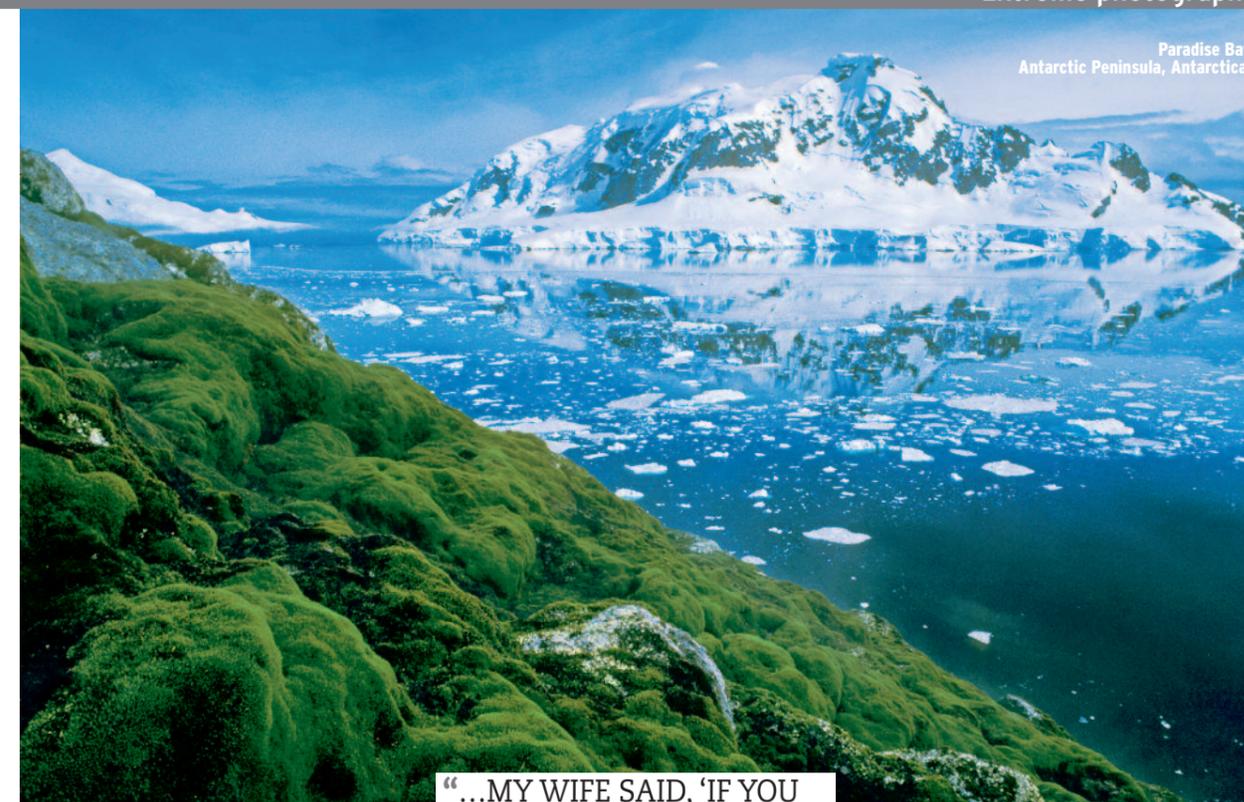
Gordon Wiltsie has spent more than 25 years leading and photographing expeditions all over the world. His work appears regularly in magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Life*, *Outside*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Ski* and *Geo*. Today he also shoots commercially on location.

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GORDON WILTSIE



Arctic Ocean, near North Pole, National Geographic magazine.



Paradise Bay
Antarctic Peninsula, Antarctica.

"I can see a rich and beautiful world, but I just see it slightly differently to everyone else. This can work both to your advantage and disadvantage. There could be stray red things floating out there that I don't even see, but I can see light very well and when I first started shooting, I shot in black and white, so it didn't make any difference. I am having the hardest time with it now in the digital age. I tried colour printing 40 years ago when I was in college, but just gave it up. The prints looked good to me, but as I can't see tints of magenta or cyan in particular, it just didn't work. However, I probably see yellow and blue better than you can."

Gordon was given his first Brownie camera at the age of eight. This was followed with a bellows camera and then a crude 35mm camera that his father had bought in the 1930s, but it was not until high school that his talents as a photographer were first recognised. Some of his friends became involved in bringing out the school newspaper and yearbook, and Gordon liked what he saw.

"They were having so much fun and it was a good excuse to misbehave. They could say, 'I can't come to your class because we are on assignment and have to take pictures of this or of that' and would roar off campus to get into mischief. This gave meaning to my life. I could take good pictures right off the bat. It gave me a sense of identity and I loved looking through the viewfinder and seeing how clear things were."

Following this revelation Gordon began spending hundreds of hours in the darkroom despite the fact his school didn't advocate photography as a career. One professor told him photography was for people with no talent and so Gordon studied science. Here he floundered until a trip to Europe offered him the chance to take hundreds of images. Upon his return to the US, Gordon changed schools, moving to a more liberal organisation in California, the kind of school that didn't give grades and that let the students create their own majors. Most importantly for Gordon, it also had a study group in

Nepal, a place he had wanted to visit for many years, having devoured countless books about the country.

While he was in Nepal, one of his friends sent a selection of his pictures to *Mountain Gazette*, one of the first outdoor magazines. Gordon came home to find one of his images on the cover and his name on the masthead, and he realised what he could achieve with his photography. It was 1974. At the same time mountain photographer Galen Rowell got his first cover image on *National Geographic*. This event both amazed and inspired Gordon.

"This just didn't happen. You work years and years and then all of a sudden you chance upon this opportunity to become a *National Geographic* photographer in a way you never expected. So I thought if Galen could do it - he was a car mechanic who had never studied photography formally - I could do it. This was a big mistake. Galen lived and worked in San Francisco. I wouldn't live in the city. If you want to succeed in photography, then living in a city is important, at least for a while."

Nonetheless, Gordon was making some money from his photography and realised it was a way for him to get to all the expensive places he could never afford to visit on his own. He took extra jobs to help pay for film, but it would be 14 years before he would see his dream come true. When the owner of *Rolling Stone* magazine started an outdoor title, they went to the *Mountain Gazette* for talent, which is where Gordon, and other talented writers and photographers, were working. It was at this time that the outdoor life really took off.

By 1982 Gordon was able to pay the bills as a full-time photographer and writer. He worked for *Outside* magazine, most of the ski publications, *Travel and Leisure* and even a couple of British magazines, anyone that would hire him. He wrote stuff he hated, but did it all.

"When my oldest son was born, my wife said, 'If you are going to get serious then you'll need to go to where the action is' - so she bought me a tie and a jacket, and sent me to New York City. It was a frightening place - I've never heard people say no in so many different ways, but I did get a couple of assignments out of it. In 1984 I went down to *National Geographic* in Washington DC for the first time. I remember there was a plaque on the door outside the director of photography's office: 'Please wipe your knees before entering'. I made annual

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pilgrimages there for quite a time. In those days I could call to set up an appointment and say 'would you like to see my portfolio?' People won't do that any more."

Yet despite relatively good access to the magazine and a strong portfolio it would be another four years before he would receive his first commission, and even then it was a case of being in the right place at the right time.

By now an accomplished explorer and photographer, Gordon was working for Mountain Travel, the first big adventure travel company in the US. He was leading expeditions for the business at a time when adventure tourism was cutting edge, and was asked by fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar* to write about the 10 top places in the world to visit. Gordon mentioned one of the trips from Mountain Travel. As a thank you the company offered him a place on a freighter heading for Antarctica, provided he could get an assignment and a visa. Tourist trips to the interior did not exist then, and Gordon jumped at the chance.

"They paid my way and I had an incredible trip. It was one of the most

beautiful places I had ever seen. My article helped to sell 80 trips the following year so I was rewarded with an introduction to a private aviation company that was trying to establish tourism in the interior of Antarctica. I got to visit again and again."

Back in Washington DC, *National Geographic* had a new illustrations editor who had previously worked as a tour director on the famous MS Lindblad Explorer cruise ship, which specialised in taking visitors to the Arctic and Antarctic. Consequently he knew the industry and of Gordon's plan to fly tourists on to Antarctica for the first time. He called Gordon, offered him money, film and the chance to shoot a story.

"I only got two images in the article, but that is how it happened. That's serendipity and it happens with so many *National Geographic* photographers. They know a lot about their subject and are called for assignments. You don't just come in and wave around a beautiful portfolio. The magazine grew to trust me and my first cover story came from Antarctica."

Gordon doesn't call himself a landscape photographer. It plays an important part in his images, but 95 per cent of his photographs have a person in them which is the reason for their appeal.

"What I'm looking for is a juxtaposition of the person and the environment that creates a visual and visceral emotional



Great Sail Peak
Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada.
National Geographic magazine.



Rakekniven Spire
Queen Maud Land, Antarctica,
National Geographic magazine.

functioned without batteries. Then he graduated to the 8008s which he loved because, no matter how cold it got, it would always work. One of his favourite assignments was in Mongolia. Before he left, the senior editor at *National Geographic* insisted Gordon take a Nikon F100, an excellent camera for the job.

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“I worry that a lot of up-and-coming photographers feel they don’t need to learn the relationships between f-stops and ISO and shutter speed and depth of field. Yet that makes so much difference in what a picture’s going to look like. I’m not a super-technical photographer but I know how to get what I want. You can’t just stumble on to images like these and in this respect I consider them works of art because they took a lot of doing.”

Ten or 15 years ago Gordon made a significant amount of his income from taking or reselling his images to large companies, but today they won’t pay, not when they can give a jacket away instead. Young photographers who want to see their names in print are willing to accept this. If they don’t, the companies go to stock sites for images. It is as if the need for unique imagery is vanishing as quickly as the landscape it encapsulates.

“And because of the collapse of the world economy it’s going to be a long time before there’s going to be any interest or funding for adventurous undertakings. There are new challenges in the world today, people are starving to death and there’s global climate change, which I would like to work on. I would like to help people understand there are some grave problems out there. I have spent time with some astonishing people who were unbelievable at creating opportunities for themselves and I was lucky enough to be included in some of the things they did. I was able to go to places where almost nobody had been before but sadly those opportunities don’t exist any more.”

There is no road map to becoming a *National Geographic* photographer, but if you’re smart enough and really want it you can do it. Some of the best advice Gordon was given was to find another job that didn’t suck his creative energy and then to work extremely hard on his photography. Then if you’re talented enough, if you’re passionate enough and if you push hard enough you will succeed.

“I had a dream when I was young, I stuck it out and it became true, but not without the help of my family and hundreds of people. I can’t think of many people who accomplish what they want all by themselves. I have been fortunate over the years to have had these great opportunities and I couldn’t have imagined doing anything else.”

Extreme photography is a unique way of capturing and presenting the world and its cultures to society. Many photographers, whether they work in fashion, portraiture or documentary, owe their inspiration to the images found in magazines such as *National Geographic*. I’d like to think that despite the problems facing the industry at the moment that it will survive. The landscape around us is always changing and with that comes a change in the viewer, and anyone wishing to photograph wild places should not be deterred. As technology develops and man is able to venture further, deeper, higher and for longer a record must be kept. The images brought back from these new frontiers won’t be snapped by an enthusiast with a good camera, but photographers passionate about their subject matter and how they make images. If there is anything to learn from the story of Gordon Wiltsie, it is anything is possible. **EM**

response in the viewer. This should make them want either to be there or not to be there. My underlying justification for all of this is to get a reaction that causes people to care about the places I photograph.”

On all the trips he takes, Gordon is a contributing member of the team as much as he can be. The climbers don’t want photographers leading and putting ropes into place, but there is still the need to become a part of the team.

“I am really lightweight with what I carry on my back. Here [in the image above] we were assisted with rope systems to enable us to haul equipment up and get it into place. We’d build a highway of fixed ropes to support us. Despite all that, though, on this expedition and several others I have woken up and gone ‘am I going to survive today?’ But in these situations photography gives me

something to do and something to concentrate on.”

Gordon has risked his life for his images more than once. His most dramatic brush with death was while standing at the bottom of a 4,000ft cliff on Baffin Island, Canada, in the spring. Rock was falling all the time, which Gordon was aware of, but he had chosen what he thought was the safest way up when suddenly he heard a horrendous noise, accompanied by a downpour of rock. Tons and tons of rock, everything from cement-sized sacks to golf balls and smaller, landed within inches of him. He could even hear them whistling past his ears and thudding at his feet. The debris had fallen 800ft from above him in a shower that lasted 10 seconds. To this day he has no idea how he survived.

“I am trying to shoot at least one image in an assignment that somebody’s going

to want to put on the wall, but the same as a photojournalist, I am trying to tell a story, a visually complete story. It won’t just be about climbing, but how we live, how we eat and how we go to the bathroom, although those images don’t usually get printed. All these little pieces tell a story and convey the whole picture, the who, what, why, when, how and where we went. The images convey my passion and how that relates to me, and how I think it should relate to you.”

For Gordon lighting and composition make a picture. With composition he believes you either have it or you don’t. Gordon has it. Things just go click. He doesn’t machine gun images, preferring to shoot very carefully to make sure he has the image. He’ll shoot vertically and horizontally just to make sure. With film he used to shoot more than he does now

GORDON WILTSIE

because he was terrified he wouldn’t have the shot. Now, with digital, he shoots too much because he can, but often regrets it in the editing process. All photographers are selling their perceptions of the world. Gordon is looking for something beautiful. He grew up with an incredible love and appreciation of the wilderness and wild places, and the need to protect them. His last assignment was high in the Arctic Circle with a Russian reindeer-herding clan, which he thinks has gone now. That was just a couple of years ago.

Gordon’s photographs seem deceptively simple but in many cases there are huge amounts of artificial light and one of his biggest concerns for the future of adventure photography is the rise of good consumer cameras.

All of the images here were shot on film. Gordon used a Nikon FM2 because it

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