

ONE ON ONE

TRENCH LOVE

TRAVEL PRODUCTIONS, WITH THEIR LONG DAYS, DAUNTING LOGISTICS AND TIGHT SCHEDULES, ARE NO ONE'S IDEA OF A VACATION. BUT CONNECTIONS WITH LOCAL CULTURES AND CREW HELP COMPENSATE FOR THE FAST-PACED FRENZY.

INTRO BY HUGH HART

Rick Steves popularized travel TV in the 1990s on PBS, and the late Anthony Bourdain gave it edge with his brash *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown* shows starting in 2005. Since then, travel TV has emerged as a mini genre all its own, pegged to charming hosts, vivid locations and quirky interview subjects.

When entertainers like Stanley Tucci, Conan O'Brien, Eugene Levy, *Everybody Loves Raymond* creator Phil Rosenthal or *Top Chef* judge Padma Lakshmi visit distant locales, camera crews in tow, their encounters with local personalities may look and feel spontaneous, but every minute of breezy chitchat requires weeks of preparation.

For example, before comedic actor-turned-travel show host Rainn Wilson found himself in the rainforest of Thailand hosing down elephants at an animal refuge during an episode of his 2023 Peacock series *Rainn Wilson and the Geography of Bliss*, producer Melissa Wood and her team needed to decide on the destination, figure out how to transport the crew to

the remote location, and juggle several other segments within a tight seven-day shooting schedule.

To explore the rigors of travel TV, *Produced By* brought together Wood and Michael Indjeian for a candid conversation. Wood earned an International Documentary Awards nomination for *Outdoors with Baratunde Thurston* before producing Rainn Wilson's show, which chronicled his visits to Bulgaria, Ghana, Iceland, Thailand and Los Angeles.

Indjeian, along with series producer Sylvia Camine, won an Emmy (garnering three additional nominations) for producing six seasons of *Samantha Brown's Places to Love*. The PBS hit follows the perky New Hampshire-bred host to China, New Zealand and Europe plus picturesque North American locales ranging from the Great Smoky Mountains to Montana's Big Sky country.

Here, Wood and Indjeian share their thoughts on the power of "trench love," the future of travel TV and the challenge of putting out fires when best-laid plans go awry.

(This conversation has been edited for clarity.)



Rainn Wilson's office was the world for his travel show *The Geography of Bliss*. Above: Samantha Brown on location for a *Jersey Shore Places to Love* episode.

CULTIVATING THE RIGHT MINDSET

MICHAEL: When I first started on *Samantha Brown*, I had never done a travel show before, but I had a great deal of experience in the corporate world, including HBO, Hertz, Gap and Pepsi, shooting commercials and making features (including 2022's *Follow Her*), so I just approached it with the mentality of "fill in the gaps." From the show's inception, there were no guidelines in place, so that was challenging.

After the show's first season, we got quite strategic on estimating the amount of time necessary per scene, per day, per episode. Even with a logistically strong plan in place, flexibility is always factored in during preproduction.

For instance, during our British Virgin Islands episode in season three, the show was crafted as a catamaran sailing adventure navigating from island to island. For one scene, we decided to have an underwater camera operator capture some unique perspectives while Samantha was snorkeling in the sea. The episode turned out to be absolutely epic.

MELISSA: I'd done international shows on National Geographic, but they were driven by journalists who needed to cover a story. With *Geography of Bliss*, our quest was to find ... bliss. The challenge was to find authentic people who hadn't been on TV already but could get in front of a camera, be themselves and share that feeling of happiness with Rainn.

MICHAEL: When I preinterviewed people for our show, I had to be 100% transparent to establish trust with the guests so that later, when we showed up with cameras and lights, they'd feel comfortable. Before we went to China



to film shows in Xi'an and Shanghai, I'd start my day very early and go very late with fixers. In Xi'an, we found an archaeologist who gave us access to a lower level of the Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum. People travel from around the globe to get to this level, but we were able to get Samantha face-to-face with some of these ancient terra-cotta warriors they were restoring. It was an incredible cultural experience.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

MELISSA: On *Geography of Bliss*, we had planned to go to Moldova and Finland. We were about four weeks away and a good amount of work had been prepped, but then Russia invaded Ukraine. Moldova shares a border with Ukraine, so it was out of the question. Finland's supposed to be one of the happiest places on Earth, but it shares a border with Russia.

We were like, "If we film this now and then a year from now Russian tanks show up on the border of Finland, this is not going to be evergreen storytelling." We had to pivot and find other stories, which is why we went to Iceland and Bulgaria. It's kind of an adrenaline rush because your creative mind has to work harder when you're under pressure and dealing with restrictions.

MINDING THE DETAILS

MELISSA: Ideally it takes several weeks to prep a show and roughly one week to shoot. We would do two countries back to back. We had local fixers who helped with language barriers and could track down people if we gave them an idea of what we were

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—MICHAEL INDJEIAN



Michael Indjeian on location in Xi'an, China, during season one of *Places to Love*.

looking for. They played a big role in explaining cultural issues or rules.

For example, when we went to film in Prampram, a coastal village in Ghana, we first needed to get formal permission in person from the village chief on the day of filming. That's nerve-racking of course, but to show respect for the local culture, this is how it had to be done. There was a traditional script that we went through to ask the chief for permission, and then we participated in what's called a water ceremony, which honors the ancestors and also blesses our crew.

As an American, you have to keep your eyes open and respond to what you see when you land rather than being stuck on the story you created when you were back in the U.S. We realized in Bulgaria, from going to their parks, just how important nature is to their culture, so we asked our

participants about that and filmed in as many parks as possible.

In Accra (Ghana), we saw how important the Makola shopping market was. It's a place to not only buy things, but also to really get a sense of daily life in that area and see how people connect with each other. The same went for the night markets in Thailand. It's these little things that come from being in a place and seeing them with your own eyes that helps you realize what's important to the local people.

MICHAEL: You need to be extremely organized. I use Google spreadsheets, and I'm constantly making lists because the clock is always ticking. Getting a location release can take weeks because it needs to go through lawyers. Getting a drone permit takes time. Sometimes I draw maps. We're going from here to there. How are we going

to schedule 10 locations in four days? What are the distances?

Where are we stopping for lunch? How are we dealing with breakfast? Does the hotel have an ice maker? We need water for the crew. We have to have snacks. If we're shooting in a desert, is there a restroom nearby? If we're going someplace cold, do we have hand warmers? I'd love to have two weeks to prepare a show. Sometimes it's 10 days, sometimes a week.

There are so many things to think about. I want the shoot to be a seamless, safe environment so the host and our camera people and our director can connect with people they're meeting for the first time.

MELISSA: In Bulgaria, we wanted to explore the fact that there's a huge population loss in the countryside, so we found a website that helps people



Melissa Wood and crew in Bulgaria for an episode of *Bliss* in 2022.

who want to work on a farm. That's how we reached out to this wonderful woman, Ejo Kirilova, who lived on a farmstead and was looking for workers.

To get ready for our trip to Ghana, we saw something on the web about this cocoa bean farmer. Her name was Doris Korkor Nyame, and she was trained by a nonprofit to incorporate sustainable farming practices into her business. Ahead of our trip, our local fixer visited Doris on her farm to learn more about her and make sure we'd logistically be able to manage filming there. The farm itself was north of Accra through quite challenging roads and terrain.

ON THE ROAD

MICHAEL: When you're on the road, loading all the gear into the truck each

time you change hotels takes a lot of time. Even if you have to peel yourself off the bed at 4 in the morning just to make that two-hour drive, shoot all day in the elements, get back in the car, make the two-hour drive back, and do it all over again the next day, it's wonderful if you can stay in one place for like four days. I always lobby for going a day early, but there is a financial commitment for hotels and stuff like that.

MELISSA: Shooting in the States is 100 times easier logistically. In Bulgaria, we stayed in Sofia, and Ejo's place was about two hours away. We didn't want to do a company move where you pack up everything and move to a different hotel. So we used a small cargo van that drove us out there, stayed for the day and then came back to our hotel.

We brought the director, the DP, the

second camera, sound, an assistant camera, our DIT, and probably four in our fixer team. We wanted a small footprint, three or four people, but when you're in a different country, you end up getting huge. Like Michael said, you don't want people to feel like they're performing, so you try to be low-profile and blend in. But sometimes it's unavoidable.

For the Thailand episode, our home base was Chiang Mai, which gave us easy access to less urban areas. But it was also an urban home base with resources. We visited a monk named Phra Vichian who was located in Wat Thung Kisua, the Chom Phu subdistrict in Chiang Mai, though if you try to Google it, you won't find it.

That was the case with a lot of Thailand locations—the names on their own are tough and we needed our fixers to make sure we were going to the right

place. We wanted to cover as much of the country and different lifestyles as possible, which involved a lot of long days and a lot of driving.

A TOUGH JOB

MICHAEL: Producing a travel show is an amazing way to see the world.

MELISSA: But it's not a vacation. You don't take in sunsets or go to museums and fancy restaurants. I wish we had the luxury to stick around for a few days to enjoy the locations. But every day counts on a travel doc and we're always working on the tightest possible schedule to keep the costs from going out of control. It can get expensive fast.

But you do get to know local people in a special way because it's a pressure cooker situation. We developed fast and deep friendships with the local production teams we worked with and the people we met.

For me and for Rainn, meeting these incredible people around the world was a life-altering experience. We call it "trench love." Like when you go to war with someone, you love your band of brothers. Well, we had trench love for every character we met and every crew member we worked with.

MICHAEL: I'd always laugh when people would say, "Have fun on your trip." I'm like, I'm going to *work*! When you can, you take a moment and peek out, grab a bite to eat or just experience where you are and savor the moment. But in the back of your mind, you're always thinking "What's next?"

THE FUTURE OF CHARACTER-DRIVEN TRAVEL TV

MELISSA: I feel for young producers. If I were starting my career in this

climate, I don't know if I would stick with it just because it is hard and not a lot is being bought right now. It's a really slow time. One of the few things being funded right now are celebrity-driven projects. The distributors believe that's a sure win to get eyeballs.

Hopefully, the pendulum will swing a bit because people still have a hunger for travel documentaries. But they're expensive to make. The risks that were taken on new ideas a few years ago are not really happening. If you're a producer and you know a celebrity, be sure to put them in your pitch deck. I've heard more distributors are open to alternative sources of funding or coproductions these days. But as with any series, a pitch needs to have a unique, fresh spin to make it sellable.

MICHAEL: Or maybe you find an influencer with 10 million followers. That's the world we live in today.

MELISSA: Travel shows are about experience by proxy, so you do need someone to guide your audience. People mention Anthony Bourdain as being incredibly groundbreaking. They've been trying to match that tone and intelligence for years, but I also think that travel documentaries have been largely led by cisgender white men, Samantha Brown (and Baratunde Thurston) being an exception.

My hope for the future would be to get new voices from different backgrounds who can guide us through the world. That's the only way you come up with something new. It's not by trying to do Anthony Bourdain again. It's by finding somebody with a different perspective who feels as fresh and insightful as he did. ■



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—MELISSA WOOD