

IN TO AFRICA

Always thought of yourself as a bit of a daredevil? Commercial photographer Matt Fowler didn't, until the opportunity arose to come out of his comfort zone and stare danger in the face

WORDS Georgie Woof PICTURES Matt Fowler



Mine clearers set out for a day's work in full protective kit. The working day starts and finishes very early in Sudan due to the extreme heat.

THERE ARE THOSE photographers who like to live on the wild side of life and thrive in the face of danger. Then there are those who like to play it safe, creating successful businesses in the comfort and security of their own hometown. However, occasionally a commission comes along that can tempt the latter type of photographer to throw caution to the wind and take on the most daring of jobs. Earlier this year commercial snapper Matt Fowler succumbed to such a temptation.

Fowler has spent the majority of his career shooting commercial campaigns for large household name companies,

such as Barclays, Mothercare and MacDonalds. He became so successful in the industry that he soon found he had to employ a helping hand, in the shape of Mark Sammons, to take on all the extra work. The pair have worked together for nine years, never straying too far from the commercial side of things. However, in early January of this year Fowler received a phone call from an operational support company called TDI (The Development Initiative) to photograph the clearing of landmines in Juba, located in South Sudan.

"Juba's villagers and inhabitants had reported landmine locations to the South Sudanese Army," he explains, "and it was

members of the Army that were seconded to help TDI remove them."

The idea was to get TDI involved so they could clear the affected areas, then build clinics and schools in their place. In turn, Fowler would document the clearing and building work.

"TDI had pitched for the work from the UN, who put out these sites for tender whilst conflict continued between the Sudanese people. Even though the conflict was ending there were places that still needed help."

Despite the dangerous nature of the job, Fowler agreed without hesitation, leaving his company in the capable hands of his associate, Sammons.

Although Fowler's experience working abroad had been somewhat sparse – he'd completed a commission some years before in the Falklands Islands for its government, documenting the return of youngsters after their overseas education – it was this information that gave Fowler the upper hand when TDI contacted corporate agency PagesCreative asking for a suitable photographer. Excited by the new challenge, and with just two weeks to prepare, Fowler packed up his kit.

Armed with a Nikon D300 (bought especially for the job), he flew over 3500 miles to the town of Juba, the nearest airport to the Sudanese army base.

Once at the base his brief was simple: document the removal of landmines from reported sites, and take pictures of every tool used by the TDI volunteers and South Sudanese Army for an audit.

Fowler was unsure just what to expect once he arrived at the base camp, or even how dangerous the job in hand would be. However he quickly realised that he would be staying right in the centre of the action, sleeping in a tent with the other volunteers, with no electricity for the duration of his stay.

"I suspected we might be staying away from the base, so making sure my batteries were charged was paramount to the success of the trip," he comments.

Although staying just a few miles away from the base, it still took around two to three hours to drive there, due to the harsh nature of the surroundings and the poor condition of the roads. Fowler was also escorted by two guards with guns directly to the landmine sites.

"The minute we touched down I was put straight to work. I suspected this would be the case, as they had spent a lot of money to get me out there. Not necessarily on my payment, I was earning about my normal day rate, but on insurance and flights etc."

Not knowing what the removal process of landmines entailed, Fowler was soon shown that there was no



↑ This child was suffering from measles in one of the clinics. When Fowler returned an hour later, the child was dead.



↑ 'Slow and steady': not just the mantra for de-miners. Fowler could be merely metres from a potential mine site.

“I had to wear a protective ‘flack jacket’ at all times, in 41°C heat”

heavy machinery to do it, nor a protective screen or wall to hide behind.

“The method is to use a metal detector to seek out any suspiciously large pieces of metal. Once a landmine had been identified one of the TDI volunteers would dig a channel a metre and a half deep around it, and use a large pole strategically angled at 45° to remove the item. Carefully, I might add!”

Fowler knew that he might be in danger, but the South Sudanese Army took no risks when ensuring his safety.

“The entire day I had to wear a ‘flack jacket’ type garment, that covered from the top of my head with a hood, all the way down to my knees. This was in 41°C heat too, so you can imagine how difficult it was to take decent photos.”

Fowler was kept at a safe distance from the landmines at all times, too. “I knew I was being kept away for my own safety, but being so far away made the job extremely difficult to complete. I needed to get some decent close-up shots of the ‘action’ for TDI, but when I lay on the ground to take some wide-angle shots on my 80-200mm f/2.8 VR lens, it would take me half an hour to get up again in the jacket. Eventually I decided the only solution was to ‘fake’ some of the images in areas that had already been cleared.”

Fowler was surprised just how friendly and cooperative the Sudanese people were, especially when asking the volunteers to take part in the images.

“Getting images of the landmine removal process was so important, as I’d been told they would be used on the website and in official documents to illustrate exactly what TDI were doing.”

Fowler visited three of the seven landmine sites during his five-day stay. On his return to the UK, he realised that of the thousands of images, only a few hundred would be appropriate for TDI.

“I made very few post-production changes, and supplied TDI with low-res and high-res discs of everything. I left it up to them to decide what to use.”



Sudanese youths from a nearby village, many of whom bear traditional tribal scars on their foreheads.

MATT FOWLER'S KIT BAG ESSENTIALS

Preparing for an overseas commission can be tricky, in terms of transporting equipment. With weight restrictions, size limits and hand luggage allowance changes every five minutes it's hard to know what you're allowed to take, and what the essential items are.

One of the most important parts of travel equipment that can often be overlooked is the bag. Fowler was aware of the importance of this before he travelled. So, rather than using his trusted Peli case, he decided to opt out of the extra weight and go for something lighter. He invested in a Calumet Rolling Flight bag, which allowed him to take all his kit on board as hand luggage.

"I can't stress enough how fantastic this bag is. It fit everything I needed in it, and protected my equipment perfectly. The Peli case is good, but in this instance the extra weight would have been a nightmare."

Fowler packed his Calumet bag with a range of lenses, including 12-24mm f/4, 300mm f/2.8, 1.4x converter, 17-55mm, 105mm f/2.8 macro, 300mm, 80-200mm f/2.8 VR and a 10.5mm fisheye. He'd far rather take more than he expected to use, and avoid leaving one lens behind only to end up wishing he'd brought it along. And it was the right decision, because "I used every lens I took with me. I even used the fisheye for some of

the creative shots. The 12-24mm definitely got the most usage though."

Prior to his Sudan trip, Fowler was a Nikon D2X user. Just days before the trip he made the bold decision to become the proud owner of a D300, and raves about its performance, saying: "I took the D2X away with me, but to be honest, it didn't really get a look in. The D300 is fantastic."

Along with the rest of his kit, Fowler took along a white photographic umbrella, a clamp, two laptops and three Nikon SB800 flashguns. Lastly, he took the essential duct tape. "I keep it in my kit bag at all times. You never know when you might need some of that stuff!"



↑ Fowler took all his equipment as hand luggage.

"Some of my images are currently on the TDI website, and I think others have been used in important documents; but it's the ones of landmine removal methods that have been most useful, more so than the creative shots."

Fowler has free rein of his images, retaining copyright, and has put them to good use. "Some are on stock library sites and are doing quite well. I've entered a few into competitions too. One of the pictures I took recently won the BIPP (London area) Travel Photographer of the Year award."

Some of the images have also filled pages in the portfolio Fowler and Sammons produce for their clients each year. And although Fowler is not actively seeking out more work of this nature, he is pleased to have successfully completed the job, and confirms that he would work for TDI again, should they ask.

"I guess the way I look at it is, as an average jobbing photographer, no different to thousands of *Pro's* readers no doubt, I was given an opportunity to go out of my comfort zone without losing touch with my usual commercial work, and have an amazing experience, whilst getting paid for it too." ■

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