

DISTANT SHORES

surfing the ends of the earth **chris burkard**



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AMMO



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INTERVIEW

with Chris Burkard, by Steve Crist

Steve Crist: Chris, you have already amassed a pretty astounding body of work at a very young age. Can you tell me what age you were when you first picked up a camera?

Chris Burkard: You know, it's funny because I think that I was right around the age of 18 or so. I had done a lot of art in high school and was always looking for that medium for creativity, that love of expression. And I found the kind of ultimate thing when I picked up photography. I had done two-dimensional art, and three-dimesional art, and had just drawn a lot and painted, and all of that stuff. And so when I picked up the camera it was like such a cool thing to be able to finally have something to take into the mountains and into social settings, into everywhere, right into the ocean even. It felt so unique, so for me that was kind of, that was it. That was everything right there.

SC: Sounds like you were hooked quickly. How did you make the transition from first picking up the camera and starting to shoot to the point when you were doing it professionally?

CB: I think that process, just it happens gradually, you know? I didn't even see it coming or even notice it happened. At least, for me, it wasn't like this conscious thing where I was taking my photography step by step. It was just this natural progression from realizing that I would rather be broke and rather be living out of my van if it meant I was, you know, pushing the scope of my experience to travel and to do these things, to go to these places and document the stuff that I was passionate about. So, for me it was kind of like, it was the only way. I mean, I had worked for other people and the experience was always just, you know, when can I get out of here? When can I go take pictures? Slowly but surely my career developed. I was shooting a lot in California. My original passion for photography came from landscapes, and I studied for a short period of time under a landscape photographer in the desert. I moved back home to California, and I had always been surfing. And I realized that there was no money in shooting landscape photography, or it was a really hard niche to break into. So I started kind of documenting surfing. I started documenting the ocean. I took that same approach to the work that I could potentially do for magazines. I love surf magazines, love to read them, and I wanted to bring this sort of different aesthetic to it. So I felt like the area that I lived in really leant itself to that, and I started just documenting these kind of pulled back oceanscapes. I made a good connection with a photo editor at *Transworld Surf*, and, basically, he set me up with the opportunity to intern for him. And so I was sending photos to him. And I learned so much about the whole process that it really honed me in on how to create a storyline. Not just to shoot photos just because, but actually shoot for a purpose, right? So being able to do that, it just really honed my skills in, and that was kind of the thing. From then on I only wanted to take pictures when it was within the context of a story or had a larger picture in mind. And for me that's always been it. I'm always trying to document something, or somewhere, or someone, and you know that that's kind of been important to me. And it just sort of developed from there. I developed a relationship with other magazines and continued to kind of go from there. It was slowly but surely, you know, and now, here I am.

SC: Well obviously the ocean and all of it's vitality and energy plays a big part in your life. Aside from photography in general, what attracts you to the water?

CB: I think it's the challenges of the water, really it's such a unique thing to shoot. Such a unique thing to try and be a part of and document. Unlike any other sport, you can't set anything up. Everything has to be happening in that moment. I really love the idea of documenting something that's so fleeting, something that's not going to be there tomorrow. I've just been grateful for that. I've been really lucky and really grateful to be able to grow up around the ocean. It always really made sense to me, so yea, that's kind of been it. That's kind of just the way it's always seemed to work. I've always had a natural affinity for being in the water, and that was sort of the main thing, you know?

SC: Not too many photographers have to be directly involved in the same action as the subject they are photographing. How on earth do you manage to balance a camera and shoot while swimming through an active wave?

CB: People ask this question a lot, and there's really no easy way to explain it. You start to learn the subtle balance of how to manipulate your body and manipulate yourself swimming so that you can really, like, kind of be, I guess, a part of the wave action, while at the same time trying not to fight its energy. You are just sort of moving through it. Because, if you start to fight the energy of the wave you're going to end up in a really bad situation. You're going to end up with the camera hitting you in the head or something along those lines, so it's super important just to kind of move with it, move with the ocean, and try to be really relaxed and loose. Especially when you are carrying a camera or something that can be heavy, and can actually be super dangerous, that's really the way that I find, there's no way to prepare for that. I think experience is the best teacher for that. It's really just like one of those things that until you do it you won't really know. Just trial and error, and I'm not anyone to ask for the exact advice. I've had some very big waves crash on me, and it's never a perfect process.

SC: For those people that might be unaware of your technique or unaware actually of how to create photographs like the ones featured in this book, you're more or less swimming while the guys you're working with are surfing and have boards, but you can't do that. Can you talk about how you're more or less swimming and floating a lot? Because I think that's an interesting concept too. You have to be there with those guys, which is kind of amazing, so you gotta be really in the zone right there, but you don't have the benefit of being on a buoyant surfboard that keeps you afloat!

CB: No, unfortunately not. When you're swimming in the ocean, you're subject to absolutely everything. You're subject to the currents. You're subject to the animals, really everything around you. You can't hide from any of it. So what I find is that it truly is a delicate art to balance, you know, you have to endure the same stuff that the surfers do, but you don't have, like you said, the protection of the board, the Styrofoam. You don't have a way to get out of that intense situation that you might have put yourself in. And so for me what I find is that it literally is something where you have to prepare; it's not something that you can just kind of put yourself into. You have to kind of understand the ocean. That's why most people come from either a body surfing background, or a surfing background, or a boogie boarding background, or something like that. That's what I find really helps.

SC: Speaking of that, have you ever had a dangerous experience in the water?

CB: I mean, there have definitely been a quite a few times when I've felt like I might drown. Or, I've been in big situations; waves have been way over my head. No pun intended. Also, I have definitely gotten to a place in the water and felt like, wow, I'm really in a really bad situation here, and I need to be re-evaluating what I'm doing for my safety. I think this problem just kind of comes with the territory. Any time you step into the ocean you have to prepare for being humbled pretty fast. And then what I find, it's that, like I've said before, it's that balance of understanding your limits but at the same time knowing how you can push yourself. Your relationship with the athlete is such a beautiful thing because when you shoot in the water so little of it is about composing through the lens. You're not looking through your waterhousing. You're not actually in there doing that. That camera is an extension of your body, and it's totally something that is, like, you're reaching out through the wave and your body is pulling out through the back of the wave. So you're kind of blindly shooting, I guess, I don't know if that makes sense or not. It's kind of hard to describe without actually demonstrating it. You're blindly shooting; you're not even really there. That's why shooting in the water is as much a sport in itself, it's as much of an action in itself as is surfing in general.

SC: You travel to a lot of remote locations, and while you're doing that you're essentially living outside. How do you deal with ever-changing elements of nature in harsh environments?

CB: To be comfortable out in those situations you have to really be able to endure. You know there's that quote it goes like, "There's no such thing as bad storms, just soft people." And I kind of think that's a funny one because it's true for the most part. In reality, it's like you have to be able to endure, you have to be able to endure the elements, you have to be able to stick through, that's what I always find. For me, I feel the most alive when I'm at the point of something, when the conditions are the harshest and when things are really tough. It's just like that idea of like, man, the shot isn't really there until things are kind of hard. And I feel like maybe that's some sort of a masochistic perspective because that's just me, and that's just the way that I tend to work. I like to put myself in those situations. And I know that it can be brutal on the body and the mind, but I think that's the whole deal. If you go through that and you survive, you feel more alive and you feel closer to the source. You feel, I guess, inundated and in a way, I think, to document nature in any form, whether it's an action sport or just landscape, the whole goal is to just get closer to nature. So if you can, you're shooting these trees that have been ravished by wind, storms and beaches that have been trampled by the ocean for years you want to feel that a little bit, and I feel like that makes you appreciate your subject.

SC: How do you go about finding these super remote, beautiful places that are potential great surf spots, in a world that seems so "over-discovered"?

CB: It's always a toss-up. You can do all your research for years and years and go to a place, and it can look and feel completely different than anything you ever thought. That can be a bummer because that's the reality of it. I've been there, I've done that. It's so, so brutal. I think that's kind of the name of the game for me sometimes. You have this idea, and you see these photos on Google Earth, or you hear from someone who has been there, or some fisherman, or you send an email and you get an idea, but you never know. You

could go somewhere and get the best weather and the best surf they've ever had in 20 years, or you could go somewhere and you can get rained on for 10 to 12 days and never leave your house. And I've had that happen, a lot, and I think what it is, is it's this idea of just planning to the best that you can and leaving a lot up to luck. And you kind of have to leave that out there. For me it's hard because I am going to kind of the ends of the earth in a lot of ways. We're always seeking out a new place that hasn't been surfed or a place that the surface has barely been scratched. We're looking for new ways to document it, new ways to explore it. And I think that what happens is you end up going to these places and you realize there's a reason people haven't gone there. They're hard to get there, they're fickle environments, they're harsh environments. And in a lot of ways they're not really friendly environments. You end up going there, and you end up dealing with all these things that you kind of knew in the beginning, and I guess it sort of comes with the territory.

SC: Chris, this book will be first published when you are 27 years old. What do you hope to ultimately do with this world of global travel and surfing that you're living in?

CB: That's a tough question. I tend to want to gravitate towards longer projects—bigger, kind of long-format projects that I can really dedicate myself to and create strong photographs. Over the course of my short career, I feel like I've found some places that have brought me back, and brought me in, and places that I've wanted to kind of rediscover. I hope towards the end of my career to at least build a body of work that really speaks to the places that I'm passionate about, the places that really inspire me—Iceland, Norway— you know that's what these books are for. Right now I feel like I'm living in that moment. I'm living in the moment of being there. People always ask, like, "Oh where do you see yourself?" Well it's hard because I'm right where I want to be right now. How can I look forward to something better when this is as good as I feel like it's going to be, you know? There's always the idea of making a certain amount of income. But the money is really not what it's about, you know? I got into taking pictures because I wanted to travel, I wanted to shoot things, I wanted to see the world. It was never about marketing and becoming a salesman and trying to get all of these photographs, covers, and this and that, yada, yada, yada. It's just kind of, it's evolved into something different, which is great; it's a learning opportunity. It's an excuse to elevate my career, but I think in a lot of ways I would have always just been happy toodling around the desert, Southwest, or Yosemite, or Big Sur, looking for sunrises.

SC: Is there any one particular part of your job in photography that you love the most?

CB: There are so many one things that really speak to me. Photography is the kind of main thing that my goals are set towards. It's amazing to see these places and stuff, but I definitely revel in and get excited in coming back with images that really speak to these places. I grew up in a family that never really ever had the money to travel. When I was a kid, I never really had the opportunity to do any trips outside of the states that connect to California. So photography is an opportunity for me to go out and see the world and bring something back to them and have something to show my son. I guess that's been a big motivating factor for me—to travel far and wide—and to really kind of push the scope of my experience, kind of for them too, you know? So I guess when I think of it, it's really that, being able to come back with those experiences to share with the people that are important in my life.

ALASKA













CARIBBEAN











