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Crossing Borders with HDV

By Debra Kaufman

Central Asia is as far-flung a destination as it gets — with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan forming a wild and rough terrain through which the historic Silk Road once passed. The area is home to a rich geographic and cultural tapestry that includes the historic cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, the ancient mountainous tribes of the Uzbeks and Kazakhs, the rugged Steppes and decaying monuments to Soviet rule.



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As part of the USSR, all five countries shared infrastructure and open borders, but the dissolution of the Soviet Union has put a strain on all of these countries' economies. The United Nations Development Programme has set up numerous initiatives to encourage development of regional cooperation and infrastructure. In concert with the Asian Development Bank, the U.N.D.P. decided to create a documentary that would highlight some of these successful programs.

Filmmaker Bill Megalos, an experienced documentarian based in Los Angeles, had already worked several times for the Asian Development Bank and had experience shooting in remote, rough areas throughout the world when he was brought on to produce and direct the project. Megalos owns a Sony DSR-PD150 but decided early on to consider shooting this documentary in HD with the new Sony

HVR-Z1U. "This trip was to very out-of-the-way, once-

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in-a-lifetime places," he says. "I liked the idea of coming back with unusual stock footage, so HD was an attraction." In addition to being shown at a major U.N. summit meeting, the documentary, *Caravan of Dreams*, was slated for broadcast in all five Central Asian countries, which air the 625-line resolution SECAM standard. Megalos was also banking on getting a better end product with a 1080-line resolution master.

A Compressed Budget

The budget didn't allow for a full-on Sony or Panasonic HD camera, and logistics also favored a smaller camera. "I needed a low-profile camera because I was going to be crossing a lot of borders where guards aren't used to seeing video cameras," he says. "Because the Z1U looks like a consumer camera, I thought we would be less hassled [than if we brought a professional-looking camera]."

Megalos knew the vistas in these countries would be spectacular; he also knew that he wanted to place the people he met and interviewed within the landscapes they inhabit. Shooting in 16:9 aspect ratio would make all this possible. "Still, I needed a lot of convincing about the HDV format," he recounts. "I am very suspicious of compression and when I made the choice to buy the Z1U [earlier this year], the editing software wasn't yet up to snuff." Nonetheless, after much research and deliberation, Megalos purchased the Sony Z1U at Band Pro Film & Digital in Burbank. "It's the only game in town," says Megalos. "There was no other small HDV or HD camera available. Had the Panasonic AG-HVX200 announced at NAB been available, I might have considered it. But for a long trip like this, cheap tapes are preferable to expensive P2 cards." His budget also wouldn't permit the purchase of a second Z1U as back-up, so Megalos brought along his PD150. "It would have been a horrible cut had I needed to use it," he admits. "But I never had to."

To start off the 24-day shooting schedule, Megalos flew into Almaty, Kazakhstan, where he met up with co-producer/writer Ian Gill, an information officer for the Asian Development Bank with whom Megalos had shot other documentaries in Afghanistan, China and Korea. Also on board was Roza Savadskaya, a Russian woman who acted as interpreter and all-around fixer. "She was a brilliant choice," says Megalos. "Having grown up in Kazakhstan and being 100 percent disarming, she was able to get people who might have taken a long time to trust us to open up right away." There was no budget left— and no room in the jeep— for a soundman. Megalos handled sound chores himself except in bigger towns, where he'd pick up a freelance soundman from the local television station.

Finding the Narrative

Traveling 4,000 miles in four weeks in a U.N.D.P. jeep, the team was set to cover three stories, all of which would highlight the benefits of regional cooperation: HIV/AIDS prevention information, water and power, and trade transportation.

The first few days in Almaty, the team shot at Temiratau, a polluting steel mill the size of a small city that's running at 10 percent capacity; a hospital for HIV/AIDS patients; a rehab clinic; nightclubs; and a blood lab, among other locales. Even in the big city, shooting wasn't without its risks; Megalos says junkies threw rocks at them as they interviewed HIV-positive prostitutes.

Driving to the Kyrgyz Republic, they shot the magnificent, desolate Steppes and, once there, shot interviews about the HIV/AIDS situation in the region, and various trade, enterprise and customs facilities. The segment on trade transportation is intended to encourage tariff-free zones and create a trading block like the EU. To craft a compelling storyline, the team focused on "shuttle traders," small-time smugglers who sell goods using the highway infrastructure connecting the five nations. In Samarkand, Megalos focused on a

family of hat makers, traveling with them for two days as they sold their goods.

For the third narrative, which focused on improving water distribution and power production, Megalos and his team spent two days on the border of the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, in an area that is the victim of oddly drawn borders and antiquated water/power equipment. The U.N.D.P. project is a complex one aimed at getting more water from a river shared by both countries and keeping the two populations talking about sharing the water through the construction of community centers and medical centers.

Braving the Elements

Shooting conditions were often brutal, says Megalos, from mountain glaciers to hot, dusty deserts, everywhere primitive in terms of utilities and services. Nearly all the roads on this marathon 4,000-mile trip were rough, mountain passages, which made for consistently jarring rides. "My tripod and lights were literally shaken apart—bolts fell out and the screw came undone from the vibration," he reports.

Dust was one of his biggest challenges, and Megalos soon adopted a way of working to protect the camera from it. "I never changed the tape outside," he says. "I'd always go into the vehicle or wait until I got into a building." To keep dust off, he also made a cover over the door out of gaffer tape.

One of the best adjustments he made to the camera, he says, was to buy the Century Optics.7x wide angle adapter that he kept on the camera "practically every moment." It remained on the camera, in fact, during Megalos's trip to a Tibetan monastery after he completed the shoot for the U.N. (see sidebar below). "It gave me a wider angle and made the camera heavier," he says. "The extra weight made a big difference for me in the hand-holding of the camera." Megalos notes that with wide lenses, in certain critical architectural or landscape shots, he'd get a barrel distortion at the wide end of the lens. "At about 07, you don't see it any more," he says. "You'd never know it was there unless you're shooting something with really straight edges."

One feature of the camera that took him a while to embrace was Shot Transition, which allows the user to create two settings by changing parameters— with control over iris, focus, focal length, gain and color temperature— and then transition between them. "I was skeptical about this in the beginning and it took me a while to commit to learn it," Megalos says. "But in the end, I ended up using it quite a bit. It let me do a really nice rack focus, and I could program the length of the transition." If he shot a sunrise, for example, he could make the color very cool at the beginning of the transition and warm at the very end, enhancing the idea that dawn was breaking.

Language Barriers and Other Challenges

Megalos also brought along a laptop computer loaded with Apple Final Cut Pro, with a LaCie 250 GB external FireWire drive. Though he intended to do some rough-cut editing on the road, he says he hadn't counted on how exhausting it would be to travel 1,000 miles a week on rough dirt roads. But over the course of the 24-day shoot, he did use FCP for one very important task. Moving among the five nations, he recorded dialogue in six languages: Russian, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Turkman, Uzbek and English. Though the majority of the dialogue was in Russian, which could easily be translated back in the U.S., he realized it would be a much trickier task to find native speakers of the other languages.

Megalos loaded the best takes of interviews in those languages and sat down during rough cuts with a local who could translate. In FCP, he put markers at the beginning of each sentence and, in the information area, would type in the translation of that sentence. "This way, I'd always know where to trim," he points out.

On the road, Megalos had an initial scare with the camera. "After the first serious day's shoot, I loaded the footage into FCP and reviewed it and there were drop-outs," he says. "I freaked. Drop-outs are more severe in HDV because it's an MPEG format, and I knew that each drop-out could affect six frames or more." (Megalos found out later, when discussing the matter with Band Pro and Sony, that his particular camera had a slight defect, something Sony states is still a very rare occurrence among its thousands of existing models now in use.)

From that point on, he says, he shot anything important at least twice. "If I needed a sound bite from somebody, I insisted that they say it again," he says. "I'd shoot a landscape at least twice, or if it were a still image, I'd shoot it very long, so that I'd have five seconds on either side of a drop-out." He also redoubled his efforts to keep the camera clean, using the cleaning tape frequently, but choosing not to review footage in the field to avoid over-handling the tapes.

In some of the desert locations, he also learned just how hot the camera could get and still function well. "I found it worked fine up to 130 degrees," he says. "The plastic handles did get frighteningly hot, but everything worked fine."

Back in Los Angeles, Megalos discovered that, though the number of drop-outs was actually well within specs, he had to deal with another unexpected and equally serious problem: broken timecode, even in the middle of running takes. He had shot 30 rolls of tape and found as few as two and as many as 10 or 12 timecode breaks per reel. "That caused the most grief and wreaked havoc on my edit," admits Megalos.

There was a solution, albeit a laborious and time-consuming one: cloning all the tapes with new timecode. Megalos also got on the phone with Sony's troubleshooters and took the camera back to Band Pro for further testing.

Final Touches

Back in the edit suite, Megalos first put together a very rough cut, using Gill's rough script as a template and refining the script as he progressed through the storyline. Then he brought in Vladimir Smetanin, a Russian translator/filmmaker who had been Megalos's student at The Workshops where he teaches. The two spent 10 days translating best takes of the extensive Russian dialogue into English for subtitling and editing. Smetanin also translated the English script and all the other languages into Russian, and recorded a scratch track for a second, Russian-language version of the documentary.

At Band Pro, CTO and company HD specialist Michael Bravin (and his team) researched the problems Megalos experienced with his Sony Z1U and discovered that the camera suffered from faulty boards. Bravin notes that he hasn't experienced any such problems with any of the other Z1Us he's sold. At the time of this writing, out of 200 cameras sold, only three were back for servicing—one had been dropped and the other was filled with dirt and dust. "They've been more reliable than PD150s and PD170s," Bravin says. Megalos appears to have had the misfortune to buy the rare one with a problem, one that Sony promised to make good—and did, in late August, by replacing the camera with a new model.

Does Megalos regret taking the risk of bringing a largely untried camera with him on this assignment? No, he says. "I'm very fond of the camera," he says. "I accept its limitations. I really enjoy hand-holding it. I liked the personal pre-sets and, with the extra weight of the Century Optics, it's the most enjoyable of the DV cameras that I've found."

The Ziu On Location

Directly following his trip to Central Asia for the U.N., Bill Megalos returned to a place that occupied a special

place in his mind and heart: a Tibetan monastery in the foothills of the Himalayas. The monks there are practitioners of Bön, Tibet's original indigenous religion, which cross-pollinated with Buddhism in the seventh century, imparting it with prayer flags, prayer wheels and the elaborate colorful Thangka paintings. Megalos, a student of the Bön religion, had visited the monastery in India's Himachal Pradesh province five years before.

Megalos was captivated by what he saw at the north Indian monastery and, at the time, shot 20 hours with his Sony PD150 with the idea of making a full-length documentary. He also met Geshe Shenphem Samdup, a monk from Bhutan who had some rudimentary training in film production and an avid interest in using video to document the Bön traditions. Megalos took a look at some footage Samdup had shot with the monastery's single-chip Sony camera — and was wowed. "He was a natural cameraman," remembers Megalos. "His compositions were great, and he was smart and interested in film."

The timing was right, too. His Holiness Lungtok Tenpa'i Nyima, the leader of the Bön religion, understood the importance of video to both preserve significant rituals and events and to show Tibetans, who, by Chinese law, are not permitted to practice their religion. Teaching comes naturally to Megalos — he's a regular faculty member in digital filmmaking for The Workshops in Maine — and he vowed to help the monks make documentaries of their own. Initially, he asked for a class of six monks. "My experience is that if you don't use what you learn right away, it's easy to forget, especially with editing software that's robust and complex," he says. "If six students learned, they'd help each other remember once I was gone."

When he arrived back at the monastery this past spring with his ZIU and PD150 in hand, Megalos learned that H.H. Lungtok Tenpa'i Nyima had designated not just six but 10 monks for the class. Apple had also donated an Apple 5 iMac computer and Final Cut Pro software; Megalos planned to teach his students how to edit their footage as well.

Rough Cuts and Rituals

The five-day class didn't start auspiciously. Megalos found out the hard way that the iMac wasn't auto-ranging when the power supply blew up. The closest Apple service center was a single person in Chandigarh, India — a three-hour drive away. While someone drove the iMac to Chandigarh, Megalos sent urgent e-mails to Apple's main service center in Bangalore.

Not wasting any time, Megalos began teaching the monks camera work. It was the week of Khalong, a very colorful, three-day summer ritual and Megalos used it as a teaching experience. Students chose each shot as they captured the daily rituals, and the class discussed how to improve on composition and technique. Though the monks shot with the ZIU camera in PAL DV/4:3 mode — using it with the Century wide-angle adaptor Megalos had attached to it during his Central Asia trip — they were thrilled to be shooting with a professional camera, especially one with the obvious potential for HD. "Everyone was dying to get their hands on it," says Megalos. They also used the Sony PD150, which had been Megalos's back-up camera in Central Asia (although they couldn't use the resulting NTSC footage from this camera).

The monks wrote a script together, translating it into English for subtitles, and were ready to learn to edit with their five hours of footage, just as the repaired iMac returned. Megalos asked Samdup do a first cut by himself and he saw that Samdup was, as he quietly suspected, a FCP natural as well. "Then, together as a class, we ripped each sequence apart, moving things around, cutting things shorter and talking about why this worked and that didn't — covering the whole grammar of film languages," says Megalos. "It was altogether a Socratic way of discussing how to make it better." They

proceeded through the piece segment-by-segment: as soon as Samdup finished a portion, Megalos would transfer it to his laptop, connected by FireWire to the monastery's largest computer monitor, and the class would begin the work of a second edit.

On the last day of editing, the cord on the laptop's power supply broke — just as the monks were putting their finishing touches on the Khalong piece, which runs 11 minutes. On August 5, it screened at the Dallas Video Festival. Khalong can also be viewed on Megalos's Web site (www.billmegalos.com). It will be shown to Tibetans who have never seen the now-banned Khalong ritual and to Westerners during teachings. While not captured in HDV mode, the monks' first documentary is clearly only the beginning of an evolving relationship with a powerful new means to tell their story, as only they can.

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