

# EMBRACING THE UNKNO

JODY MACDONALD,  
ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHY,  
AND SAYING **YES** BY JENNY MONTGOMERY

**Jody MacDonald** seems like just the kind of person you'd want on your improv theatre team. For those of you who have not yet had the somewhat terrifying (or thrilling, depending on your perspective) experience doing of improv theatre, the most important rule is the "Yes, and..." rule. When your teammate proposes an idea (for example, "This carnival is kind of creepy!"), your job is to agree to the situation and then add something new ("I know! Have I ever told you I have recurring nightmares about funnel cake?"). Improv is unscripted live performance, so improv teams are constantly launching themselves into uncharted territory. And, judging from Jody MacDonald's stunning work as an adventure sport and documentary photographer, she thrives when facing the unknown.



# WVN





CANON EOS 5D MARK II, 70 MM, F/5.6, 1/320 S, ISO 1600. © JODY MACDONALD

Whether paragliding over snowy mountains or train hopping through the Sahara, MacDonald is all in. Saying yes has paid off for her—both in incredible life experiences and in awards and recognition. Her work can be seen in the publications and media platforms of clients including *National Geographic*, *Outside*, BBC and Patagonia. Last year she won first place in the Lifestyle category of the Red Bull Illume action sports contest with an image taken on that train adventure in the Sahara. Even a quick look at her portfolio will leave you in awe of her ability to capture such beautiful shots while navigating rather uncommon situations.

This mastery of doing two demanding things at once is something she's been working at for years, though. "For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in art and

adventure," she said. "I always gravitated towards art and physical education classes in school. In university I majored in outdoor recreation and took a few photography classes as an elective and fell in love with it immediately. I began taking photos on my climbing and

outdoor adventure trips, and it became a perfect marriage of my passions." She added, "I sailed around the world for 10 years. It really gave me the opportunity and platform to endlessly improve my photography skills with new unique opportunities. It also provided me with many

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CANON EOS 5D MARK II, 24 MM, F/7.1, 1/320 S, ISO 400. © JODY MACDONALD



CANON EOS 5D MARK II, 50 MM, F/7.1, 1/1250 S, ISO 400. © JODY MACDONALD

invaluable lessons about working in remote, difficult locations. I know sailing around the world a couple of times isn't something that most people will ever do, but the applicable lesson would be that everything can be figured out and it is all possible. The most important thing is to walk out the door and just start shooting. To practice, practice, practice. You don't have to travel far away to do that, you just have to find some place that inspires you to keep practicing and taking as many photos as you can."

Though inspiration can be found near or far, MacDonald's assignments happen to take her rather far. In fact, she travels to some extremely inaccessible places and tends to be away from home about nine months of the year. When I asked this peripatetic Canadian (who now lives in Idaho) how her ideas about "home" impact her life and

career, she replied, "I grew up in Saudi Arabia, so my formative years were spent in a very foreign landscape and culture. I think because of that upbringing I've never really developed deep roots anywhere, so I adapt to new places and cultures much easier. As a photographer, this helps me immensely. I think Saudi Arabia's the longest amount of time I've ever spent in any one place, and I think from a very young age it instilled in me the feeling that I could live anywhere. As humans we are excellent at adapting to our surroundings and it never takes me very long to settle into the rhythm of a place or its people, and that makes travelling for me very easy. That being said, I think it's very difficult to feel like you belong in foreign countries. Obviously I think that varies if you move within 1<sup>st</sup> world versus 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, but regardless, I think

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that feeling of 'home' takes a considerable amount of time. For me, it's obvious when I do get to visit my family and friends, the people who know me so well that I don't have to explain anything about myself...they just understand who I am and the way I think, the unconditional love, that is home to me." When she's travelling, though, she admitted, "If I have my camera and computer and a way to connect with family and friends, it's about as close to feeling at home as I'm going to get."

Instead of looking for the best travel destination for photos, MacDonald encourages photographers to focus on the stories they want to tell. "I think when photographers are starting out, they just want to go to certain locations to take specific images. You have to start thinking beyond that and think what stories are worth being told

# MACDONALD ON...

## MENTORSHIP

"I haven't had one specific mentor. I have a lot of fellow *National Geographic* photographer friends that I constantly talk to for advice. I would have loved to have one specific mentor, but it just never worked out that way. I would highly recommend it though. If you can find a person you greatly admire in the field and they are willing to mentor you, never pass that opportunity up."

## FAILURE

"I wish I had learned to embrace failure earlier. It's such a critical part of the process and when you can step back and identify it as such, it changes everything. Suddenly a failure isn't perceived as a failure but rather as a learning opportunity. If you can love the process of learning, getting better and making mistakes, then you are more likely to embrace new opportunities and have a more fulfilling life and career."

## PLANNING

"I'm always thinking about different projects and ideas. I keep a list of projects I'm interested in, and then I will do a bunch of research online. I am not a planner. My life has taught me that making a general plan is okay, but nothing really goes according to plan and I don't want it to. I really don't want any expectations, and I want to make mistakes. I want to be open to every opportunity and be able to adjust and adapt to a situation as needed. Also, for me, planning takes the adventure out of projects. I like to constantly problem-solve and figure things out as they come up. That being said, I do some planning but the extent of it is a lot of research upfront. I will research what an area looks like, find places of interest, read local newspapers and get a feel of what the general geography of a location is like and areas I want to focus on. A lot, of course, depends on any time restraints to a project or how big or small it is, but I'm very flexible once I'm on location."

## STAYING INSPIRED

"So much inspires me as a photographer. From a creativity standpoint, I get inspiration through music, art and other photographers. People trying to do the right thing inspire me. People actively pursuing their passion are so inspiring. Issues that I care about—such as the effects of climate change—get me inspired to do something, to try to make a difference with the skills that I have. I fully believe that it's our obligation as humans to use the talents that we each have to contribute to the greater good. Anyone who is doing that greatly inspires me."



CANON EOS 1D MARK II N, 15 MM, F/4.5, 1/5000 S, ISO 320. © JODY MACDONALD

in your mind and how you can contribute to those conversations through your photography." She continued, "I think good storytelling in photography often has subject matter that is unique and different. People often want to see things they haven't seen before or from a unique perspective. Images that can tell a story that the audience can have an emotional connection to are critical to good storytelling. Information without emotion isn't retained, and, of course, the images also have to be visually compelling."

There's no doubt that MacDonald knows which stories are

important to her and the "why" behind what she does. She explained, "I am currently motivated to use my skills as a photographer to contribute to the important conversations of our time. I will be working on a lot more environmental issues and overpopulation issues. We are living in a crazy time and I believe it's only going to get worse, so for me it's trying to figure out how to be a better storyteller so that I can contribute to those issues in an effective way."

She said that the best advice she's ever received was "to just go out into the world, do good work



CANON EOS 1D MARK II N, 14 MM, F/7.1, 1/320 S, ISO 200. © JODY MACDONALD



CANON EOS 1D MARK II N, 15 MM, F/4.5, 1/320 S, ISO 160. © JODY MACDONALD

that reflects your own voice and passions, and to make as many mistakes as you can along the way. To be persistent and that the greatest freedom is to have little or no choice. Try to simplify your gear and your photography and the whole process will be more fulfilling.” And, if you’re the type of person who gets nervous about

all the uncertainties that come with new adventures, MacDonald would urge you onward anyway. “I would tell them to try to change their perception of those unknowns. The unknowns aren’t what you should fear but embrace. The unknowns should be what you are looking forward to because it’s where the best

experiences in life come from. Life is so short to live in fear of the unknowns. If you can embrace them, then the world opens up to you in only the best of ways.”

There, I rest my case. Jody MacDonald is clearly a master of “Yes, and...” ■

## 5 TIPS FROM JODY MACDONALD ON SHARING IMAGES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

1. Put out good content.
2. Be consistent but not annoying. (I personally struggle with this, but I think it is essential to gaining followers.)
3. Think of it as your own curated magazine. Put out the type of content you would like to look at and read about.
4. Tag companies, sponsors, etc. that you work with or that might be likely to repost your content, and don’t over-hashtag. Again, don’t be annoying.
5. Do some research and learn the best time to post for your followers. Instagram and Facebook both have great insight as to what time of day your viewers are on the most.