

Tracing the remarkable voyages of the Chinese treasure fleet



Treasure Fleet is a 90-minute documentary which details the seven voyages of the great Ming Dynasty (15th century) Admiral Zheng He. The documentary was produced for the National Geographic Channel and reunited the successful team of cinematographer Grant Douglas and director Jonathan Finnigan. Their previous collaboration, **Marco Polo—the China Mystery Revealed**, also for National Geographic, won the Best Cinematography Award in 2004 at the Asian TV Awards.

Treasure Fleet follows National Geographic photographer Mike Yamashita as he retraces Zheng's epic journey through China, South-East Asia, Sri Lanka, India, Yemen and finally the Swahili coast of Africa. Interspersed throughout this story line are re-enactments. "When Jonathan and I first discussed the look of **Treasure Fleet**, we discussed how we could portray the internal turmoil within China by the use of light and shade, the yin and yang."

"We used very formal and symmetrical compositions to convey China's might and power. Each frame is rich in color, with bright highlights and deep blacks, a very clean, crisp look. While there was an initial push to shoot on HD, I felt that for such an epic story, there was no choice but film. **Treasure Fleet** is an adventure of unparalleled cultural diversity told in images of stilt fishermen in Vietnam, sulphur miners in Java, religious piercing in Malaysia, ancient martial arts in India, shark markets in Yemen and the incomparable waters of Zanzibar. The end result confirms the decision as the only right one," says Douglas.

Shooting began in April 2005, in India and Sri Lanka, and in the following months in Yemen, Kenya, Tanzania (Zanzibar), Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Hong Kong and China, finally wrapping principal photography in mid September.

"My camera of choice was an ARRIflex SR3 Super 16 high speed camera and Canon lenses. I mainly used the Eastman EXR 50D 7245 stock. Its fine grain, good tonal range and great ability to handle the highlights, was perfect for this production." Douglas' basic technique was to expose for the shadows and let the highlights overexpose. "I just added a polarizer and ND, combined with using the long end of the zoom lens I was able to shoot wide open. The shallow depth of field really draws the audience to the important information in a frame."

For the high-speed sequences, Douglas switched to the Kodak VISION2 250D 7205 film. "It's fantastic, cutting perfectly with the 7245 and the extra stop was a real bonus. For all the interior work I used Kodak VISION2 500T 7218, for its fine grain as well as great latitude. Often we found ourselves shooting in very dark locations and the stock just grabbed every detail," says Douglas.

For the Ming Dynasty recreation scenes, which were shot at Hengdian Movie City in China, Douglas required a high contrast, de-saturated look. "I used a bleach bypass process on the negative, which was done by FTS in Singapore and the end result was fantastic. For the interior and night scenes on which I used the Kodak VISION2 500T 7218, we still retained some of the color, which in turn added a bit more texture. This was exactly the result I was after, I really wanted these images to look like paintings." ■



Above: (top) Filming in the Forbidden City using a crane. (middle L to R) Ming Crew: Producer, Paula Mason; Director, Jonathan Finnigan; DP, Grant Douglas (behind camera) with local crew on location at Hengdian Movie World, China. (lower) *Treasure Fleet* has images of vast cultural diversity including the ancient Indian martial art of Kalari.