

PERSONAL TECH

Making the Video as Good as the Trip

By ROY FURCHGOTT JULY 21, 2010

To some people, vacationing means lying inert on a beach, drenched in coconut oil, tropical drink in hand. Not my friends. Several of them, like 22 million other North Americans, took adventure vacations last year.

The problem is they like to video the activities to share afterward. Despite all of the mountain biking, racecar driving and scuba diving, the videos are painfully dull. After a minute or two, an unchanging view of car track, bike path or ocean floor becomes monotonous.

I didn't want to make the same mistake on my next vacation, so I tried my hand at a short video at home. There is a lot to learn and I made a lot of mistakes. But if you want to make your video look as exciting as your trip — O.K., more exciting — there are some basic steps.

The first thing I learned is that an action video takes considerable planning. You'll have to decide what to shoot, where and when, and learn to use your equipment.

I decided motorcycling might make a good subject. I picked a short twisty piece of road lined alternately by industrial buildings and lush vegetation. The light is best in early morning and late afternoon, but traffic dictated late afternoon, when I'd have the road to myself.

Next, equipment. I used a BMW R1200 GS motorcycle because its exposed frame has lots of places to mount a camera. I wanted a lot of video shot from the rider's point of view, requiring a special camera. I chose a helmet cam from Contour called the ContourHD. The \$250 video camera is compact and light and, because it records to a memory card, durable.

I could use a PanaVise suction cup mount to stick the ContourHD to the bike's tank and windscreen, giving me several angles facing forward and back. But a suction cup did not provide as many angles as I would have liked.

To get more, I used about \$85 worth of Ram Mounting Systems hardware, including a pair of U-bolts and articulated arms that let me attach the camera to the foot pegs, handlebars or frame. Ram sells all kinds of specialty mounts for filming a variety of activities, like scuba diving and stunt flying.

It took several runs to understand the camera — I once took the low-battery light to mean I was recording and lost hours of work. It took a half-dozen more runs to figure out camera placement. One problem with all-in-one point-of-view cameras like the ContourHD is that there is no viewfinder in which to frame your shot. You have to point and hope. You can't see the results until you download it to a computer.

Fancier "lipstick" cameras, like Panasonic's POVcam and Sony's HXRMC1, send a signal to a remote recorder so you can see playback, but then there are wires to deal with, and the cameras can cost \$3,000 or more. Contour isn't the only company to make a compact helmet cam. Several made for specific activities like skin diving or snowboarding can be found through specialty dealers like Pointofviewcamera.com.

Ready to shoot, I needed three main categories of shots: establishing shots, which give the viewer a sense of where you are and what you are doing; cutaways, which let you interrupt the main action without jarring leaps; and point-of-view shots, which put the audience in the action.

As I shot, I found out this was not a one-man operation. For establishing shots of the bike on the road, I didn't want to leave the camera on a tripod and ride away, hoping it would be there when I rode back. I marshaled a friend to help. He could

film me riding, and we also mounted the camera on his car for some on-the-road video.

Then problem No. 2 appeared. It not only takes two people to make a video, it takes two cameras. The wide-angle ContourHD reduced me to a speck on the horizon when riding a safe distance from the car. I made do. Maybe I could make up for it in editing.

There was a third problem, too. To match your action from several angles you have to do the same thing over and over. That's fine for sports like skiing, where you might schuss down the same slope repeatedly. But for some other sports, you may drive your fellow vacationers (read: spouse) crazy asking to "do that one more time, and this time..." You have to consider how much vacation you are willing to sacrifice for your video.

Including my flubs, I probably put in 12 to 15 hours of filming for a 45-second sequence, viewable online at www.nytimes.com/personaltech/. I barely made it. I wished I had shot more, and I would have liked to cut it even shorter.

The principle of editing — I used iMovie software for Macs — is to simply cut away the bad parts. In practice it's more difficult. Just cutting from good point to good point would be a confusing mess. This is why I made three kinds of shots.

For instance, turns looked pretty cool in my video, but straightaways were a snooze. So I cut from a wide establishing shot of the motorcycle on the road to a point-of-view in the curve. Then I replaced a long boring straightaway with a quick shot of my foot shifting gears. Then right to the next curve.

In the end I didn't have the variety of shots to make what I wanted, a video of a stretch of road shot in sequence. So I cheated, taking the best-looking shots and assembling them in a way that seemed to make sense, even though they were out of order. I also had to dip into my test shots, so watch; you will notice trees are in bloom in some clips and bare in others.

The soundtrack was an additional problem. Often all I got was wind noise. Ultimately, I should have had a microphone covered in layers of windscreen foam

mounted near the exhaust. Even then I'd have to edit together the sounds of acceleration shifting, and deceleration to match the video. The simple way around that was to kill the sound track and replace it with music.

I've learned a lot in the process and I'll do better next time, but at the very least I can say that in 45 seconds people won't have much chance to get bored.

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