

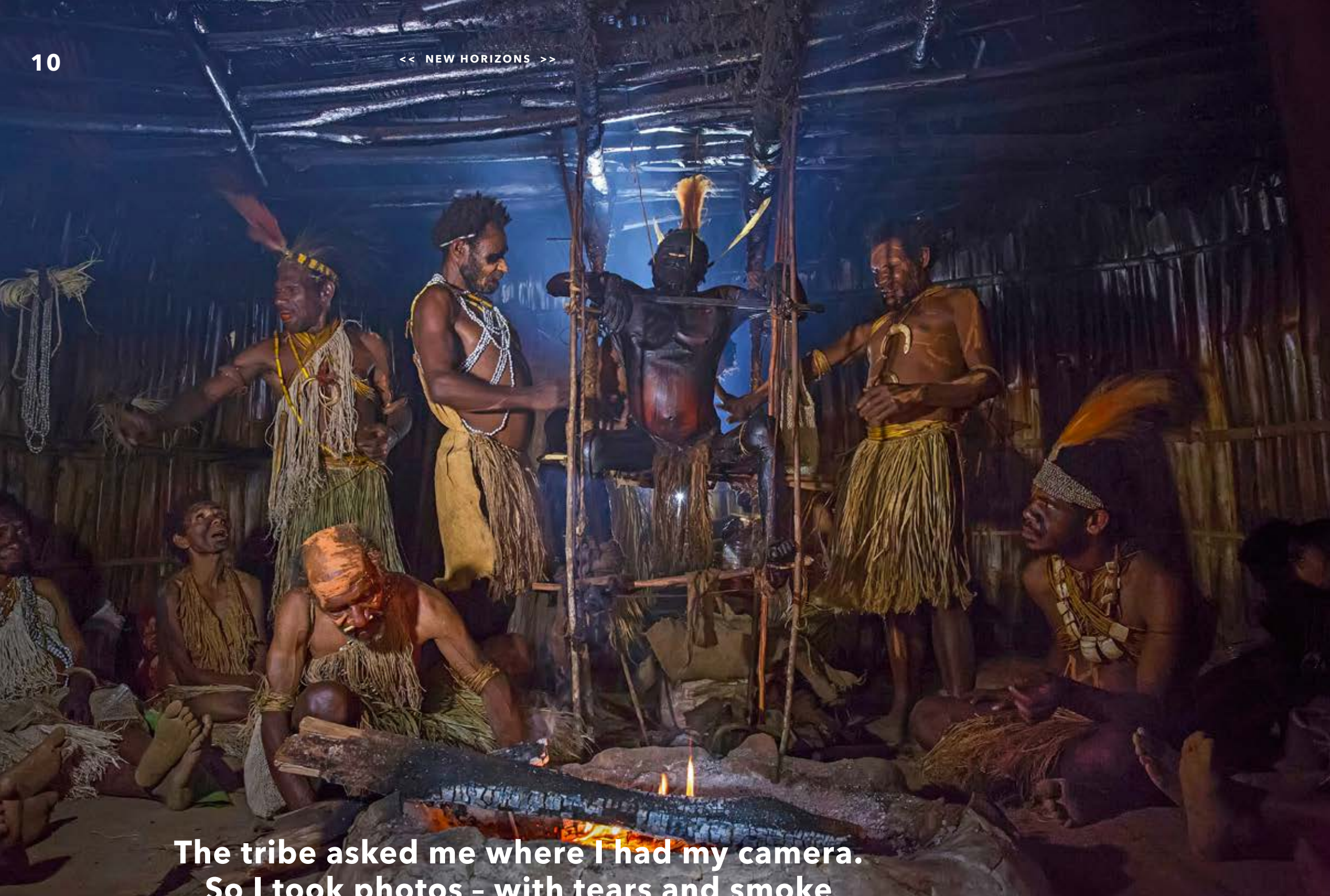
L I G H T M Y F I R E

There is no mountain too high, no jungle too dense, no volcano too hot - the photographers Ulla Lohmann and Basti Hofmann are already well known in the USA. Now they are about to impress their home market too.

Interview
Michael Neumann

Photos
Ulla Lohmann





The tribe asked me where I had my camera.
So I took photos – with tears and smoke
in my eyes. For Gemtasu.



They smoke their dead - Ulla gained the trust of tribal chief Gemtasu in Papua New Guinea for more than a decade. His last wish: Ulla should document his mummification.

Y

You just returned from a six-week journey...

ULLA: We went to Tasmania for a climbing trip for our sponsor Canon and compiled a report about the Tasmanian devil for the magazine Terra Mater. Before that, we were in Papua New Guinea to guide a photo excursion.

BASTI: That is a typical example of our tours. We need to combine several things in one journey otherwise we cannot refinance it.

Do you remember your first paid picture?

ULLA: When I was 18 years old I did my first around-the-world trip and published three, four double pages each month in the local magazine Willi. Two years long. Back then, it was 400 Deutsche Marks each – which extended my journey for a few months.

What do you need nowadays for a professional career as a photographer, except for a camera and a lot of talent?

ULLA: Perseverance, persistence and hard work. Sometimes, we have trainees who think we would only travel around and take photos. The creative part of our work only takes five percent of our time, including editing afterwards on the computer. The rest is organisation. Emails, social media, marketing, contacting people, selling stories, visiting fairs, canvassing magazines and TV channels, writing concepts. It does not happen without excessive passion for the stories. You must be passionate about your photographic ideas and you must suffer to achieve results. But the stories are the most important. Each great picture needs an even better story behind it which reaches and moves people. It is not enough to have a new camera – which everybody can operate these days – and to have talent. >>

Ulla Lohmann (40) comes from Enkenbach-Alsenborn. She won a contest for young scientists in 1996 and used the 3,000 Deutsche Marks as travel money for her journey after high school. Ever since then, she has not stopped being curious about foreign cultures and the blank spots on the map. She lives in Hohen-schäftlam an der Isar together with her husband Basti Hofmann (32). Basti has been accompanying Ulla on her expeditions to the end of the world for years. The passionate climber makes sure that Ulla does not accidentally fall into a volcano while looking through the finder of her camera.



Do you need to be keen to be on stage?

Self-promotion is always important. All the bloggers show how to do this. I am on Facebook and Instagram but other people are much better at it. But if it helps to put out the story I am willing to include myself in the story.

How do you become an ambassador for Canon?

ULLA: Canon observed my work for quite a few years and then approached me. If it was always as easy as that...

Can you also test a few prototypes beforehand?

ULLA: I was actually chosen to test the EOS 5 Mark IV nine months before market launch. As the first photographer worldwide. It has a



Before Ulla met Basti, she wanted to be a diving instructor in the South Pacific. And he wanted to become a pilot. Nowadays, they are a very successful photographer couple.

few features that are unique in its league. For example, you can change the focus point afterwards and shift the focal plane.

Do you have any photography role models?

ULLA: Nobody takes pictures of people like David Alan Harvey does. I was his assistant at his workshops for a long time. He simply takes his camera with him and it feels like he is only chatting with friends and taking some snapshots on the side. But those are brilliant. Carsten Peter is for me the number one adventure photographer. He visits extreme places – and always goes one step further. And still, he manages to produce perfect pictures in extreme situations with never ending motivation.

From Yann Arthus-Bertrand, the famous French aerial photographer, I have learned to ask questions and to listen. His latest movie is called "Human". For that we asked 2,000 people in more than 60 countries the same intimate questions. And no matter where we were, the answers to the core questions were always the same – and that was beautiful.

You are part of the Explorers Club of National Geographic, aren't you?

ULLA: First of all, National Geographic is my photo agency. Everybody is a member who has published something in the US magazine. I have also received sponsorship from National Geographic. I used it to go to Papa New Guinea to explore mummies. Well, and afterwards I was chosen for the New York Explorers Club. That is an illustrious club of legendary conquerors and explorers such as Sir Edmund

Hillary, Roald Amundsen, Neil Armstrong, Reinhold Messner, Dian Fossey and Thor Heyerdahl. The purpose of the club is to finance expeditions that bring colour to the blank spots on the map. It is not only about the case itself, something should remain afterwards. Hence, many of my projects have a scientific background.

What was your first contact with National Geographic?

ULLA: As a chef! I was on my first world trip and really wanted to see an active volcano. So I travelled to the South Sea Islands of Vanuatu. There was a National Geographic Team there at the same

It is our job to bring colour to the blank spots on the map.

time. They had so much luggage and I was always in their pictures with my small backpack. I asked them if they needed a chef. They did. Carsten Peter from Germany was accompanying the story as the photographer and I was actually on one of the pictures they printed in the magazine. When they were verifying the captions, the author got in touch with me. In her Email she mentioned that I could visit if I happened to be in Washington. And before I knew it, I was standing in front of Ann Williams' door. She showed me the editorial office and I quickly realised it was a long journey from a chef to a photographer.

Can you earn your living today with photography?

ULLA: I don't know if I could ever only live from photography. I also did 20 documentaries as a director, camera woman and producer. The magic word is multi-talented. I am glad that Basti and I complement each other so well. We can cover everything as a team: from 360° films to drone shots to 3D scans. We also do all the logistics, mountain guiding and financial accounting for the carriers.

Where did you get to know each other?

BASTI: We met at the climbing hall in Bad Tölz, not very spectacular. I was working there as a trainer and Ulla had no shower at home. On washday, she always came into the climbing hall.

ULLA: Basti was just about to decide if he wanted to be a pilot for Lufthansa. And I was about to decide if I wanted to move to the South Pacific for good and earn my money as a diving instructor and story teller. Before doing so, I wanted to try to live in Germany to see what it was like. I had not lived there since my highschool degree. Three months turned into six, and then Basti entered my life and the climbing season started outside. At one point, it was clear that Basti was not going to be a pilot and I was not going to be a diving instructor. Instead, we wanted to start something together. Today, Basti is responsible for the technology and logistics. And I do the creative part and the talking at presentations. You can also admire Basti when he accompanies my talks on the piano. >>

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In 2001, I heard about a volcanic eruption in Papua New Guinea. I went there straight away. Although everybody thought it was crazy of me - a woman - to go alone to Papua.



And after the wedding off to the Maldives?

BASTI: Something like that. I like high mountains and Ulla active volcanoes. So we made a compromise and went to the highest active volcano in the world. It is almost 7,000 metres high and is located in the Atacama Desert in Chile.

ULLA: At night, it was -30 degrees, so romantic sleeping bag hook-ups were rather difficult. We probably did not fulfil the classic clichés but it was awesome.

Left side: Joyful swimming against the backdrop of a volcanic eruption in Papua, brave vine jumpers on Vanuatu.

You also share your knowledge in workshops. How does that work?

ULLA: The workshops usually take place over a week in South Tyrol and consist of different modules which build on one another. The goal is to tell stories. Whether it is with landscape or portrait photography. And after six days, you put together a photo essay with the single pictures. We go for simple mountain hikes that only take one and a half hours walking time – but we are out for the whole day. Taking your time and looking at the world from a different point of view does not only improve your photography but also slows you down. The centrepiece is the review in the evening when everybody shows the best five pictures of the day.

Your photo excursions mostly take place in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Would they be interesting destinations for our readers of the Globetrotter Magazine?

ULLA: Papua is such an unusual country with extreme contrasts, unique locals, an unusual fauna and without much tourist infrastructure. Even most well-travelled people have not been there yet. In Vanuatu, we climb the active volcano and camp for five nights near the crater with a bubbling lava lake in its vent. If you want to go even closer, we abseil even deeper into the crater.

When did you first have contact with Papua New Guinea and its inhabitants?

ULLA: During my studies in environmental management in Australia, I heard about a volcanic eruption. That was in 2001. I immediately bought a plane ticket and went there. Although everybody thought I was crazy going to Papua alone as a girl. Luckily I met somebody on the plane who took me under his wing. He organised a bodyguard with a gun for me for the first three, four weeks so I could watch the volcanic eruptions safely. So I had enough time to get to know the country, the people and the culture. Once you are familiar with people's mentality and when you speak their language, it is much safer.

What is their mentality like?

ULLA: They are very honest. And emotional. The combination can get a bit dicey in combination with alcohol. But once you get used to a town and its structures, nothing will happen to you. The people have not known our society for so long. Therefore, you just need to follow some basic rules. For example, how to dress. I can walk around topless but should not show my thighs. Or my hips. That is too sexy.

Can anybody just walk up to the tribes and say: "G'day, it's me"?

ULLA: No, I do not recommend going there on your own. You need to know the country, the people and the language to be safe. There are numerous taboos that you will break without knowing it – and then you will have the biggest problems. Apart from that, you would not arrive anywhere. There are no signs and no street >>

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AKTO

Sehr leichtes Solozelt mit echten Allwetterqualitäten in unserer RED LABEL Kategorie. Wie hier an einer nomadischen Siedlung in Kirgisistan.

Jeremy Scott/jeremyscott.com.au

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names, you would not know where to go. Of course, you can book a package holiday, sit in your hotel and admire the singalong from your window. You need to leave your comfort zone to experience the real Papua. On our journeys, we stay with the people in their village and not in a hotel.

What is the deal with the mummies culture?

ULLA: When I took photos of the volcanic eruption in 2001, I read in a travel guide of the 70s that there was still a tribe that smoke their dead. I did not know what that meant. It took me several years to find the tribe. And it took some time until the tribe accepted me. I saw that they smoke their dead and mummify them in doing so. I found that very exciting because for them, death is part of life. Not like in our world where you bury the deceased in the ground, put a cross on them and that's it. There, the deceased are mummified for three months in a hut and then put on a cliff from where they can protect the village. Some of them have been doing that for 70 years.

And then you actually took part at a mummification...

ULLA: I was like a daughter to Gemtasu, the tribal chief. When Basti wanted to marry me he had to give him a pig. Gemtasu wanted to

get mummified after his death – and he wanted me to document it so the custom would not die out. Last year the time had finally arrived. He fell asleep peacefully and the procedure was about to begin. We happened to be there with a travel group, but I just could not do it. I turned on my heels and flew back home. I had a bad conscience for five days because I had made a promise to Gemtasu. Finally, it was Basti who convinced me to fly back there.

On the first day, I could not hold a camera in my hand. I arrived at the hut and saw the fire on the floor. The women started to sing their lament. I looked up from the fire and saw his feet. Then the stomach and his face. It was so peaceful. On the second day, everybody asked me for my camera. So I took photos – with tears and smoke in my eyes. The pictures were published world wide in Geo and National Geographic – Gemtasu would have liked that. >>

We were already 500 metres deep inside the volcano when a waft of heat hit us from the 1,200 degree hot lava and almost burned our faces.

There are not many places in the world where you can get as close to a volcano as on Vanuatu.



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How do you communicate in Papua and Vanuatu?

BASTI: We both speak Pidgin and Bislama. They are artificial languages and were introduced by the missionaries to make communication between the tribes possible. So they are not the most complicated languages in the world. In Papua, there are 800 different tribal dialects. Many tribal wars only happened because the people did not understand each other.

Besides Papua, active volcanoes are your second main topic. Are you always looking for danger?

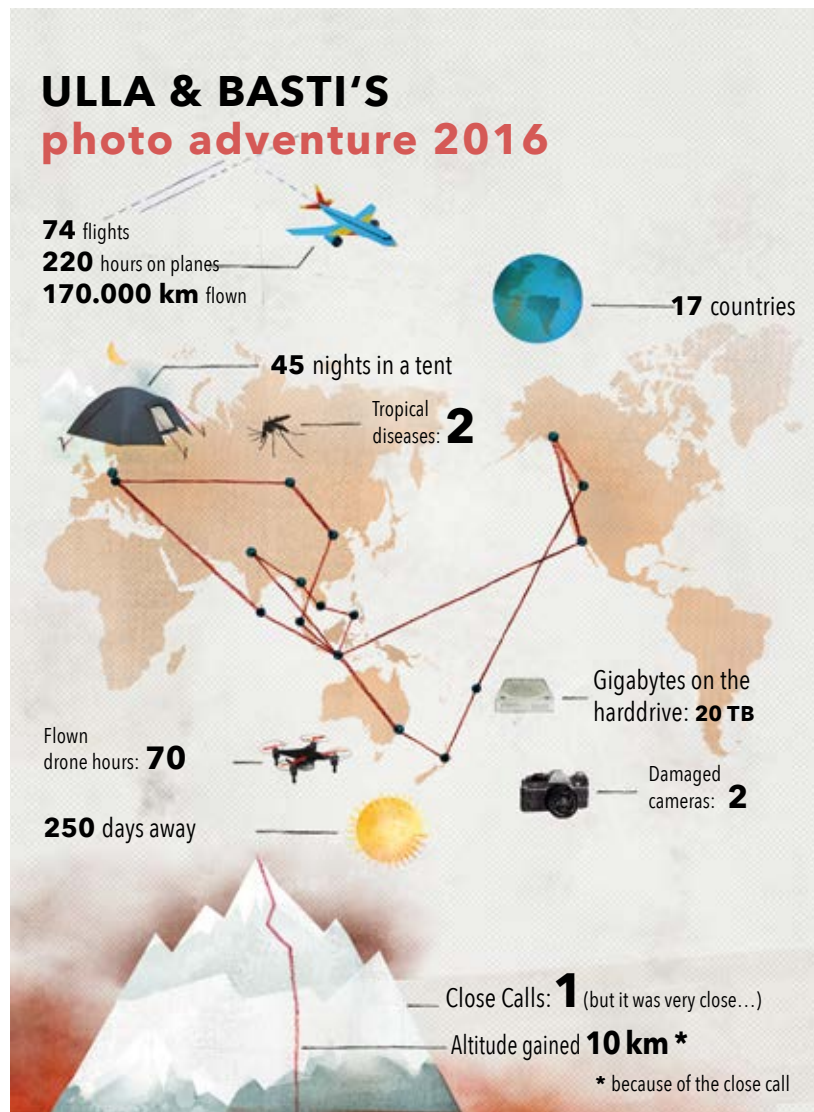
ULLA: It is dangerous but calculable. We always work closely together with volcanologists, and Basti has studied geology and me geography. And before we get very close, we always observe the volcano for a long time.

Where do you still really want to go to?

ULLA: To Erebus. That is an active volcano with a lava lake in the middle of Antarctica. You need a lot of money and the support of the Americans who run a research station there. So I hope that being a member of the Explorers Club will help me to get there one day.

Does a photographer automatically make a good camera man?

ULLA: You can learn the trade without any problem. It is much more difficult to take away the fear of cameras for the person being filmed. Only then do you get authentic



The creative part of our work only takes five percent of our time. The rest is organisation and marketing.



Currently, Ulla is working on a film about Papua chief Gemtasu.

moving images and direct quotes. That is a bit easier when you only take photos. But I must admit I like to work together with "real" camera people who have learned their craft from scratch. There are not many, though, who would follow me to the bottom of a crater in a volcano.

That is exactly what you do in your movie "Spitting Distance"...

BASTI: Our camera man Jochen Schmolli really did break out in a sweat. We were faced with the decision of abseiling down from the second to the third terrace. We were already 500 metres deep inside the volcano and wanted to abseil a further 200 metres below. Suddenly, a surge of heat from the 1,200 degree hot lava hit us and almost burned our faces. Our scientist took the temperature of the stone with his heat gun: 80 degrees. Ulla's naive assessment of the situation was that it's 90 degrees in a sauna so we should get further down...

What if the ropes had snapped?

BASTI: Well, no mountain rescue service is going to help you. In 2014, we had already had a go but only managed to get down to the second terrace. Then it started >>



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No worries, it is only artificial blood. By the way, Ulla likes to take photos of Heavy Metal concerts to relax - like here in Wacken..



raining. When it rains, rain falls through the volcanic gas and turns into acid rain. We had no idea what that would do with the ropes. We were really petrified.

Besides your niche topics, you also have a picture book and presentation about the Dolomites in your repertoire. Isn't that rather usual?

ULLA: For me, it is a topic close to my heart because it is important to open people's eyes. To show how beautiful it is on our doorstep. I did not really know the area before. So the project was very exciting. We crossed the Dolomites in several stages during the course of one year. From the Brenta group to Marmolada mountain. On touring skis, as well as climbing, biking and hiking.

Where do you go for holidays?

When we have time we love to be at home. We live south of Munich. I even like working in the garden there. And afterwards we cycle to a lake or go climbing.

BASTI: Sport is the big thing we have in common and which we can do almost everywhere - even right on our doorstep. I also like to go paragliding but in 2016 I had a real close call. In the middle of the flight, the canopy of my paraglider started disintegrating and forced me to do a rough emergency landing. The bruised ankle was totally fine considering what could have happened. Only climbing was not possible afterwards.

So you prefer climbing. What is your difficulty level?

ULLA: I should better not fall because of an injury to my knee. So Basti always takes the lead climb. We have just

mastered the Totem Pole in Australia which is a 7b+. That is a 70 metre high rock needle in the middle of the roaring Tasman Sea which looks like it could collapse any second.

Where can we see you live next?

On www.ullalohmann.com you can find all our presentation dates as well as workshops and expedition journeys - but for 2017 we are almost booked out. Also, have a look on our Facebook and Instagram accounts. <<



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