



THE RED
BULLETIN

U.S. EDITION

BEYOND THE ORDINARY

MATT DAMON
"The best revenge is living well"

THE 2,200-MILE GRIND
Ultrarunning's master takes on his biggest foe

**INSTAGRAM
YOUR OWN
ADVENTURE**

Likes and #vanlife—
meet the new
generation of outdoor
photographers



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\$4.99



A LOT TO LIKE

Instagram has spawned a new class of photographer, one that values likes and courts sponsorship. The hustle is grueling, but the payoff—for shooters like Travis Burke—can leave you cursing your day job.

Words Scott Yoriko
Photography Greg Miomske

The sun was setting, the tide was rushing in, and the van was axle-deep in the sand. Waves splashed over the bumper, hitting Travis Burke in the face as he scrambled to wrap a rusty chain around the axle, a desperate attempt to rescue his baby from drowning in the encroaching surf.

It was 2014 and Burke was one month into the biggest leap of faith of his life. He'd quit his odd jobs and invested everything he had into this kitted-out adventure mobile—his grandmother's 1994 Dodge Ram B250 Van, complete with a fridge, rooftop solar panels and a Goal Zero Yeti 1250 generator—and kicked off a road trip on his 27th birthday with \$81.10 to his name.

With close to 10 grand invested in the van and at least 20 in camera and lighting equipment, Burke scrambled helplessly as the Northern California coast threatened to swallow his dreams whole. "It was my everything and it was all just about to be completely destroyed," he says.

The local kid who'd been ripping donuts on the beach in his lifted Dodge pickup was getting impatient. Burke had begged and pleaded with the kid to help tow him out, offering up a GoPro and all the cash he had. As the kid gunned his truck at a 90-degree angle, his fat tires spinning in the sand, the van started to capsize onto its side. But Burke screamed and flailed his arms to stop the kid, who backed off the gas just in time.

Several tries later, after more of Burke's frantic digging and bawling and begging for help, the kid took a lesser angle and gunned the engine, snapping the van's axle out of alignment and lurching its wheels out of the thick, wet sand. He towed the boxy gray van a mile down the beach without stopping as Burke collapsed to his knees in the twilight, tears of relief and joy and disbelief pouring down his sandy face.

That night, the summer tide engulfed the whole beach and rose to the cliffs' edge. The van would have been completely gone by morning and Burke's career as a world-traveling, van-dwelling adventure photographer with nearly 400,000 Instagram followers would have failed, tremendously, to launch.

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Two years later, he's sitting on a picnic bench in Yosemite's Camp 4 with "Betsy the Grey Wolf" parked a few feet away. Though he's unfazed by the fearless squirrel circling his orange backpack for snacks, you wouldn't peg him for a guy who's been living in a van

THE SOCIAL PLATFORM CAREER MAKER

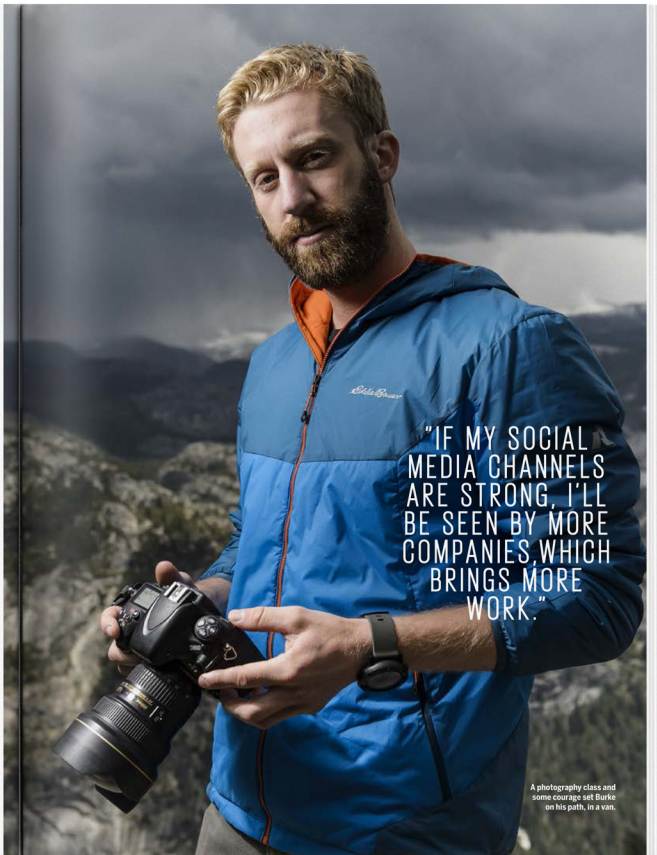
At one point, the best place for newbie photographers to showcase their work stopped being a website. We can't trace that point to a specific day, or month even, but Instagram's rise from foodie feed to showcase for top-notch photography has created careers out of thin air. The app now boasts more than 400 million users.

With the recent inevitable changes to algorithms (you do you, Facebook), getting noticed is harder. And for the photographers who've arrived, the platform demands a careful calibration between exposure and exclusivity, especially when it comes to partnering with brands. "I have the option to be selective on the jobs I take and companies I work with," says Burke, "to make sure I'm only choosing ones that represent me." A scroll through his feed shows just why those brands want to partner with him.



♥ 17,100+ likes

The clouds glowed iridescent green as we stood on the edge of an active volcano. Saturn and Mars a bright orange.



"IF MY SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS ARE STRONG, I'LL BE SEEN BY MORE COMPANIES, WHICH BRINGS MORE WORK."

A photography class and some courage set Burke on his path, in a van.

all this time. His blond hair sits in a neat side part and his beard is tame and even. He wears forest-green pants and a plaid-lined hoodie with casual boots and looks like someone you'd meet in a Seattle coffee shop who would help fix your computer. At first glance it's hard to guess why brands like GoPro, Goal Zero, Clif Bar, HydroFlask and HippoTree clothing pay him a livable salary to represent them with organic product placements in his social media feed. "I've gotten quite a few jobs and sponsors just because of my Instagram account," he says with focused, attentive eyes. "So I know that if I work hard to make my social media channels strong, I'll have the potential to be seen by more companies, which brings more work."

Since the app's debut in 2010, Instagram has gone from a place to post pictures of your lunch to a social platform connecting you to wedding party pics, selfies, bellies and never-ending streams of sunsets. With hundreds of millions of monthly users worldwide, it was only a matter of time before the power of this global audience was monetized.

From the #vanlife of Foster Huntington to the stunning landscapes of Alex Stroh and Burke, a new generation of adventure photographers is finding ways to do just that. Equal parts shooters and brand builders, they document their aspirational lifestyles to audiences in the hundreds of thousands, and brands eager to partner with them. The trick is staying ahead of the curve so your posts don't get lost in the crowd with everyone else rushing to blast their products in the faces of as many people as they can with little regard for tact and subtlety. And that's the part Travis Burke is doing so well.

He looks for tense energy in his action pics and trippy night shots from what look like other planets. They've graced the cover of Backpacker, the homepage of Yahoo! and ad campaigns of brands like Subaru. But it's not just the photos that are making his name so marketable—it's the life of the guy behind the lens.

With social media, followers get a glimpse of the man making all the pictures, whether by selfie stick or time lapse or remote trigger. Morning coffee shots with a sunrise glowing over a lush river valley garner just as much attention as a BASE jumper diving off a skyscraper or a surfer getting towed into a heavy slab.

Seeing excerpts from a lifestyle that feels within reach of their own potential captures people's attention long enough for them to engage with comments, questions and friend-tagging. That's why Burke's posts, which he only throws up every couple of days, garner anywhere from 14,000 to 30,000 likes within a few hours. Seconds after posting, the notifications on Burke's Instagram iPhone app automatically max out at 100.

For the pro photographer, the response provides the sort of reaffirming, instant feedback unique to the digital age. For his followers, his way of life on the road has them dreaming of the same, beyond their cubicle walls.

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Before he found photography, Burke was a just a SoCal skateboarder who thought nature was boring.



♥ 14,700+ likes

For two mermaids it was awesome to surround them with a form of H2O they had never experienced.



♥ 1,350+ likes

Day 7 California Coast Trip: I'm not a huge fan of big cities but surfing next to the Golden Gate Bridge was awesome.



♥ 22,800+ likes

Tonight is the peak of the annual Perseid Meteor Shower ... the biggest and best of the year. Perfect excuse to get away from the city lights and stare up at the night sky! Self portrait from Delicate Arch, Utah.



His trusty steed, a 1994 Dodge van, is where he eats, sleeps and edits photos.

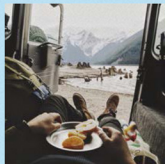
"I DON'T FEEL
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Though not a pro athlete,
Burke is just good
enough to keep up with
his subjects.



Three more adventure accounts to follow as you rethink what you're doing with your life

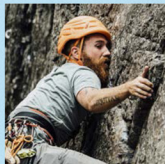
From the heights of the Andes and the Canadian Rockies to pristine barrels in Indonesia and a certain van, the three photographers below have one thing in common—instead of talking about it, they did it.



40,230 likes

Alex Strohl
Age: 26
@alexstrohl
1.3M followers

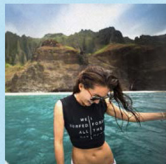
A European photographer based in Montana, Strohl was a graphic design student in Quebec City when Instagram first came out in October of 2010. He downloaded the app on day one and hasn't stopped using it since. He was one of the first accounts added to the "Suggested" user list, which commanded a large following early on. His photos, sort of a modern take on Ansel Adams, reflect his obsession with seasons, and he only works with a select few large clients, including Land Rover and Canon. "I see [Instagram] as a free billboard on the highway of my work," he says. "But I'd rather work at a local burger joint making fries than sell out my Instagram feed. Being free allows you to command a higher rate." As for the future of the platform in a digital landscape shifting by the minute, Strohl is optimistic: "People who say it's peaking are just early adopters getting tired. In other countries people don't even have it yet."



1,005 likes

Chris Brinlee Jr.
Age: 28
@chelseakauai
27K followers

A former nationally ranked college cheerleader and Navy ROTC, Brinlee filled his post-college athletic void with backpacking and soon discovered mountaineering. The cubicle walls eventually closed in on him at his advertising job in L.A., and he set out to capture the experience of being in the mountains through photography. He found himself globetrotting adventures and aligning himself with sponsors like Cotopaxi, which support humanitarian and relief efforts. "The use of social media is really important because it allows direct engagement with the followers and people who care about these types of stories," he says. "It allows a personal connection." Brinlee posts at least once a day and makes heavy use of the hashtag and sponsor shoutouts. "If getting more people to buy their products is going to elevate the globe, then I'm more than happy to lend my voice to that."



5,870 likes

Chelsea Yamase
Age: 27
@chelseakauai
198K followers

As Travis Burke's van-sharing travel companion, Yamase is often the model in his photos, as well as her own. But with a background in graphic design and print journalism, she's like a new-media Swiss Army knife. "I found that I was able to harness and do a whole wide range of things when I diversified the skill set I have to offer," she says. So when a brand wants to do a product shot for their social channels, they can use Yamase as a model in the shots, an influencer with her large following, a producer hiring photographers and organizing photo shoots, and as a blogger about the experience as part of the whole package. She keeps it authentic by aligning herself with brands with a message and product she cares about. "Society tends to define us by what we do, not necessarily our passions," she says. "I happen to do a bunch of things I'm really passionate about and somehow get paid to do them."

He'd always possessed a stream of untapped creativity, but most of his young adulthood was focused on money-making. In high school, he toiled the graveyard shift on an assembly line with a crew of ex-convicts making golf clubs. While dabbling in graphic design classes at a community college in Oceanside, California, he worked for a fire safety company that had him crawling into the ventilation systems of 24-hour Mexican joints, scraping grease traps while fighting off rats and cockroaches.

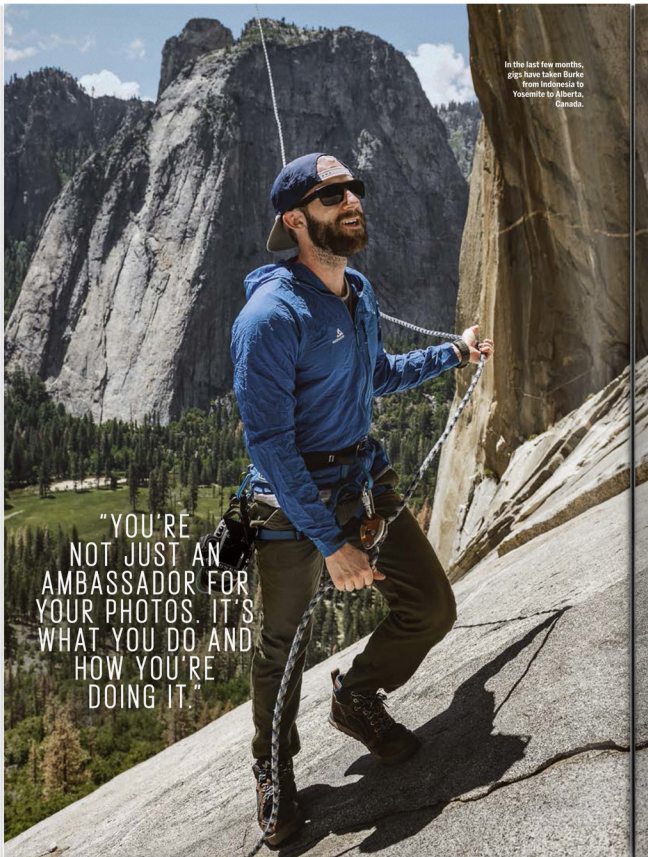
But Burke is not a man of complacency. "When I get into something, it consumes my life," he says. "I'm like a pit bull locked onto a limb." And so it was with photography, which he discovered on a reluctant trip to Yosemite in 2008 to meet his parents for a stop along their Pacific Crest Trail thru-hike. After laying in the dirt to shoot a trail of ants and staying up all night on Half Dome to capture the moon rising over the mountains, he was hooked. Photography classes came next.

"When I was in school, I wouldn't just go to class and then go home and sit on the couch and watch TV," he says. "I'd go to class, then go home and spend five hours YouTubeing and Googling how to do a night shot and then go shoot all night to practice." That kind of drive won him first place for student submissions in the 2010 Advertising Photographers of America contest for his High Dynamic Range work—a long shot for kid at a small community college up against every serious photography student in the country.

His artful style and diverse subject matter impressed former pro surfer and GrindTV boss Chris Mauro enough to give him a job as full-time staff photographer in September of 2012, but not



After photography class, Burke asked Google and YouTube additional research before going out on his own to experiment.



In the last few months, **gig** have taken Burke from Indonesia to Yosemite to Alberta, Canada.

"YOU'RE NOT JUST AN AMBASSADOR FOR YOUR PHOTOS. IT'S WHAT YOU DO AND HOW YOU'RE DOING IT."

before encouraging him to take his first 100-day road trip along the West Coast and through the Utah desert, purely for adventure and to capture the visual experience.

In 2013, when GoPro posted Burke's shot of himself walking across a log in front of a waterfall in Arizona, it became GoPro's most-liked "Photo of the Day" on their Instagram account, which blew his following up to 50,000 almost overnight.

That was a huge boost to both his social following and his confidence as a photographer, but even now, while living his dream life with his dream job in his dream van, Burke still doesn't feel like he's made it. He's his harshest critic and approaches even the most casual photo shoot with acute focus. "That's why I try and tell people that I don't feel like I was gifted or had a natural ability," he says. "I just worked my butt off and I was passionate and dedicated."

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At work in Yosemite earlier in the fall, Burke was standing on a granite slab at the base of El Capitan. Chelsea Yamase, his Hawaiian model and recent travel partner, swung out across the valley on a 130-foot rope suspended from a few bolts in an alcove high above. She dangled from the sky like a ballerina on a silk scarf as Burke fired off shots from his DSLR, which was tethered to his belt with a few feet of Prusik cord. Just five feet behind him, a college-age tourist from Delaware with running shoes and basketball shorts had his iPhone trained on the exact same scene from the exact same angle. The guy quickly uploaded his photo to Instagram and showed it to his girlfriend approvingly. Anyone standing nearby could get an almost identical shot, but just 'gramming a sweet pic isn't enough to gain a loyal following.

"I HOPE IT SHOWS PEOPLE THAT THEY SHOULDN'T SETTLE FOR SOMETHING THEY AREN'T HAPPY WITH."

"You're not just an ambassador for your photographs," Burke says later while high stepping over boulders and weaving through a sea of hikers lining up to Snapchat panoramas of a scenic overlook. "It's what you're doing and how you're doing it. I don't just want to be sitting in a pullout in a national park taking the same photos as everyone else with a telephoto lens. I want to be out there climbing up a mountain and hanging off a cliff or shooting the ocean from the surf or something that takes a little more effort and skill."

Burke is the first to admit he's not exceptional at any of his recreational pursuits, be it climbing, surfing, mountain biking, highlining or mountaineering, but he tries to maintain a level of proficiency that enables him to keep up with top athletes. He says he can only truly capture the experience if he knows what they're thinking and feeling in that moment and can predict the natural moves they're about to make.

While taking some risks and working hard got Burke to where he is, authenticity is what's keeping him there. He doesn't pull out his phone once the entire day in Yosemite to his check social media channels. Nor does he ever flood his photo captions with sponsor shoutouts and hashtags, even though sponsorship is his main

source of income enabling this freewheeling odyssey. He simply uses the products he likes and they naturally show up in the backdrop of his awesome life. "Now I get paid a big enough salary just on social media to the point where I don't even have to do editorial work," he explains. It's a big departure from the times he's spent stranded out in the desert for weeks, dead broke and waiting for checks to clear.

Another drawback? The lack of mentors. On Instagram, Burke has no photo editors to guide him, no art directors challenging him with projects that push him in different directions. He counters that with more hard work: hunkering down in his mobile office with the curtains closed, editing photos until his eyes are bloodshot, working on his craft with the long-term vision in mind.

"I want to be able to have enough clients and editorial work to the point where if social media were to fall off the planet tomorrow, I'd still be able to make a living with photography," he says. Even before the sponsors and photography jobs, Burke's original goal was to inspire other people to get outside and explore their own backyard. But he's hearing more and more from people who credit him with giving them a push to simply travel more, change career paths or pursue some kind of dream they didn't think was possible. "I hope it shows people that they shouldn't settle for something they aren't happy with," he says. "I love seeing other people chase their dreams, and I think it leads to a happier and more successful life."

Today he's hiking to the top of Upper Yosemite Falls to hang over the largest waterfall in North America and take photos two miles above the ground. Last week he was in Bali surfing and trekking through the jungle and next week he'll be deep in the backcountry of Alberta, Canada, shooting for a client. This is the life Burke has created for himself—one that allows him to go anywhere at any time, inspiring others through social media and getting paid for it. Nothing is out of reach, but only one thing is off-limits: driving in the sand. He'll never do that again.

Travis Burke, Alex Strahl and Chris Brimble Jr. take over [iredbulletin's](#) Instagram this month