

Short Takes

Dubai Hosts a Toyota Spot

by Iain Stasukevich



"On the scout day the area was filled with water, but a week later it had nearly all disappeared," says cinematographer Chuck Ozeas. "Production spent the first half of the day trucking in water to fill it back up."

The latest commercial for Toyota's Land Cruiser SUV, "King of the 4-Wheel Drive," fades in on a harsh desert landscape. Lizards and beetles scurry across the dry ground, a falcon takes flight, and suddenly the silence is shattered as the gleaming grill of a 2008 Land Cruiser pulverizes the top of a dune. Sand rockets into the air as the vehicle roars across the desert terrain like it was asphalt. From there, the car makes short work of rocky canyons, arid playas, and modern roads, making a final stop somewhere in the outskirts of Dubai City. It's impressive imagery, and it took cinematographer Chuck Ozeas and an international team of collabora-

tors two weeks in the desert to get it.

It all started when Ozeas received a call from director Yasushi Matsuura. The two had worked together before, and Matsuura needed a cinematographer for the Toyota spot. Matsuura's concept was that the vehicle "tames nature, while also being a part of it," recalls Ozeas. "We really wanted to put the car into the environment because of where we were shooting, but we also wanted to shoot a lot of the natural world around it. We shot falcons, scorpions, camels, all sorts of desert creatures. It was a great idea, and we were shooting as high-concept as we could for a car spot."

The filmmakers briefly considered shooting in California, but Dubai was eventually chosen for a number of reasons, the first being the diversity of its terrain. "All the locations we covered give [the spot] an epic feel," says Ozeas. "Incidentally, I also noticed the Land Cruiser is very popular there — every third or fourth car we passed was one! All our production vehicles were Land Cruisers, too."

Ozeas' crew on the shoot included Japanese, Irish, South Africans and Australians; as many as 17 countries were represented. "I was the only American," he recalls. "When I sat down at the first production meet-

Right: Long lenses were used to compress the Land Cruiser into the environment.

Below left: The crew sets up a 100' dolly counter at magic hour.

"The shot started at 250mm, compressing the car into the rugged mountains," Ozeas recalls. "As the dolly moves in, we zoomed back to 25mm to obtain a powerful low-angle shot of the Land Cruiser."

Below right: A bed of black rocks provided contrast that helped make the car "pop" from its environment.

"The interesting thing about the rocks was that when you turned them over they were a regular brown color," says Ozeas. "They had been burnt to black by the extreme temperatures in the region."



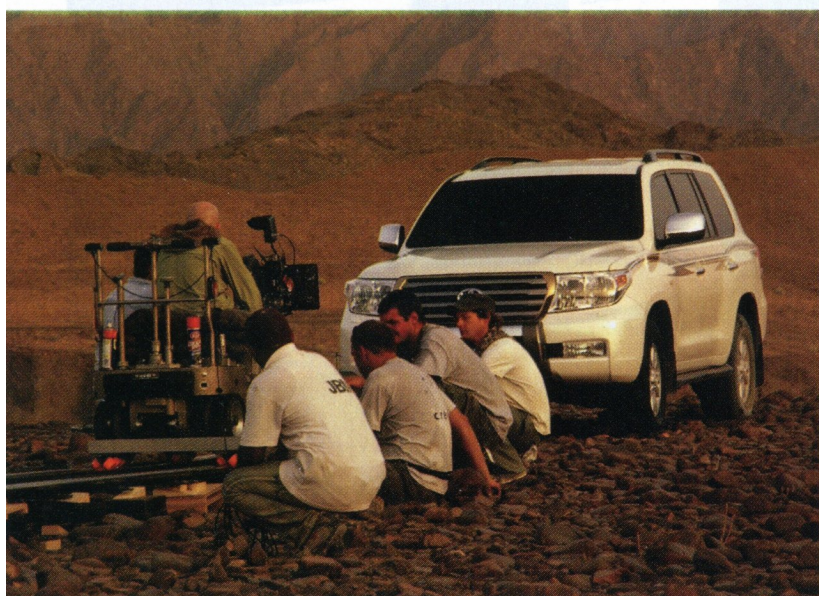
ing, I looked around the room at all the department heads and production personnel and realized that every one of the nine was from a different country."

Another concept the spot was intended to convey was the "journey" of the Land Cruiser through the desert to the city, and it was therefore important that the vehicle always be in motion. As a result, Ozeas relied exten-

sively on helicopter shots and often found himself grabbing shots from a camera car. Matsuura wanted the Land Cruiser to have an impressive presence, and Ozeas tested an array of focal lengths during his weeklong prep. It was decided he would use wide and tight lenses and very little medium-range glass. His hero lens for the car was a 20mm Zeiss Ultra Prime, which "gave the car a powerful look," and he

used longer lenses to compress the car against the mountains and dunes in the background.

He shot the spot on two Kodak Vision2 stocks, 50D 5201 for morning and early afternoon, and 250D 5205 for late afternoon and evening, and made extensive use of Mitchell diffusion on the lens. "I truly appreciate the classic softening quality of Mitchell," he notes. "It beautifully softens the





Left to right: Key grip Ian "Tigger" Mussell, director Yasushi Matsuura, B-camera 1st AC George Tutunjian, Ozeas, and best boy grip Boris Olomi.

contrast and sharpness inherent in both the Ultra Primes and 5201."

Ozeas says the shoot was the most physically challenging one he's had in his 10 years as a commercial cinematographer, thanks to daytime temperatures that were often as high as 128°, remote locales, and

constantly blowing sand. He notes his crew's hard work and professionalism helped him get through the experience, and he reserves special praise for key grip Ian Mussell. Film productions in Dubai use the British system of shooting, with the gaffer and electricians handling the lamps and control of the

light, and the grips handling dollies, cranes and other devices for camera moves. "So much of what we were doing relied on the work of our grips," says Ozeas. "Ian was my savior, and he showed me the ropes of Dubai."

One shot called for the Land Cruiser to trundle across a rocky lakebed at the bottom of a deep, narrow canyon. The location, Wadi ("riverbed"), was 90 minutes outside Dubai City, and it took the crew almost an hour to take the equipment to the bottom of the canyon in a piecemeal fashion. With barely more than 8' of space in which to fit both the car and a dolly-mounted camera, Ozeas and Mussell constructed a makeshift skateboard dolly using a high hat, skateboard wheels and speed rail. To get the shot, Ozeas operated the camera with his back up against the canyon wall. "The location was worth the effort," he says. "The ground is covered with black rocks, which really popped the car out from its background."

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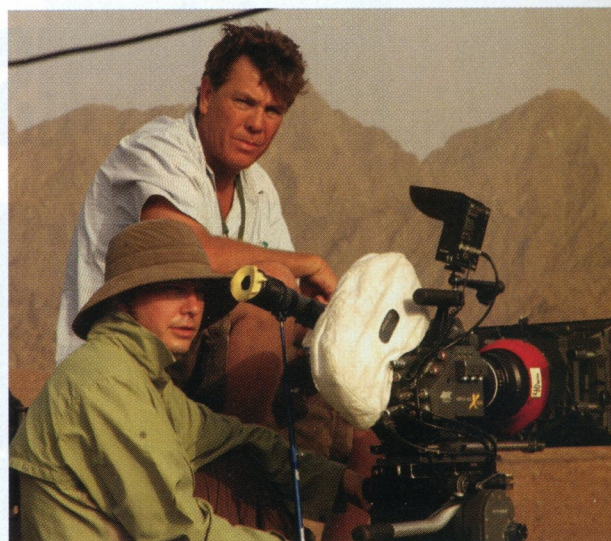
For the sequence of the Land Cruiser breaking through the dune, the setup consisted of two Arri 35-III "crash cams" and two Arri 435 Xtremes. Matsuura wanted to get as much coverage as possible from the few takes time would allow, and as it turned out, this was the only time all four cameras rented by the production were in play at the same time. Location scouts found a suitable dune with a natural ramp on one side that was long enough for the vehicle to accelerate up, and a bank of air cannons was buried in the sand where the car was supposed crash through. At the moment of impact, they fired off a dramatic explosion, shooting sand into the air all around the vehicle. "The sand there is almost like dust — completely unlike the sand on a California beach," notes Ozeas.

Of his camera crew, headed by 1st AC Richard Latham, the cinematographer says, "I was surprised at how well they dealt with the heat. They

shoot there all the time, so they're used to it. When it came to change film and change lenses, they were incredibly relaxed around all the blowing sand."

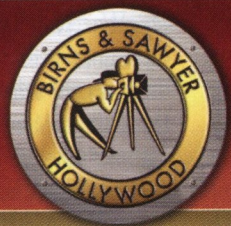
For hard road sequences, basic camera cars were used. A few dune shots were actually close enough to roads to make use of a regular camera car. The rest of the deep desert coverage required an ATV camera mount.

Cameras and equipment were procured locally from Cinequip through Phoenix Films, one of Dubai's production companies. Ozeas notes that all the film work in Dubai is filtered through private organizations. For instance, if a film worker wants to enter the country for a production job, it has to be under the auspices of company sponsorship. This policy fosters Dubai's rapidly expanding film-production industry by protecting the jobs of the filmmakers who are already there and ensures that the production companies only hire the workers they need as new jobs come along.



Ozeas (in hat) with 1st AC Richard Latham.

Ozeas found the availability of equipment was somewhat limited, and the production ended up importing a lot of gear, including lenses and a stabilized head. "The industry, like the country, is expanding fast, however," he observes. "All the equipment we needed on our shoot will probably be available there next year." ■



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