

Adventure photographer James Kay's career is defined by his tenacity and drive to bypass the ordinary and take the extra steps to get something extraordinary

*Text And Photography
By James Kay*

Whatever It Takes

I can still recall the soft pillows of clouds drifting across the face of the Teton Range as I drove north to meet a client at Jackson Lake Lodge in Grand Teton National Park many years ago. As I approached Oxbow Bend, that iconic spot along the Snake River, I realized something wonderful was about to happen. I pulled over, jumped out of my car and quickly set up my tripod at the edge of the water just as the setting sun was beginning to illuminate the undersides of the clouds. Within five minutes, I had captured one of the most breathtaking sunsets I had ever seen. Two minutes later, I was back in my car, heading to my meeting at the lodge.

"Wow, that was so easy," I remember thinking as I zipped up my camera pack. "I didn't even break a sweat." In my experience, simply stumbling across great images doesn't happen very often. The more normal situation finds me hauling gear up mountains before sunrise or bushwhacking through desert canyons with sweat dripping into my eyes as I curse the weather conditions for not cooperating with my well-laid plans.

This latter scenario just so happens to be the subject of this article—the good, the bad and the ugly of what's sometimes required to return home with a truly unique and dramatic image. While the amount of physical effort isn't always



← Lake Of The Hanging Glacier, British Columbia

As part of my usual pre-trip-planning process, I often scour topographical maps, looking for good photographic vantage points. As I perused the maps surrounding this high-mountain lake, I noticed a glacier-draped summit beside it that looked like an ideal spot to set up a tripod. Getting there involved a 16-hour drive to the town of Invermere followed by a 1.5-hour drive along a dusty gravel road deep into the Purcell Mountains. The road ended at a nondescript pullout with a small battered sign announcing the trailhead. This was the plan: Backpack 2,300 vertical feet along a steep trail to the lake, set up a base camp for two or three nights, climb the peak, get the shot and hoof it back down.

Three strenuous hours later, after pitching camp at the edge of the lake, the real work would begin. Getting to the top of that peak I saw on the map would require bushwhacking through a tangle of trees while scrambling over, around and under large boulders at the base of the mountain. Above the trees, we'd need ice axes and crampons to ascend the glacier to the summit. Setting out at first light the next morning, we shouldered our packs and began the climb. Several hours later, high above the lake, I located a spot on an exposed ridge that provided the vantage point I was after. It was glorious. Back at camp the next morning, we awoke to thick smoky skies from a huge forest fire to the west. I couldn't believe my good fortune. After everything it took to get this shot, if we had arrived just one day later, I would have missed it.

Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 24-105mm lens, Gitzo 1228 carbon-fiber tripod, Acratech Ultimate ballhead

proportional to the photographic result, it often seems that a certain quota of dues needs to be paid before I'm "allowed" to capture a worthy image. I often recall Thomas Edison's quote: "Success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration."

The way I look at it, getting off the beaten path is fundamental to my photography, so the effort required simply comes with the territory. When I do occasionally stumble across a great shot with little effort, as I did at Oxbow Bend, I feel like I'm cheating, as though I've somehow escaped the necessary self-flagellation rituals required by some strict monastic order of photographers. But, hey, suffering can be fun! Just ask my friends who occasionally accompany me, but don't necessarily believe what they tell you. Rest assured, at least, I enjoy it.

Escalante Slot Canyon, Utah →

When two friends and I decided to descend this canyon on the east side of the Escalante River, we knew it was going to be an ordeal. Nobody we knew in the canyoneering community had been down it, and other canyons in the vicinity that we had already explored were some of the most challenging we had ever encountered. Simply getting to its headwaters required finding a route through the protective rim of Wingate Sandstone, which fortifies the high mesa from which it drains. Due to the arduous nature of descending these narrow, water-filled slot canyons, a large backpack is out of the question. All camera, climbing and camping gear needs to be kept to a bare minimum. In place of a sleeping bag,

I used a thin foil-coated reflective blanket. My tent was replaced with a bivouac sac. The stove remained home along with my tripod. My camera pack, which I stuffed into an abrasion-resistant SealLine Black Canyon dry bag, contained only one 35mm body and one 24mm lens. My backpack was lined with another dry bag to protect the rest of my gear.

We spent two difficult days negotiating canyons so narrow we had to remove our packs and turn sideways to squeeze through. We lived in our wet suits to protect our bodies from abrasion and to keep warm in the icy pools. At night, our wet suits doubled as sleeping pads. Without a tripod and no image-stabilizing lens, I handheld this shot at 1/8 sec., with my elbows resting on my knees.

Nikon N90S, Nikkor 24mm lens, Fujichrome Velvia





← Amethyst Lake, Jasper National Park, Alberta

This was the image that nearly got away. It turned out to be the only decent photograph I captured during a four-day backpacking trip into the Canadian Rockies. While the physical effort was only moderate, the grim sky conditions made it particularly frustrating. A dreary stretch of cloudy weather settled in soon after I began my 12-mile backpack to Amethyst Lake. I scheduled three nights at a campsite near the lake's eastern shore in hopes that this would give me a window of opportunity for at least one good sunrise on The Ramparts, a 3,000-foot rock wall that leaps from the lake's western shore. Regardless of the dismal skies that greeted me each morning, I got up before dawn to get into position just in case there was a break in the clouds.

Finally, on my last morning, the clouds were beginning to thin out overhead, but it looked just as thick to the east as the previous two mornings. I set up my tripod anyway, and just as I was about to give up, the peaks began to glow from a jagged beam of sunlight that pierced a small unseen hole in the clouds to the east. I only had enough time to shoot three frames before the hole closed up and the light beam disappeared. The clouds thickened and lowered and that turned out to be the only direct sun I saw during the four days. As I look back, I recall saving lots of money on film and sunscreen on that trip.

Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm lens, Fujichrome Velvia, Bogen 3021 tripod

Petzl TIKKA XP²

Choose between a long-distance focused beam and a wide flood beam when wearing the Petzl TIKKA XP². The headlamp can deliver both, thanks to a flip-up wide-angle lens. When the lens is up and covering the light source, the beam is diffused. When it's down, the light beam is more focused and travels farther. A high-output white LED delivers a maximum 60 lumens, and a red LED provides lighting to preserve night vision or becomes a blinking light for increased safety. The light shines up to about 196 feet and, when used in economic mode, can run for 160 hours. The unit is light and compact thanks to a single-compartment design for holding the LEDs and batteries. Estimated Street Price: \$54. **Contact:** Petzl, www.petzl.com.



GoLite Quest

If you're going camping for several days, the GoLite Quest pack is comfortable, functional and spacious. Features include contoured, padded shoulder straps, a sternum strap with whistle buckle and an air-channel back panel that hugs your back. The pack weighs just more than three pounds and delivers a volume of more than 70 liters. Adjustable load-lifter straps, a top compression strap and a size-specific, anatomically molded hip belt help stabilize the load. A large front pocket holds a rain jacket, water filter and snacks. The pack is made with recycled ripstop nylon for durability and less weight. Estimated Street Price: \$175. **Contact:** GoLite, (888) 546-5483 www.golite.com.



Cabela's Deluxe Tent Cot

Get a good night's sleep in the Cabela's Deluxe Tent Cot, which comes in single and double models. A heavy-duty, powder-coated steel frame supports the cot, and the body is made from 70-denier, 190T nylon taffeta with a 600-denier polyester floor. A full-coverage fly is included with a 1500mm waterproof-rated coating, meaning you stay dry no matter what. A rain-gutter system on the fly channels water off and away from zippers, and seams are fully taped for maximum protection. Estimated Street Price: \$189. **Contact:** Cabela's, (800) 237-4444, www.cabelas.com.

DeLorme Earthmate PN-60w

Stay connected and moving in the right direction using the DeLorme Earthmate PN-60w with SPOT Satellite Communicator. This handheld GPS with Type & Send outbound text messaging allows you to keep in contact with friends, family and emergency services, from locations around the world. Even if you go out of cell phone range, you can still send text messages to cell phones, e-mail addresses and social-networking sites from the most remote locations. Estimated Street Price: \$549. **Contact:** DeLorme, (800) 561-5105, www.delorme.com.



James Kay's Outdoor Gear



MSR Reactor Stove

For easy camp cooking, the MSR Reactor is a fast-boiling, fuel-efficient stove designed to work in the most challenging outdoor environments. The Reactor's radiant burner is enclosed by a heat exchanger, which helps it to perform in windy conditions, while an advanced pressure regulator provides optimal heat output over the life of each fuel canister.

One liter of water boils in just three minutes. A collapsible handle locks the unique see-through lid in place for safe and easy transport. Estimated Street Price: \$159. **Contact:** Cascade Designs, (206) 505-9500, www.cascadedesigns.com.

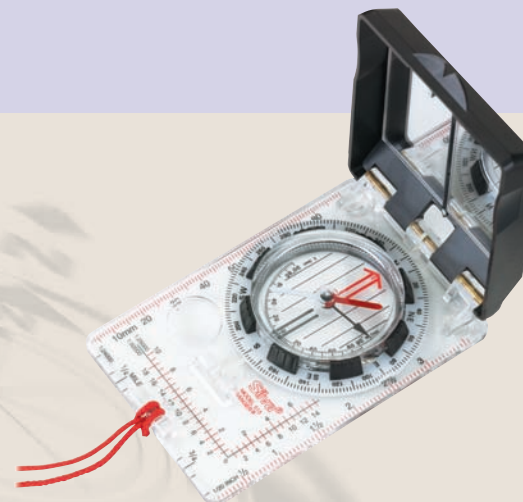


MSR E-Bivy

When the weather takes a turn, stay dry in the MSR E-Bivy, which weighs just nine ounces and packs to the size of a soda can. A half-length zipper provides venting and easy exits. A short overlap shelters the zipper from moisture, so you don't get soaked during the night. The emergency shelter can be used as protection for your sleeping bag under a tarp or for extra warmth. The coated and fully waterproof floor keeps you dry, even on wet ground, and slows heat loss. Estimated Street Price: \$79. **Contact:** Cascade Designs, (206) 505-9500, www.cascadedesigns.com.

NEMO Gogo

The NEMO Gogo is a one-person bivy and tent with inflatable poles that won't break or weigh down your pack. The Gogo has an adjustable vestibule called the ExoFly, which allows you to keep all of your gear inside and increase the floor space of the bivy, or you can unclip the body from the attached vestibule and have a separate space for storing gear, preparing food and more. The Gogo weighs 1.9 pounds and provides 19 square feet of room; the vestibule is five square feet. Estimated Street Price: \$289. **Contact:** NEMO, (800) 997-9301, www.nemoequipment.com.



Silva Ranger 515 CL

Keep your sense of direction sharp with the Silva Ranger 515 CL compass. It has a bright, easy-to-read bezel (compass dial), adjustable declination and a split-sighting mirror for pinpoint accuracy when navigating over distant landmarks. There are three scales for quick, easy plotting with any topographic map. A clinometer lets you measure angles of inclination. The compass weighs just 2.4 ounces. Estimated Street Price: \$54. **Contact:** Silva, (800) 572-8822, www.silvacompass.com.



← Mount Assiniboine, British Columbia/Alberta

Mount Assiniboine has been dubbed the “Matterhorn of the Canadian Rockies.” Surrounded by huge glacial lakes and accessed by a network of excellent trails, I decided this was the perfect venue for a combo flat-water kayaking/backpacking trip. The plan involved loading our kayaks with gear and paddling eight miles to the head of Spray Lakes Reservoir where the four of us would transfer everything to our backpacks before stashing our boats in the woods. After that, we’d backpack five miles to our first camp at Marvel Lake, which turned out to be a great spot if you like bogs and mosquitoes. I brought my 6x7 camera body along with four bulky lenses for the landscape photos, plus a fanny pack full of 35mm gear for the sports/people shots. I also brought my very stable, but large, Manfrotto 3021 tripod. Looking back now, I attribute my decision to bring this huge pile of gear to temporary insanity. Add food and clothing for a seven-day trip, and you can begin to imagine what my pack looked like. Do you remember that guy on the cover of Led Zeppelin’s fourth album, toiling under that huge load of sticks? That was me, except for the beard.

It was brutal. Covered in mosquito welts and bending under my load the next morning, I slogged eight miles to the Lake Magog campground beneath Mount Assiniboine. Ah...the hard work was finally over. From there it was an easy two-mile hike up the ridge where I captured this shot. As soon as I returned from that trip, I ordered my first carbon-fiber tripod. Oh, I should probably mention one thing. If you prefer, you could just helicopter in to Lake Magog and simply skip through fields of wildflowers to the top of the ridge for this shot. But that, of course, would be cheating.

Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm lens, Fujichrome Velvia, Manfrotto 3021 tripod

James Kay's Outdoor Gear



Katadyn MyBottle Microfilter

Having clean water is essential when spending time outdoors. The MyBottle Microfilter from Katadyn allows you to have clean water wherever you roam. Simply fill MyBottle with water, and the 0.3 micron pleated glass fiber microfilter goes to work with carbon-reducing chemicals to make water safe and taste better. The compact, lightweight bottle is easy to use and meets EPA standards for removing bacteria. It has a flip-up mouthpiece/straw for convenience and a carry loop to attach it to your pack. Estimated Street Price: \$39. **Contact:** Katadyn, (800) 755-6701, www.katadyn.com.



Mountain Hardwear Ultralamina 15

Stay warm all night in the Mountain Hardwear Ultralamina 15° F sleeping bag. With a mummy shape, the bag compresses down nicely to take up minimal space. Thermic Micro fill helps keep the inside warm and the structure of the bag durable. With dual-entry half-zippers, you can sit up and read or cook while staying warm. The zippers unzip down to your waste to save weight. A shoulder-level internal zippered pocket keeps eyeglasses, flashlights and other small items handy. Estimated Street Price: \$215. **Contact:** Mountain Hardwear, (800) 953-8375, www.mountainhardwear.com.

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↑ **Sandstone Wave, Utah**

Like spines on a lizard's back, the high, jagged sandstone reef known as The Cockscomb ripples across the landscape of southern Utah for more than 30 miles from the Paria Canyons in the north to the remarkable formations of Coyote Buttes across the Arizona border to the south. I've spent countless hours scrambling over its shattered ridgeline and recently came across this breaking wave of sandstone.

Perched high on a ridge crest where the first rays of morning light illuminate it, the question was logistical. Located about two miles from the nearest car camp and surrounded by steep, crumbling sandstone bluffs, I could either load up a backpack with overnight gear and camp beside it or get up before dawn at my car camp and hike in with a lighter day-pack. I decided to negotiate the steep, unstable terrain with a light pack and a headlamp.

On my first predawn attempt, the view to the east was blocked so I couldn't see a narrow band of clouds obscuring the eastern horizon until I had climbed to the top of the ridge. It took two more predawn attempts before a cloud-free horizon allowed me to capture this shot.

Pentax 67, Pentax 45mm lens, Fujichrome Velvia, Gitzo 1228 carbon-fiber tripod, Acratech Ultimate ballhead

James Kay's Outdoor Gear



Mammut Lucido TR1

Keep sight of the trail when the sunlight fades using the Mammut Lucido TR1 headlamp. The high-quality Total Reflex Optics lens focuses light efficiently and evenly across your field of vision, enhancing peripheral vision. Four LEDs are arranged with dispersion angles designed to match your peripheral vision, reducing dark spots. High and low settings offer 65 and 39 feet of illumination, respectively, with up to 60 hours of battery life on low. The lamp weighs just 2.5 ounces. Estimated Street Price: \$34. **Contact:** Mammut Sports Group, (802) 985-5056, www.mammut.ch.

Leatherman Freestyle Multi-Tool

Keep a toolbox of the essentials in your pocket with the Leatherman Freestyle Multi-Tool. You can easily access the blade without revealing the rest of the tools, which include needle-nose and regular pliers, as well as wire cutters. When closed, the Multi-Tool measures 3.45 inches and weighs 4.5 ounces. The 420HC stainless-steel knife blade opens easily with one hand and locks into the open position. The blade features a partially serrated edge. Estimated Street Price: \$44. **Contact:** Leatherman, www.leatherman.com.



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