

The storm chaser

Explorer/ adventurer and a man with balls made of steel, George Kourounis on storm chasing, common sense and nature





Common sense says you haul ass when you see a storm. What makes you do the opposite?

I get that a lot. It's funny because I find myself being the only person heading into an area when everyone is running in the opposite direction. At least, traffic's not a problem! I have a deep passion for documenting weather, but not just any weather. I prefer the nastiest, most dangerous weather on the planet. I'm truly in my element when there is a tornado on the ground or in the eye of a hurricane. It really makes you feel small when you feel nature's incredible power firsthand. The bonus is that I get to share what I've seen with the world through my TV series and website. That way, people feel like they're riding along with me, but they get to keep their hair dry and not worry about all the flying debris.

So how do you roll? Like, you hear of a storm on the telly and you're off?

If I wait for a storm to be announced on television, it's too late. Most of the time, I need to be in position before the storms form. When I'm chasing tornadoes across central United States, I have to try and be in position hours before there are any storms at all. Sometimes I drive for hours under blue skies before things start to get crazy. It's amazing to see a storm start off as a small, puffy cloud then quickly grow to a monster that is twice the height of Mount Everest in less than an hour.

Cool. So which places on the planet have you hunted 'em down?

I chase storms and other forces of nature all over the world. I've chased weather on all seven continents, including Antarctica. In total, I think I've been to about 35 countries. My approach is based on what I'm going after. If it is a hurricane in the Caribbean, I have to try and fly in to some small island before the airports all close, but if you fly out too early, then the storm could change course and then you are stuck with nothing!

Sometimes, I'll locate myself where the seasonal weather gives the best chances for what I'm trying to capture. I was chasing storms in the Australian Outback a few years ago and I timed it so that I was there for a few weeks during the peak of storm season. Of course, Mother Nature is always in charge and she can be a cruel mistress. Sometimes you spend a lot of time and money and she doesn't deliver.

So are there any rules or codes that the Storm Chasers follow?

The vast majority of storm chasers are not professionals. Most are people who

love severe weather and spend some vacation time trying to find tornadoes. I'm one of only a small handful of people who do it full time. We self-regulate as best we can. We try to be courteous to each other and if we come across someone in a disaster zone who needs help, we call off the chase right there to help them out. We also send our storm reports to the National Weather Service and these reports can help them issue tornado warnings to towns that are in the path of the oncoming storm.

Is it okay with the authorities if one chases storms?

A lot of the time when I'm tornado chasing, the cops are mostly interested in asking me what's going on as I know more about the situation than they do. As long as I watch my speed and stay out of the way, there is no problem. During a hurricane chase, things get complicated because there are evacuations and curfews in place. One of my goals in life is to remain out of foreign prisons although that has never been a problem!

Mostly, the cops have been great. When I was in Jamaica for hurricane Dean, a group of cops stopped us to welcome us to Jamaica. They posed for pictures while the waves were crashing against the shoreline only a few meters away. That was an odd moment.

Any encounter with the authorities is always an odd one! Anyway what's the usual feeling when you see a big lively one banging hard all across the earth?

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There's obviously a great deal of excitement, but I always have to remember that somebody could be having the worst day of their life, or possibly the last day of their life so there are mixed feelings for sure. Whether I'm there to document these storms or not, they are going to happen anyway and if I can help someone along the way or assist in getting the warning out, all the better.

Ever had a cow, a fence or other random but interesting storm debris flung at you?

A lot of people ask me if I've seen flying cows, but no, although I've seen what happens to cows that have been flying and it is not like what you see in the movies. It's not pretty. A few years ago, I was chasing a tornado at night with a friend in Oklahoma when all sorts of debris started flying through the air beside me. I was inside the tornado and it had picked up large pieces of wood and metal, trash bins and a variety of other objects and I was trying my best to get out of the way. I had to drive behind a brick building to escape while the electrical transformers on the poles beside us were exploding. My heart was racing, but we were alive. After we double checked that we were okay, we kept on chasing until we almost drove into it a second time along the highway.

Ever been right in the storm? What's the closest you got to a storm and had your "This is it. Goodbye world!" moment?

Oh sure, I think I've used up at least seven of my nine lives over the years. I



can think of numerous times where I've had tornadoes cross the road right in front of me, sometimes at night or in heavy rain when visibility is almost zero. Your heart starts pounding and you begin to wonder what could've happened if you had been driving just a little bit faster.

Lightning really can scare you too. I've had lightning bolts hit so close to me that I've felt the heat on the side of my face. I almost jumped out of my skin and since I spend a lot of time outside in thunderstorms standing next to a metal tripod, I become a pretty good target. The thing with lightning is that you'll never hear the one that hits you.

The power of lightning is almost unimaginable. A big lightning bolt can be over 100 million volts and burn five times hotter than the surface of the sun!

Ouch! Anyway, what are your favourite type of storms; cyclones, tornadoes, hurricanes or hailstorms?

I love them all, but each kind of storm has its own personality. With hurricanes, you have to be inside the storm, feeling the rain, wind and waves, but with a tornado, you want to be on the outside, looking in. Getting too close to those and you could be in big trouble.

I recently spent several weeks chasing hailstorms in the U.S. and I really enjoyed it more than I thought I would. I did bash up my vehicle and I smashed out my windshield, but the force that these chunks of ice come down with is unreal. I had countless bruises on my shoulders and back to prove it. Wisely, I was wearing a helmet during the worst of it.

Wow! And what about the most fearsome storm you ever encountered?

I remember being in Gulfport, Mississippi the night before hurricane Katrina made a landfall and I knew that it was going to be really, really bad. I wasn't sure if the building I was in was going to survive or not and the warnings coming from the National Weather Service sounded like the end of the world. After the storm, the news media really focussed on what happened in New Orleans but where I was in Mississippi is where the strongest part of the storm hit. New Orleans got the weak side of the hurricane.

I remember looking at the giant floating casino they have in Gulfport. Before the storm, it was to my south. After the storm, it had been lifted up by the waves and dropped into its own parking lot. During the peak of the storm, the debris was flying around like crazy. Small pebbles felt like bullets and I had to crawl across the ground to move around. If I would've been

standing, I probably would've been blown away like a kite. Scary stuff.

What about your favourite storm movie?

I suppose that *Twister* was an influential movie for me. At the time it came out, I found it fascinating but now I just watch it because I like to point out all the errors and mistakes they made! Storm chasing is usually not like it is portrayed in the movies, we spend so much time driving, then sitting around, then driving some more. No audience wants to watch that, so they have to compress the action down to a level that is totally beyond reality.

There have been a few days in my career that have felt like I was in a movie though. I remember my last chase day of 2004. One storm we were following produced ten tornadoes in about three hours! Sometimes there were two on the ground at the same time. I didn't know where to point my camera. Those moments are rare, but that is the kind of experience that lends the tiniest bit of credibility to the Hollywood portrayal of storm chasing.

Got it. So what's playing in the car when you're out chasing one?

Most of my time is spent driving across vast empty spaces on boring highways, so music is an essential part of storm chasing. Loud rock music with a good beat always gets me pumped up as well

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as music with a weather theme like *Couldn't Stand the Weather* by Stevie Ray Vaughan or *Thunderstruck* by AC/DC.

When we're actually in pursuit of a storm, we usually listen to the weather radio or one of the other VHF radios in the truck because we're trying to get the most up to date weather information possible. When I have my video camera rolling, the music is certainly off because I want to be sure that I'm recording the raw power of the wind which sounds so incredible when it's really howling!

Neat. So what is that one message that you take back from all the destruction that follows?

The difference between what differentiates a natural phenomenon from a natural disaster is something that I think about a lot. If a tornado touches down in an empty field or a hurricane hits an uninhabited island, then it is considered a natural phenomenon, a force of nature. As soon as the event impacts a population of people, only then does it become a natural disaster. We are the difference. When you look at it like this, there's really no such thing as a natural disaster unless we put ourselves in the path.

No matter where you live, you're going to have some natural forces to contend with and I find it shocking how poorly prepared most populations are. If you live along a coastline, then you know that a hurricane could come along and sweep away your home. If you live in a village at the base of a mountain, an avalanche could come crashing down any time there is a heavy snowfall. No matter where you live, there is some force of nature that could potentially become a disaster. People say that they had no warning, well consider this your warning. The time to make preparations for disaster is now, long before it happens.

You were in Mumbai during 26th July 2005 too, right? How was that experience like?

I was in India filming an episode of *Angry Planet* in 2005 and we were focussing on the monsoon season rains. We'd had great luck in Assam with heavy rains and flooding, but unfortunately, several bridges had been washed away by the water so the areas was chaotic in places. We relocated to Mumbai for a few days and as luck would have it, the city was drenched in 200mm of rain in 24 hours that was combined with a very high tide. Much of the city was under water but it gave me a great opportunity to document how such a large city is able to cope



with this kind of incident.

We filmed so much material in India that I'm sure at some point we could make another program just with the footage that never got used.

We got fucked in that one! How do you see nature after experiencing the lethal fury - a God like force we need to bow down to like how the pagans did. Or do we fight back with all the advanced technology that we have?

I don't see nature as either a God force or something to be battled. We and every other living thing on Earth are residents of this planet and it is full of wondrous, beautiful, dangerous forces. We need to be in tune with these forces and learn how to cope when the weather gets wild. We are a part of nature but each year we get more and more disconnected from it. I try to show people, through my TV series and photographs, what nature is capable of doing. People are still fascinated by the worst of the worst.

Is there any money to be made in doing what you do? Or is it another crazy, non-money making hobby like collecting bird feathers?

The vast majority of storm chasers spend a lot of money to chase and

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never make any money from it. Very few of us can make a living at it and I've been very fortunate that I've been doing this full time for the past few years. For me it started off as a hobby, and then it grew more and more until I was able to call it a career.

Nice! Do you have any chaser buddies whom you come across while chasing the same storm?

It really amazes me how I can be pulling into a gas station in some small town in Nebraska and meet up with friends from all around the world. It happens so many times, that it's not even strange anymore. We're all basically making the same forecast and targeting the same storms, so it's inevitable that I'm going to run into people I know. It happens all the time. I'll see friends from Europe, Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand... you name it!

What else do you do apart from chasing storms?

Chasing storms is just one facet of what I do. I also climb into erupting volcanoes, descend into extreme caves and caverns of all kinds and been diving with great white sharks. I've been suspended above a violently boiling lake by ropes in the Caribbean and I've also taken a small rubber raft out onto the world's largest lake of sulphuric acid in Indonesia.

I'm a total nature junkie, especially the extremes of nature. We once chartered a boat in Tonga and went out to a brand new island that had just erupted out of the sea. I had to swim ashore because the seas were too rough to bring the boat in. This island was so new that the ground was still warm in places.

I'm also very lucky that I have a wife who understands my adventures. In fact, she's so cool that we even got married on the crater's edge of an exploding volcano in the South Pacific! That was quite an incredible ceremony, as we popped the champagne cork, the volcano blasted out a cloud of ash and lava!

To see photos and video clips from George's adventures, go to www.stormchaser.ca