

WHEREVER THE WIND BLOWS IS WHERE STORM CHASER
thunderstruck GEORGE KOUROUNIS GOES
 BY JEN HORSEY

WHILE MOST PEOPLE ARE COWERING IN THEIR BASEMENTS, GEORGE KOUROUNIS IS OUT IN THE FIELD, LITERALLY. A HUMAN LIGHTNING ROD WITH HIS CAMERA ALWAYS AT THE READY, KOUROUNIS IS ONE OF ONLY ABOUT 10 hardcore Canadian storm chasers. Every year, he takes six weeks off from his day-job as a sound engineer to simply pick up and follow the weather. From a string of tornadoes that almost killed him one spring evening in Oklahoma, to massive Hurricane Isabel, which ripped into the East Coast last September, the 33-year-old maniac has been at the heart of some of the worst that nature has had to offer. **REV** asks Kourounis about a life of silver linings.

What is it about a storm that intrigues you so much? It's amazing watching Mother Nature make something out of nothing. You can go from a clear blue sky to a thunderstorm twice the height of Mount Everest in under an hour. Watching the storm take shape is a real spectacle of nature. Each one has its own personality. They're kind of like giant snowflakes. **Violent, deadly snowflakes.** OK, so they're not really like snowflakes, but they each have their own character and their own unique disposition. They have different weapons they use against you – some have a lot of lightning, some have a lot of hail. **You have a reputation even among other chasers for getting close to ferocious weather. Do you ever get too close?** Last year in May this one storm was out to get us. We were in a suburb of Oklahoma City at night and there was a tornado about to plow through the town. It turns out the tornado was a little closer to us than we thought. We knew we were very close – we like to get close. But because it was so dark, we couldn't see exactly what was going on and the next thing we knew, we were in it, right on the edge of the tornado. **You knew because you could see it, in the dark?** No, the big problem at night is that you can't see anything. You have to wait for the lightning bolts – only then can you see this giant black wedge coming for you, illuminated in the flash. This night,

CHARGE OF THE LIGHTNING BRIGADE: this bolt struck a quarter-mile away from Kourounis; seconds later, another one hit the cellular tower in the foreground (Toronto, summer 2003)

"THERE ARE NO STORMS BIGGER THAN A HURRICANE. NOW THAT I'VE EXPERIENCED A CATEGORY TWO, I CAN'T WAIT TO EXPERIENCE A CATEGORY THREE OR FOUR. CATEGORY FIVE WORRIES ME A BIT, ALTHOUGH I THINK I'D GO IF I HAD A CHANCE... I KNOW IT'S NOT THE SAFEST THING TO DO, BUT IT'S NOT A HOBBY – IT'S A LIFESTYLE. I CAN'T IMAGINE NOT DOING IT."



FIELD OF STREAMS: seeing as this tornado picture was taken in a town called Turkey, you could refer to Kourounis as the "white meat" (Texas, spring 2001)

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) DRIVE, THROUGH: trapped in Turkey; STEP BY STEP... a beachfront stairwell is swallowed by Hurricane Isabel (North Carolina, fall 2003); ICE OUT OF THE RIGHT: taller than Everest, a 50,000-ft thunderhead starts hailing (Texas, spring 1999); STAIR MASTER: Kourounis, in the swim of things (North Carolina again)

there was no rain; we were just driving in the truck and then the pieces of siding and the two-by-fours started flying in front of us and we thought: "Here it is; it's right here." We realized we were in the edge of the tornado and immediately knew we were in a bad place. That's when the self-preservation instinct kicked in. So we floored it and took shelter behind a mall. It was dark, but there were power transformers exploding right beside us and these huge blue explosions were lighting up the storm. It was when the blue explosions would happen that you could actually see the funnel. I got out of the truck and a huge piece of sheet metal slammed down beside me. Like, *right* beside me. That was really scary. I even took a dent on the side of the truck from flying debris. Luckily, I had the video camera rolling the whole time. Rule number one: never stop filming. **What's the videotape like?** It looks like you're driving through a swarm of bees, with all the stuff flying around. We were right in it. You don't get much closer without a trip to the hospital. **Got an example of a safer experience?** We were in Texas, also in May last year, and there were two tornadoes on the ground simultaneously and we were stuck in the mud. That was a day! **Stranded in a muddy field with tornadoes sprouting out of the sky doesn't sound "safer."** We felt safe and since we weren't going anywhere anyway, I figured I had nothing better to do than start filming. The first tornado formed in a field just north of us and I got out of the truck and started filming. It was a beautiful elephant's trunk shape in the

sky. Then right behind it a huge tornado forms, basically at the same time. This tornado was three-quarters of a mile wide. It was huge. They were so beautiful. They just touched down in the middle of a field, they didn't hurt anybody and they spun like a drill press. They were really posing for us. It's pretty rare to see two at the same time. That was a gift from heaven for sure. We were in the right place at the right time. **How do you feel when you watch the videos or look at the pictures afterward?** There are a couple of different reactions, actually. It's amazing to see what you've been able to capture of the event. It's still not the same as living through it, though. Also, there are mixed feelings because a lot of the time these events do a lot of damage to properties and to people's houses. I've been in storms that have killed people; that kind of weighs heavy on a person. I don't feel guilty, because the storms are going to do the damage whether I'm there or not, but I've got mixed feelings, looking back, for sure. **You drive to the storms with your high-tech weather-tracking truck dressed up in antennas and other equipment. I imagine the locals aren't all that thrilled to see you.** A lot of times we get looks of shock when we pull into a town. They see us, they say, "Uh oh, the storm chasers are here – is there a tornado coming through today?" But I've had nothing but really good experiences with people. We can't stop for gas without basically being mobbed by locals asking questions about the weather, especially in these tornado-prone areas where they know about

storm chasers. They know we send our reports to weather services and that helps them track the weather, so they're usually very grateful. Sometimes we'll tell people "You're in a very high-risk area today" and they'll take appropriate precautions. There have also been a number of times when I've had to help out at a disaster scene. During Hurricane Isabel we were letting a lot of people know they were in a very unsafe place and they should leave. **What's it like to chase a hurricane?** There's not nearly as much precision involved with chasing a hurricane compared to a tornado. The hurricane chases you, basically. It's not like a tornado where you're on the outside looking in; with a hurricane, you're feeling it, you're hearing it, you're tasting it and you're breathing it. Your senses are basically battered for hours and hours as this thing is making landfall. It's a much more physically demanding event, for sure. You have to worry about where you're going to stay the night. You have to bring all your own food and water with you because there are no amenities. But I'm hooked on hurricanes now, too. **What's the "hook"?** It's nature at its most fierce. There are no storms bigger than a hurricane. Now that I've experienced a category two hurricane, I can't wait to experience a category three or four. Category five worries me a bit, although I think I'd go if I had a chance. **Do you worry that you're going to get killed?** There's a certain amount of risk involved, obviously, but it's a calculated risk. If you know what you're doing and you take proper precautions, it can be done

in a relatively safe manner. I know it's not the safest thing to do, but it's not a hobby – it's a lifestyle. I can't imagine not doing it. **So you're really not worried you're going to get killed?** There has never been a storm chaser that's been killed by a tornado – yet – although it is only a matter of time. **Does your family approve of your hobby?** I've got a lot of people around me who are very supportive of this whole activity. I'm a very lucky guy. My girlfriend's very supportive. She doesn't want me to go playing with the clouds up in the sky, that's what she says. Every time I go I have to promise her I'll come back in one piece. My parents are so cool. They know that I do it safely and I do my research. They're just happy to hear from me whenever I get back from one of these chases. I'm sure they think I'm crazy. **I'm sure a lot of people think you're crazy. Exactly why do you do this?** It combines all the stuff I love: travel, adventure, photography, the environment... I've always been fascinated with the atmosphere, especially its more violent aspects. It's pretty wild. Anybody can collect stamps, but this is such a unique thing. It's a very difficult thing to do and it's very time-consuming, but when you are successful the sense of accomplishment is incredible. The storms are fierce and the spectacle is so powerful. **What would make you want to stop?** I think I'd have to be dead or incapacitated – I think those are pretty much the two choices. I don't see myself stopping anytime soon. I'll be doing it until they pry the camera out of my cold, dead hand. ☑