

Digging for the Truth

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An Interview with Josh Bernstein

The television program [Digging for the Truth](#) is a massively popular series broadcast by the [History Channel](#), in which an intrepid fellow, Josh Bernstein, travels the world exploring archaeological sites and mysteries. In some archaeology circles, Digging for the Truth has raised some eyebrows, because of its glossy image, the emphasis on exciting frames of reference such as 'extreme archaeology', and the fact that the program attempts to solve complex archaeological problems in one or two hours. But the program I saw--the two hour premiere of Season 3, called "Atlantis: New Revelations"--was balanced and interesting, and put four of the current theories about the reality of Plato's legendary city under scientific scrutiny.



Josh Bernstein is a New Yorker, with a BA in Anthropology from Cornell University. In addition, he has used much of his career as part of the [Boulder Outdoor Survival School](#), where he has been CEO and President since 1997. His gig as host for *Digging for the Truth* began in 2004. In addition to being the host, Bernstein actively participates in the writing and producing of DFT, one of several for the History Channel's production team, JWM Productions.

Recently, About.com reached Bernstein on location, where he took time out for an email interview.

Digging for the Truth: Driven by Archaeology Mystery

About.com: I know you're not an archaeologist by trade, so... What is that intrigues you about archaeology? What is it that makes you want to explore these topics?

Josh Bernstein: I suppose I've always been fascinated by ancient cultures and people. After all, my degree was in anthropology, so it's not like my original interest was that far off: Archaeology just focuses more on the stones and bones, while Anthro focuses more on the culture and people. But there's a lot of cross-over between the two so it didn't take much convincing for me to sign on for DFT. Add a good mystery, an exotic location, a few adventurous activities, and the help of world-class experts, and what's not to like?

About.com: How is a project selected for your program? Can you tell us something about the process and the criteria you use to select a good topic?

Josh Bernstein: Episode topics are selected by a team of people, chiefly the executive producer at The History Channel and the executive producers, producers, and researchers at JWM Productions. Of course, I weigh in at times, but I'm usually too focused on filming the current episode to worry about what might be coming down the line.

For any topic to be green-lit, it must meet three key criteria: first, it should be a mystery related to the field of archaeology through a person, place, event, or cultural question of some sort. Secondly, it should be in a beautiful location or have some aspect of aesthetic appeal to it, since we're shooting in High Definition. And finally, there's the "activity factor." Or, as the producers ask it, the "What's Josh got in his hands?" factor. We want the show to be driven by an archaeological mystery, yet supported by my doing things like scuba-diving, rappelling, paragliding, etc. to keep it interesting and active. If all three factors come together satisfactorily, the show is green-lit for pre-production and additional research.

The Depths of Digging's Research

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About.com: I was very impressed with the breadth of the coverage on your Atlantis program--such as the scene in the [Beta Analytic](#) laboratories. I'm wondering, do you have a resident archaeologist or historian who does some research, fact-checks or finds the people to talk to? Who is that person or persons?

Josh Bernstein: I agree--that carbon dating scene at Beta Analytic was fun and perhaps the first time any major TV program has ever showed people how it's done.

The people who do the research are called producers and associate producers. JWM Productions--the production company behind Digging for the Truth--has an impressive staff of people who love using the success of DFT to shed light on archaeological mysteries and to present things in a new way.

And because everything is going to be on The History Channel, everyone double- and triple-checks the facts during editing.

About.com: Are you looking for more ideas? I suspect my audience is full of people who might be interested in contributing. If people had an idea to pass along, how would they go about doing that?

Josh Bernstein: Best to send them to [JWM Productions](#) in Takoma Park, Maryland.

Planning for the Unexpected

About.com: In the Atlantis program, you go along with [Robert Sarmast](#) on his quest to find Atlantis off the coast of modern day Cyprus. At one point you asked him if his expedition would be delivering a definitive answer. As you know, it is rare that that kind of certainty happens in our line of work--archaeology is a science of hems and haws. What would you have done with a more fuzzy answer?

Josh Bernstein: The expedition's goal was to determine if the anomaly on the sea floor was human-made or natural. That seemed like a pretty binary answer to me--either yes it was human-made, or no it wasn't. I was simply asking that the data we collect be conclusive so that we wouldn't spend all our time, money and energy only to walk away wondering what made that anomaly. Of course I recognize that many aspects of archaeology are subject to interpretation, but this didn't seem like one of them to me. And as it turned out, the geologist Patrick Lowry was able to make a clear decision based on the data.

Had it been more of a fuzzy answer, I would have been frustrated that we failed to meet our goal. And I'm sure many viewers would have been frustrated, too.

About.com: One unplanned-for complication that reminded me of how archaeology usually works was a technical problem with the sonar device becoming tangled underwater. What caused the knots in the line?

Josh Bernstein: That was actually explained in the episode. The towfish was simply lowered too quickly--probably because we were using a new high-speed winch that was much faster than the winch used on Robert's first expedition. As the slack in the line loosened and tightened with the pulling of the ship, the towfish was jerked back and forth through the cable, creating the knot. Kind of like un-spooling a fishing line too fast--the reel becomes a big mess--only this line had a very heavy and expensive object attached to the end of it.

Digging for the Truth on the Daily Show

About.com: I saw you on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, and you did fine, although you looked a bit nervous to me. What was that like?

Josh Bernstein: Jon was great. I love his show and was honored to be on it. Funny how many more people have come up to me after seeing me on *The Daily Show* than on, say, the *Today* show or the other talk shows I've done. No, I wouldn't say I was nervous – I just didn't want to step on his jokes. You never know what he's going to come at you with.

More on DFT

The third season of *Digging for the Truth* began in January; both the first and second seasons are available on DVD and a book collection is available on the History Channel website. This season's programs will include such topics as Genghis Khan, King Tut, Maya sites in Guatemala, Ramesses II, Machu Picchu, Egyptian mummies, Petra, [Tiwanaku Empire](#), the [Dead Sea Scrolls'](#) Copper Scroll, the Aztecs, and the biblical King David. The program airs on the History Channel on Mondays at 8 pm EST, and is rebroadcast at 1 am EST Tuesday mornings.

- [Digging for the Truth](#), on the History Channel
- [JWM Productions](#)
- [Boulder Outdoor Survival School](#)
- [Josh Bernstein interview](#) on Jon Stewart's The Daily Show
- [DFT, Season 1](#) (on DVD)
- [DFT, Season 2](#) (on DVD)
- [Digging for the Truth Books and Program Videos](#) on the History Channel