

Digging for the Truth about The History Channel's Josh Bernstein

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Somewhere beneath the vast, arid Peruvian plains, Josh Bernstein is crawling around underground, knee-deep in an aqueduct system that is over 2,000 years old. It's wet. It's dank. It's totally void of wiggle room.

The intoxicating aroma of twenty centuries' worth of what may or may not be mud assaults his senses as the cramped stone walls of the passageway begin to narrow greatly, but he remains undaunted. He's seeking the secrets to the legendary Nasca Lines, and finding the truth behind ancient mysteries can be a dirty job.

Bernstein makes his way from one spiral entrance dotting the desert floor to another, all the while detailing the importance of the irrigation system to the surrounding area. Were the Nasca Lines a creative way to map out some of the ancient underground channels? It's but one theory he will ponder with viewers for the next hour.

He emerges, soaking wet, and looks into the camera's ever-present eye.

"I'm definitely impressed and...I definitely need a shower."

As host for The History Channel's "Digging for the Truth" (DFT) series, it's not the first time the Big Apple native has gotten grungy and it certainly won't be the last. In a melding of hands-on historical study and myth busting, the affable explorer takes aim at many of the world's most enduring historical puzzles.

"The idea of international adventure and archaeology coming together is timeless," he notes.

"Long before the Indiana Jones movies, people have wanted to hear of distant lands and ancient mysteries. I think it's part of the human psyche. The show is not trying to be too much and I'm



Digging for Truth host Josh Bernstein.
Photo: Joshua Kessler.

certainly not taking myself too seriously. Perhaps that makes it easier for people to relate to what I'm exploring."

In a literal example of the old adage "show don't tell," he has made stone-aged weapons, donned medieval armor for a sword fight, chiseled limestone like an Egyptian pyramid builder and plunged 2,000 feet into the earth - all in the pursuit of knowledge. He'll even man the digital camcorder if he finds himself in a snug spot too narrow for The History Channel's larger high definition camera to enter.

His easygoing and gregarious manner comes across vividly in each episode, despite sudden downpours, crackling ice, blinding blizzards, freak floods or even tense negotiations with local authorities. He jokes with natives, cuts up for the camera and generally tries to make the show not just a learning experience, but fun and entertaining as well. It's a formula that worked almost instantly.

"I think it's great that so many people are being turned on to exploring history," the 34-year-old Bernstein says happily.

"At the very least, people are re-discovering some great stories, listening with modern minds, and discerning what for them is true. I think it's great that the show doesn't force feed you an opinion - we leave you able to make up your own mind. If you disagree with what I say, or with what an expert on the show says, that's fine. Independent thinking is encouraged."

That tone carries over into every expedition, with Bernstein not only plunging into the story and driving the action - but living every second of it as well. Whether snowshoeing in the Alps hot on the trail of a 5,300 year old murder mystery, hacking through the rainforest seeking El Dorado, communing with monks in search of the Ark of the Covenant or investigating the Nazi regime's pursuit of the Holy Grail, it's clear that this is more than just a job to him.

Judging from the show's ratings, viewers are also enjoying the ride. His adventures on DFT captivated an average 1.4 million viewers during the first season in Spring 2005, making it The History Channel's number one original series to air more than six telecasts. Bernstein said he really feels no additional pressure to top those numbers in season two because he and the crew give one hundred percent for each show either way.

"I wasn't aware of the success being instant," he admits.

"In fact, I really wasn't all that aware of the show being a success, mostly because the industry is new to me and I didn't understand Nielsen ratings. But now that I DO understand how unusual the ratings for DFT have been, I'm proud that people are responding so well to something we all worked so hard to create. CREATING the show, after all, was hardly instant and I think we've all earned our viewers' support."

He knows that many of those viewers will inevitably compare the show to the big screen exploits of the fictional continent-crossing character Indiana Jones, made famous by actor Harrison Ford

in a trilogy of films. His wardrobe may look like Indy's, but Bernstein is quick to point out that there is actually little similarity between the two larger-than-life historians.

Other than the fiction versus nonfiction angle, the main difference may be in the mission. While Indiana Jones sought to retrieve treasure from the clutches of evil, Bernstein seeks nothing but the truth. Though the parallel between his exploits and that of the silver screen hero is not lost on him, he hopes everyone also sees the differences.

"You know, I've heard that comparison a bit and I'm still not sure how to take it. Indiana Jones is a Hollywood creation who we all know is going to steal something back from the bad guys and save the girl every time. DFT doesn't have any bad guys. Or enough girls," he jokes.

"But, as any archaeologist will tell you, that's not what archaeology is about. So that part's very different and I don't think the comparison is appropriate. We also don't have any cool fight scenes, but I'm still working on that. Of course, if my rappelling into volcanoes, exploring ancient tombs and crawling through tight spaces inspires people to travel or evokes any sense of adventure the way Indiana Jones does, well, thank you very much! That's a tremendous compliment."

During the first season alone, he logged more than 100,000 miles by land, sea and air for DFT, and traveled to over a dozen countries. He soldiers through jet-lagged, hungry, thirsty and/or just plain exhausted. In fact, the grueling schedule, which frequently entails rising before dawn and bedding down long after sunset or even traveling all night, doesn't seem to dampen his spirits at all.

Although he was born and raised primarily in Manhattan, the Cornell University graduate (Anthropology and Psychology) is accustomed to all the wilderness trekking and other miscellaneous brushes with Mother Nature DFT demands.

Since 1997, Bernstein has been (and still is) the president and CEO of BOSS, the Boulder Outdoor Survival School in both Boulder, Utah and Boulder, Colorado. He has been on staff at the facility, the largest of its kind on the planet, since he was just a teen, ascending from apprentice to CEO.

"My duties these days include sharing the mission of the school with the public and hopefully bringing that message to a larger audience. I also keep an eye on our financials, the metrics we use to track them, and the overall marketing of the school. So while I might not be there to welcome each student to his or her course these days, I'm still involved in all aspects of our operations."

Genetics have obviously been very kind to him, but it wasn't just looks and education that helped him nail his hosting gig. It was the added combination of his BOSS training, curiosity and personality that led to his first small screen shot.

After serving as a consultant on location for films like "Charlie's Angels" and "Castaway," Bernstein eventually landed some on-camera work for NBC's first reality show, LOST (not the

dramatic series on television now). That resulted in a gig as a recurring host, but unfortunately, LOST fell through the cracks with several other series in the reality genre after the events of September 11, 2001. When The History Channel put out the word they were seeking an "adventurous, world-traveling host with a passion for archaeology" two years later, he gladly heeded the call.

He knew from the start, however, that juggling the demands of ever-growing BOSS with his History Channel duties would be - in a word - complex.

With the kind of intricate plotting and forethought usually reserved for a NASA mission, the energetic investigator somehow manages to fulfill his CEO duties at BOSS's two facilities and travel for the show eight or nine months out of the year. Out of necessity, technology has quickly become his best friend, but to say he is an icon of organization would be a dire understatement.

"I keep one calendar for the series production schedule and a second calendar for my personal schedule. They're both updated, synched, and posted to a secure server daily so that my family, my staff, the production company, and The History Channel all know where I am on any given day of the year. That gives me the ability to plan as much of my free time as possible, which is when I go to Utah and Colorado. How MUCH I'm out West depends on the shoot schedule."



Digging for the Truth: Mystery of the Anasazi. Host Josh Bernstein prepares to fly over the Anasazi ruins in a powerful Paraglider. Photo: Kate Sweeney/JMMProductions.

All the constant travel means Bernstein has to closely watch his health by staying in shape and trying to eat healthy on a regular basis. To avoid down time, he is also extremely careful to avoid accident or injury - on or off camera.

Because he tries to fully immerse himself into each story, he sometimes absorbs a few experiences he would rather forget. During the first season's filming, he grappled with food poisoning, parasites, a Brown Recluse bite and other minor illnesses. Still, he and the crew (which averages about eight people per show) managed to complete the first season with only a few mishaps.

"The scariest incident was not caught on camera," he admits somberly.

"We were scuba diving in Lake Titicaca for the show on the Lost City of El Dorado. The weather was particularly rough and for whatever reason, the captain of the dive boat did not have an anchor. He had to use the motor to keep the boat in position while we were at the dive site, reversing the engine every few minutes to keep the boat from crashing into these large rocks ahead."

"The cameraman needed to come up into the boat quickly and was at the rear of the boat - directly above the propellers - just when the captain decides to reverse them again. We're yelling

'STOP THE ENGINE! STOP THE ENGINE!' while the captain's yelling 'ROCKS AHEAD! ROCKS AHEAD!'."

"The cameraman felt the propellers hitting his diving fins, and we're all having visions of him getting sucked into the propellers and chopped to bits. It was a VERY scary moment. Fortunately, the captain killed the engine, we pulled the cameraman out of the water, and then we drove the boat away from the rocks just in time."

His BOSS training and resulting mental discipline allows Bernstein to keep his wits about him despite such nerve-wracking moments. He must be ready to go, after all, around the clock. It isn't a nine to five job.

For the nine to 14 days of shooting each episode entails, he spends his "spare time" on-site investigating this lead or that, devouring research or getting acclimated to the local culture so he is prepared for anything the next day may bring. In addition to the physical rigors of filming, he has to hit the books in able to ensure he can talk shop - and ask the right questions - with the multitude of experts he interviews on DFT.

Then there's the language barrier to contend with, which means more studying. (In fact, if Bernstein could have one superpower, he would be able to speak and understand every language on earth fluently.) Even after filming is done and he is back in New York, there are still voice-overs to be polished off and the requisite press rounds for the show. When that's all done, it's back to BOSS.

"During the production season of the show, my time for BOSS is limited to what I can do by phone, fax and email. But these days, that's not very limiting. You'd be amazed at where cell phones work today! From the Pyramids of Giza to the icebergs of the Arctic, I've had full contact with my staff. GSM/GPRS technology is amazing and my Blackberry is invaluable."

His BOSS training lends itself well to many of the activities he takes on for DFT. The trick, he's found, is to blend his exuberance and naturally inquisitive nature with sound research and physical feats that most people wouldn't dream of attempting. Bernstein said DFT is careful to stress the "Don't try this at home" message to viewers and he would never partake in a potentially dangerous activity without proper gear and training.

"A lot of the activities required during filming are things I've already done previously, so there is little training required for those obviously; but others, such as powered paragliding, require a few days of safety courses."

There are some things he dreams of doing, such as camping out at Chaco Canyon or sleeping beneath the looming pyramids of ancient Egypt that are restricted, but he takes it all in stride. He generally gets to choose most of his modes of transportation at least, such as his recent request to express his inner cowboy a bit more by doing more horseback riding in season two, as well as more powered paragliding and scuba diving.

As anyone who has watched Bernstein hike, crunch, hunch, climb, dive, ride or fly through each episode of DFT can attest to, he is pretty much phobia free. Not that there aren't a few situations that are more goosebump-inducing than others.

"I'm not afraid of the dark or cramped spaces, that's for sure, nor do I mind heights or depths. But sometimes a tomb can be creepy - after all, there's got to be some basis for curses, right?" he notes.

"And certain natural events - like icebergs breaking under your feet or thunderstorms crashing down on you - can be pretty humbling and frightening in a helpless, powerless kind of way. Most of the time, though, I just try to keep my wits and have faith that I'll live to see another day. If I don't, then you [the viewer] will live to see one helluva last day."

Read all about "Digging for the Truth" and Josh Bernstein's multi-cultural adventures, including the history behind his quests, in his journal at www.thehistorychannel.com. The second season debuts in January, 2006.

If you would like to tap into your inner explorer by experiencing wilderness and survival tactics first hand at BOSS, go to www.boss-inc.com for course schedules, locations and contact information.

Quick Quiz:

Favorite archaeology: Egypt ("How can one NOT love the Pyramids and the Sphinx?")

Favorite activity: Diving the cenotes of the Yucatan peninsula

Favorite town/country: Axum, Ethiopia

Favorite food: Naples, Italy

Favorite environment: Easter Island. ("The scenery is breathtaking and the water and air are the cleanest I've ever experienced.")

Number of people involved in making each episode of DFT: Over 200, including writers, producers, on scene film crew, etc. The average crew on location is made up of eight people.

Who chooses the locales: The History Channel staff

Where to talk to other DFT fans: <http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/DiggingfortheTruth> - The DFT website moderated by Josh Bernstein. There's no chat room, but Bernstein regularly updates fans on his adventures and newsworthy events.

<http://boards.historychannel.com/forum.jspa?forumID=10020&start=0> - The DFT chat site on The History Channel website - fans can chat here.

Childhood hero: Clint Eastwood - one of the reasons he initially went West.

Where is his "final frontier"? "I'd love to know what it's like at the very center of a tornado, inside a huge thundercloud, or deep within an active volcano. I bet the power inside each one is awesome."

What did he want to be when he grew up: "Maybe a doctor? I've always liked the idea of healing people, but I'm not crazy about blood. Actually, it's not really the blood, it's the pain they're in that gets me. Once I was a teenager, though, I wanted to be a BOSS instructor. Or a Native American Medicine Man... they get to heal people without all the blood. BOSS was easier."

How does a psychology background help on the show? For BOSS? "Hmmm... I don't know if there's a direct correlation, but a lot of what I do for each show is establish a rapport with experts and try to have a natural conversation with them about whatever mystery or topic I'm exploring. So having an ability to work with someone, make them feel comfortable, and perhaps anticipate their concerns or answers COULD be a possible use of psychology, couldn't it? On the trail at BOSS, psychology plays a huge role in personal and situational leadership. Survival is, after all, mostly mental."