

Mr. Worldwide: A Glimpse into a Nomad Filmmaker's Global Journey

American travel filmmaker Brandon Li has made a name for himself in the online video industry over the past few years with his captivating art. Ashley Williams takes a closer look at the man behind the lens.



Image: Ashley Williams

BRANDON LI HAS LEFT a sock in nearly every corner of the world. The nomad is far too busy straddling elephants to worry if his grays don't exactly match. Such is the life of a traveling filmmaker. Li wanders the world in search of the nearest Wi-Fi hotspot, while along the way capturing stunning imagery which simply "saturate the senses." He lives nowhere, yet everywhere at the same time.

I had the opportunity to travel with Li in Scotland, England, Malta and Portugal, just four destinations of more than 40 countries he's visited in the three years since diving headfirst into the nomadic lifestyle. Apart from occasional contract assignments, he mostly travels to wherever he desires. One moment, you might find him in Guam, capturing unbelievably difficult shots of children frolicking on the shore just before a

torrential tropical storm makes landfall. And in the blink of an eye, he's already jetting off to another global destination.

It may seem like Li is living a never-ending vacation (and perhaps that's partly true), but he and his trusty cameras always manage to maintain focus despite often traversing some of the world's most beautiful places. "I have the opportunity to enjoy myself a lot," Li said. "Some days I just need to buckle down and get the work done that I started on my last adventure. Otherwise I'd never produce anything, I'd just be hanging out and basking in the sun every single day."

His dedication has definitely paid off. If you're unfamiliar with his work, take a quick glance at recent Vimeo Staff Picks and you're [sure to spot his latest project](#). At least six of his films have been chosen previously. And it's no wonder he's getting noticed. What Li creates behind the lens and in post-production is nothing short of magic.

The filmmaker in action

Having observed him in the field on a few occasions, his filmmaking method kind of resembles an unfinished puzzle – at least, at first. In fact, one might *actually* be puzzled when first observing him in action, much like the amused churchgoers who watched him filming in Mdina's St. Paul's Cathedral. It appeared that Li had adopted his camera as his dance partner as he swiftly shuffled his feet back and forth across the cathedral floor, knees bent as he held his Sony nearly over his head with the lens directed up at the decorated ceiling as he sought the exact effect he'd hoped to capture. Once you see the final product of his work, however, the pieces come together in a way you wouldn't expect.

The word "work" is used loosely here. Make no mistake, this is no ordinary job. In fact, according to Li, it's more of a lifestyle than anything else. "It's constantly open to revision," Li explained. "I can change what I do at any moment. Because I'm not on a salary, I don't have a contract, I don't really have a boss, I don't really have a team. So if I wanted to just stop tomorrow and do something completely different, I could."

Li realized shortly after graduating from North Carolina School of the Arts that he wanted to call his own shots rather than "climbing ladders," all the while simply "making someone else rich." He found the type of freedom he was seeking while shooting and editing for MTV's "True Life" documentary series. "The actual shooting part, I got to make all the decisions on my own. And that's the only way I've ever really been good at doing it," he said.

Discovering his passion



Image: Ashley Williams

Post-It Notes are what first propelled Li into the world of filmmaking. In grade school, he'd raid his mother's supply so he could draw stick figures fighting in his homemade flip books. He got a serious equipment upgrade when his parents gifted him his first camera at 8 years old.

Realizing that every good filmmaker needs critics in order to improve, Li would show his videos in class (with the permission of his teachers) and ask his peers to rate them from one to five. "Usually, they all gave me a five, and their comments were things like 'It was nice,'" Li reminisced with a chuckle.

Nowadays, his personal works are garnering similar rave reviews, albeit on a much larger scale. And he's not complaining. Receiving accolades such as Vimeo Staff Picks,

Li said, means getting noticed by potential clients, fellow filmmakers and other key players in the online video realm. In this bustling industry, however, there's no doubt that Li is dominating his particular niche. A quick Google search of the phrase "nomad filmmaker" reveals just that.

So, what's he doing any differently from all the other travel filmmakers out there?

As Li puts it: "Filming the local culture candidly. I'm not telling my story as a traveller. I'm telling their story as a people [the way I see it.](#)" While most people who produce travel videos simply capture enjoyable moments of their trips, he's progressed to focusing on capturing footage that appeals to him emotionally. The more authentic, he says, the better.

"I prefer real stuff. I just feel like it's easier to create a believable world if you're starting off with something that's real, rather than inventing a scenario out of thin air," Li shared. The self-professed perfectionist has a real knack for quickly reacting to his environment and capturing events as they unfold without needing to stage any part of it. It's a tricky feat, considering that some shots are once-in-a-lifetime moments.

Immersed in a lifestyle that's constantly on the go and with no true place to call his home, one could wonder if Li will ever tire of living out of his lime-green suitcase. He says hasn't yet found the one place that he'd consider settling down, but the possibility of doing so isn't too far off into the future. Having nearly 200 countries from which to choose certainly doesn't help narrow it down. For now, he remains committed to his life as a nomad filmmaker, and will undoubtedly continue to impress online audiences with his captivating art.

— Ashley Williams