

SR – The New Third Way

Skyworks' producer Damian Keogh loosened his SD straps and experienced the best HD has to offer

What was the background behind this shoot?

Skyworks has been looking to 'step up' to HD for a couple of years now in its acquisition of high end aerial footage and creation of aerial programmes for broadcasters.

Due to the lack of suitable HD aerial systems, until recently, there hasn't been a decent opportunity. We discovered that the Cineflex gimbal (our chosen HD aerial platform at the moment) would be in Europe last month, and decided to use this opportunity to work with the gimbal.

Given the large cost of the shoot, we had reasons beyond technical curiosity driving the decision. We are currently working on a couple of big HD proposals, one is an epic European series being considered by the BBC, another is a joint international venture with RDFI.

Both of these projects can be taken to the next level with some real HD aerial imagery to support them. Also, Getty Images have for some time wanted to work with us to gain high-quality HD aerial footage, using the unique talent of Richard Mervyn who founded Skyworks.

This shoot has given us the opportunity to kick-start that relationship.

Why was high definition and especially HDCAM SR chosen?

In terms of HD generally, there are two

reasons. First and foremost, we are firmly of the opinion that it is necessary to shoot HD if we want our programmes and footage to be of value in the future. Second, the epic nature of Skyworks' imagery, unique aerial storytelling, not to mention the ambition of our current projects, all make the case for a high quality format.

HDCAM SR was chosen for two reasons. First, the new SR recorder that Sony was offering us to test is lightweight and portable – this is a major consideration when filming from a helicopter. Second, SR gives us the ability to record at the best possible quality (with the least compression). What better way to future-proof material?

Have you worked with HD before, what were your pre-conceptions?

We had investigated filming HD from the air in some detail and had seen imagery from various gimbals. Also, we managed to have a short play with the Cineflex gimbal on a stand at an exhibition – in terms of operating, it is very similar to the SD Ultramedia we have been using for years.

However, that was the extent of our hands-on experience and we were aware of the differences, particularly when shooting progressive, so we are

extremely grateful for the invaluable help and advice throughout from Mike Brennan.

In terms of pre-conceptions, we were concerned that the limited monitoring in the confines of a cramped aircraft might make it difficult to ensure that focus was always sharp. However, it proved to be much less of a problem than we anticipated.

There was also the issue of post-production. But, shooting 25p and making simultaneous timecode PAL DVCAM tapes at the same time has allowed us to offline in the SD environment, which is essential with limited resources.

What is good/bad about the format?

We are absolutely delighted with the rushes we've brought back. There are only really two issues. When shooting progressive scan, which is important to us, we have had to get used to the limitations on speed of subjects through the frame – you can get away with more shooting interlaced. The second issue is that the prohibitive cost of buying/renting SR decks and post-producing in the HD environment means that we have to spend much of the time watching SD clones of our material – a bit depressing when we know how good the SR masters look on the right screen.

Were you surprised how good SR looked?

We were extremely impressed with the image. HDCAM had looked great to us (having seen other HD aerials shot on this format), but SR was even better. Again, coming from the SD world, it all appears wonderful to us, but SR seems to be the best imagery we've seen yet. It also allows the post people to grade that bit further, something we had experience of only yesterday at AHC!

Will you use HD again? For what kind of content?

Subject to the availability in Europe of the Cineflex gimbal and the cost/budget balance, we will acquire all our material on HD from now on. It is imperative for the company that these magical aerials shot by Richard Mervyn, the unique talent behind Skyworks, are future-proofed.

What are your conclusions?

For us telly lot, HD is an expensive environment to work in (unlike film people who sometimes view it as a cost-saver). However, the results are quite superb, and we will fight as hard as possible to ensure we film on HD from now on in our niche world of aerial programme making.

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