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Have camera, will travel: life as an expat film-maker

British expat Edward Longmire is currently filming his second documentary about expat life. He tells Telegraph Expat why he's so fascinated by people who make new lives abroad – and why modern films are always too long.



British expat Edward Longmire, inset, is filming 20 expats as they go about life in Berlin Photo: John Woods / Alamy

By Leah Hyslop
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You might say that Edward Longmire is obsessed with expats. The British film-maker and photographer, originally from London, is currently in the middle of filming a group of British people as they go about life in Berlin.

There’s nothing indicative of an obsession in that alone, of course. But the Berlin film is hot on the heels of an earlier feature, *Alive and Well in Prague*, which focused on expats in the Czech capital – and he has plans to maybe make a third expat film as well.

“I guess I’m interested in expats because as an expat myself, I empathise,” says Longmire, a former City worker who decided a few years ago to abandon the world of finance in order to pursue his interests in film and photography overseas. "Fundamentally, it’s interesting to see a place through the eyes of a foreigner. People do tell me it’s risky to make the same film again, but I think they are significantly different.

“My Prague film, which began as a project when I was studying at the Czech National Film School, was rather dark, ragged around the edges – heavily focused on an English teacher with a spiralling alcohol addiction, and the frustrations of expat life. I think the Berlin film is rather more optimistic – more centred on an arts crowd, much more polished. If I make another, I hope that would be different too.”

Both Alive and Well in Prague and his Berlin film, as yet untitled, are based on the experiences of very different expats, filmed at different stages of their time abroad. He says that the British documentary series *Up*, which filmed the same group of children at different times in their lives, was a large influence on him. “It’s a very addictive form, and an easy way to make an interesting documentary. I love stories and seeing how they develop, and it means I can fit easily round people’s commitments - I always say to people that I can be in and out of their lives in an afternoon. It’s best to do it that way, in short bursts over a long period. It’s like wine: the longer you leave it, the better the documentary will be.”

Alive and Well in Prague centred on four expats – Longmire says however that he filmed eight, and is currently filming 20 people in Berlin. “I don’t have a crystal ball, but I look for people who look like they will grow. But I do always end up dropping people – either they don’t want to go on, or you don’t want to go on filming them. I’m not a psychologist, but you soon get an idea if people like the camera. It’s about building up a level of trust. They need to like being filmed.”

The biggest challenge for Longmire is the post production process. In the past six months, he's shot over 80 hours of footage, which will be edited to a film of no more than 90 minutes. “For the Prague film, I spent months holed in my apartment editing, going slowly mad. The way to do it is to edit on separate timelines, then put it together. Some people suggest I should put them all online so people can view the different characters' stories in whatever order they like, but I like guiding people through the story.

“The conundrum of modern film-making is that now everything’s digital, there’s no limitation to how much you footage you can take, but that makes life harder. Most films now are just too long. It’s quality not quantity.”

Does he work with anyone else? “No. People do offer to help me, and suggest I should have a camera-man so I can interview people on screen – but I like to have the control, and I like the organic feel of just following someone around. It’s very much a one-man band; have camera, will travel, that sort of thing.”

If Longmire decides to go the next step and turn his expat collection into a trilogy, he thinks London will be a probably destination. “It’d be nice to return to my own home, though I'd have to find a foreigner working to centre it on. In many ways, that would feel quite nicely complete - returning to make a film based on the kind of life I used to lead.”

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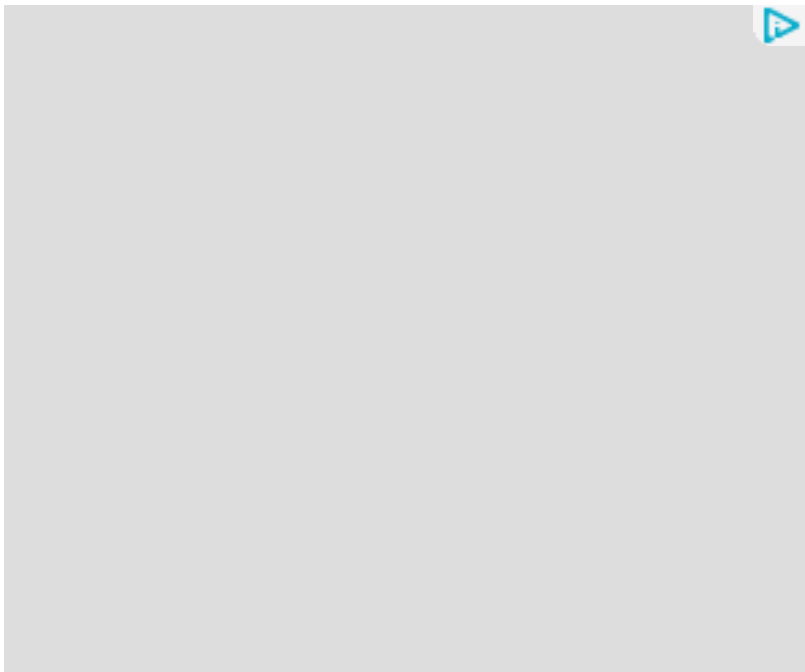
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