

Storm Chasing

STORM CHASING inspires visions of ominous cloud formations, flickering flashes of lightning and rumbling thunder, along with a lone photographer giving chase to achieve the ultimate image. Marty Pouwelse is one of Australia's top storm chasers; his collection of surreal photographs is legendary; and his yarns are spellbinding ...

"I was standing on Fort Hill Wharf in Darwin as a daytime storm approached. A storm cell slowly headed towards me with a very solid rain shaft and lightning visible. Eventually, as it approached lightning rumbles became sharp cracks until one bolt must have hit the pier I was on. I was under shelter, but rain was coming in on me vertically which had me hiding behind my umbrella trying to keep my camera dry, which meant I didn't actually see the bolt. I did see the intensely bright flash it produced, and that cracking SNAP of thunder occurred at the same time!"

Born in 1973 in Melbourne, Marty grew up with his parents and brother in the southern city. "I was one of the nerdier ones at school, very shy, interested in the sciences and computers. I remember when the Commodore 64 computer was introduced at my school and I spent many lunchtimes playing with it and learning about it," reflects Marty. One real memory as a young boy which piqued Marty's interest in weather was thoroughly enjoying the few storms in Melbourne. "While the rest of my family would be tucked up inside, I would be standing on the back patio in awe of the lightning and thunder."

As a student, Marty was extremely good academically such that the teachers couldn't come up with a word he couldn't spell! It wasn't until Yr 11 when he started to get a bit distracted and wagged a few days, which for him was unheard of. During that year of schooling, Marty was introduced to 3WRB-FM, a local volunteer-run community radio station. "This would soon change my life," says Marty.

After leaving high school education behind, Marty did odd jobs (including wrapping cheese) and all the while continuing to present a radio show and doing some technical engineering work at the station. But the following year his intellect stirred and he began a two-year computer programming course, Diploma of Business (Computer Programming). "I already had a big interest in computers and now figured this would become a career. I excelled at



this course, but things were ramping up at the radio station where I eventually started doing audio production full time and getting paid," said Marty.

Five and a half years later got Marty his first commercial radio gig at 3TR Traralgon in regional Victoria doing audio production and the occasional weekend on-air shift. Ten months later he accepted a job in Canberra in Production and it was in the capital Marty's storm chasing began in earnest. "Even before I had access to a car, I would run down the road to a good lookout point to watch storms as they came over. I first technically started chasing (that is, with a car) in Canberra around 1997, which incidentally is also when I bought my first SLR camera, a Pentax P30N.

I don't remember my first official chase, but I don't really consider having a very 'first' chase because I'd been 'chasing' them in some form for years already."

Then two and a half years later in December 1999, Marty moved to Brisbane to work as Imaging Producer for B105.

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"Coming to Brisbane seemed like a dream because of the high incidence of severe weather events, and since joining an online community of observers and chasers, I have been learning more and more about the weather and forecasting, but only as much as it helps me chase and get better images."

Three years later Marty took two months off to join his good friend, Jeff McLean, and ride a tandem recumbent tricycle across West Africa in an attempt to make a television documentary about the honesty and generosity of the locals. With a well established interest in storms by the time Marty went overseas he was keen to see what storms were like in West Africa. "We did get some good activity over there, but no real way of actually chasing them. We got a few nights of storms in Bamako (capital of Mali) which excited us both enough to run around on foot with a camera bag and tripod in an attempt to find a decent view. We had a particularly memorable evening in Kumasi in Ghana - the magic of such a strange foreign place, the warm humidity, and standing on a good balcony watching a great lightning show with constant rumbling thunder," recalls Marty.

On his return home Marty regained employment with Austereo Brisbane as Breakfast Audio Producer at Triple M, where he's been ever since.

Storm chasing is not all about adventure, adrenaline and action. Marty explains the science and technology behind the storm events, "The models on the Bureau of Meteorology show how severe a storm might be and where the best hot-spots are, and that will often determine where I go, if I decide to head out before storms have started. On the morning of an event, I'll check an aerological diagram or 'sounding' (Skew-T). Then using the top temp and dew point for the day, a chaser can determine potential instability, the likely height of storms, wind shear, the likelihood of hail, lightning etc, which in turn can suggest the possibility of not only storms, but supercells, the kind of storms which produce tornadoes." "Chasing in and around Brisbane, where my partner Michelle and I live, is enjoyable mainly because we get some very severe storms with awesome cloud structure," says Marty, "but the downside of any city is the traffic and most of our storms occur around peak hour!"

Obviously, severe weather carries many dangers and Marty stresses that chasing is about trying to find that compromise between getting a great photo and risk minimisation, "The adrenaline is definitely something I enjoy about chasing, but I (and most chasers) actually try and stay ahead of the storm. Generally, the best visible structure occurs at the front of the storm which is incentive enough for me to try and stay ahead of it."

Marty Pouwelse, storm chaser, has a host of stories gathered over the years "An awesome experience

was watching a fantastic lightning show from the top of Wildhorse Mountain near the Glasshouse Mountains. The lookout is quite high and was originally built for fire spotters, so it provided an uninterrupted 360° view."

"My longest chase in a single day is probably about 600 kims, though of course you never set out to drive so far. The worst part of a storm day is when it's all over, it's late at night, you're 300kims from home and you've got to get up at 3.30am for work the next day."

While there are many exciting and sometimes dangerous aspects to storms, Marty says one thing that could be classed as unusual which he would find incredibly fascinating is ball lightning. There is much anecdotal evidence but very little scientific data and very few photos of this phenomenon. Most observers describe a bright fireball which varies greatly in colour and speed of movement. Most stories suggest ball lightning is produced as a result of (or alongside) a normal cloud-to-ground lightning strike. Marty says with a grin, "I have never seen it, but I would love to!"

Although Marty understands storm chasing appears action-packed and exciting to the public, he is adamant that unless you're doing it already, chasing storms is not something he would recommend without some knowledge of how storms behave. However, for weather enthusiasts, there are plenty of other options to follow and says anyone who would like to learn more about storms, the Australian Severe Weather Association is a great place to start. It's a not-for-profit organisation whose members meet regularly in each capital city to share knowledge and weather photos and footage, and visitors are most welcome.

What does Marty consider the ultimate in storm chasing? In his eloquent words, Marty gives readers his vision ... "The atmosphere, the ambience when you get out of the city. There are no people, no traffic, and a cacophony of insect and bird sounds. After dark in the heavy humidity, under a half moon sky, with insects buzzing and an active storm in front of me letting out great bolts of silver lightning and huge booms of crystal clear thunder unattained by human civilisation - there is nothing better ... except getting a decent photo of it!"

MARTY'S photographic passion and expertise has expanded from cityscapes, landscapes and severe weather to more human subjects; which means portraits, weddings and events. His portfolio is available at:

www.ozlandscapes.com

(which includes a comprehensive list of storm chase reports dating back to 1999)

"Most images are available for sale as prints or for corporate use. Marty has also just released a coffee table book with his best cityscape, landscape and severe weather photos, available through his website.