

Thoroughbred champion

A run of bad luck didn't stop Brian Clopp picking up an award at this year's Travel POTY ceremony. **Peter Dench** finds out more

If bad luck comes in threes, American artist and businessman Brian Clopp is relieved the most recent triptych is over. Arriving on the flight to London to receive his first prize in the Thrills and Adventure category at the 2019 Travel Photographer of the Year (TPOTY) awards, a woman snatched the cabin baggage containing his laptop. She was later apprehended by customs. A previous laptop was stolen while transiting through the US postal system. Most alarming of all, his camera equipment, laptop and hard drive with a year's worth of material, including his TPOTY entries, was pinched from a rental car.

Brian managed to recover just five of his top images: 'For TPOTY they need original files, raw or JPEG. I got an email from the contest saying I was a finalist. I was excited, then the devastation hits that I didn't have any of the files. About a week goes by and I realise I had sent five to a print gallery a week prior to the theft.' When I meet him in the top bar of the Plough Pub opposite the British Museum, the Fujifilm X-T3 with 18-55mm lens he won as part of the TPOPY award, is satisfyingly strapped to his hand. Why didn't he double or triple back up his files – it's not rocket science. Brian should know, his father is a rocket scientist. 'I've learned, never travel with a hard drive – and back up to the cloud, Google drive or Dropbox as soon as possible,' he says, fondling the Fuji.

Time for a detox

Brian moved from his family home in Maryland to live in Los Angeles to pursue a successful career in film, including co-producing the Golden Globe-nominated, *First They Killed My Father*, recounting the horrors activist Loung Ung suffered as a child under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, directed by Angelina Jolie.

After six years in LA, Brian needed a detox and moved to Utah to concentrate fully on nature photography. He quickly became obsessed with the wild horses, descended from escaped ranch horses or those that worked on the Pony Express mail service of the 1860s. 'The horses are a symbol of freedom, which is something

America seems to have less and less of,' says the 20-something-looking 37-year-old. 'If you hang out with these wild horses for a couple of hours, you're going to get something spectacular.'

In 2019, Brian hung out with the Onaqui wild horses for weeks at a time, often in harsh conditions, to capture these stunning images. He slept on the flat seats in the back of his car, the dust being too prevalent to try pitching a tent. Wasn't it boring? 'It's like a free TV show. You have this drama unfolding in front of you for hours. When I do landscape photography I can get bored, you have to hike for hours and the sunset might be washed out and then you have to hike all the way back. Sitting out for a day with the horses goes in a flash.' In one spectacular image, two stallions on their hind legs fight for hierarchy as two ponies canter towards Brian's Nikon D850 and 600mm prime rental lens, captured as he hobbled to a halt on a sprained ankle. The image looks like a montage but Brian is a purist, keeping any manipulation to a minimum.

The horses aren't too hard to find in the Dugway desert, a two-hour drive east of the Enola Gay hangar at Wendover Air Base. Pilots of the 509th Composite Group, the B-29 unit, may have seen similar bands of horses during training flights in preparation for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. Through photography, Brian wants to preserve not destroy. 'My whole theory in life is it's a gift and you have a limited time to do as much as you can. What can I do now that will have an effect? The world is a beautiful place, and we can be protectors of it.'

Brian is writing two novels, one about Homer's *Odyssey* set in space. He recently completed his directorial debut on a short film about Penelope Stout, the first female white settler of New Jersey, where he now lives. He is co-launching The Giving Herb, a wellness CBD company that gives to charity. Will there be time for this entrepreneur to commit to more photography? 'Absolutely. It activates the creative part of my mind and helps me see creative solutions to life problems that come up,' and with that, we drink up.



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Hanging out with wild horses for a couple of hours always results in something spectacular. The horses are relatively easy to find in Utah's Dugway desert

Brian was left with just five images when his hard drive was stolen – four of which are seen here. Competitions like TPOTY demand to see original files



Brian Clopp

Originally from New Jersey, Brian Clopp moved to LA to pursue a career in film-making. His travel photography has been featured in numerous places, including CNN's regular Travel Photo of the Day slot. See some of his latest photography work at [instagram.com/brianclopp](https://www.instagram.com/brianclopp).