

Toil & strife

Kevin McElvaney tells **Gemma Padley** how and why he photographed the men who mine sulphur along the slopes of a volcano in East Java, Indonesia

It's not your average subject – a sulphurous volcano in the Indonesian province of East Java – but for 27-year-old Kevin McElvaney, Ijen, which stands at more than 2,500 metres high, was a photographic challenge too good to pass up. The documentary photographer, who lives in Hamburg in northern Germany, came across the volcano after watching a documentary film about the veteran photographer James Nachtwey. In the 2001 film *War Photographer*, Nachtwey is seen photographing the Ijen volcano, situated towards the east of the region, battling, as McElvaney says, the heavy clouds of sulphur that almost engulf him.

From the volcanic sulphur mine at Ijen (one of the few remaining in the world), workers collect the hardened yellow sulphur, which they sell to local industries. The sulphur is used in matchsticks and to bleach sugar, among other purposes. Retrieving the substance from the edges of the volcano's crater is a dangerous, difficult job, and it isn't well paid, but despite this, many persist, lugging up to 90kg of sulphur down the mountain at a time before returning for the next load.

Intrigued by what he saw in the film, and not a bit put off by the inevitable challenges of such a trip, McElvaney, a former business administrator who picked up a camera four and a half years ago,

decided to take a look for himself. His reason was initially an aesthetic one. Given that Nachtwey images are in black & white, McElvaney wanted to see what the yellow landscape (caused by the cool and hardened lumps of sulphur) would look like photographed in colour. In October 2014, McElvaney packed his bags and set off for Ijen to find out for himself.

The journey was long. It comprised three flights, a ten-hour train ride and a couple of motorcycle journeys – but eventually the young photographer made it to the base of the volcano. Laden with his camera equipment and supplies, there was only one thing for it – to trek up the side of the volcano. With help from Imam, a former miner who stopped working at the sulphur mine in Ijen six years ago, McElvaney traversed

the rocky terrain and spent two days photographing the workers as they went about their daily business.

'It was far more dangerous than I'd expected and at times I asked myself why I was doing this,' says McElvaney. 'I thought it was a rumour that the workers carried 80 or 90kg of sulphur, but when I got there, I realised it was true.' It takes the workers around two hours to climb down the mountain with their hauls, which sell for around seven cents per kilogram, he adds.

The project

McElvaney's images show many aspects of the daily grind that the workers endure as they toil tirelessly against an imposing volcanic backdrop. We see individuals hauling heavy loads through thick smoke and the scars on the back of a worker, caused by the labour-

intensive nature of the work, but also a man pausing for a brief moment of rest, surprisingly, with a cigarette. McElvaney explains how strong winds made photographing all the more difficult, and describes how the volcanic gases would shoot up from naturally forming vents known as fumaroles – not to mention the density of the acrid smoke, which was often unbearable.

'Usually, there would be between 100 and 200 people working, I was told, but due to the poor weather conditions there were just 12 on the days I was there,' he says. 'From my research, I'd expected the volcanic gases to rise on one side of the crater, but these winds were [coming across], which is why many of the images look smoky.'

A gas mask protected him against the worst of the noxious gases, but it was not completely leak-proof. 'I

Above: A worker tries to find a safe way down avoiding the hot pipes. Sometimes people are burned by the hot steam, gases and fire. The pipes cap the fumaroles of the volcano and channel the gas down to the barrels

Far left: Six years ago this man (Imam, 38) decided to stop mining for sulphur, but after all these years you can still see the toll it has taken on his body

was coughing for four weeks after I returned from Indonesia,' he says. 'At the time, I had a long beard so the mask didn't fit properly. Sometimes the smoke was so intense we had to lie on the ground for a few minutes until the wind eased. It burns your eyes and is pretty warm. Some of the workers even passed out.'

Undaunted, McElvaney persevered, and managed to capture several documentary shots and landscape images. Ordinarily in his photography, he veers towards environmental portraits and tries to get to know his subjects, he explains, but, given that talking with his subjects was difficult in these conditions, he decided that a photo essay with a range of shots would be a more honest way of telling the workers' story.

'I always try to come back





Above: With full baskets, the miners walk along the steep crater walls very slowly and stop several times

Left: The miners use steel bars and other simple tools to cut off chunks of the solid sulphur



from any trip with personal stories and portraits, but the bad conditions made it near impossible to speak to the workers,' he says. 'And even when the conditions improved, they wanted to get on with their work and not spend time talking with me. Since I wasn't able to photograph them [in the way I wanted], I had the idea of photographing in more of a documentary way, which meant following them as they worked and showing what they do.'

Tricky conditions

McElvaney, who has also travelled to Ghana, Israel and South Africa with his photography, explains that

he needed to have a robust 'dust-proof' camera that could withstand the tricky shooting conditions, (he used a Nikon D800), and, since he was unable to change his lens due to the dusty, smoky conditions, stuck to using a fixed-focal-length 28mm lens. 'I had thought about changing my lens, but forced myself to use only this optic and instead move closer to the people,' he says. 'It's easy to make shots from a distance and stay in an easy environment, but...' he trails off. 'Plus, I usually shoot with this lens.' He also had a Polaroid camera and took pictures using this to show his subjects, 'as a way of saying thanks'.

Reflecting on his experiences in

East Java, McElvaney has some sound advice for others who may have plans to photograph in difficult regions. If possible, he says, link up with a guide who can help you with the logistical and communication aspects of the trip. Body language gets you so far, he says, but don't underestimate the importance of a native speaker.

'Local contacts are very important, especially if the conditions become increasingly difficult [to handle] or aren't what you had expected,' he adds. 'To have people who can translate the language or introduce you to others is a big advantage.'

At present, McElvaney is working on an edit of images from a recent trip to Israel and also hopes to visit Nigeria, Greece and the Ukraine to work on projects in the near future.

'I often dislike my images immediately after I've returned from a trip, and it takes me two or three weeks to make an image selection,' he confesses. 'I self-fund the projects I do, and have another job [to support myself] as I don't want to be forced to work on a story just to make money.'

'I see this as a phase in which I am investing in my photography career,' he adds. 'I would love to be the photographer who is booked to do an assignment because the person who commissions me likes my visual language.'



Kevin McElvaney is based in Hamburg, Germany. Kevin's previous projects include documenting the pickers at Agbogbloshie's e-waste dump outside of Accra, Ghana. To see more of Kevin's work, visit his website at www.derkevin.com

