

Alps test Lakewood IMAX daredevil

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Helicopters supplied the production crew of "The Alps." (Michael O'Donnell, MacGillivray Freeman Films)

Pasquale Scaturro has climbed Mount Everest three times, navigated the deadly Blue Nile River and confronted disease, wild animals and restless militias in corners of the world where most people will never set foot.

Filming an icy hike in the Swiss Alps wasn't the most difficult task of Scaturro's 25-year career as an extreme explorer and filmmaker, but PV — as he's known to his friends — didn't have an easy time of it either.

"The weather was very technically difficult," the 54-year-old said last week from his Lakewood home. "The constant decision-making was, 'Do we climb? Do we fly with a helicopter?' There were lots of differences of opinions on that. I won a lot of them."

The IMAX film "The Alps," which opens Friday at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, tells the story of John Harlin III's quest to re-create his father's fatal climb up the daunting North Face of the Alps' Eiger.

Scaturro's charge was to lead that filmmaking expedition, hiring the right people, making the climb with Harlin, and eventually re-creating it months later so the slow, expensive IMAX cameras could capture it.

That's where the bad weather came in. "It's like (IMAX filmmaker) Greg MacGillivray says: 'Clear skies are boring.' That's always true on screen," Scaturro admitted. "We used lots of helicopter shots here — ones we never could have used in Nepal."

Scaturro is referring to another little high-definition film he made in which he led Golden's Erik Weihenmayer to the summit of Everest. Not bad, considering Weihenmayer is blind. But IMAX presents different challenges than any other format.

"It's not like shooting video," Scaturro said. "With IMAX, there's no shot that's ever spontaneous. It's a very detailed, tedious way to shoot. Every shot is programmed and organized."

Scaturro's team pre-visualized with hand-held video cameras on the initial climb up the 6,000-foot Eiger wall known as the Mordwand, or "murder wall," for the number of lives it has claimed.

Utilizing IMAX without a plan would have been financially and logistically impossible. Each roll of IMAX film costs \$4,000 and lasts only three minutes. The 70-millimeter cameras weigh between 60 and 110 pounds and can cost up to \$400,000 each. The three-day Eiger hike would have assuredly taken longer if saddled with delicate, complex, heavy IMAX gear.

Scaturro is familiar with seemingly impossible tasks. A geophysicist by trade, the world traveler has led historical expeditions into the most remote parts of the planet, from Africa to the former Soviet Union. His company, Exploration Specialists, truly takes people (and eventually, movie-going audiences) where no one has gone before.

"For me, the Nile was way, way harder," Scaturro said, referring to the trip that birthed his award-winning film "The Mystery of the Nile."

That project, which used a pair of rafts to navigate 3,300 miles of river, took six months to film and nearly cost Scaturro his life several times.

"We shot it ourselves, and we're used to doing those type of things," he said. "Usually I'm running the whole show, although with 'The Alps' there were other people to deal with — the director, producer, the 'talent.' "

"The Alps" may not have been the most daunting challenge of Scaturro's life, but it still taxed him — and would have undoubtedly broken lesser explorers.

"It was demanding because the Eiger's not a simple mountain," he said. "We had tough weather, and I'm used to doing logistics. I've been leading expeditions for decades. What we attempted to do was outrageously difficult."

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