

Vest, price upon request, at Ralph Lauren, in the Galleria; shirt, \$375, at Dolce & Gabbana, River Oaks District.

## Man on a Mission

By Carita Rizzo

Photography by John Russo | Styling by Heidi Meek  
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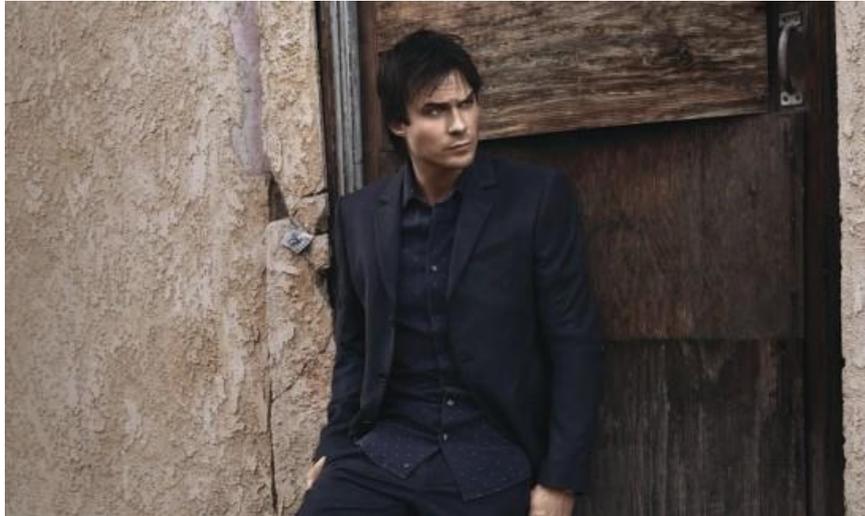
*With a strong sense of social responsibility, **The Vampire Diaries** star Ian Somerhalder sinks his teeth into protecting the environment and its wildlife.*

How many men have faced a smoke monster and a polar bear on a tropical island, then seduced and fed on a bevy of beautiful women? Only one, as far as we know. And that would be none other than Ian Somerhalder. The blue-eyed, chisel-jawed, 37-year-old actor is best known as castaway Boone Carlyle on the ABC TV series *Lost*, and as Damon Salvatore, a sexy, somewhat naughty 170-plus-year-old vampire who makes good use of every undead moment on The CW's supernatural drama, *The Vampire Diaries*. But this month, when Somerhalder appears in an episode of the National Geographic Channel's documentary series *Years of Living Dangerously* (airing Nov. 2), he experiences a real-life situation as mind-blowing as any faced by his fictional characters.

To find out the effect that humans have on climate change, and how our actions—or lack thereof—will impact storms in the future, Somerhalder traveled hundreds of feet below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean inside a three-man submarine. His mission: to explore what scientists refer to as a blue hole, an underwater cave that accumulates sediment over time, creating a perfect time capsule of past hurricanes. *“The most unnatural place for a human being to be is 400 feet below the surface of the water, but it holds such wonderment and such beauty,”* says Somerhalder. *“And it is emotional. I realized I was sitting on sand, shells and debris that was going to tell us the story of the climate. ... You feel, in that moment, at one with the planet.”*

At the very bottom of the deep blue sea, in an area of Earth that remains virtually untouched, he contemplated human nature and our place in the universe. *“I was just down there thinking: We are a powerful, really dumb animal,”* he recalls. *“We’re eating ourselves out of house and home. And we’re putting our future at risk for money.”*

Known as one of the entertainment world's most vocal environmental and animal rights activists, Somerhalder has been a United Nations Environment Programme goodwill ambassador; a participant in *Angry Birds: Champions for Earth*, the special tournament incorporating information on climate change into the popular mobile game; a supporter of WildAid (wildaid.org), an organization to end the illegal trade of shark fin, elephant ivory and rhino horn; and a proponent of Go Green Mobile Power (ggmpower.com), an industry leader in eco- efficient, off-grid power and lighting solutions for the government and entertainment industry.



Austin fit sports coat, \$1,398, and pants, \$495, both at John Varvatos, in the Galleria; navy cotton polka-dot button-up shirt, \$432, at Etro, River Oaks District; black shoes, \$595, at Salvatore Ferragamo, in the Galleria.

Born and raised in Covington, La., Somerhalder developed a strong social conscience when he was still young. *"I grew up pretty impoverished in the Southeast, in a very delicate ecosystem on a lake that borders New Orleans,"* he recalls. *"There had to be balance between nature and human. My father always taught me to find that balance. You have to give back what you take."* In 2005, Somerhalder witnessed his hometown ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. Five years later, the devastating effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil-drilling disaster prompted him to take action on a larger scale.

*"The Ian Somerhalder Foundation (isfoundation.com) was born out of the feeling of helplessness watching our government stand aside and let a company lie, cheat and steal from the people,"* he says. *"I watched my backyard destroyed."* With 6.4 million followers on Twitter, 9 million on Instagram and 17 million on Facebook, he's determined to spread the message of sustainable living, ethical treatment of animals and the importance of grassroots movements to the next generation. *"You change the world through the education of its youth. The greatest, untapped natural resource in the world are kids,"* says Somerhalder. *"It's all about knowledge."*

When talking about the need to save the planet, Somerhalder's enthusiasm is off the charts. But when he discusses his entertainment career, he's more pensive. *"That's who I am. I want to be an artist,"* he declares. *"I just really want to find the thing that makes me tick."* After eight seasons, *The Vampire Diaries* is ending this spring, an inevitability that Somerhalder considers bittersweet. *"There's an immeasurable amount of things that the show has provided,"* he says, noting that he has had the opportunity to direct two episodes and, at the time of our interview, is in the process of directing his third. *"I'm learning so much. I get to direct a fun episode with the people that I love, and it's a great environment because everyone here wants me to succeed. They don't want me to fail, and that won't be the case when I leave the*

*safe waters of The Vampire Diaries.”*

Still, he's ready for new challenges. *“It's been the most incredible experience, and I'm extremely grateful for it. But, now, the sky's the limit.”* Somerhalder plans to plunge headfirst into running Rare Birds Productions, the film and TV production company he started with his wife, the *Twilight* films actress Nikki Reed, to create thoughtful content that will positively impact the world. *“I think what's really important to us right now is starting to tell socially relevant stories,”* he says. *“I always think to myself: What are we teaching people? Particularly our young people. We have all these violence issues in the world... so I would just really love to start telling stories without blowing stuff up and killing people.”*

He'd also like to start a family with Reed, a longtime friend who he started dating in 2014 and married in 2015. *“The second we were around each other, and not [dating] other people, we just knew,”* he says. *“Oh, I will one day have amazing children with my beautiful wife. Absolutely, definitely.”*

Their brood already includes 10 animals. *“I live with someone who strives to find happiness and peace in the smallest things—whether it's sitting for five minutes under a tree or getting out into the country and spending time on our horses or even just going for a walk around the lake or riding a boat,”* he says. *“I am so blessed that I did, indeed, find this human being that can deal with me and is also the most caring, compassionate person I've ever known. That's why I wake up happy.”*

*Photo Assistants: Jason Bush and Mike Blumberg*

*Grooming by Daniel Curet with Criterion Group*

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