



CREDITS: DISCOVERY CHANNEL,
DEVIL'S ISLAND/PAPILLON (FRENCH GUIANA
& LOST CITY OF GOLD (PERU)

MISSION IMPROBABLE

Discovery Channel's new Face of Adventure, Olly Steeds, has just hit our screens in a major new series of historical mystery investigations. Richard Madden catches up with a refreshingly self-deprecating adventurer.

OLLY STEEDS HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS 'A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE NEW GENERATION: THE MODERN, MEDIA-SAVVY, HIGH-TECH, DIGITAL ADVENTURER'. BUT TO PROVE HE ACTUALLY EXISTS IN THE REAL WORLD, HE INSISTED ON MEETING OVER A PINT. HE GOT LOST ON THE WAY TO THE PUB. I BOUGHT THE BEERS.

Were you an adventurer from birth?

I think adventures are caused and defined by incompetence: the greater the cock-up, the greater the adventure. So yes, I probably have been an adventurer since birth – some people get athlete's foot, for some reason I always seem to get into trouble. One early memory was not liking school very much and so aged 8, I decided to walk 12 miles home – mainly across the fields and by the time I got home the local

police had dogs out looking for me. Sadly I never seem to wise up.

Any favourite adventure stories to tell us?

One of my favourites was my first great expedition across Mongolia and China to research an old communication highway, part of the Grass Silk Road that linked two competing capitals of the Mongolian empire, Karakorum and Yuan Shangdu (Xanadu of Coleridge fame). Sadly the expedition was rather badly planned and we ended up having to walk 1400km across the Gobi desert. Towards the end I stupidly, and rather rashly, decided to do what all good leaders should never do, and leave the rest of my team and walk the final 150km to the Chinese-Mongolian border alone.

I quickly ran out of food and water, got rather lost and life returned to the basics of taking one step in front of another. Each step was a step closer to survival.... well

that's what Sean Connery was saying, because fortunately he appeared in a vision and accompanied me through the ordeal. In the end, even Sean couldn't keep me going and I collapsed thinking I would never wake up again. I will never forget Sean's final words to me before I passed out: "Well that was rather silly wasn't it".

What did you do before you were a TV presenter?

I led a few expeditions but was, in fact I still am, an investigative journalist. I cut my teeth (they still hurt) as a guerrilla film-maker going to places that no else wanted to go (usually for good reason) and trying to report on the unreported - to Saudi and Yemen after 9/11 to look at the rise of fundamentalist Islam, to the Sahara to examine Tuareg slavery, to Burma to reveal the illegal trade in timber, drugs and gems that was keeping the junta in business. But the last one was working with the masters



of international investigative documentary, Channel 4's *Unreported World* – where I was investigating the plight of North Korean refugees in China. The majority are women, sold into the sex trade or as wives to Chinese villagers.

Your previous series living with remote tribes was a great success. Tell us a bit about it.

We have spent 95% of human history living as hunter-gatherers and there is so much of our cultural heritage and wisdom that has been lost in the path of our 'progression' – so we hoped to document the lives of some tribes before they were destroyed and lost for ever. My friend and co-presenter, Mark Anstice and I, lived with different tribes for four months each time to try to tell their story. We went twice to West Papua to live with the Mek and the Kombai (one of the last tribes thought to practice cannibalism) and to the Amazon to live with the Machigenga.

Did you gain any important insights from your time with the tribes?

Well there is so much we have forgotten from our past that is hardwired into our behaviour today, not least our pursuit of happiness that seems to have become a modern determinant of our time. And yet all the tribal communities I've been lucky enough to live with have an incredible spirit

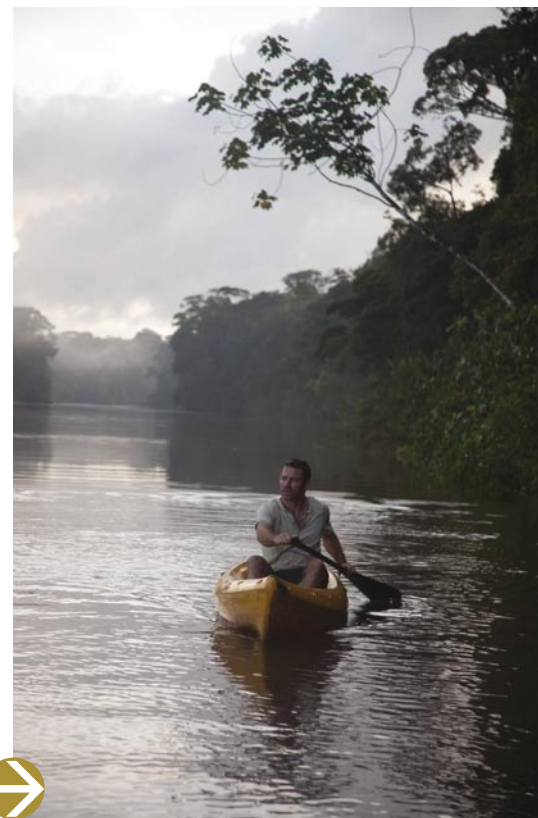
and joy of life that is unrivalled.

On average we laugh about 15 times a day in the UK, but with the Mek and Kombai we laughed together ten or twenty times that. Everything was funny. It turned out even a potato could be funny if you look at it in the right way. There seems to be a great tradition of laughter and happiness in those jungles – upheld in the midst of one of the worst genocides occurring on our watch where the Indonesian army have already killed over 100,000 tribal people in the past 40 years.

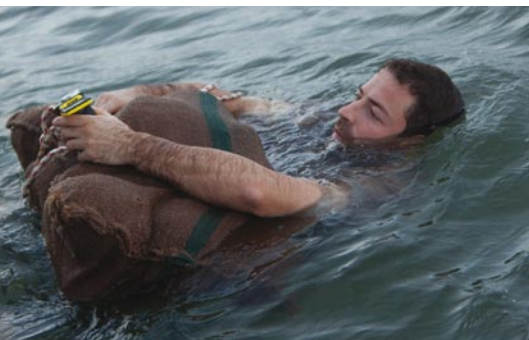
Despite these horrendous atrocities, every day when possible, the guerrilla fighters (the OPM – fighting for Papuan independence) stop whatever they're doing and perform the Happy Dance singing and laughing the only lyrics: "I am happy, I am with my friends and my family".

Tell us about your current series

I needed an excuse to eat goat testicles and go to the Corridor of Crime in a Russian enclave on the Baltic. Well really it was a chance to fulfil my childhood fantasy of being like Indiana Jones – I've spent much



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of the last year investigating some of the great historical mysteries – from the Ark of the Covenant, to Atlantis, Nazca Lines, Lost Cities of Gold, Nazi Treasure, Hitler’s Mummies (not his Mum, she was called Clara apparently) and even the Papillion story of escape from Devil’s Island.

I’m interested in them from a journalistic perspective and a human perspective. Asking tough questions, to see if there really is any substance, any hard evidence to these myths in the real world – and we travelled to the front line in each investigation to find out. Turns out that there’s a kernel of truth in all of them, and each one proved to be an absurd adventure of learning, danger and occasional hi-jinx incompetence.

Do you have a favourite anecdote from the series?

Well for me, people make the journeys and define the investigations and the more extreme the situation, often the more rewarding the experience. Where to start?

Anything from meeting antiquity smugglers in the West Bank, being offered a mummified head by grave robbers in Peru, taking a little too much San Pedro with a Shaman in the Nazca Desert, confronting a gun-wielding neo-Nazi over his beliefs that Hitler was a great guy, being given clues to a lost city of gold by drug smugglers in the high Andes or dodging human traffickers on the Maroni River in French Guinea whilst testing out whether it was possible to swim across the caiman-infested river.

You also set up iNOMAD and do a lot of work spreading the word to young people about the benefits of exploration. Tell us more.

iNOMAD has now morphed into Digital Explorer and that’s something I am most proud of. We’ve just launched the Academy of Exploration that enables explorers and expeditions to connect live with thousands of classrooms across the UK wherever they are in the world. The idea is that the explorers can come right into the classroom and a journey of a few can become a gateway for learning and understanding for many.

What are your plans for the future?

We need to get loads of schools and expeditions to sign up to the Academy – it’s FREE – so there will be no rest until UK schools, education and expeditions are working together properly. Also back to work with *Unreported World* on Channel 4 and a new series for Discovery. Plus I want to eat more scotch eggs.

MYSTERY INVESTIGATOR

Mystery Investigator: Olly Steeds is on Discovery Channel at 10pm on Monday nights (www.discoverychannel.com). Devil’s Island episode Monday July 5.

The Academy of Exploration:
www.digitalexplorer.com
www.oliversteeds.com

Faces of Exploration:
www.joannavestey.com