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The modern explorer



Paul Allen takes time out with Oliver Steeds, one of Britain's most accomplished young explorers

THE BRIGHTEST YOUNG star of British exploration is stretched out across a tattered sofa in his trendy north London studio. Tea served, he's effortlessly making small talk, while I'm beginning to sense what's odd about this scene; explorers out of expedition are notoriously irritable creatures, itching to pack their bags and bail. Oliver Steeds is clearly different. He seems to be as comfortable in the concrete jungle as he is in the real thing, but then it's just this quality that sets him apart from the old guard of exploration.

Steeds and his team of young explorers recently set out to follow the ancient Grass Silk Road, a 1,400-mile trade route between the kingdoms of the Mongol emperors, Genghis and Kubla Khan. As they travelled, the team simultaneously recorded their exploits on the Internet using a laptop, satellite phone and digital camera. For the first time in history, a communication highway of the ancient world was connected to the modern superhighway.

The innovation meant that when Steeds recounted his journey in a talk held at the Royal Geographical Society in spring, instead of facing a regular slide show, the guests were treated to a dynamic, multimedia-packed expedition travelogue.

The Grass Silk Road starts in the Mongolian steppes of Karakorum, slices a 1,400-mile path through the Gobi desert and ends in Xanadu, Kubla Khan's legendary pleasure dome in China. Steeds and his men took 66 days to complete the journey, 40 of which were spent on foot in the Gobi desert –

walking an average of a marathon each day. In ancient times, skilled riders raced across the entire highway in less than 10 days.

"The old riders would change horses at full gallop and eat on the way," says Steeds. "But we were totally unprepared. Three of us had never even ridden a horse before."

With a photographer, a filmmaker and a linguist on board, he dubs his team more of a "media circus" than a band of hardy explorers, but none of them was a stranger to expeditions.

Steeds first met Swiss filmmaker Yves Scagliola at a rave on the Great Wall of China. A professional snowboarder, Scagliola had lived with monks in the Himalayas, where he taught many of them his craft. Two friends from home completed the team: photographer Anthony Parkinson, and Edmund Brown, a Mongolian and Russian linguist.

Despite the harsh terrain and blistering temperatures, the men set out to live like nomads on the way, riding horses in the steppes, leading camels in tow across the desert, and only ever using one local guide at a time.

Disaster struck ten days into the expedition when Mongolian gangsters kidnapped the team and their horses. Steeds recounts part of the story, pauses and then asks casually, "Would you like to see for yourself?"

He sits me at one of the many computers in the studio, where I witness through real-time visuals and audio – without any risk of post-expedition

embellishment – exactly what the men experienced. Steeds caught their local guide stealing equipment and asked him to leave, offering wages and a payoff. The man demanded more money, and when refused, roused "thugs in a local town with batons" who took the team hostage. There is audible fear in the men's voices as they whisper into the microphones, and a manifest sense of relief when they successfully escape their captors.

Show over, he settles back onto the sofa and smiles, "You know the Mongolians were actually the kindest, most hospitable people I've ever come across."

In spite of the kidnapping and a later arrest by the Mongolian military on charges of espionage, physical harm on the trip came not so much to the men as to their equipment; camels trampled the video camera, the military confiscated two radio microphones and a satellite phone exploded following a huge solar charge. Despite these setbacks, Steeds still has 20 hours of film and audio footage, which he hopes will result in a television documentary.

There are also plans for another expedition, but the young explorer is currently busy promoting interest in exploration within companies and schools. He is the founder of iNomad, a collective of individuals dedicated to "communicating discovery through multimedia platforms".

"Exploration has always been the basis for progression," he says. "But we want to move away from 19th century ideas that it's about conquering lands, people and cultures. Exploration should be a medium for positive development."

iNomad director Jamie Buchanan-Dunlop includes commercial projects in this development, "We want to bring together businesses, explorers and the media. Through sponsorship, companies can access footage of real expeditions as they happen, request specific multimedia output, and

then use it to reach their market audience or enhance their brand. iNomad feels strongly that companies should see a return on their investment."

Steeds himself is involved with everything from corporate motivational speaking to staging art exhibitions and planning exclusive parties; nightclubs around the world already project images of iNomad expeditions on screens above their dance floors. The pictures reach thousands of euphoric clubbers, a generation of young people whose desire to travel abroad is stronger than ever.

"The fact that more young people are going out into the world is fantastic," says Buchanan-Dunlop, "but I have reservations about them using the world as an adventure playground."

Steeds' vision is to harness this wanderlust and direct it towards a positive end. "It's not that we've anything against gap-year travellers," he says. "Only iNomad isn't about wandering; it's about pursuing goals and sharing new wisdom."

The rhetoric may sound clichéd, but his enthusiasm for exploration is genuinely infectious. It is also refreshingly modern to hear that educating school children about responsible tourism and fostering corporate involvement in expeditions are as much a part of the young explorer's plans as stomping about in the jungle.

As I say my goodbyes to Steeds and his North London crew, it strikes me that exploration suffers from a habitual problem; ironically, the most daring and pioneering expeditions often lose their bite in post-travel presentation. Perhaps it's because the audience never quite feels part of the adventure, no matter how many slides they are shown. Steeds and his media circus have developed the perfect solution. Their skill lies in making exploration come alive for everyone – whether in the classroom, the boardroom or the Gobi desert. ■

Information

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