



Exploring cultures with Benedict Allen



By Mark Bidwell

Benedict Allen is an English explorer, environmentalist, film-maker and author of a number of books, including “Mad White Giant”, “Into The Crocodile Nest” and “Hunting the Gugu.” Benedict has become famous for his immersive style of exploration, by disconnecting from technology and diving into the lives and cultures of indigenous communities, from whom he learns survival skills in challenging and often hostile environments. He has recorded six TV series for the BBC, both traveling solo and with camera crews. In 2010, he was elected a Trustee of Royal Geographic Society.



It's great to have you on the program. How did you come to be an explorer?

I think it was through my dad. My dad was a test pilot and used to fly in his Vulcan bomber amongst other things, and it's still clearly in my mind, the thought of my dad going over our backyard with this huge charismatic plane the Vulcan and with other planes as well, Valiant The Victor, all of the V-bombers. The fact that my dad, someone I knew so well, someone I loved and respected could be a pilot, a pioneer, could be doing something really out of the ordinary, I think it just made me believe it was possible. I was a very curious child anyway, and I think we all are, but what made the difference to me was knowing that my dad was an exciting person, doing something that was cutting edge. As I grew older, I began nurturing his dreams. I was bit of a dreamer really, less practical than my dad, but I was thinking of these amazing places that my dad flew to, the Amazon, Borneo, New Guinea, and it was all very romantic. I read the stories of Shackleton, Speke, Stanley Burton, I just thought I wanted to be one of these people too. I think having this role model, my dad, made me believe it was possible. And people think I had money because expeditions cost money, but I didn't have it and I still thought it was possible, because my dad was around to make it seem possible. So I just worked in a warehouse, I was obsessive and I got enough money to get me on the first expedition.

And you've been to many very remote parts of the world, like the Sumatran and the Brazilian rainforests, Namibia, the Gobi Desert, the steppes of Mongolia. How do you prepare to go into these environments and to make the transition from Balham, where you were living when we first met, into some of these places? How do you prepare for the transition?

I want to say that I'm an explorer that is very different from the usual, in that my technique is entirely based on the indigenous people. And this all happened because no one was interested in my first expedition. I was someone who was just a student effectively, and my mom had said, "Look, if you want to be this, boy, you'll just gonna have to go for it, you're gonna have to find your own way of doing it, no one's gonna pay for you to do this." So I worked at a warehouse, I got myself a lot of money for my first expedition, which was purely based on the fact that there are indigenous people out there, the people who didn't see the forest as a problem, they didn't think of spiders or snakes, or the scorpions as a threat, they saw these things as just part of their home, and their home was a resource where they were getting their food, their meds and the shelter. So this is a financial solution for me at the beginning of my career, and I guess I really wanted to be an explorer from the age of 10. My mom said to give it a go, I gave it a go, but I quickly realized after that first expedition through the Northeast Amazon, just purely based on going to local people and asking for their help, that this would become more like a philosophy, instead of it being a practical solution to wanting to realize my dream of being an explorer. I turned to the locals, but they didn't have any money either. That was the idea, but I very quickly realized that these communities I was learning from had a different perspective. This forest, as I said, it wasn't a threat to them. It wasn't an alien environment. These weren't remote environments to them. This was purely what they knew and understood, and I began thinking my role as an explorer should be different from everyone else's. It should be about immersing myself, not going with a GPS, backup companions and all the rest, but simply slipping out into the Mrs. Nowhere as it were, and learning from people who could teach me all the skills to survive, and more than that. They could teach me how they saw the world, which wasn't a record that we had very much. We always saw remote people as the people out there, but I got to know numerous societies, and this became my approach and my philosophy. So in terms of practical preparation, it all began out there, instead of getting physically fit here. Obviously, I have a survival kit, the basics, studying maps, and so on. But all the skills, all the connections, all my backup will be based out there. People think of me as this weird throwback to another era, as I didn't take GPS, I didn't take a satellite phone, I didn't take a lot of these modern gadgets. But this is all part of the philosophy really, that you trust the local people because they understand that environment. They didn't use words like survive in these environments. You just live there. You don't need to struggle as long as you have the skills.

“In the end, the great lessons of the rainforest are the lessons of life, which is it's a highly competitive world out there. And if you're going to cope, you wouldn't do it alone, you gotta do it together.”

I think you put it very nicely in the intro to one of your books, you say that exploration isn't about conquering nature. It's exactly the opposite, it's about making yourself vulnerable, opening yourself up to whatever is there and letting the place leave its mark on you.

Yeah, to me this is what it's about. Exploration could be all sorts of things to different people. And I also believe it's what we all do as humans, we all are curious about the world. So to that extent, we all are explorers. There is certainly a profession, there's a lot of people like me who have a sort of expertise in going off into the middle of nowhere, surviving hopefully, and coming back and reporting about that place. But my particular focus is on that environment. Some of it is a military tradition, I suppose. It's almost an imperialistic tradition of going in there and asserting yourself, planting the flag, dominating the landscape, or using the landscape as an arena for your great feats - traditional exploration, races to the poles, mountaineers who plant the flag, even going to the Moon, you can see there's an element there, of not necessarily conquering but asserting, the nation trying to show that they are better than the other nation. But my philosophy is to go and listen and learn. It's a different approach. but I'm not saying that other approaches aren't valid, because there's a huge amount we have to learn about the world. This is another big thing, exploration isn't in the past, it is now, we all as curious individuals, as people who want to understand our world, whether it's about climate change, or habitat loss, or just the way it rains, ordinary things. We want and need to understand how the world around us works. That's all a part of exploration.

“Humans are very weak creatures, the strongest man on the planet would last only a few seconds against a hungry lion. We are physically weak, but mentally we are extraordinary, we can do amazing things if we can believe in a better tomorrow.”

You say you get engaged and you listen. I've got a number of your books in front of me, and my eyes still water when I think about Into The Crocodile's Nest. Immersion, in that sense, meant participating in an initiation ceremony, which involved getting tattooed with scales of a crocodile all over your back and your front, right?

Yeah, definitely, front and back. This is a very brutal ceremony, and I didn't fully understand it because this was a secret man-sacred ceremony, and it's what helped the Niowra cope in their world. This is in Lowland New Papua Guinea, in the Sepik. The Niowra believe that every male has to make himself as strong as a crocodile, and yet it was a secret ceremony where everyone was led away into an arena, away from the women and the village, and were cut repeatedly with bamboo blades. I think I lost about two pints of blood. That wasn't the end of it, unfortunately, that was the first day. From then on we were beaten four or five times a day all together, and we had to sing happy songs while we were being thrashed by the old man with sticks. But it was very incisive, I learned a huge amount. From my point of view, I was trying to understand this culture, which, like so many others, was disappearing, and I thought my role was to record this ceremony, and that's why I was allowed to go through it. But on a personal level, I also felt that if you call yourself an explorer, you should, like in any profession, do it with full commitment. And I felt if it's good enough for the local people, if I'm trying to understand their lives, it should be good enough for me as well if they allow me to get through this. And they did let me and it was very brutal, but very intriguing and insightful as well, because it taught me, as it did my fellows who were going through this with me, maybe 20 other local people, it taught us about ourselves, about my strengths, my weaknesses, and strengths and weaknesses of all those around me. And that's what the ceremony is all about. It's about making us tough of course, but in the end, the great lessons of the rain forest are the lessons of life, which is it's a highly competitive world out there. And if you're going to cope, you wouldn't do it alone, you gotta do it together, you got to know yourself, you got to know those around you, and you got to stick to them. Because the forest is too big to fight, this world is too big to battle. So you've got to find your way through it with the help of your fellows. It's a great life lesson, obviously for someone who's pushing himself to the limit, or risking his life a lot as I am, it's also useful to keep myself going.

That was at the beginning of your career. I'm wondering if you have exposed yourself to similar levels of, I won't call it brutality, but pretty intense physical rituals, since the physical side of your expeditions is pretty brutal? Was this unique, because you were putting yourself through this process or the ritual? Have you ever done it anywhere else, or was this just a one off?

It was a one off. I have to say the Niowra would be quite proud of it being called brutal. I think they did use a local equivalent of that word. They thought this ceremony should be brutal, because their role model was the crocodile. They wanted to show that they are the toughest people around to scare off the others who wanted their land. They were very unashamed about it, very unpolitically correct, to say “yes, we are the toughest, the angriest, and couldn't care less.” But no, I haven't gone through something like it, and I felt it would dilute that. Not the experience, but I just felt I couldn't cover my body with all sorts of tattoos. There wasn't much of me left to tattoo. Funny enough, I have got tattoos from two other cultures. I was living in the Mentawai Islands. in the Siberut which is west of Sumatra. And I was allowed to have their tattoo, and it unfortunately took three and a half hours of being jabbed with an old safety pin.

And a rusty one I think, wasn't it?

Oh, you remember?

This is in Hunting the Gugu I think.

Yes, I think so. I've managed to dismiss most of it from my memory. But yes, I've still got the tattoo. I felt very fortunate to be allowed to have these insignia which belong to them, they're not mine. But I also felt

that at another level it enabled me, by sharing these incredibly rich, but also important experiences in the life of young people in these communities, it helped me to get very much closer to them. I could never be one of them. I can never be a Niowra, a Crocodile Man as the phrase goes, but I could hope for minutes or days to be so immersed in it, I'd be distant from my world and fully acceptant of another world. It's so difficult to get in that stage where you totally let go of home, of all the things you've trusted to keep yourself alive, and to trust to other people's belief system.

Of course, there are lots of rituals in our society. We talked the other day about the military, how the SAS and Special Forces have very, very intensive rituals. Even on Wall Street, going to work for an investment bank, they drive you for the first couple of years, 70, 80, 90 hours a week. There's nothing unique about this culture, although it will manifest itself in a very unique way in the process you went through. But rituals are alive and well, and they all serve similar purposes around creating the sense of bonding and belonging, letting go of your past, and immersing yourself in the current environment that you're in.

“Listening is what's kept me alive. I think it is so important, and it seems like we're listening less and less to each other.”

Yeah, absolutely. And for me who was not only trying to learn about other cultures, but I wanted to survive in these places that could be very difficult, I had malaria in that very region I had it four times again since I went to that ceremony. So you've got to be tough, you've got to be resilient. The Niowra, they weren't beating their children just for fun, they believed that this would keep people alive in the end, they were doing it just to make a point that they were tough but they also believed this was valid. So same process, breaking the individual down and building him up again. I suppose it's important to remember that this role model was very relevant to them, the crocodile, a tough, territorial, intelligent creature is a great role model if you're living in the crocodile swamps, if you're sharing a habitat with a creature like that. And there is another aspect to it, which is that culture, the Niowra culture was very much at one with that environment. They are very balanced with that world, they knew what it took to cope in that world. And although we might think that these people are backwards, Stone Aged, primitive, brutal or whatever, actually, they have managed to exist in that environment without destroying it. They sort of got, I won't say immortality, but they found a way of keeping in balance. We have to be very careful about judging societies that seem very primitive, because we're destroying huge chunks of our planet. We have to approach them with a sort of sensitivity, to not dismiss these rituals, however painful or barbaric they might seem.

The other thing is, the concept of ownership in these communities seems to be far more akin to the sharing economy that everyone's talking about today, how they marshal and look after resources for multiple generations to come, versus just trashing the resources for individual edification today. There are a number of areas where we can certainly learn quite a lot from them, given the situation that we find ourselves in on the planet today.

Yes, and I found this a great personal sort of tug of war. There was I, trying to immerse myself, trying to understand another point of view. But I'm the last person actually to be able to live in this environment, in a strange way. I've had to learn to exist very much as an individual, I've loosened the bonds with my own society in order to slip into various other groups around the world, and I've had to do things very much as an individual. But individuality is something that's, I won't say frowned upon, but it just wouldn't be understood, because the part of that ceremony that I've been talking about is about bonding. It's all about working together, because that's how things are, and without these bonds, without everyone knowing everyone's else's responsibility, their duties, the whole thing falls apart. So that's why we have these so-called tribal cultures. So there's an onus on looking back at what our ancestors did was this, and therefore we should follow that model. And that, of course, is very dangerous for us, it's the opposite of our approach, I think we look forward, and I suppose two great badges of our culture are individualism and this idea that change is good. Amongst so many of the societies I've lived with change is bad, or at least it's regarded as dangerous. And we think of change as brilliant, you grab whatever opportunities come along, you look for any possible solutions. And this is definitely very much not the way things happen in nearly all indigenous cultures. It's all about fending off outsiders, fending off values that are alien, and I found this great difficulty personally, because I wanted to learn so much, to try to adopt values of local people in order to immerse myself, and to be sympathetic to cultures I was trying to learn about. But then I think “oh why didn't they just build a toilet there, instead of everyone slipping off into the trees and defecating wherever, or just hygiene, washing hands before you eat, and the simple little things that will keep you alive if you're someone like me, who's vulnerable, living in the rain for six months at a time. Simple things, innovations, they are just not thought of, not invented or not thought as necessary. There has always been this antagonism in a way within myself, an ultimately individualistic person, but somebody who had to cut himself off from the world for six months at a time, and be free to adopt other cultures. There's a natural tension there, I think, but it's also useful tension. I can never be anything other than someone from my own culture. And it's important for me to recognize, in the end my home is back in Britain. I used to get back to the Niowra people, because I felt I owed so much to them, I felt I needed to learn more about their culture. But in the end, it was getting very difficult for myself, I no longer belonged to my own culture, because I was getting more and more like someone who's a foreigner, or someone who had alien thoughts, sort of fitted into Balham less and less. And yes I knew I could never marry and settle down, which was increasingly what they wanted me to do locally in the forest of New Guinea. Endless women would turn up, hoping or expecting to be my bride, and I just felt I couldn't do that either. In the end, I had to keep on moving to different cultures, and always go back to home, in one place which is essentially Britain, to remind myself where my origins were. So I think if you lose sense of yourself, you lose everything really.

Absolutely, it's been crucial for me, whether I'd been ill or just immersed in other worlds, you need to have that core strength. And that comes from a sense of knowing who you are.

And the geography associated with that as well.

Yes, exactly. You always need to have a very strong idea of what you are fighting for, the way out, home, mentally and physically, how to get out of the place you're in.

Let's move on a little bit. You found yourself in some quite hot spots. I remember the story of you having to eat your companion, a dog, as you came out of the Orinoco, where you've been shot at by Pablo Escobar. How do you find the resources within yourself in that situation to survive? Where do you think this comes from?

Some of it might be innate, because having a test pilot as a dad. I do have quick reactions, I do have a sort of mental resilience I think, I've got a very high pain threshold. But I don't know how much that plays a part, it's very difficult to know. I think a lot of it happens as a sort of practice. rather like soldiers who are taught how to cope in a firefight. The first time you're using live rounds you're prepared for that moment by using lots of blanks and target practice to build yourself up. You're given very, very clear instructions that when it all goes wrong, you've got to do this thing or the other. I've had to learn it on the job. I was never in the military, never trained to be an adventurer. It just happened, I went in the deep end, my first expedition from the Orinoco to the Amazon winded up by me being attacked by gold miners. Everything was going fine before that, learning from local people. Then I was chased by these two men with knives, jumped into my canoe with the dog, canoe capsized, I lost everything and had to walk day after day out of the forest. I think I survived largely through luck. I was incredibly naive, I just didn't know how out of depth I was, and I survived because I ate the dog, because I just hung out in there somehow with malaria. And it was terrible, terrible time, really terrible for having eaten the dog, but just the battle of three weeks thinking you're not gonna see your mom and dad again... I was then 22. But I still got through it, and that gave me a lot of inner strength and it helped me the next time. So on the next expedition, I went through that initiation ceremony you mentioned, and that gave me more resilience. I think a huge amount of this is purely the power of the mind, the mental strength. It is so much more important than the physical stuff you hear about on the telly. You know, all these survival tricks as it were, there are certain things you need to know about food, shelter, water, the key elements of survival, but it's about the power of the mind. It's not just about these dangerous situations when you're being shot at, or you've been attacked or robbed as I've been a lot. It can be as dangerous when you're just losing your focus. You're tired, you haven't eaten for a couple of days, you're sick, you've got dysentery. Those are tricky times when your life can slip away, especially in rainforests, there are lots of unknown fevers and infections. You can just lose the appetite for life, lose a sense of all things you care about like home, getting out of there, to live another day. You just turn in on yourself, unless you're very careful and you learn to be resilient. I suppose some of it are certain tricks. I have a survival kit around my waist, the basic tools of survival to lessen the odds of things going wrong. I duplicate as much as I can, I have two packs if possible, everything's duplicated, I have a survival kit as well. I have boots but I also have shoes, the shoes for the nighttime so I don't get bitten by a scorpion or something at night. You will also be able to wear those shoes instead of your boots in the day if necessary, if these get broken or something. In my survival kit I got the ultimate backup: fishing hooks, fishing line, distress flares, a little bit of waterproof paper to write messages on.

You have a checklist, which I found quite interesting as well.

That is an interesting one. I was just mentioning a few tricks, but this to me is the best trick of all. As I said, survival is mainly about the mind. So yes, it will help me having fishing hooks and fishing line, but you've got to preserve your mind. Humans are very weak creatures, the strongest man on the planet would last only a few seconds against a hungry lion. We are physically weak, but mentally we are extraordinary, we can do amazing things, any one of us, if we can believe in a better tomorrow. So power of our mind is quite extraordinary thing, we can keep on going, keep on believing. So I have a bit of paper, and it's very simple. It talks about a plan A, plan B. Plan A is what you want to do, Plan B is when you have to deviate from that plan. And Plan C is when you're getting this bit of paper out, it's when its all gone wrong, and it's your exit strategy. You're now focusing not on you what you wanted to do when you set out from Balham or Hammersmith, or Stoke Poges. It's how to get back again to that place: You've abandoned your original plan, it's now about survival. It's very straightforward stuff, a list of seven or eight points, things like adapt to changing circumstances, you're only as strong as the weakest member of your group, look to your surroundings as a resource instead of a threat, and on and on like this. Simple, obvious reminders about the things that you just need to know deep deep down to tell you that it is okay, that things are possible, they are bearable. It seems like the obvious pointers, but if you're in a situation when you've just been robbed by two men who I really trusted, thought they were my friends, it was better just to rob me, they thought I was going to die anyway, I was walking alone through the rain forest with two bags, we made a little bridge to get over with a pole cut out of a tree, made this bridge with this pole across this river, and they walked across the river to the other side with my two bags. Then they kicked this pole away and they walked off having robbed me and left me to die. The shock was not that I was now suddenly left alone with only my survival kit, and with 100 miles to go to the outside world. It was a shock that my friends were doing this. It's a terrible psychological moment when you think you're worthless. You can't afford yourself to believe you're worthless, you've got to start believing in yourself, so one way to do that is look at the

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pictures of homes. So now when I've got children, I have photos of my children in my survival kit. It's that important, just to believe, you got to find something. And then you remember your basic lessons, which is that the forest is a resource, that you're not actually alone. That's another key, none of us are actually alone. One of the most lonely places I find is a city. When you first arrive in the city, or working in an office environment, you just feel you're all alone, you got your project, but actually there are resources all around you, not just the people in the office, they might be bullies, but those who believe in you, your grandmother, your dad, people who might have died, but they still left something, they pass on messages of belief to you, and you gotta draw on them. So even in the rainforest, I felt I wasn't alone, because a lot of people over the years have taught me stuff, people like the Niowra and that crocodile initiation ceremony. Another group were the Matsés an Amazonian indigenous people who had a different role model, not a crocodile, but the jaguar. The Jaguar is another top predator, highly sensitive, intelligent, agile. They look to this animal for strength. And I think of these people, the Matsés, particularly a man called Marco Pablito taught me a huge amount about hunting and so on, and I thought he was not here to help me, but even his children could cope in that world. I thought of the little children he had, his girl called Lucy, when she was eight she knew 20 sorts of herbs, and those herbs were disinfectant, she would have these leaves she could gather and she brought them on the skin for disinfecting, so she knew a huge amount about the forest. And I thought if a child could see this place as a home, maybe even I can, so that made me feel I'm not alone. I picture that little child walking ahead of me, and how other boys used to hunt with bows and arrows. That built me up again, and gradually I got back my self-belief, and with that self-belief you can bring about change, you can afford to commit yourself more. With that sort of resilience growing in me, I managed to get out, and the way I did that, in that particular case of walking a hundred miles was again turning to that bit of paper. Another little note I'd made was to break down impossible obstacles. What I did was count every single pace and notched up a 100. For every hundred paces, I made a little mark on a stick, and then carried on, following the compass bearing walked more towards South-East, and gradually walked towards the end of that stick. Even looking at that stick made me feel better, I thought when I get to the end of that stick, I will have survived, I would have gone out of this hell and I'll be back with my family.

Wonderful. So you talked about your family. I'm curious how you think about risk now that you are a parent?

Oh, it's terrible, it's all gone wrong, really. I had to commit myself thoroughly to my dream, which was to be an explorer. And off I went. And my mom and dad, it must have been so hard for them, not my dad really, because as a test pilot he was used to risk. I thought he sort of expected me to go off and do something like this, as he had. But my mom was saying goodbye to her only son. And now unfortunately it's all different, my mom and dad have died. It's now me with children. And I'm not saying goodbye to them yet, well I am, I mean they're not leaving, it's still me leaving. But they are dependent on me, and that is the big difference. They rely on me and it's very hard. I should say I don't think of myself as a risk taker. It's quite an important thing. People do see me as a risk taker, and I suppose I do take risk more than most people. But I calculate risks all the time, I spend a huge amount of my time thinking about risk, mitigating risk. Whether I turn left or right as I walk through the forest, odds of finding water down there, 5 out of 10, odds for finding water up there only 3 out of 10, and I'm doing this all the time. Always looking back to the last people I saw, whom perhaps I could retreat to if it all goes wrong, and building up little networks and contacts all the time in case things go wrong, second guessing different scenarios. I think of myself as a challenge taker, not a risk taker. Maybe I'm fooling myself, but I think it's important to bear that in mind. I wouldn't have lasted as long as I have if I was I was just care free. I spend a lot of my time angst ridden.

You remind me of an interview I heard with a guy called Alex Honnold, who's a free solo climber. He said he goes up the side of El Capitan, which is three and a half thousand feet, without a rope. And he gets asked this question all the time. His answer is exactly the same as yours. He manages risk, he knows the twenty-two hundred specific moves he has to take, and the order, and he's practiced them all for two or three years. He goes when he's ready, and if he doesn't feel ready, he stops. It's fascinating for people who don't actually understand what that means or can't put themselves in your shoes or in his shoes. It's quite hard to get our minds around it. But what you're saying is that's how you live, that's how you think about the world.

I think the trick is not fooling yourself. It is so easy to start believing you're a superhero, or simply that you've done it lots and lots of times before, therefore, you can be relaxed about the situation. And it's happening to me now rather more, because I'd stopped doing what I was doing. I was in the Arctic and I got separated from my dog team, and I thought ok, that's one too many risk-taking, it's all gone wrong, I'm now gonna stop. So I actually did stop my career. But I started going again after a long, long gap, 15 years or so. I thought "oh, well, this is easy" and I realized I just have to reassess everything. I was going back to rainforest, it almost felt like second home really, getting back into the forest. I thought "no, no, no, hold on." I've forgotten so much. And you've really got to do the reality checks and remind yourself that you're not the person you once were, because things change. I'm now 59 years old, and I'm not the 22-year-old who first got to know the rainforest. It might be the same forest, but you yourself have changed. You got to be measuring yourself all the time, absolutely scrupulously, rigorously testing yourself. Reminding yourself who you are, what state you're in. It's very easy to just get a little bit easy, little bit casual, and pay the consequences. I think that is absolutely right, it does become sort of instinctive, this survival instinct as a way of approaching an obstacle, but it's always dangerous. You can play tricks with yourself, and of

course, there is always the possibility of something that isn't preparable for. For example, I was in New Guinea just over a year ago, when I disappeared.

And you drew quite a lot of flak for that, didn't you, in the media?

Yeah, I did, because people didn't really understand what I was doing, they thought I was some David Livingstone, someone left over from another era. I think they had no idea at all that I've been doing this for 35 years. Yes, I disappeared off the map, just as I used to all those years ago. It excited the imagination of everyone when I was just about 10 days late coming out of the forest, which isn't that long a time. Its true, I did have malaria and dengue fever, and I was in quite a bad shape by the end. But what happened was to me totally unpredictable. There was a battle going on effectively between two lots of people. And this was a problem due to the outside world, actually. There's a big gold mining operation happening on the edge of the forest, the battle broke out and a lot of social unrest. And it's outside my skill set. Living in the rainforest is one thing, but fighting is not my thing. That would have been okay because I avoided that area, but then, the next problem was I got Dengue Fever which is incurable, but even then I had a backup plan for that, which was to head to an airstrip and everything should have been fine. Except that airstrip had also been attacked separately, radio has been smashed up and so that backup went wrong. But you sort of get the idea now, that there's always a backup plan, and the backup plan to the backup plan. You need about five of these backup plans to collapse before it really gets serious. That's what happened, the whole stream of unlikely events. But this is a possibility, I'm afraid it does go with the territory. But then if someone like me doesn't try it, then well... It doesn't worry me, we're in such a health and safety world, aren't we? Even adventurers are expected to take all the latest gadgets, not risk. To some extent, risk is good. Sometimes you gotta just give things a go, otherwise what are we?

You went in, as you always do, without a cell phone, without GPS, with this concept of disconnection. Many of our listeners, like me, really can't survive a few hours without cell phone coverage. When we spoke the other day, you talked about how important it was in your mind to actually be willing and able to disconnect occasionally.

Yes, it's very interesting to me, because you mentioned the flak I had received through not taking a satellite phone and not taking a GPS. To me, it's part of philosophy, which is you look to the local people, they have the expertise. In the New Guinea, people I was with and even I could get out of the forest much, much quicker than a helicopter could ever come in the rain forest to try and get me out. There's expertise, and I want to look the locals in the eye and say "look, I'm doing this on equal terms with you, I'm no more likely to be rescued than you are" and so on. With that comes a change in relationship. Locals would no longer be guides, they'd be friends, and that friendship is incredibly important, because when the chips are down you want people who are not just with you because they're paid, but because they're your buddies, they will do things for you, and you do everything for them. But yeah, I think the criticism I received was largely about why I didn't take all this technology, just hide a satellite phone at the bottom of my rucksack if perhaps I'd need to use it. People were saying that I'm a leftover from another era, I'm a sort of dinosaur. I think it's so important that some of us do disconnect. Weirdly, this philosophy of disconnecting, separating, just disappearing, immersing myself in another world, it wasn't so much relevant to the Victorian era as it's relevant now. Now we need to step aside and view the world from a different point of view. Journalists talk about churnalism, the same ideas go round and round on social media and so on, because people don't step aside, the 24 hour news cycle, the same ideas, get run, and run. But it's incredibly important that someone, hopefully more than just me, totally stands back, gets a different perspective on what the situation is, and on our society and who we are. Far from being inactive, I'd argue that it has actually become more relevant, for explorers at least, to cut themselves off. I didn't mean all exploring, some adventurers do a great role of educating children by giving updates from Antarctica. But for me, and I think this should be encouraged amongst all of us from time to time, that we stand back, and switch off and switch on to other things, meaning not gadgets so much, as the world around us, different perspectives, takes on life, contradictory takes. Listening is what's kept me alive. I think it so important, and it seems like we're listening less and less to each other.

I heard the definition of the internet as being like a giant confirmation bias machine. They strengthen your biases because you're living in a giant echo chamber. I hear from executives running companies, who are desperate just to step out of their industry or their organization, just to learn more, to get a different angle on how the customers are evolving or how the regulators are evolving. But it's very, very hard to do that unless you actually take a physical step or a mental step out of your comfort zone. That's fascinating. I'm mindful of time, so maybe we can just begin to wrap up with the three questions that I sent across to you. So the first one, what have you changed your mind about recently?

It's about my whole job I suppose. I've always struggled to describe what I do, but it is a job, my profession, my activity as an adventurer. I stopped in the year 2000, which I briefly mentioned. I lost my dog team in a blizzard, and I decided I had taken one too many risks. This particular occasion is a clear example of when I allowed myself to be too thrilled about a situation, I pushed myself, and pushed until I was almost going to die. I did find my dog team again, but I decided to come out of the Arctic and get safely home. I stopped my profession. For all my talk of mitigating risk and how careful I am, I was pushing myself harder and harder. I got comfortable living in rainforests, then I've pushed myself to desert, pushed myself to the Arctic, going to harder and harder environments. And I thought I'm just going to die

one day, so stop. I'd stopped, and I found myself lured back into this world after about 15 years. I went off to help a friend, Frank Gardner, BBC security correspondent. He's in a wheelchair, and he wanted to see birds of paradise in Papua New Guinea. I went off with him to find these birds of paradise. It was a film shoot with the BBC camera crew, but I was reminded in this accidental way of what I had left behind. I thought this was ridiculous, I've turned my back on a whole, not career, but a foundation of knowledge about indigenous people that I've lived with for decades all around the world, living isolated from my own culture. So I thought I had to come back to this. I allowed the fear of risk, fear of making mistakes, to actually preclude a whole chunk of my life. After all, these environments are now radically been denuded and deteriorating. I thought I owed these places an explanation in a way, or certainly I needed to put myself to better use. So instead of sitting in the bottom of the garden in my shed in Twickenham where I was living then, I thought I'd be going out there. So that's what I've done. My worry is, I do now have children and I worry about that. But I now try and take less risk, or certainly mitigate risk even more and make sure the trips are shorter. But I've totally changed my view, which is that I should not retire from active life. I should actually get more active, I just have to do it in a better way to make sure I don't mess things up for my children and not appear.

Excellent. Second question. How do you access fresh perspectives, particularly when you're facing real challenges?

It's a difficult one to answer, because sometimes I have challenges back home. I'm wondering now whether to commit myself to another expedition. There are two ways: either I go for a run, I try to get myself very fit, and I feel I didn't do fitness in a very interesting way. What I do is run around a running track, and it's a sort of a meditative thing, I work through problems. But also I turn to my wife. My wife is in a way taking no interest in my career whatsoever. She hates the jungles, she hates the desert, she hates spiders, anything that creeps and crawls she loathes. But the great side to that is that she's someone who is very down to earth. I suppose that's why I married her, it just helps having someone who's apart from my world, who clearly, hopefully cares about me. So I simply ask her what she feels about things. I think it's important whether that person is a family member, a loved one or just a friend, or even a stranger, just to have someone to go to who's outside your world as she is, she's not part of the profession. It's good not to be too tribal, not to consult people who are meant to be the experts, but actually consult with people outside your expertise, because they have a different view: it's that perspective that's so precious, especially for me who's a loner, but also who is very driven. And there's a real danger with driven people, ambitious people, that they follow their own dreams and not get a grip on reality.

That resonates with me as well. Final question, what's been your biggest stumble or low point, how did you recover, and what have you learned from that?

I think probably my first expedition when I was attacked and ended up eating my dog. That whole expedition, not just the fact that I nearly didn't survive, but when I emerged out of the forest, I wasn't believed. My peers, my seniors in the expedition world, the Royal Geographical Society, they just thought I made up the whole adventure.

This is *The Mad White Giant*, isn't it?

Yes, it's my very first book. I was an unknown person, I was 23 at the time when I wrote the book, and I pulled off this extraordinary expedition. It's true in a way that I didn't deserve to pull off the expedition, because I was useless, I was a bit of baggage really for the local people that just kept me alive. The indigenous people just passed me on like a parcel through the forest, these kind people didn't want me to die I suppose. So I pulled off his journey which I had no right to pull off, and I didn't really understand the forest or what I had even achieved. So lots of people just said it was just a fraud. And just as well, I'd already gone through that brutal initiation ceremony and actually contacted another indigenous group in West Papua before the publication, because if it hadn't been for that, I would have been finished. So that was right at the beginning of my career. Physically I was a wreck, I had two sorts of malaria and almost starved to death. And secondly, no one believed my story anyway. And to pull yourself up from that, I remember my mom said "your day will come one day." But it seemed to take a long time coming, and I just had to hang on in there. But it almost broke me in terms of my belief in myself, it's very hard to come back from everyone doubting you, and physically being ill as well. It felt double, physically and mentally, really ground down, but I just sort of ploughed on, and just be stubborn about it.

Lovely. Well, I guess that prepared you for the initiation ceremony. We'll put all the links to your books in the show notes. Where can people get in touch with you? What's the best, is it your Twitter feed or your website?

Oh, yes. I'm not the most high tech person in the world. My website is perhaps the best thing, www.benedictallen.com.

We'll put that in the show notes so that people can reach out and get some of your materials, and drop you a line if they want to connect. This has been wonderful. The first time we met was over the telephone, thirty-something years ago and it's been great, I've been following your career. I got a pile of

your books here in front of me, and it's been wonderful to hear the inside track on some of your stories. Many, many thanks for your time, and let's keep in touch.

Yes. Well, I hope to meet you, have a pint or some schnapps or whatever you drink over there.

Either of those. All of the above. But many thanks for your time. Have a great day.

Yeah, thank you very much.

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