

Expanding his horizon



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Left: The Lemaire Channel in Antarctica. Above: Whale watching in Greenland, with Richard's home at sea in the background.

Expedition Photographer, Richard Sidey, talks about his life less ordinary.

RICHARD SIDEY HAS BEEN privy to some of the world's most rare, remote, timely and surreal sights our planet has to offer. Working as Expedition Photographer and Videographer for Silversea Expeditions, he spends eight months a year living at sea and documenting the sights and experiences of the guests on board. His travels have meant that he has been able to visit and capture some of the most extreme existences in our world. Reindeer herders of far-east Russia, the Inuit people of Canada and Greenland and a tribe deep in Panama's Darién Jungle are among those that have shared their way of life with Richard's lens. At age twenty-seven, it is likely that he has seen more of the world than many would see in their entire lives.

Getting involved with this work "was a combination of coincidences and of saying yes, with a little bit of luck and a lot of determination," says Richard. His family history, however, suggests that he may also be genetically predisposed to a life less ordinary. A great-uncle of his desired to live in solitude on a desert island. He lived self-sufficiently for seventeen years on the remote Pacific island of Suvarrow, until his death at the age of seventy-seven. No doubt choosing this way of life meant having an extraordinary sense of mind and purpose. Existing that far out of the norm certainly wouldn't be many people's cup of tea but something about the challenge appealed to the

man's pioneering spirit. It is apparent, on meeting Richard and his inquiring nature, that he has inherited this legacy.

"I've always been fascinated with maps. I can look at maps for hours and hours." A keen traveller, he had his first taste of it at a young age, when he camped around Europe with his parents. "I loved tracking where we went as we jumped from country to country. I loved expanding my horizon as I went to places I hadn't been before and making my world bigger." The enrichment that Richard found in travel stayed with him, leading on to more adventures in his adulthood. He has traversed Canada from coast to coast and completed a massive loop of Europe. Richard insists you don't need to be rich to do it either, so long as you are prepared to be a bit resourceful. "Unlike what most people think, you don't need much money to travel. For instance; two months across Canada cost me \$72 in accommodation." He insists his intrepid exploration of the world has not gotten him into many life-threatening situations. However, his near misses include nearly getting caught in a bush fire, almost stepping on a highly poisonous snake and being charged at by a Grizzly Bear.

Thanks to his grandmother, Richard found himself on his first expedition to Antarctica at the end of 2003. "She likes to talk a lot," says Richard. She had spread the word



Above: Grizzly Bears at feeding time.

that her grandson was working in a bar in Wanaka. At that time there was a Russian expedition ship called Icebreaker, in the port at Hobart. They were in dire need of a bartender to start immediately and the only agent for the ship lived in Wanaka. After a brief interview, Richard's bags were packed and he left the next day to join the crew. While he was there to bartend, he also spent a great deal of time taking photos and filming. His talent was recognised and he was asked to provide guests with some of his work. "I got back from three months working aboard this Russian ship and my whole career path had changed. I wanted to get back to Antarctica, it kind of gets in your blood. I needed to see it again."

Richard isn't sure what it is about Antarctica specifically but thinks anyone that has been there would agree it leaves a lasting impression. The sheer vastness of the place forces a person to understand incomprehensible scale. The ship would spend days navigating around icebergs that were sometimes the size of Germany. During the first weeks of his voyage Richard maintained a voluntary state of insomnia - mesmerised by the scenery around him, he did not want to miss a thing.

Richard worked alongside a crew made up entirely of

Russians, who became like family during his time on the boat. "There was a lot of vodka. After work I'd try and work on my relationships with the other crew. They lived on deck one and two which was below the waterline. If you went down there you wouldn't come up for a few hours because you would get sat down with a few bottles of vodka and some dried fish." He now works mainly alongside a Filipino crew, who spend most of the year away from their families in order to support them. "They live a life that seems very hard by our standards, being separated from their families for long periods of time. Yet they are happy and their cheerfulness is humbling."

Life on the ship tends to be fairly comfortable. He gets his own cabin and has a choice of either the Filipino fare of rice, vegetables and meat of varying combinations with the other crew, or a six-star, five-course luxury meal with the guests. "The Filipino food mainly consists of rice and when I asked one girl how she could eat so much, because she was so tiny, she said: 'No rice. No power!'"

In addition to being catered for, he is also excused from life's usual domestic administration. "The main thing about living at sea is that you become useless. I don't do my laundry,



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Clockwise from Top Left: (Arctic) Iceberg & Zodiacs; Central America in the Darien Jungle with the Emberá locals; Richard Sidey; Guanaco in Torres del Paine; Elephant Seals fighting in South Georgia.



I don't make my bed, I don't tidy my room, I don't cook, I don't do dishes, and I don't go supermarket shopping. Everything is done for you and when I come home I'm absolutely useless around the house." However, despite the perks, Richard also mentions that you can get sick of living at sea. Finding your own space or just going out for a walk are luxuries that he misses. "You feel like you're stuck in a tin can sometimes. But the nice thing about my ship is that you do get off every two or three days and do an expedition somewhere like in a jungle or out on a glacier."

During one recent expedition, Richard was part of a team that travelled deep into the Darién Gap. Consisting of undeveloped swampland and forest, the

area separates the Darién Province in Central America from Colombia in South America. As building roads there is very expensive and the environmental consequences are seen to be too great, this area is the missing link in the Pan-American Highway which would otherwise connect North and Central America to South America. Travel is largely by the waterways and rivers, which means that the few people living here are some of the most isolated in the world. Richard had a chance to spend some time with one of the Emberá tribes that inhabit

this inhospitable place. The people they encountered hadn't seen white men for over a year and Richard was bowled over by his experience with them. They were treated as honoured guests and, in an enormous sign of respect, Richard, as the only single man on the trip, was presented with one of the tribe's most beautiful women as his personal guide. "We both spoke a little Spanish so we could communicate with one another. She showed me around their village and I loved their way of life. They work about four hours a day, all helping each other, and then spend the rest of the time just relaxing and playing

with their kids." Richard still remains slightly unsure of what the chief's intentions were in presenting him with the young lady and that perhaps he was trying to engineer a courtship.

"When I left she asked when I would be back. As it happened we were going back in two weeks, she said she'd wait for me. I'm not sure what she meant by that." It was a unique and fortunate experience for Richard. He is excited about the prospect of revisiting them this year and continuing to build relationships with the tribe that live a life so far removed from his own.

Wildlife and nature have also treated Richard to some astounding sights. He notes one of his most surreal travel experiences as being the northern lights, while on an

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expedition in Greenland. Diligently, he ventured out into the cold, night after night, determined to watch this phenomenon until eventually his efforts were rewarded. Taking his place on a deck-chair, he spent hours entranced by the sky.

Another special place for him is South Georgia, which he refers to as "The Garden of Eden for wildlife". South Georgia is now only inhabited by government officials and scientists, otherwise it is home to vast numbers of sea birds and seals including Albatross, King Penguins and Elephant Seals. Their expedition landed at an old whaling station. "Landings on South Georgia are always a bit up in the air. The remote island is subject to large swells and adverse weather. No matter what, you always need a bit of luck on your side." Once on the beach, he found himself surrounded by hundreds of thousands of the majestic King Penguins and also witnessed an aggressive fight between two male Elephant Seals. He captured this up close and personal experience on film, just ten metres from the battling mammals. The animals on the island seem to have no fear of humans, allowing Richard to take incredibly detailed photos of them. "It's fair to say you don't need a big telephoto lens down there. I have great pleasure in telling people that it is my office - well for a couple of days a year anyway."

With hundreds of thousands of photographs under his belt (fifty thousand alone from the last expedition), it is hard to imagine that Richard could pick a favourite from them all. Yet one photo he recalls lives up to that accolade. Lying beside a campfire in Quebec, Richard set up his camera to take a time lapse photo, recording the movement of the stars above his head. To his surprise and joy he discovered that the shutter had been open long enough to not just photograph the stars but also absorb the light projected onto the surrounding trees from his campfire. "I had no idea that would happen." he says. "It captured the night just exactly as I had experienced it. It was perfect."

Richard has now been working at sea on and off for seven years and thinks that he'll do one more year before reverting back to life as a land mammal. At times he finds the transient lifestyle frustrating and is mindful of protecting the passion he has for his work. Between expeditions he enjoys nothing more than getting home to New Zealand and catching up with friends and family around the country. He likes to put down the camera and get out amongst the wilderness that we have available. "There is plenty right on our back door step to still discover and experience. You don't need to travel all around the world. You just have to use your imagination and make the effort to get out there."

For more information about Richard Sidey and his work visit: www.richardsidey.com ■

Below (Top to Bottom): Richard's favourite Star shot in Quebec, Canada; Richard up close and personal; Younger members of the Emberá Tribe check out Richard's camera. Opposite page: King Penguins in Antarctica.

