

Benedict Allen has been called 'Britain's most fearless man' and compared to the proverbial cat with nine lives (many of which he has used up!). The celebrated explorer and writer's far-flung expeditions have taken him from his Shepherd's Bush home to Namibia's Skeleton Coast, the Gobi desert, the Amazonian jungle and New Guinea, where he made 'first contact' with remote tribes. And he has just published *Into the Abyss*, a gripping account of his remarkable and near-fatal solo journey across Siberia with a pack of sledge dogs.

The adventure bug has been with Benedict since childhood, when his father, a test pilot, would bring home exotic souvenirs from his frequent travels abroad. After that, he admits, he only ever wanted to become an explorer: 'I just couldn't think of anything that would ever be quite as exciting.'

So, what exactly drives a man to trek 1,000 miles across Siberia solo? Smiling, Benedict tells me that he wanted to discover just what makes human beings tick, what keeps them going day after day in the harshest conditions 'when the world is collapsing all around.' Typically, he chose the world's ultimate inhospitable territory: 'Siberia is generally seen as a symbol of hell on earth. We think of the gulags and the tortuous places, but there are people

living out there. It's their home.'

Benedict attributes this preoccupation with the art of survival to 'the many narrow squeaks that I've had throughout my career'. These 'squeaks', as he quaintly terms them, include being shot at by drug-runner Pablo Escobar's henchmen, being poisoned in the Peruvian Amazon and having to eat his dog or face starvation. He's quick to point out, however, that his worst problems have always been caused by his fellow man: 'All the times I've almost died it's never been a natural thing. Never a snake or piranhas; always people – gold miners, loggers, drug barons, opportunists...'

Wherever he travels, the key to Benedict's approach to exploration is to try to adapt as much as possible to the local environment – and that can mean taking part in bizarre rites of passage such as a 'crocodile initiation' ceremony in New Guinea which, he confirms, was as painful as it sounds. He also travels alone without a satellite phone, GPS or other sophisticated twenty-first century gadgets. 'It works because I'm not a threat. I'm simply me. I'm very vulnerable. I don't have a gun, I just potter along'. Mind you, as anyone who has seen his riveting television documentaries or read his books will know, 'pottering along' does seem to put Benedict in harm's way more often than not. Does this make him very courageous or just plain crazy? 'I do risky

things but not as much as everyone thinks. But fear is a good thing to have. I *do* feel fear!'

Before leaving for Siberia on his latest journey, Benedict packed a 'survival file': 'It was full of quotes and cuttings from explorers and ordinary people about what it is like to live through disaster.' It proved useful inspiration when, one night, during abysmal weather, he was separated from his dogs. 'Through the night I was wondering if I'd find them the next morning, if I'd survive. I had to come up with a purpose to get out.' The dogs became both the means and motivation to carry on: 'They were the most important thing to me,' he recalls. 'They had become more than just dogs; they were professional colleagues and I had become part of their pack.' Eventually, due to the appalling conditions, Benedict was forced to cut short his expedition and turn back, a decision he didn't regret for a moment: 'I had two wonderful days coming back out of danger on the Bering Strait. I developed such a sense of camaraderie with my dogs and really felt what it was like to be given back life.' And what did he learn from such a traumatic experience? 'Survival is about two things: having a purpose allied with belief. You have to believe that it's possible that you can survive.'

For even for the most seasoned traveller, I suggest, it must be a culture

TO THE ENDS OF **THE EARTH**

Rowena Carr-Allinson meets Benedict Allen, the intrepid explorer, author and documentary-maker who is Shepherd's Bush's real-life Indiana Jones



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shock to switch from the solitude of Siberia to the hectic pace of metropolitan Shepherd's Bush, his home for the last dozen years. 'The main thing is not to get sucked up in the whirligig; it's very tempting to leap into social life. I tend to avoid people when I first come back. I love just doing ordinary things – that helps – and I tend to go and visit my family; that is my mental resource.' And what twenty-first century comforts does he yearn for when he is away from home? Apparently, ordinary things such as: 'a good hunk of meat. Although it's available in Siberia, it'll be raw walrus – not quite a Sunday roast. And if you are eating monkey day after day, it's very dull.'

Benedict is clearly very attached to his patch of West London. He loves Shepherd's Bush's village atmosphere – 'the familiar faces, the butcher, the bookshop' – he's a regular at the Havelock and the Old Parr's Head (he's a fan of the Thai food) and knows all his neighbours, although he isn't, he jokes, a 'very good neighbourhood watch person!' He also likes the fact that London has kept so much of its old heart: 'Things more or less stay the same and you get a sense of permanence. A street might become one-way, another Post Office might close, but nonetheless you see the eras that have been here before you. The city just seems to march on. And the

other great thing about London is that there are so many races and cultures all shoved together. I'm not a great fan of multi-culturalism, but I love individuals with cultures that they bring with them. It could be a nightmare, but it's lovely. If I couldn't go abroad again, I'd find enough to keep me going just in Shepherd's Bush!

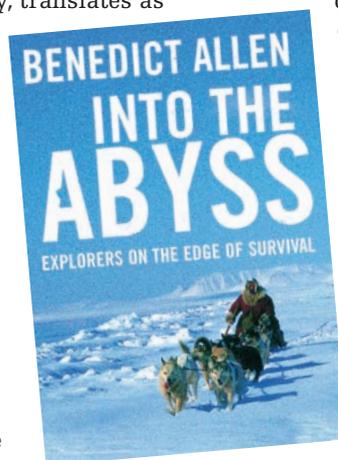
Talking of which, where he is heading next? Benedict tells me that he has his eye on the world's largest waterless expanse, North West China's Taklamakan desert (which, reassuringly, translates as 'go in and you won't get out'). But he does confess he is finding that organising expeditions, and being away for months at a time is getting harder; he is increasingly torn between leaving and staying put – 'perhaps I'm just getting older'. Sponsorship is an option, but Benedict has firm principles: 'If I find the perfect sponsor who'd be ready to write a cheque that would be great, but I don't want to travel with a whole load of Western gear and advertising.' And despite the popularity of his documentaries, if he does make it to Taklamakan, it's unlikely the video-

diaries will turn up on our screens: 'TV has changed. It's more gimmicky now. They are not interested in authentic expeditions any more.'

Back in West London Benedict is contributing to the community by talking to children in local schools. He is modest about inspiring the next generation of would-be-adventurers with tales from a real-life Indiana Jones. 'I don't know about them being impressed by me, but they are impressed by the places. I tell stories and hope that they get involved. I

do tend to emphasise the dramatic bits – like when I was shot at! These are the things that grip young imaginations. I always say: "you probably don't want to be an explorer – maybe you want to be ballerina, a chartered accountant or a footballer – but the great thing is I did what I wanted to do."

Listening to Benedict's extraordinary tales, I'm sure that there are now a few aspiring adventurers growing up in W12.



***Into the Abyss* is published by Faber & Faber at £17.99 (hardback). For more information about Benedict Allen's adventures visit www.benedictallen.com**