

Mike Laird has come a long way from his time on wind-swept Taransay alongside Ben Fogle in 2000. And, as PAULA MURRAY discovers, he is now setting records for exploring some of the world's remote hot spots on two wheels

HE made a name for himself as a television Castaway alongside the dashing Ben Fogle in a pioneering BBC series that was to ignite Britain's passion for reality TV. A decade on, former Taransay resident Mike Laird is carving a new career for himself as an explorer with a difference, touring remote and little-fancied corners of the world by bicycle.

In recent years he has taken his saddle to the likes of Bolivia, Syria, northern Pakistan and even war-torn Afghanistan, and he is in the final preparations for the most dangerous excursion to date: Iraq.

His adventures are certainly a far cry from the windswept Hebrides, where he starred in *Castaway 2000*.

"I think it would be fair to say that I am a modern-day explorer," says 41-year-old Mike, during a break from visiting the Iraqi Embassy in London.

"Maybe it is not all about uncharted territories as the nature of exploration changes with time. When Dr David Livingstone headed to Africa, he had better tools at his disposal than Christopher Columbus hundreds of years earlier.

"I am happy with what I have achieved."

Mike's most recent two-wheeled expedition took him to Australia where he became the first Briton to retrace the steps of 19th-century explorers Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills across the Outback solo and unassisted. They had set out to make history when they left on their famous expedition in 1860, but, while well-equipped, they lacked any bush experience and perished along with five of their men.

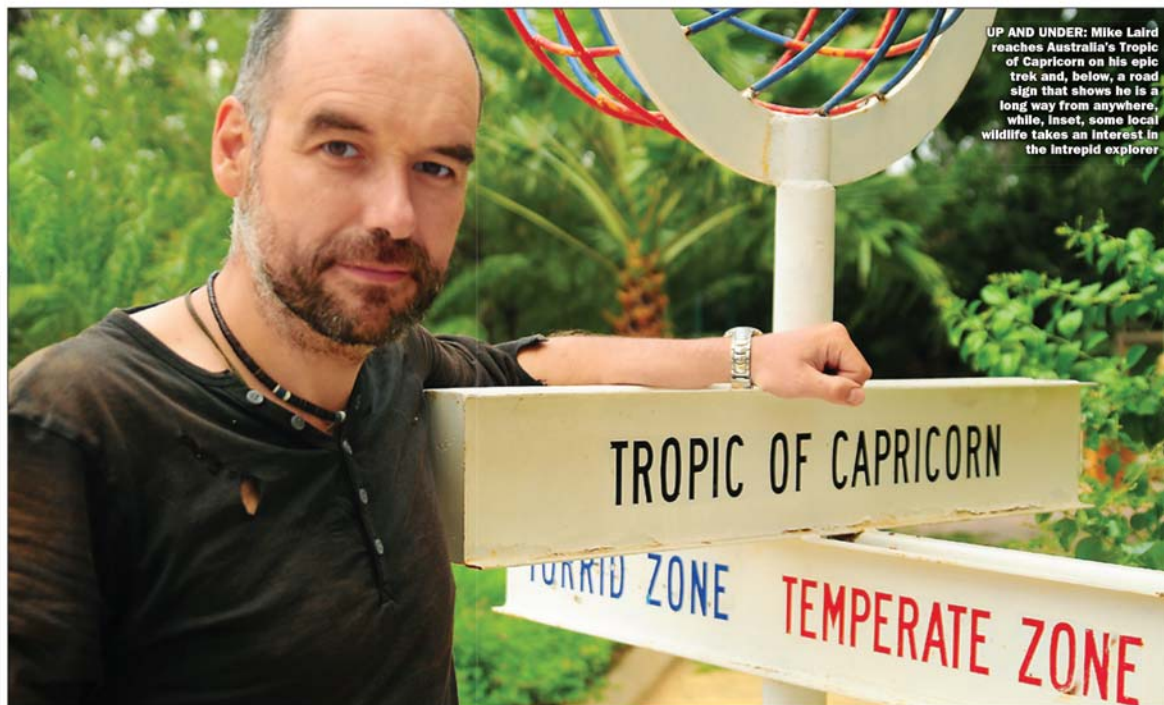
A full 150 years later, perhaps like a real-life Indiana Jones, Mike battled deadly brown snakes, giant spiders, a locust plague, and suffocating hot weather, on his way to completing the gruelling 2,000-mile journey from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria on the north coast.

Incredibly, he did very little cycling in preparation for the challenge which saw him battle the elements for 33 days.

MIKE says: "I was given a book about Burke and Wills about three years ago and always felt I wanted to retrace the journey and as this year was the 150th anniversary it seemed like a good time to be doing it.

"They were the first white men to set out on this journey but that did not go quite as planned.

"Along the way if I felt like staying somewhere for a couple of days I did. I saw a lot of interesting things. It's an amazing way to see the country."



UP AND UNDER: Mike Laird reaches Australia's Tropic of Capricorn on his epic trek and, below, a road sign that shows he is a long way from anywhere, while, inset, some local wildlife takes an interest in the intrepid explorer

From harsh to war zone ex-Castaway

At one point he was struck down by 'handlebar palsy', caused by a compressed nerve and resulting in numbness and acute pain. "It was the direct result of long days on the saddle," he confesses. "But I didn't know what to do about it so I put socks over my hand. It didn't really solve the problem. My right hand was extremely painful and bandaged.

"I just kept on going. I guess I am a bit stubborn in that sense.

"When I arrived back, my GP told me it was a bit of a pain, but it should sort itself out. It did - after three months."

Describing the Australian Outback expedition as one of the toughest challenges he has ever undertaken, Mike continues: "I had to put up with snakes, scorpions and spiders, kangaroos and flash floods. I was knackered and had lost 21 pounds by the end of it.

And there was no one to give me a hug and say 'Well done', so I felt a bit deflated."

Mike, who is now the project manager for a 19-day endurance race along the same route next year, has not exactly chosen the quietest, or safest, countries in which to cycle. Indeed, along much of the way he has faced arrest, viewed conflict and been subject to intimidation but it has not halted his ambitions to head into Iraq next.

Edinburgh-born Mike wants to spend time visiting the Marsh Arabs and carrying out ground work for humanitarian projects although he does not wish to go into too much detail about the trip. "It doesn't take a genius to understand why," he chuckles. "Besides I am still waiting for all my paperwork to clear so the less I talk about the better.

"I know it does not come without its dangers but I would like to think I know

BBC reality series and Outback, how is the new Indiana

what I'm getting myself into." He admits in many ways Taransay was his springboard to seeking adventure and adds: "Looking back on the year that I had there I can only feel sorry for some people because they didn't make the most of the opportunity given to them.

"But it made me realise a lot about myself. It knocked off a few rough edges.

"I loved my year and all the wind and rain that it brought. Experiences like that make you appreciate comforts in life all the more when you get back to them.

"Few people know that I felt like quitting not that far from the end but I was convinced to stay by the group, which in itself was nice.

"I was glad I stayed on, though, and there was a great sense of achievement among those of us who make it."

For more details on Mike's Australian adventure visit his website jockandthebeanstalk.com, while information on next year's endurance race can be found at www.transsiberiade.com

