

CASK Still

A bottle of whisky is the central focus, with a label that features a landscape painting. The background of the entire page is a larger, similar landscape painting showing a valley with a river, mountains, and small houses under a cloudy sky. The bottle is filled with a golden-brown liquid and has a detailed label with a crest and a landscape scene. The lighting is warm, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

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WHAT'S IN THE BOTTLE?

How to combat cask scams and 'Scottish' gins distilled in China



DRAMS OF THE WORLD

Whether at the North Pole or crossing Lake Baikal, explorer Mike Laird always carries a dram

Written by
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If you were marooned on a desert island, what luxury would you yearn for? Might it be your favourite down pillow for a peaceful night's sleep? A bar of chocolate to combat the hunger pangs? Or perhaps an endless supply of breakfast tea?

For intrepid explorer Mike Laird, who appeared on the BBC's reality TV series *Castaway* in 2000, carrying an additional kilo and a half in the shape and form of a whisky bottle is always worth it, even on the most gruelling expeditions.

'It's not purely the fact that I enjoy drinking – drinking all the way through wouldn't do you any favours – but it's something nice to look forward to at the end.

'The primary reason that I take a bottle of whisky is that it's engaging for people. So, if I

meet people along the way, I share it,' explains Mike.

A thrill-seeker since he was a 17-year-old travelling through Europe with nothing more than a *Lonely Planet* guide and a scraggy old map, Mike grew up in Edinburgh but now lives in Lockerbie, where he has an extraordinary (and ever-growing) collection of 800 whiskies from around the globe.

'People always respond to whisky – I think it breaks down barriers. For example, at the end of walking across Lake Baikal [a solo 640km trek to the most northern, southern, eastern and western points of Siberia's vast frozen body of water], I met a group of Russians and I told them what I had just undertaken. I got a bottle of whisky out and the conversation flowed, smiles broadened and lots of things were shared.'

By day, Mike works as a risk manager, primarily for insurance companies and banks, but when off duty he winds his way across the world, taking on all manner of challenges, often on the back of a wager with friends.

To date, he has travelled over 100 countries. On top of his gritty Lake Baikal odyssey, he has undertaken a 565km ski from Resolute in Canada to the North Pole, cycled across Iraq, Bolivia, Syria and Northern

Left: Mike at home with his 800-strong collection of whisky.



Left: At the North Pole with Johnnie Walker Explorers' Club Collection. **Right:** Top tipples in Mike's collection. **Below:** Tasting the spirit of home.

Pakistan, and worked as a war photographer in Afghanistan. One of the most unusual places he has sipped the water of life, though, was while on the Amazon, listening to the bells toll as he crossed the Equator.

'Back as a teenage boy, I used to pinch whisky from my dad's drinks cabinet. I don't really know why because I didn't like it at all, it was just one of those teenage boy things,' laughs Mike. 'It was an uncle of mine, who was actually a customs and excise man, who introduced me to whisky. He introduced me to a dram called Cragganmore 12 Year Old which is a delicious

Speyside whisky. It's still my go-to drink of choice.'

Though his own palate enjoys the sherried, sweet, floral, honey notes of Speyside, it is often the accessible, well-known blends that Mike travels with. 'Blended whiskies are usually blended for a reason – to appeal to a broader palate.'

This year, Mike walked from the Pacific over to the Atlantic across Central Panama, and shortly after circumnavigated Lake Victoria in Africa, making sure to schedule in a pit stop at a unique distillery called Thousand Hills. The whisky may not have been his favourite tipple of all time, but as far as he is concerned, a dram's power to bring acquaintances, old and

new, together far outweighs any personal opinions on taste.

'I have tasted so many whiskies from so many countries, I feel blessed,' says Mike, adding that he will, quite literally, go to the ends of the earth to acquire a whisky. In fact, he once flew to New York twice in the space of six weeks to get his hands on a limited-edition whisky in Duty Free.

No matter how far and wide he travels, though, amber nectar remains the spirit of Mike's home – Bonnie Scotland.

'One of the wonderful things about drinking whisky in Scotland is, if you're outdoors, you don't always have to run to the bar to get those two or three drops of water into your whisky to open it up – you can just hold it under the heavens.' 🍷



'MIKE WILL, QUITE LITERALLY, GO TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH FOR WHISKY'