

Credo...

Latin. (n) 'I believe'. A set of beliefs which influences the way you live.

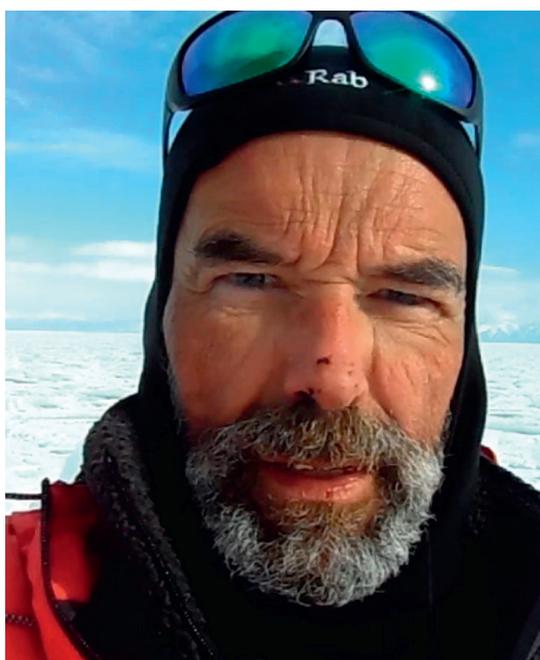
The intrepid explorer and Castaway TV star ensures he's never without a dram on epic adventures

I'm from Edinburgh and lived there until I went to uni. In my earlier days I was quite a gentle child. I excelled at under-achieving. In my mid-teens I was a bit of a rogue, but by the time I was 18 things came back on track and I went to London to read accountancy. I quickly discovered that wasn't for me.

A friend phoned me one day and said, 'I've seen a programme called Castaway on TV and it looks right up your street'. We went through psychometric tests and group exercises, getting cold and wet in the Lake District to ensure that we were not going to become injured in terms of our mental well-being. The hardest thing for me was the removal of my support groups – my friends, my family, and being able to pick up a telephone or see someone for a pint on a Saturday night.

As with any major solo expedition, going to Lake Baikal [in Russia] was very challenging. You should never venture out to these places unless you have absolute faith that you can deal with anything the world throws at you. I went through the ice several times – twice up to my waist, and twice full immersion above my head. The current could sweep you under the ice, you may have skis on, you may be attached to a sledge (mine weighed 92kg), and the ice could close above you. In these situations you've got no choice – you either excel or you perish.

I can remember the first time I was put in jail abroad. I was taken off the streets in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia by the secret police for photographing in a shanty town. I was put into one of these cells which was reminiscent of a movie set in



Mike Laird

'You've got no choice – you either excel or you perish'

Hollywood with stained walls, iron bars, and a flickering lightbulb.

If I could go on an expedition with anyone, dead or alive, I'd go with David Livingstone. You realise how tough explorers were 150 years ago, going out in hobnail boots, tweed trousers and a linen shirt with little more than a handheld ship's compass and a scraggy old map. When I cycled solo across Australia to redo Burke and Wills' route of 1860, I got myself an 1860 atlas which included Australia. It was void of any detail because people had no idea what was there. These people set off, as Livingstone did, with very little information.

I'm aged 52 and I've travelled to 97 countries. I try to visit – properly engage with, explore and embrace – four new countries per annum. Covid sadly has scuppered me, so I now need to live to be about 100 to get the remaining countries all done. The next countries I'd like to visit are Benin and Togo in central-west Africa. No one goes there because there's almost no reason to go there, and I'd like to understand *why* there's no reason to go there.

I always take a notebook and a pencil with me on expeditions. I specifically say a pencil because Biro's freeze in some of the places I go to. I always have goodies like cheese and chocolate in cold environments, and I take at least one bottle of whisky. I remember once having a whisky crossing the equator while going up the Amazon on a ship.

There's nothing like coming home. I've lived in breathtaking tropical countries, but they're not a patch on Scotland. My favourite place is on the banks of Loch Awe looking out at Kilchurn Castle.