

The Accidental Adventurer

CHARLIE RICHARDS

As a result of being extremely annoying at the age of 18 years old and a very long summer holiday looming, it was clear I needed a purpose and I was packed off to America. It was this particular Summer when my excitement for adventure was ignited; I took on a role as a 'Camp Counsellor' in deepest darkest Minnesota nestled in the Great Lakes.

I had absolutely no experience of the great outdoors let alone looking after feral kids and understanding local wildlife. I quickly realised that this was quite a responsible position I had taken on, particularly when we had our Bear Training from the Rangers, gulp!! I was briefed on the 'actions on' if a bear came into our canoe camp - I wish I had listened more carefully as a very large brown bear and her cubs actually did decide to join us for breakfast on day 3 of our canoe expedition, and they ate all our porridge and the entire rations for the next 2 days!!

I quickly developed skills I never knew I had ranging from canoe expert, map reading skills, how to keep 15 children aged 9 – 12 years of age distracted during 'Bear Gate', organising the most incredible game of flags (basically hide and seek in the woods but on a different level), where to hide when bears came into camp and driving slowly on the roads as buffalo can look like speed bumps.

This experience certainly shaped my path ahead. After finishing university, I knew I didn't want to head to London, so my step-father suggested the Army. I read the brochures and it looked quite fun; Nordic Skiing, high jinks in the Officers Mess, basically a continuation from university life. I couldn't have been more wrong. Within my first 8 months I was heading out to Kosovo with the Royal Irish Regiment on a UN operation that was the first to deploy into Kosovo. It was then I realised the gin and tonics, parties and skiing were

Charlie on an adventure camping trip to Botswana / Charlie Richards





Charlie on a Sampan driving lesson in Vietnam / Charlie Richards

only a small part of what I had signed up to. My travels in the Army took me all over the world and I feel privileged to have had such an interesting and life changing job surrounded by some remarkable people. Ten years later and a few tours of Kosovo, Iraq and Bosnia as well as a few jollies to Cyprus and Bavaria, I decided to say goodbye to the green and become a 'civvie'.

My next accidental experience with adventure was when I saw an advert in the local village post office recruiting for an Expedition Advisor. After organising Squadrons on operational tours, I knew I could manage planning trips to rather more exotic destinations. This role took me all over the world from the mountains of Morocco, the jungles of Borneo, rice paddy fields of Northern Vietnam, adventure camping safaris in Botswana, running large-scale military

expeditions in Nepal and awesome wildlife and projects in Uganda. I truly believe the only way to be effective at planning and delivering incredible travel is to experience it first-hand. One of my best travel moments has got to be chimp tracking in Uganda through thick forest, heading out with forest trackers in anticipation of finding a troop. After 3 long and sweaty hours and only seeing a centipede, I was thrilled to hear the high pitched, shrill calls as a troop ran right in front of me. I am sure I heard them laughing as one of their fruit skins (thrown from the tree tops) narrowly missed my head. My weirdest experience was having dinner on an adventure camping safari in Botswana and being surrounded by 10 hyenas waiting to join us for pudding!!

My favourite place has to be the High Atlas Mountains

of Morocco. It is the perfect place to escape to and step back in time to a simply stunning corner of the world. This is where I had my toughest adventure experience earlier this year, a winter attempt of Mt Toubkal, Northern Africa's highest mountain. The high winds and deep snow were highly challenging, but it was one of the most incredible shared experiences with a fantastic team. We started as a disparate group and after many long tough treks, fantastic chats and giggles we became a cohesive and tight group of friends with a really special shared experience.

When planning an exciting trip for a group it is crucial all the logistics run smoothly; nobody wants to spend their time in an amazing destination worrying about transport, where to eat and sleep. As a travel expert I could ensure the group could immerse themselves in the destinations and really get under the skin of the places they visited. It is so important to have quality in country teams and local guides with knowledge and experience that out strips any travel guide.

I feel strongly about responsible travel and ensuring that we give back to the communities we visit. It is important to meet with the village elders and really listen to what they need to improve their lives. Often these would be the simplest of projects such as repairing irrigation systems that were crucial

to their farming or providing goats and pigs to schools as a source of food and income. Whilst these small projects won't change the world, they make day-to-day living more comfortable for the less fortunate communities we have the privilege of meeting. I spent over a year planning a large scale rebuild of a classroom block in Uganda. This provided a decent learning environment for the children and a fantastic way for the UK team to interact with the children and teachers. Everyone came away feeling very fortunate and it was an experience that will stay with them for the rest of their lives; needless to say, there were many tears when it was time to say farewell.

In 2018 I took the plunge and set up Tribal Tracks, Exceptional Group Travel - www.tribaltracks.co.uk with Gaynor who also has a serious passion for travel. After all my truly amazing travel experiences and the lifelong friends I have made through my military and 'civvie' adventures I felt I could certainly help others achieve the same wonderful experience and bonds with fellow travellers. Tribal Tracks specialise in incentive and reward travel, trips for clubs, charities and associations and exclusive private group travel. We listen to what our clients want to achieve from their trip and carefully create life changing experiences.

Charlie Richards on Mount Toubkal Winter Summit Trek / Charlie Richards

