

Made in the sky



20

The sleight of hand displayed by this Syrian vendor would keep even an unruly crowd quiet and mesmerized. Cups fly in the sky, juice floats in the air... and before you realise what's happening a cupful of tangy liquid is held out for you — just made in the sky!

Getting closer

For this 'outsider', life is a journey full of heartening surprises — like the man who brought him a bowl of water in the heart of the Sahara desert. After more than two decades of expeditions in search of the meaning of life he declares: 'Human beings are good.' And the Eskimos are the best.



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CUP & SHIP



When the whole of Oman exploded into a glorious burst of ecstasy, the brains behind the great moment sat in the dressing room, quietly. The reality hadn't sunk in. John Burridge, the goalkeeping coach of Team Oman, recounts for the first time the excitement and the exhaustion.

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The best people he has met, so far, are the Eskimos, says

Swedish explorer

Mikael Strandberg. Like

the Eskimos, explorers

must always live in the

present,' he tells

SALIM JOSEPH



NATION

FRIDAY, February 13, 2009



Eternal

Explanan

HE DECLARES that he is no sportsman or adventurer, just an intellectual in search of the meaning of life...! But, "the more I know, the farther is the

truth," says Mikael Strandberg, a Swedish explorer, considered the best contemporary explorer in the world, who stopped by Oman last week.

Mikael, who was voted the Explorer Hero

by the National Geographic 2002, chose to travel to get more close to people. He covered 90,000km on a push-bike in seven-and-a-half years that began with the 27,500km PanAmerican Highway from Chile to Alaska in 1986-87, crossing El Darién Jungle, the 800km stretch of virgin rainforest between Panama and Colombia. He carried his bike through swamps and dense forest for a month.

Two years later, he started from Norway to South Africa, a distance of 33,000km, passing through the Sahara Desert, and it took three months for him to push the bike through the desert, with the help of just a manual compass. The bicycle journey ended with the one from New Zealand to Cairo, conquering the continent left — Asia. And, he went on horseback to Patagonia, on foot to Maasailand, in East Africa and, finally, in a canoe and skis to Siberia (in 2004) hailed as the coldest ever destination in the history of expeditions.

Now what? An explorer cannot stop. He has to continue! Mikael is busy preparing for his next expedition and, that, probably, will begin from Oman, a new 'paradise on earth' that he has chanced upon. "I am impressed, with the country, with the people, their self confidence, dignity and respect for others," he told *HI!* in an informal chat before leaving Muscat after a five-day trip across the Sultanate. Excerpts:

WHY do most travellers begin their expeditions on bicycles?

AN EXPLORER always thinks about the meaning of life. When I was 17, I went to India to study Mahayana in a Buddhist ashram. But, I realised, it wasn't what I was looking for. There I met an Irish guy, who had cycled from Ireland to India. Then I thought a bicycle trip could be the best way to get in touch with people. The Guinness Book of World Records said the longest road in the world was the Pan-American Highway. So, I thought, if I cycle that one, somebody would listen to me when I tell my stories. And, if you want to get close to local people, you have to travel keeping in mind that life is not easy always. In Arabia, you realise the best way is to travel on foot and camel. We have to choose the right medium of transport. In Siberia, it was canoe and ski; in Patagonia, horse and, in Maasai, I went on foot.

What preparations do you always do before an expedition?

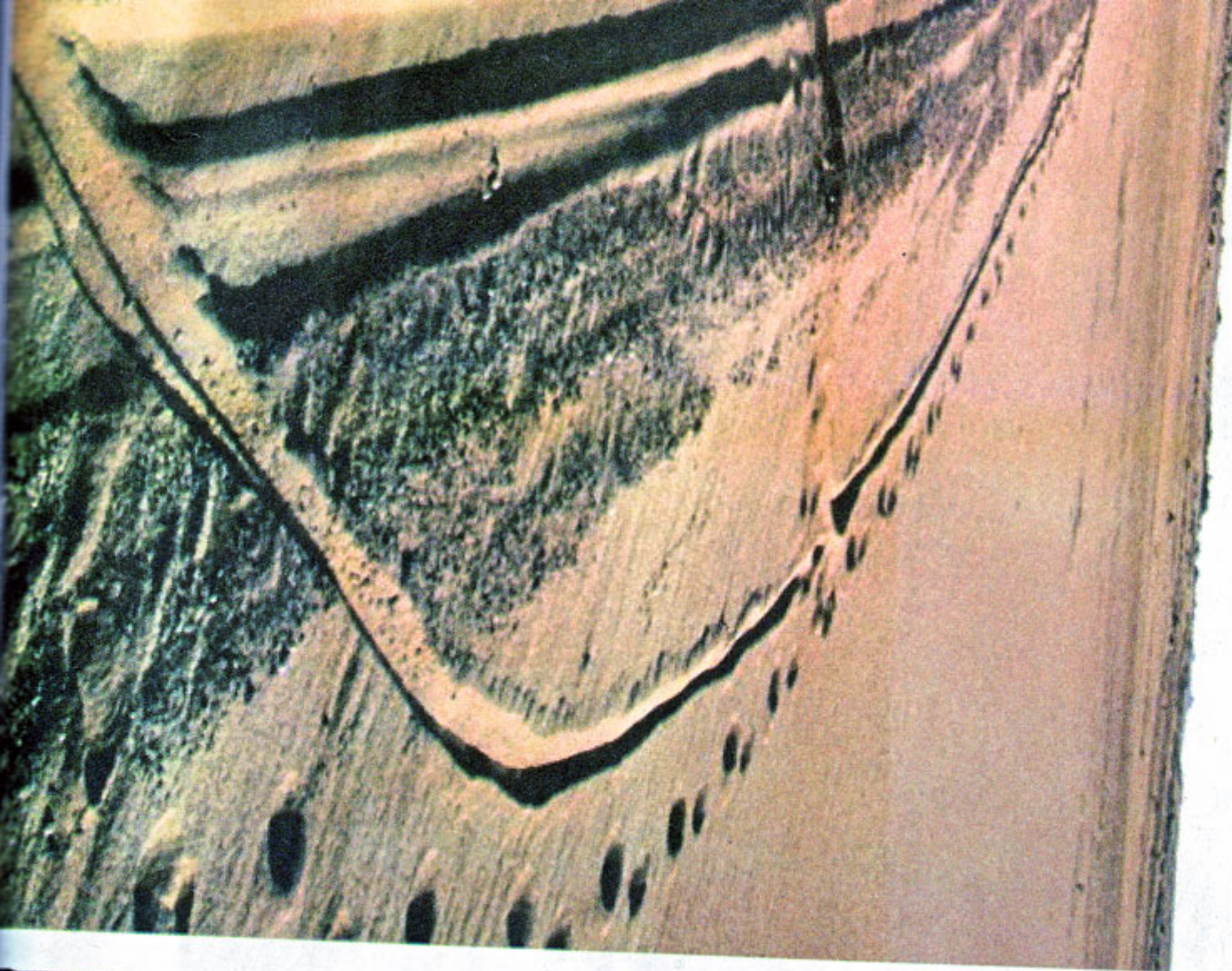
I START with special preparations at least a year before. Like for Siberia, I slept two years outside my house in a tent in extremely cold weather conditions. I pulled tyres behind me on skis. You have to be extremely fit and train six hours a day during the last six months. Mental preparation is the hard part. You need to be a fanatic and believe in what you do. And, should have an extremely short memory



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NATION



“ I had been cycling across the Sahara desert, without seeing a single soul for a week and I had very little water left. Then, I saw something moving far ahead. Five hours later I realised that it was a man bringing me a bowl of water. Life is like that, full of heartening surprises!”



Listen and laugh!

What you like most about your profession?
Meeting people.

Ever considered exploring space?
Nothing is impossible. But, you learn, that there's no way you can plan the future.

What do you like besides travelling?
No matter how much you travel, you will never be able to explore more than one percentage of life.

What are the key qualities of a good explorer?
Ability to listen to others and a good sense of humour.

If you are stuck up amid a journey, with no way out, what would you do?
This is what you thrive on. Then, you would be fully concentrating, 100 percent.

Who has inspired you most in your life?
Nelson Mandela. Who else could be put in prison for 27 years and then truly forgive everybody? One reason I went to India was Mahatma Gandhi, who really believed in his ideas.

What is the most disheartening aspect of an expedition?
Bureaucracy is always a problem in every country.

Your ultimate goal?
After doing all these, you cannot have any goal. Only thing I can do is to see what happens next.

to forget everything unpleasant and continue. You should also have a lot of passion for life. After living in 110 countries in the past two decades, I know, people are generally good.

What is the biggest possible challenge one can encounter in a virgin territory?

YOU should never lose concentration because, if you do one mistake, you perish. It can be even a simple thing, not necessarily meeting a lion. When you are relaxed you often commit mistakes, like reading the map wrong. Most explorers die not during the difficult part but during the easy part.

Which has been your most interesting expedition?

SIBERIA. The temperature was minus 70 degrees Celsius, it was almost impossible to live in such a climate. If you don't move, the liquid in your knees and elbows will freeze and you fall over and die. When there's nothing available to eat, you have to often eat raw food. There I met the best people in the world, the Eskimos! I wonder how they survive. They don't spend too much time worrying about life. They live in the present and just continue. That's exactly what an explorer has to do.

How have you grown through your experience? SOMETIMES I feel like a very old wise man who has so much knowledge. At other times I realise, how it's almost impossible for me to

have a family and know about other important aspects of life. Can you imagine having a wife to whom you often say, "Sorry, but I will be away for a couple of years. And, God knows, if I will survive and be back."

What is your understanding of life?

THE MORE I know, the further away I get. I

may have enormous amount of information. I have realised things most people just don't because it's impossible if you haven't had these experiences. I know the capacity of mankind, what you can do if you set your mind, and how easy it is to get things done. I know that human beings are good, which gives me lot of confidence and peace of mind. But I never belong anywhere. You are completely



Mikael and his Omani guide Kamil Al Raisi of Eihab Travels LLC

different, an outsider in your own community.

How difficult is it to penetrate other cultures? YOU HAVE to see yourself as a guest. You are there on their terms. You have to adapt maximum and learn how to behave. You have to be genuinely interested in their lives. Human beings, everywhere, want to talk about themselves. You have to be a listener. And, you need humour, to get over difficult situations.

Your first impressions about Oman and its people?

WHAT impressed me most was the people. In many aspects it's like a paradise on earth. It's the dignity of the people, the way they carry themselves and the way they behave with respect and a lot of self-confidence. People here really believe in themselves, their own culture and in Oman.

Motivation for an Arabian expedition?

I WOULD like to go from here all through the desert belt of Arabia, through Sahara to the other side to West Africa. There's unbearable tension building up between the West and the Arab world. I want to travel through Arabia to build a bridge between the cultures. I know there are misconceptions about Arabs. I want to do it my way by letting ordinary people along the way, not politicians, tell their story. All you have to do is connect, to show that people are the same everywhere.