

Special Report: Fighting Extremism with Rap

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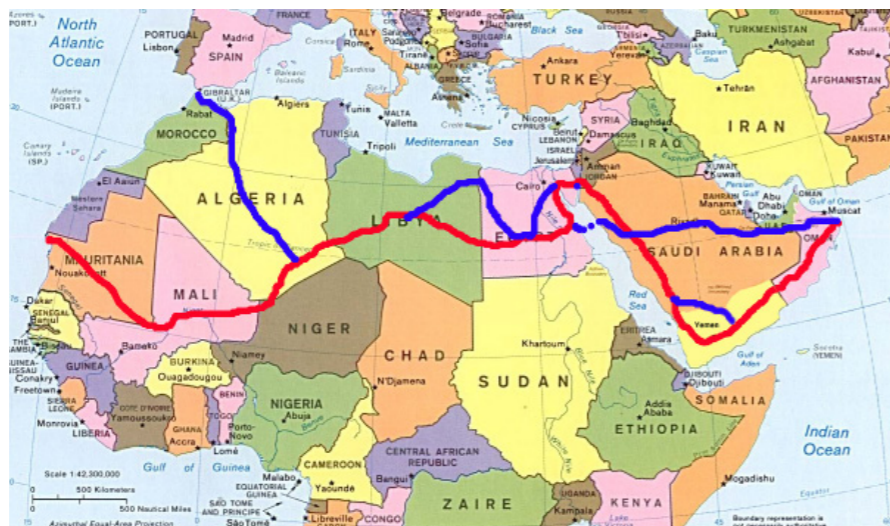
Yemen's unexplored coast

British Prince Visits Yemen

Traversing Arabia by Camel

Hip-Hop in Sana'a





The red line represents the expedition's proposed route.
The blue line represents alternate routes.

Traversing Arabia by Camel

By David MacDonald

“The idea is to travel by camel, from Oman to Mauritania.” That’s a bit crazy, was my first thought. But I quickly got the feeling that Mikael Strandberg, the Swedish explorer who uttered those words, was used to inducing such reactions. For a man who spent months riding a bike through the Sahara, and months more skiing through Siberia, eating nothing but raw fish, riding a camel for a few thousand miles (7,780 to be more precise) through the world’s two most formidable deserts might seem like a perfectly natural thing to do, however outlandish it appears to others. Mikael’s appearance doesn’t immediately suggest such exploits: he is of average height, soft-spoken, with almost boyish features. It is when you

get him talking about the things he has done, and why he does them, that you get a sense of why he was named one of the world’s 50 most important explorers by the Royal Geographical Society of London. Raised in a remote Swedish village boasting more dogs than people, Mikael has allowed his passion for adventure and exploration to dictate the unpredictable events of his life. “I’ve always chosen my own route,” he says. “Few people do.” He occupies a profession that many didn’t realize still existed. For many, “exploration” rouses thoughts of Magellan and Columbus, sailing around the globe, filling in the blank spaces on the European map. But contemporary



Mikael Strandberg with his Omani hosts

exploration, Mikael points out, has become something akin to the World’s Strongest Man competition, in which men (and sometimes women) attempt amazing physical feats, purely for the sake of their difficulty. Modern explorers (or “adventure tourists,” as critics call them) have become adored for their ability to climb X-number of peaks of such-and-such height, or to circumnavigate the globe in a novel manner, etc. Indigenous populations and novel landscapes have receded into the background. The explored has been superseded by the explorer. Mikael’s opinion of this trend was clear: “What’s called modern adventure is for me ridiculous. I don’t see the point of that. So we have to change the emphasis of exploration to educating people, instead of telling how strong and what a formidable human I am. I’d rather talk about the people that I meet.” But the humble talk shouldn’t fool you: Mikael’s exploits are extraordinary, and have attracted plenty of attention worldwide. He began his career as an explorer 24 years ago, when he road his

bike from Chile to Alaska. He followed that with two more bike journeys, the first from Norway to South Africa, and the second from New Zealand to Cairo. He then rode a horse through Patagonia, before trekking through Eastern Africa on foot. Then came his Siberian expedition in 2004, for which he gained international acclaim. Mikael painted a stark picture of his daily life on that journey, in which he traversed 3,500 kilometers by ski and canoe, much of it in the dark: “Well, in Siberia, we’re talking seventy degrees below zero. If you would be there, we would have to amputate your limbs within four hours...If you don’t move, the liquid in your knees and elbows will freeze within two minutes. We lived there for one year, sleeping in a tent, eating raw fish because petrol will freeze.” What’s the most challenging part of such a physically demanding experience? “The most difficult thing is trying to keep your motivation over a long expedition. For me an expedition is at least one year, otherwise it’s a holiday. You need a year to be able to appreciate the changing of the season, the

changing of the minds of people, getting the whole picture. But after months of hard work, you get tired. That’s the hard part, when you run into these questions: ‘Why?’ But with all the unforeseen turbulence that goes into the planning of such long and complex expeditions, the “why” is never in doubt. “My vision is to educate, and to understand the people I live with.” This simple goal permeates the exploration process, from early planning, the choice of transportation, the execution of the expedition itself, and also the post-expedition events, which have included lectures, books, and TV series. During his ten months in Siberia, Mikael broadcast short video clips via satellite, typically featuring the locals whom he came across during the journey. He also recorded his observations in great detail via blog. On the Arabian expedition, Mikael hopes to broadcast for a couple of minutes every two or three days. The Siberian expedition had over 250,000 followers, and Mikael expects this expedition to double that. Concerning the mode of transportation,





Mikael in Patagonia



The Empty Quarter



Mikael in Siberia

I was curious as to why Mikael chose to ride a camel. For that matter, why in the past had he chosen to ride a bike in some cases, or to walk or ride a horse in others? “When you meet people along the way, you need things they can associate with,” he explained. “For example, I lived in Patagonia for a year. How do you travel there? By horses. Here, it’s camels. It’s a door opener. That’s how you break the wall in between.” Riding a bike or walking through Arab villages could strike the locals as strange, he continued, “But if you come with a camel and two Bedouin, they will feel respect. So I use it because it’s a door opener, because I want to hear about their lives.”

The two Bedouin are Saleem al-Wahaibi, a 33-year-old farmer with a lifetime of experience with camels, and Nasser al-Kabi, a 24-year-old soldier. Along with them, Mikael will be traveling with an Asian-American woman named Pamela, a kindred spirit he met while in Yemen. But why is he traveling with two Omanis who don’t speak English? “Things written in the past were always by Europeans and Americans, and that’s why it’s important that I’m traveling with them. It’s important that they do much of the storytelling. So we’re trying to go from an Arab perspective instead of a European/American one...We really hope to get the Arab world involved.”

To overcome the language barrier, Mikael spent two months studying Arabic in Sana’a, at the Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies. This also gave him a chance to acquaint himself with

the country that will be among the most important of the journey. But before we discussed Yemen specifically, I had to ask: How did you come up with the idea for this expedition?

“I was wondering what was next, after Siberia. While in a friend’s office, I saw a map, and at the corner of it I saw al-Ruba’ al-Khali [the empty quarter]. Al-Ruba’ al-Khali is an old wish, so I thought, maybe that’s it. So I took a plane ride to Oman. On the plane I was reading a map, and I saw there was actually a good east to west trip, through the Arabian world, from Ras al-Khaima in Oman to the tip of Mauritania. And I thought, That is a big trip if it can be done by a camel.”

As always, the trip must contain an important element of cultural exchange as well. “I’ve always been interested in the Arab world. And today, the big fight of civilization or whatever they call it, is between the East and West. I’m doing this because I want to promote the Arab world and try to educate as much as possible, to build bridges.”

The expedition will take Mikael and his companions through the two largest deserts on earth, the Sahara and the Arabian desert (aka al-Ruba’ al-Khali). This will be the first expedition to tackle both in one go. Another aspect that separates it from previous journeys, is that the travelers will be moving in the summer as well. Temperatures as high as 58 degrees Celsius have been measured in the Sahara, so finding water and shade will be a priority. However, Mikael plans to complete the trip in as unsupported

a fashion as possible. There will be no airdrops or supplies left for them, although they do expect to accept the hospitality of locals along the way.

The proposed route will take the travelers through Oman and Yemen first, followed by a northern path through Saudi Arabia. They will then move through Jordan on the way to Egypt, from which they go east through Libya to Algeria, before continuing on to Mauritania. Traveling 30 kilometers per day, at 20 days per month (10 days will be spent resting



and meeting locals), they will cover 600 kilometers per month, and complete the journey in a year and a half. But as Mikael points out in his brochure: “That’s if nothing happens, which it will!”

Taking the travelers and their belongings through the deserts will be at

least eight camels. A great deal of work goes into their selection. While they are prized (and prohibitively expensive) racing animals in Oman, Mikael is looking for endurance and strength over speed. He is currently in the process of selecting the right ones, after which they will need at

least six weeks of training. They hope to begin the expedition in January, 2010.

The cost of the camels, the broadcasting, and all of the preparations add up quite quickly. The whole operation is likely to cost millions of dollars. Mikael has been raising money through sponsors, from the East and West. He also engages in promotional activities before and after.

In addition to the logistical issues Mikael typically has to deal with on an expedition, Yemen’s political challenges, and accompanying travel restrictions, make travel through the country an unpredictable affair. So why not choose a more tranquil route, through Saudi Arabia? “I’m not doing this just to do an east-to-west. I want to do a real Arabian trip; to do that you have to go through Yemen. Avoiding this is impossible to do. This is the origin of the Arab world...It is still the jewel of the crown.”

He also hopes that the expedition, with all the publicity it will generate, will cast Yemen in a more positive light than the international media often does. “The potential is enormous for tourism. So we will be able to promote it in a good way. I highlight characters, life, and possibilities.”

While respectful of all the snags that can confront him on a journey, Mikael is coolly confident in the face of fate: “Exploration is just a set of obstacles you have to get through. And the reason that you go through is that you have a different attitude than most people, otherwise you wouldn’t have this life, would you? So I know everything is possible. You just have to put your mind to it.”

Mikael Strandberg’s Previous Expeditions

- 1986-1987 Mikael went by bicycle from Chile to Alaska, a distance of 27,500 kilometers. He crossed the El Darién Jungle, 800 kilometres of virgin rainforest between Panama and Colombia, without any roads. He carried his bike through swamps and a dense jungle for a month.

- 1989-1992 He went by bicycle from Norway to South Africa a distance of 33,000 kilometers, passing through the Sahara Desert. It took 3 months to push the bike through the desert, with the help of only a manual compass.

- 1994-1996 Mikael went by bicycle from New Zealand to Cairo traversing Asia, a distance of 90,000 kilometers.

- 1997-1998 As a newly wed man Mikael was accompanied by his wife on his next expedition. This was also their honeymoon. Patagonia 3,000 kilometers by horse through an isolated, windy and painfully cold part of the world.

- 2000 Mikael walked through Maasailand in Eastern Africa, exploring all clans of the Maasai people.

- 2004 Mikael explored the unknown Kolyma River in North-Eastern Siberia.

- 3,500 km by canoe and by skis. An expedition which is globally hailed as one of the coldest ever in the history of exploration.