

# LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST

He's swum the Amazon and trekked to the North Pole in winter. Now he's sailed around the world to highlight the plight of the planet. Meet Mike Horn, eco-explorer extraordinaire.

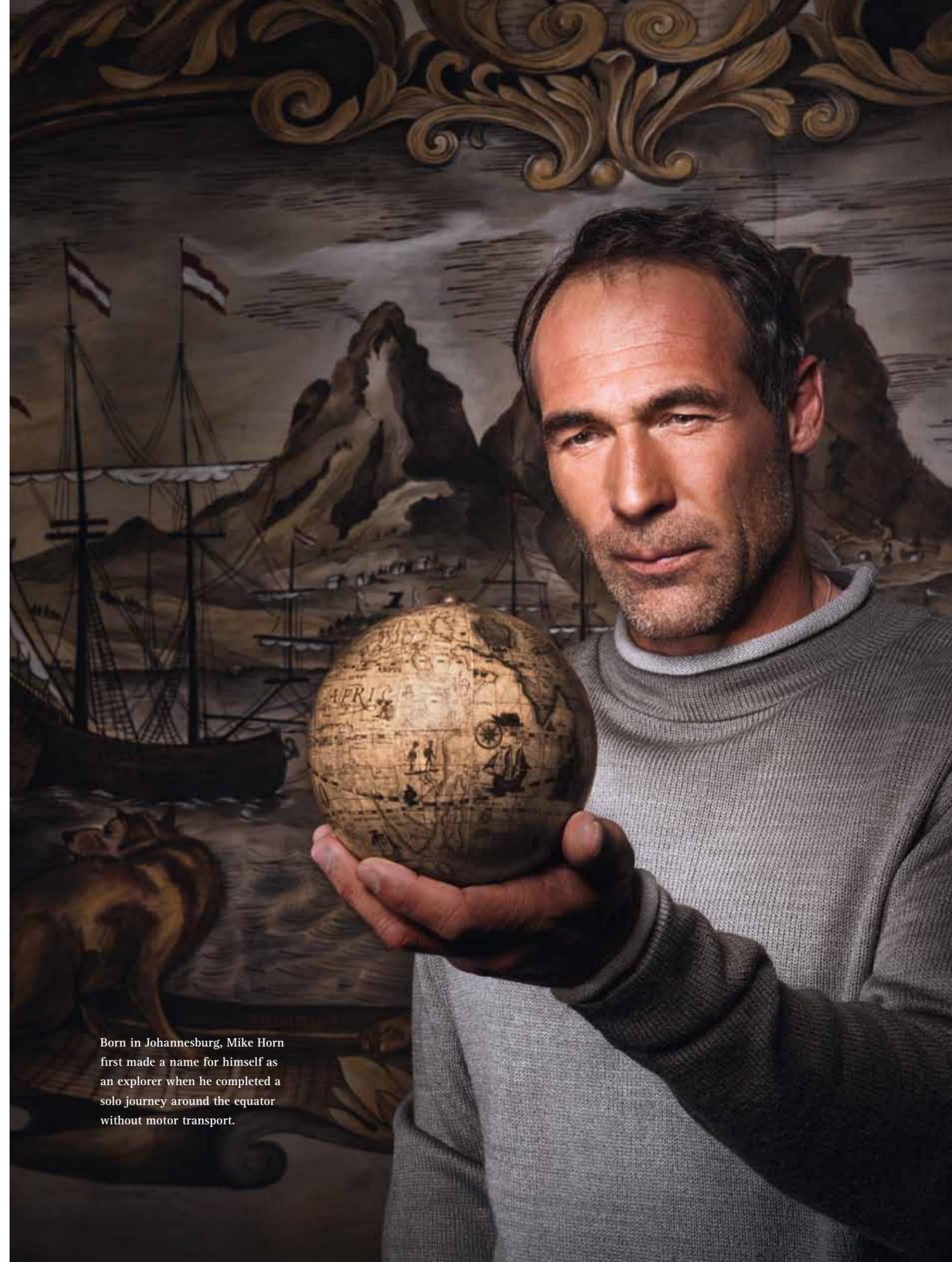
by Richard Webb

Modern-day eco-adventurer Mike Horn called in at Cape Town in mid 2012 on board his exploration vessel, Pangaea. The brief stopover marked the start of the final leg of a four-year transnavigation of the globe. Named for the supercontinent that existed 250 million years ago, The Expedition Pangaea is arguably the biggest environmental project in the world to date. It has crossed five oceans, visited seven continents, reached both Poles and taken in 260 000 kilometres. For this passionate South African, however, it's all in day's work. Described as the most accomplished explorer alive today, hyperboles such as 'exceptional feats', 'determination' 'endurance' and 'courage' pepper editorials about Mike Horn around the world. His mission is simple: to inspire young people to protect and restore the planet. To this end, he created a Young Explorers Programme and invited young adults, aged 15 to 20, from every continent to join him on various sections of his journey. They learned about flora and fauna, discovered the importance of nature and its elements and were also encouraged to understand the importance of environmental issues.

'The aim of the Pangaea mission is to enhance a respect for the environment, encourage the clean-up of the planet and protect its resources for future generations', explains Mike. He wants to inspire future generations to find the solutions needed to balance nature and mankind. 'During the past four years, we have shed light on the environmental problems we face today. I have witnessed the power and passion that the youth possess about the environment and am filled with hope for the future of our planet.' Mike's stopover in Cape Town gave him the perfect opportunity to promote his expedition, share his passion for the planet and show visitors around the innovative vessel that has been the project's headquarters. As he ushers guests across the gangplank of the Pangaea, he surveys their shoes for suitability to walk on his deck. His handshake is firm, his gaze direct and unwavering. The boat remains unpainted, save for partner branding on each side of the hull. 'Painting emits more than a ton of greenhouse gas emissions,' Mike explains. Comfortable, but not luxurious, the vessel sleeps up to 30 people, is designed to ram through floating



As part of a four-year journey of discovery that began in October 2008, The Expedition Pangaea has visited both the Arctic and Antarctic.



Born in Johannesburg, Mike Horn first made a name for himself as an explorer when he completed a solo journey around the equator without motor transport.



The Pangaea is 35 metres in length and has berths for 30 people. She is powered either by sail or by Mercedes-Benz diesel engines. Solar panels provide power for state-of-the-art information technologies.

ice in the Antarctic and is capable of being fully beached on specially designed skids. *Pangaea* was built by Mike next to the slums of São Paulo in Brazil. It's 35 metres in length and combines comfort and safety features with rugged power. 'It's not fancy, but because it is made with aluminium, it's wholly recyclable. It also has solar panels, so it's sustainable, as well as Mercedes-Benz diesel engines,' he says.

The solar panels also power the state-of-the-art technology on board and keep the crew's laptops buzzing with the content needed to feed the world media, hungry to follow the vessel's every move.

Introductions to his two crewmates, Jacek, a pragmatic Polish engineer, and Tristan, an urbane youngster from a passionate sailing family on France's Brittany coast, reveal that this trio regularly man the entire vessel themselves. There's an unspoken bond between them, forged through life-threatening conditions and shared experiences. They trust each other. They have to.

'Don't write about me', insists Mike, 'write about the environment and what is being done to educate the most powerful source of energy in the world – young people.' But to understand this message and its veracity requires us to know more about the man. Who is Mike Horn?

Born in 1966, Mike is the second of four kids. At just 18 he lost his father, a world-class athlete, to stomach cancer. His father's parting advice? 'While you're alive, live. Don't

live half a life.' His family has been a tower of strength for him. 'They gave me roots and they gave me wings,' he says. 'People think of explorers as misfits and outcasts, but successful ones come from close-knit families that provide the platform from which their children may confidently stray.' Mike was also in the South African Special Forces when he was still a teenager and saw combat in Angola, where he was sent to fight in the late 1980s.

Mike's calling as an extreme explorer came in 1990, when he gave everything away and travelled to Switzerland on a one-way ticket. His love of mountains and watersports were soon combined when he learned the art of hydrospeeding or riverboarding. Annual expeditions followed with valuable publicity being generated to help gain momentum for Mike and his brand of adventure. He still holds the record for the tallest waterfall leap for his descent of a 22-metre waterfall on the upper reaches of the Pacuare River in Costa Rica.

Buoyed by his early achievements, Mike descended the Mont Blanc glacier drift right through to the French Riviera. Soon afterwards, he developed a carbon Kevlar hydrospeed vessel with special compartments to store food and equipment for his first expedition on the Amazon, which saw him cross the South American continent.

Exploration soon became Mike's life and it still is. What happens if the desire to carry on wavers? 'There's nothing better than relentless danger to focus the mind on your

intentions.' But, something else calls to him, and his conversations are peppered with clues as to what it is.

He says that extended stays in the wilderness help to restore him. 'There is something restorative in witnessing Mother Nature at her most merciless', says Mike. 'I love nature when it is at the peak of its violence and its splendour, because it forces me to undergo the worst pains imaginable. It allows me to be a part of it, and that is a real privilege.'

Despite winds that drive the wind-chill to minus 60 degrees Celsius, the Arctic he says is relatively straightforward. 'There's no deceit and you always know what you're up against. If a polar bear wants you for dinner, he'll come for you,' says Mike. 'Only man tells you one thing and then stabs you in the back.'

The absence of deceit doesn't make Arctic exploration free of danger, though. Exposed skin can be frostbitten within minutes, as Mike experienced to his cost on his failed 2002 attempt to reach the North Pole. Thirty six days into this mission, a broken shoestring saw him remove his gloves, resulting in frostbite. Over the next few days, he had to decide between evacuation and loss of several digits. He wisely chose evacuation and was 'rewarded' with only the loss of three fingertips. 'That was a big lesson for me and one of the hardest decisions I've ever made,' Mike says.

Who is it that would trek to the North Pole in the 24-hour-a-day darkness of the Arctic winter? Why would anyone want to put himself in the way of multiple dangers by swimming the entire length of the Amazon River? Extending the boundaries of human achievement is a very risky business. Mike reels off his exploits like a shopping list. Latitude Zero, an 18-month circumnavigation of the earth around the Equator; the Arktos Expedition, a 27-month solo circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle; the North Pole Winter Expedition, the first-ever night expedition starting from the northernmost point of Russia and ending two months later at the North Pole; and the Himalaya Expedition, summing two mountains each higher than 8 000 metres without the use of additional oxygen. Naturally, equipment is a vital component of any expedition. Mike speaks of his Argos

beacon with the kind of reverence normally reserved for his New Zealander wife, Cathy. 'The beacon has 16 settings, each linked to a unique radio frequency.' Cathy and Mike agreed a terse code for each frequency. The lower numbers are fairly benign, with zero for 'all good'. Higher numbers reveal a slightly less relaxed condition. Six means 'I'm lost; standby'. Ten is 'I have a problem; criminal'. No one wants a 16, which means 'Expedition aborted; beyond rescue.' Gritty stuff this exploration business.

Mike was close to transmitting '16' just once. 'I was in the Amazon in 1999 recovering from a highly venomous snake bite. For two days I lay in my hammock, blinded, with my condition

# I WILL NEVER FAIL TO TRY



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rapidly deteriorating.' On the third day, he reached for his Argos and nearly punched in the dreaded 16. Two days later he had regained enough sensation to walk to safety. Commitment, passion and inspiration are important characteristics for an explorer. There is also physical strength, creativity and vision. Accomplished in all, it's vision that sets Mike apart. He's planned and pushed through to achieve things that no one else has, including the circumnavigation of the globe, alone, without motorised power. To even consider doing these feats is quite something. To achieve them, against obstacles such as money, elements, logistics and, yes, relationships, requires extraordinary commitment and vision.

'I have seen Cathy for about 30 days in the past four years,' says Mike. How do they manage? 'I have the best wife,' he announces. 'Without her, none of it would be possible.' Asked whether Mike has to 'sell' his ideas to get buy-in, Cathy hesitates before answering: 'I know Mike, I know the way he thinks, probably know what's coming up next so I go with the flow. That's how our whole life together has been.' Mike chimes in, 'I can't really surprise Cathy any more. Cathy is an engine, pulling me along with positive energy.' While Mike is a full-time professional explorer, Cathy manages their bestselling books and motivational speaking engagements. Mike and Cathy fully understand the commercial imperative of leveraging his activities to fund critical objectives, but not at any cost. 'Pangaea works with carefully selected partners, not sponsors,' says Mike. Mercedes-Benz, of whom Mike speaks glowingly, is the title partner. Panerai and Geberit are presenting partners and Nespresso is a business partner. Mike's two decades of exploration has meant that he has often travelled solo and been away from human contact for protracted periods of time. Pangaea changed all that, with a small group of young people sharing 'cosy' conditions on board the vessel. For Mike, it's been change worth embracing. 'I am deeply committed to sharing my experience with the next generation. I want to show the youth, through science, the beauty of the world and how to clean up our carbon footprint,' he says. His young recruits are in the perfect position to share their knowledge

with their communities back home.

Mike says Pangaea has reached out to around six million environmentally devoted youths globally, thanks in part to the diligent harnessing of social networking.

So what happens to the yacht when the mission is over? 'Perhaps the boat will be taken apart,' says Mike. 'The steel casing, aluminium hull, bamboo flooring and the glass will be recycled.' With a shrug of his shoulders, he betrays the faintest hint of loss. In fact, he's already earmarked the aluminium for his next dream exploration vessel.

Leaving the boat at Cape Town's V&A Waterfront, Mike continued to talk animatedly about his projects over lunch at the Cape Grace hotel, a luxurious setting in comparison to Pangaea. Mike's interpretation of luxury? 'Luxury is time to me. I don't always have the luxury of time because of the programme I have set for myself. What is his ideal birthday wish? 'Give me the time that others waste, that would be the biggest gift you could give to me. Because I'll know what to do with it.'

He's an incisive thinker this guy. He sailed solo across the Atlantic in a 28-foot trimaran through a hurricane in 19 days with little more than a GPS. But he has a warm, engaging nature that honours the interest in his life's work. So do you have to be a risk taker? 'Yes, but you also have to have the desire to win more than you lose,' he shoots back without pausing for thought. 'I would rather try and fail than fail to try,' he adds.

When we find ourselves on unfamiliar ground it can be frightening. Is it only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually? 'Yes, in fact, if a day goes by and I don't learn anything, I consider it as a waste of a day', agrees Mike.

As the day with Mike draws to a close, his parting words sum up his attitude to life: 'A life with 30 000 days is just enough for you to do everything you want to do. I have 12 000 days left. A second chance in life.'

Mike Horn has not only continued the legacy bestowed upon him by his family to 'confidently stray' but has also magnified and enriched it for a great many more people around the world.



See highlights from the day with Mike at [www.opulentliving.co.za](http://www.opulentliving.co.za)

Mike's wife Cathy and his daughters Annika (middle) and Jessica (far left) joined Mike at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town.



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