

THE EXTREME TEAM

SUE CADE learns how wild camping on Dartmoor led to the foundation of a worldwide medical training phenomenon

left: Mark and the medics who are set to 'lead, support and care for people in extreme locations'. Photo: Perou
below: Medics taking part in a polar medicine course. Photo: Dimitri Lisitsyn
bottom: Camping under arctic skies. Photo: Dimitri Lisitsyn





After you've been talking to Mark Hannaford, founder of World Extreme Medicine, for about 10 minutes, you start to wonder exactly what it is he hasn't done and why your own life seems ever so slightly dull.

Mark spent his 21st birthday rowing down the Patagonian coast to the San Rafael Glacier while I spent mine at Papa Joe's brasserie in Southampton.

He had a kick-start to his life as an adventurer; after his Master Mariner father was posted to the Middle East, Mark boarded at Kelly College in Tavistock where he greatly enjoyed wild camping on Dartmoor.

'My school career wasn't the most illustrious,' he admits. 'My school reports were appalling in all subjects bar geography – but I loved Duke of Edinburgh Awards and being a marine cadet. Any success I've had is firmly rooted in these experiences, not academic prowess.'

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The trip to Patagonia was due to Raleigh International, an organisation Mark praises strongly as a great resource. 'Careers guidance isn't likely to suggest becoming a mountain guide, but Raleigh sparks the idea that you can do something different with your life. Though I actually did work as a mountain guide in Marrakesh and Damascus!'

Mark actively sought increasingly extreme experiences, taking part in an avian DNA study in the Northern Territories of Australia where he crossed one of the most arid, isolated areas on earth, the Tanami Desert, to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

'Back then there wasn't the tech we rely on so heavily now; we really were on our own.' Being isolated has never fazed him, in fact, it seems to be what makes him tick.

'When I worked as a geological field assistant in Central Australia, I'd be dropped in the bush by helicopter, somewhere no-one had ever been. If for any reason the chopper didn't make it back, absolutely no-one would have known where I was.' For one brief moment he toyed with the idea of settling down and took a job with BT. But it wasn't long before he concluded a mainstream career wasn't for him.

'My colleagues were great people, but many had been there their whole working lives. I knew I wasn't going to be able to conform. I'd studied geography at university and remember my tutor stating that with geography you're a jack of all trades, master of none. That's me, I want to keep learning, keep trying things. After BT, I got back on track, driving RIBs taking passengers ashore in Kamchatka in the far east of Russia, Antarctica, Iceland, Greenland, the Seychelles and Madagascar.'

A stint working on charity challenges in Jordan and Israel roused Mark's entrepreneurial streak. 'The idea for these events was great, but there were big gaps in the safety elements, especially in terms of medical back up. Sometimes I appeared to know more about medical issues than >



the support team – even though I had no medical training.'

When he set up his own charity challenge organisation, Across the Divide, he made sure there was always a professional medic on board.

'I'm proud of what we achieved. The BBC asked us to run the Children in Need Rickshaw Challenge and we organised Helen Skelton's kayak along the Amazon for Sport Relief. Across the Divide was fundamental to raising around £103 million for charity, at the same time introducing thousands of people to the outdoors, taking them out of their comfort zones.'

A campfire conversation during a one-off training course for medics involved with these challenges convinced Mark to try a new enterprise, offering similar courses for anyone interested in becoming an expedition medic.

'We ran the first course in the Lake District. It came as a bit of a shock when 70 doctors turned up!'

This encouraged him to establish World Extreme Medicine in 2000. Its aim, to train medics to 'lead, support and care for people in extreme locations'.

'I'd done much of the groundwork with Across the Divide. I knew people in Costa Rica who could help with a jungle course, I'd worked as a dog sled guide, perfect as a basis for a polar course. I had contacts, skills, people and equipment, but it's difficult for a non-clinician to create a medical discipline. World Extreme Medicine is only as successful as it is because of the generosity of the many clinicians who've supported me along the way.'

It's grown to become a world-leading provider of courses in remote medicine and, under Mark's steerage, much more besides. There's an impressive community of Faculty members who bring their expertise to courses ranging from tropical medicine and human performance science to wilderness expedition dentistry. A fellowship programme enables individuals to achieve recognition for their work in extreme medicine.

And the annual conference brings together incredible people willing to share their expertise.

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'Where else would you find a space doctor, special forces medic, Médecins Sans Frontières doctor, a wildlife vet? Where else could you discuss how one medical discipline might translate to another? It's a unique platform.'

So much so that in 2021, Tom Cruise made a virtual appearance at the conference, interviewing NASA astronaut Victor Glover about astronaut training. 'It came >









clockwise from above: Tough conditions on a WEM desert medicine course.
Photo: Dimitri Lisitsyn

Mark on yet another adventure!

Mark and his partner Nikki McLeary, World Extreme Medicine's science project lead, at The Explorers Club.

Participants on a World Extreme Medicine jungle medicine course



left: Ukraine volunteers Andrii, Stepan, and Nazarii with Luca Alfatti and Mark Hannaford.

below: Mark Hannaford and Luca Alfatti delivering supplies to Ukraine.

Photos: Perou

‘We knew medical supplies would be needed, so we started asking for donations from anyone who could help’

about because of another area of our work, providing consultancy and medical back up for film productions including *Mission Impossible* - we’ve also worked on *Jack Ryan*, *Transformers* and TV shows like *Survivor*.’

Closer to home, Mark helped develop an MSc in Extreme Medicine, the first of its kind, at the University of Exeter. This year, the course is being offered at Northeastern University in the States and there’s talk of Australia and Dubai too.

Mark’s exploits have not gone unnoticed. ‘I was honoured to be invited to join The Explorers Club 50 in 2021. For over 120 years the club has supported scientific expeditions of all disciplines. Past members include Neil Armstrong, Teddy Roosevelt, Sir Edmund Hillary and Charles Lindbergh – I definitely had a moment of imposter syndrome.’ There’s yet another side to Mark, a philanthropic streak. In 2016, World Extreme Medicine provided logistical support for a People’s Convoy to travel 2,600 miles across ten different countries in six days, taking vital equipment to rebuild a bombed paediatric hospital in Syria. And when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Mark and colleague Luca Alfatti created a new organisation, Medics4Ukraine, to help medics working on the frontline. We knew medical supplies would be needed, so we started asking for donations from anyone who could help, either through financial support or supplies to make up trauma treatment kits. It simply grew from there, and we now send regular convoys taking crucial supplies along with volunteers to provide essential training.’ £2 million in terms of support was delivered in the first year of the war, and Mark says the initiative will continue as long as needed. Just after I spoke to him he was leaving for Kherson with a training team.



In his ‘spare’ time, Mark can be found running the coast path near his home town of Beer accompanied by his husky, Anya, giving talks to schools and local organisations, going out on a Coastguard shout, wild camping on Dartmoor... There seems to be no end to his energy and his passion. I’m hoping some of it rubs off on me!

worldextrememedicine.com

MARK’S FAVOURITE REMOTE PLACES

1: My most favourite recent place is **GEORGIA**. The Caucasus Mountains and especially Mount Kazbek are breathtaking whilst the simple simplicity and hospitality of the hardy mountain folk living in their shadow are legendary.

2: A place quite unlike any other that I’ve explored is **NAMIBIA**. The impact of the Benguela Current as it brings frigid Antarctic waters along the Skeleton Coast is dramatic with rolling mists dominating the near coast.

3: My first professional expeditions took place in **MOROCCO**. The Berber architecture of the remote villages of the Atlas Mountains and the tradition of tea with the village ‘caid’ (headman) transport you back to enlightened days of the Moorish Empire.

4: **THE AQUARIUS REEF BASE** off the coast of Florida is used by NASA as a training base for astronauts heading to the International Space Station. Conditions are as close to being in space without leaving terra firma. Spending a night or two sleeping underwater is one of the most surreal experiences there is.

5: Summer in **ANTARCTICA** is incredible with endless days and rapid shifts. Balmy summer sun changes to roaring winds as katabatic winds drop heavily off the icesheets bringing locomotive speed winds.