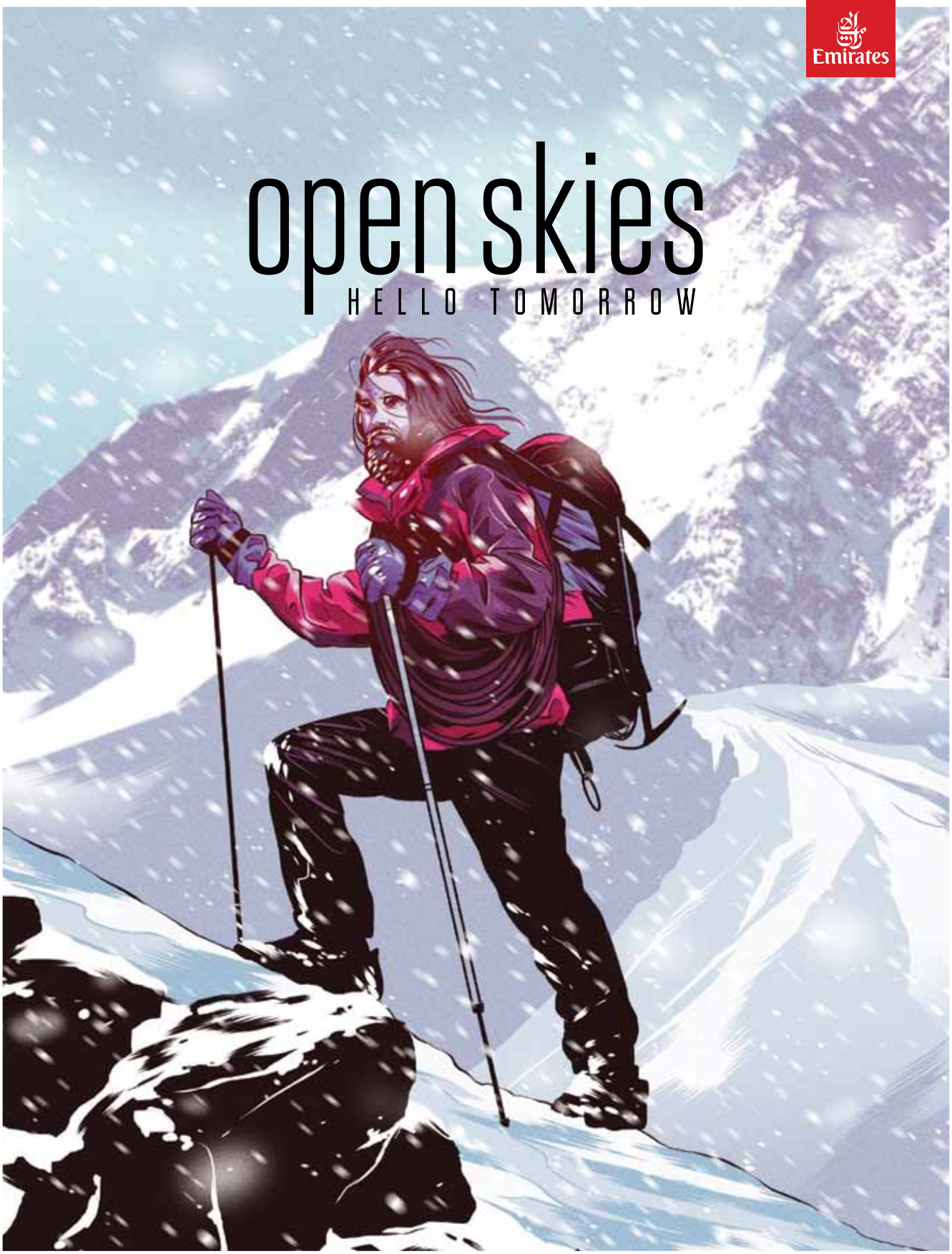
Emirates

open skies

HELLO TOMORROW



JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

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For a small group of people, travel isn't just the occasional holiday with friends and family; it's an all encompassing obsession to see more of the planet than anybody else... and nowhere is off limits

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It all started in the summer of 1965 on a trip to West Germany when Don Parrish was 20. It was the young Texan's first time outside of the United States and he took up work in a small metal factory in Hanau, just east of Frankfurt. Parrish had this strong impulse to live as a foreigner in somebody else's language, so the American made a pact with himself that he wouldn't speak a word of English the entire time he was in Germany. He bunked up with a local family, found a pen pal in East Berlin, and bought a motorcycle to ride off into sunsets and explore the unknown. Half a century and 13 passports later, Parrish says the summer of '65 changed his entire life.

By 1969 Parrish was exploring Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He made his first trip around the world in '71. Not long after, Bell Laboratories hired him as a planning manager developing electronic switching systems, and he started skirting the globe as a business traveller laying the foundations for the telecommunications revolution we now take for granted. The job made him enough money to retire in 1996 at the age of 51. He continued working for another five years as a consultant, but quit for good in 2001 to dedicate himself full-time to his one true passion: extreme travel.

"The big shift that occurs between normal travellers and extreme travellers is this point when you suddenly decide, 'I want to see everything'," Parrish, who now lives in Chicago, explains. "When people start travelling they typically go to really nice places they've read about. But then if you start going further and start visiting *un-nice* places, or places you know have problems, you get to a point where you just look over an entire map and say, 'Let's see it all'."

Parrish can't say just when exactly he came to that realisation, but over the next decade the lifelong bachelor systematically orchestrated trips to all 193 UN member states, including Iraq, North Korea and South Sudan (the world's newest country). He says some of his favourite trips in that time were to those *un-nice* places, like Puntland in northeast Somalia, even though he had to have armed guards with AK-47s on watch the entire time he was there.

Parrish reckons he's flown about five million miles, visited more than 60 islands by ship and seen 455 Unesco World Heritage Sites. He's been to places that have seen fewer people than the top of Mount Everest, such as Marion Island, halfway between South Africa and Antarctica. By some accounts Parrish could be called the world's most travelled man. Of course, that all depends on who's keeping track and just how exactly you define something as un-definable as having seen "everywhere".

Global record-keeper Guinness retired its category for the world's most travelled person in the early 2000s due to a lack of common standards. It couldn't have predicted it at the time, but that decision set the stage for a new era of competitive travelling. In Guinness' wake a handful of organisations rose to the challenge of definitively answering the question: who on earth has seen the most of it? But there were problems right from the start. Namely, they all came up with different criteria.

The Traveller's Century Club (which dates back to 1954) defines "everywhere" as 325 countries and territories. You have to have visited at least 100 of them to join, but there is no ranking system of top travellers. That came with the two other record-keeping clubs for the travel obsessed, both of which digital, that popped up after Guinness bowed out, and sliced the globe into an even more complex puzzle. Most Travelled People (MTP) lists 875 places, while The Best Travelled (TBT) sets a virtually unattainable bar of 1,281. This means that a person like Parrish can simultaneously be the world's top traveller on MTP, while raking seventh on TBT.

FUELLED BY MONEY, TIME AND A COMPULSION TO SEE THE UNSEEN, THERE ARE NOW THOUSANDS OF COMPETITIVE TRAVELLERS RACING TO THE WORLD'S WILDEST CORNERS

Fuelled by money, time and a compulsion to see the unseen, there are now thousands of competitive travellers like Parrish racing to the world's wildest corners and remotest islands. MTP alone is credited with spawning small-scale expeditions (often with big, US$50,000 price tags) to some of its hardest-to-reach locales (the list includes far more obscure landmasses than TBT). Take Bouvet Island, for example. This uninhabited sub-Antarctic island in the South Atlantic, owned by Norway, is like catnip for competitive travellers. It's the Holy Grail of earthly obscurity at eight days by boat from anywhere else.

TBT founder Harry Mitsidis, of Greece, reveals he went on an expedition with a group of competitive travellers to Bouvet Island last year, but when they finally got to the island they weren't able to land because the winds were howling mad (like they almost always are). "People really went crazy when they realised we weren't gong to actually touch Bouvet," the 44-year-old recalls. "One person even closed himself off in his cabin and didn't leave for five days."

That's because the destination doesn't count for either list unless you set two feet on solid ground. What counts and what doesn't may be the most contentious subject within the community. After all, if you're collecting countries like trading cards what sort of proof do you need to back up your claims? And does it matter if you're just a box-ticker who only sets foot in a location for a few minutes?

American Don Parrish is, by some accounts, the world's most travelled man

TBT and MTP have different ways of verifying a

Harry Mitsidis (above) in Somalia

Jorge Sanchez (right) says travel is not a competition but an opportunity to learn new things

traveller's claims. Mitsidis, who ranks fourth on his own list, asks any traveller who exceeds 500 spots to then show proof of travel for a randomly selected set of destinations. This could be passport stamps, receipts or a set of photos, for example. TBT also requires that you travel beyond the transport hub, though there's no minimum time limit. The club claims about 10,000 members and at least four people who shot up to the top of the list, but couldn't verify their claims, have been kicked out.

American Charles Veley, creator of MTP, says his community of 20,000 "polices itself", particularly among the upper echelons (Veley is No 3 on MTP). "When I receive a complaint of suspicious activity I request proof of travel, which can take many forms, including an oral interview," the 50-year-old explains. But there's no required minimum stay in a location so long as you enter legally and clear immigration at airfields and ports. Veley tells me a minimum would be impractical, particularly as the list includes many war-torn regions and uninhabited islands that require special government permissions.

The community of competitive travellers is overwhelmingly Caucasian, upper class, middle-aged and male, through there are some notable exceptions. There's Finnish traveller Oili Liutu (the top-ranking female on MTP), Kazuto Matsumoto of Japan (currently 12th on TBT) and Danish globetrotter Henrik Jeppesen (who, at 27, became the youngest person to visit every UN-recognised country earlier this year).

Each person in this top tier tends to have his or her own unique travel style. Parrish, for example, tells me he'll attempt to speak the basics of a local language so he can latch on to a domestic tourist, "because they often know the best places to go within a country". Though he enjoys the kind of cultural exchanges that can occur on a humble local train, he also has no qualms forking over thousands of dollars for a one-off expedition to the edge of the unknown.

"Every top traveller has his own definition of what constitutes a superior experience," says Veley, who now works full-time at a Washington, DC-area business intelligence company and has three kids in San Francisco. "Some people value the most expensive experiences, while others find authenticity only in frugality."

IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY. JORGE SANCHEZ ENDURED AN AERIAL BOMBING BY US-LED COALITION JETS IN SADDAM HUSSEIN-ERA BAGHDAD, AND WAS JAILED AS A "SPY" CROSSING THROUGH AFGHANISTAN

Spaniard Jorge Sanchez is the most famous among the latter. Though the 62-year-old participates in both TBT and MTP for the travel inspiration each list provides, he's also created his own list of 222 ways to travel deeper called the Travellers Exploits Club. It's a rebuke to what he sees as lists riddled with "pseudo travellers" – people who eschew quality for quantity and "accumulate countries faster than we cook churros in Spain".

"Some people tick off a territory like Niue Island or Fernando de Noronha just by landing on it and immediately, in the same airplane, flying back without ever visiting the island," he explains. "These people don't learn anything, they just waste money for narcissism to get points in the travel clubs."

Don Parrish at Robben Island in South Africa

THE WHOLE WORLD THINKS WE'RE CRAZY, BUT THERE I AM, DISCUSSING THE BEST WAY TO GET INTO DARFUR AND IT WON'T SEEM LIKE MADNESS, IT'LL SEEM THE MOST LOGICAL CONVERSATION

Sanchez spends a few months of each year washing dishes on the Costa Brava to save up for his low-budget, high-intensity travels. He's breezed through 22 passports and ranks No 2 on the TBT list behind German cyclist Heinz Stücke. Yet, he bristles at the term "competitive traveller".

"Travelling, for me, is not a competition but an opportunity to learn, to develop yourself," he says. Sanchez is the kind of guy who calls planet earth his university. "I consider every continent to be a subject and every country to be a lesson."

No matter what kind of extreme traveller you are, sliding in and out of prickly frontier towns, lonely islands and dangerous war zones does have its costs. Sanchez endured an aerial bombing by US-led coalition jets in Saddam Hussein-era Baghdad and was jailed as a "spy" crossing through Afghanistan during its war with the Soviets. Mitsidis found himself jailed in Yemen for crossing a border illegally, and Veley recounts a harrowing 24 hours stranded with no shelter on an Antarctic island in the Bellingshausen Sea.

Parrish says the scariest places to him are often the most mundane, like crossing the street in a former British colony and forgetting which way to look. All in all, most top travellers report seeing a world that looks much different than the kind of images often splashed across the television news. "Given all the travelling I've done, I've been in danger very little," Mitsidis says. "I think that's proof that the world is not nearly as dangerous as it's made out to be."

But what about the ethical dilemmas of globetrotting? Is there anywhere off limits?

"You get arguments on whether you should go to places like North Korea, where you know the money you spend is going to the hands of the 'bad guys' but… when it comes to making a choice, I would rather increase my understanding of a place than say I'm not going to go because other people are telling me not to go."

Mitsidis, a lecturer in leadership and organisational behaviour, says he hasn't regretted a single trip in his life. Most competitive travellers agree on that point. They also insist that, for all their differences and occasional bickering, they really are a close-knit community. They'll go out of their way to pass on the contact of an African station chief in Bosaso or tell you the secret to how they secured the permits to land on an otherwise off-limits nature preserve. They'll even schedule conferences in places like Grozny, Chechnya, just to get together, toss back a few beers and share tales from life on the road.

"When I come across another competitive traveller, it's amazing how I feel as if we understand each other," Mitsidis explains. "The whole world thinks we're crazy, but there I am with this person who doesn't, who knows where I'm coming from. Our conversation could be about how to get to Darfur and this won't seem like complete madness; it'll seem like the most logical conversation possible."

Neither Mitsidis nor Veley actually believes anyone will ever complete their respective lists in one lifetime. Mitsidis doesn't even believe there is such a thing as the best travelled person. "Anyone who tends to say this about themselves is, in my opinion, really diluted," he insists. "I don't think that's really the point of it all. It's not about being the best. It's about enjoying it, learning, seeing as much as possible and, yes, there might be a nice element of friendly competition, but I wouldn't suggest that anyone should ever be known as the No 1."