

Beyond Boundaries - Building yourself a new future through adventure

Steve Carter

Tired of battling the recession, feeling you're banging your head on a brick wall, wondering what on earth you should do with your life? Then it might just be the moment for a little adventure says psychologist and adventurer Steve Carter.¹

¹ Author of the 'Road to Audacity', Steve Carter is a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and a psychologist. He has worked globally as a consultant with some of the world's leading organisations including HSBC, SABMiller, Oracle and the Economist Group. He is CEO of the international performance development consultancy Apter Development LLP.

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Perhaps one of the hardest things we do is to decide what we want to do – with our careers, with our time, with our lives. We might reach for the self help book, filling in a few checklists in search of a way forward. Perhaps we are lucky enough to receive Executive Coaching; spending up to £20,000 on support. These days monasteries, Buddhists retreats etc all offer timeouts for those seeking or needing a change in direction. But perhaps for some people these gentle, reflective, *comfortable*, approaches are too disconnected from their personal style and approach. For such people, a surer sense of purpose can be an unexpected benefit of involving themselves in something more adventurous. In some cases a purpose that is a radical alternative to what has gone before.

It's 5.30 am in the Sahara desert. The sun is just about to crest the Abu Maharik dune - the Father of the Shifters - which runs 600 kilometres south west - turning the sky a sequence of colours from white gold though pale yellows to egg shell blue.

I stirred slowly in my sleeping bag on the sand, treasuring the unhurried progress from the deepest of sleeps to a brand new day. Around me scattered like tree trunks, my fellow adventurers were still sleeping.

With a mixture of reluctance and anticipation I rolled out of my sleeping bag and staggered across to where Saleh, had already made some coffee on a decrepit gas stove. He was kneading flour and water and a little salt in a metal bowl to make flat bread on the revived embers of last night's fire. He grinned and passed me a battered old tin mug. "Shukran", I muttered in one of my very few words of Arabic, "you're welcome" he replied.

So here I was 200 km from Cairo, 50 km from the nearest road. We had spent the previous day navigating across the sands using low tech navigation techniques such as tracing the shadow from a stick in the sand as the sun moves from east to west giving us a line from west to east. We had discovered Palaeolithic tools on the shore of an ancient lake bed; we had crested the dune and gazed into what seemed like infinity. Then last night we had sat around the campfire, Westerner and Bedouin sharing food and singing songs. Not only your body, but your mind is in a different place out here.

I wandered across to a slight escarpment of sand and gravel and sat down on top of it, sipping the coffee. "This is a good adventure" I thought.

Looking back over the shallow valley which dipped away from me, I watched the others struggle randomly into life. One of the earliest risers spotted me and wandered over, scrambling up the last few metres. It was John; we had spent two hours in deep conversation the previous day, crossing a vast flat lake bed punctuated at intervals by strange outcrops of hard rock, formed by the mineral bearing spring water that once welled up into it.

He sat down next to me... 'I knew what he was going to say...

"I've been thinking" he said.

Because that is what you do in the desert.

There is a quality to the thinking you get on an adventure. I had noticed it when I took myself with a Berber guide on a trek in the Atlas Mountains a couple of years previously. Three days in, huffing and puffing over the barren rowan-bushed mountain passes and deep green and fertile valleys often only reachable by foot or mule, something changed in me. I noticed that the screaming babble of goals and demands I had arrived with had faded into a barely considered murmur.

Psychologically, the challenge of coping and testing yourself with immediate and primitive challenges like; get there, eat, sleep, reduces the

insistent noise of a complex world, to something that is now literally and figuratively a thousand miles away. Life remains challenging but it is a new simpler sort of challenge – "will this body of mine take me up THAT hill?!" This distancing effect just seems to slice through to what really matters for you, and this focus is sharpened by the overwhelming inspiration of where you are. The top of a mountain pass, eating a boiled egg, as you lie on your back and watch a Golden Eagle soar over head, is the perfect place to make the big decisions.



Adventuring seems to cut out the complex crap from our thinking allowing us to simplify our lives to a few clearer goals, albeit ones that may be bold and stretching.

What makes an adventure? It isn't just the place, if you can get your guides to take you up Everest, and companies that can take you almost anywhere with a clear itinerary and a tight schedule, then an adventure is not so much about *where* you go but *how* you get there. It's a subjective thing. Adventurous journeys are ambiguous, you don't know each night where you will stop, you can't guarantee to get to your destination, most of all there has to be a challenge you don't have the complete confidence you can meet. It is under these conditions you learn so much more about yourself, discovering and re-discovering aspects of who you are that open up new possibilities or allow you to engage with present circumstances in different ways.

I had always thought that 'adventures' were something other younger, fitter, braver people did. People who thrash themselves into shape in early morning gyms, have learnt to tie complicated knots and who go for weeks only eating witchetty grubs. But then a few years ago, my father a very competent sailor, who had always planned to sail the Atlantic when he retired, died. One of the impacts upon me was an overwhelming need to re-order my life and put the outdoors somewhere into it. So I looked for adventures, little adventures that I could manage. The trick was not to see myself in competition with super athletes but, with due care and preparation find something that challenged me.



I learned to choose adventures, with respect to myself and my abilities but not to be afraid to explore what is possible. The trek through the Atlas Mountains was tough-ish but took no special skills, the desert is hot and again tough, but flat. Sometimes it's all about self-talk.

Out of this experience grew the conviction that other people could really be transformed by similar experiences. Alongside my regular role as a consultant to corporate senior management, I developed a commitment to use adventure as a way to enable others to find out who they want to be and how they might achieve this.

People at first almost universally hesitate; sometimes because they feel very unsure of themselves physically, or more

intriguingly, because all 'real' adventures have been done.

This is not true.

The leader of the Sahara trip, my friend, the poet turned writer and explorer, Robert Twigger, sees the search for adventure as vital to the successful realisation of who we are and is one of the champions of small scale, low budget, expeditions. Although he has caught the world's longest snake; was

the first person to cross Western Canada in a birchbark canoe since 1793; and has hunted for lost oases in the Sahara and bona-fide Zombies in Haiti (and found them), he is keen that adventures are seen as personal, accessible and d.i.y.

Sitting under an unbelievable heaven the previous night, we had talked about the 'unknown and the undiscovered.'

"There's masses of stuff out here man," he said. "The desert isn't empty, except of people thank God! There are all sorts of things to be discovered, people are always finding new sites, you never know what next. New cave paintings; dinosaur bones and until very recently camel trains used to snake across the desert meaning all sorts of stuff over thousands of years used to get dropped."

"There's plenty of adventures to be had and exploring is a great way of having them," he went on. "It depends how you look at it. Exploring is as much about recording a place with new eyes as anything else. Sometimes retracing

another explorer's steps can be so illuminating. When I crossed Canada in the canoe, we got to one point described in the 1793 expedition – a log jam – where absolutely nothing had changed in 200 years.”

“There are so many possibilities - and you just never know what you will find and where it will take you.”

As I sat on that ridge, watching the sun rise, and John started to tell me his latest plans, I couldn't help thinking that he was right.

Steve Carter is CEO of Apter Development and project leader for the Beyond Boundaries Expedition - a career transition / adventure programme.

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