

# TheSaturdayInterview

## 'It is a lost world. We might as well have been on Mars'

WHEN most people plan their travels abroad, they do not envisage unpacking their belongings in a country teeming with terrorists, two-headed snakes and tribespeople who have not seen outsiders for 50 years.

But Colonel John Blashford-Snell OBE is not 'most people'. In an adventure that could have been scripted with a flourish of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's quill, the intrepid explorer, who turns 80 in October, led a group of hardy souls to the foothills of the remote Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains in the north-east of Colombia last month.

'In many ways it is a lost world,' he said. 'We might as well have been on Mars.'

The 18-strong group, comprising doctors, nurses, dentists, biologists, farmers and engineers, undertook the expedition to provide a tribe known as the Wiwa with education, and engineering and medical advice.

'We were probably the first outsiders to venture into those parts for 50 years. Given that it is a lost world, we were privileged,' said the former Royal Engineer, who was educated at Victoria College.

No stranger to exploring isolated pockets of the globe, Col Blashford-Snell has led dozens of expeditions over the years – and has been shot at, held prisoner by Ethiopian bandits and charged at by wild beasts. Yet despite his vast experience, two unexpected obstacles frustrated the adventurers as they attempted to complete their objectives: the Wiwa people's blessing rituals, and the threat of terrorists.

'It was the most difficult expedition I've done for many years,' he said. 'The president of Colombia had summoned a terrorist group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, for a peace conference as we were reaching the country. About 400 of them arrived and they were armed to the teeth. A lot of them came from over the border in Venezuela.'

'Fortunately they were there to negotiate, but the rival terrorist group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), had not signed the peace accord and turned up unannounced, three kilometres from where we were. So the Colombian government sent more than 100 troops from the army to protect us.'

'The army were worried that the ELN terrorists might do something to harm us to get massive publicity. The army soldiers were very tense – they were not playing games – and they carried machine guns. We had to wait for them to clear routes in advance. If we stopped by the side of the road at any point, the army checked the area for mines.'

The threat of terrorist activity contrasted sharply with the peace-loving Wiwa. An indigenous people, they are direct descendants of the Tairona, the ancient civilisation who built the Lost City of La Ciudad Perdida in 800 AD.

'Spending time with the Wiwa was other-worldly,' said Col Blashford-Snell. 'They are an unusual people who have been struggling to come into the 21st century. The men, women and children wear pristine white garments, long, flowing robes, and don't usually permit outsiders to visit. The only people who have been there in over 50 years are terrorists. The Wiwa believe in the spirit world and think that everything has a spirit.'

He said that while he fully respected their beliefs, their prayer rituals meant it was difficult to get things done.

'The Wiwa are great conservationists who refer to the rest of



Col Blashford-Snell in north-eastern Colombia with members of the Wiwa tribe – waving the Jersey flag, of course

## David Edbrooke catches up with Colonel John Blashford-Snell after his latest expedition – to meet the Wiwa tribe in deepest Colombia

the world's people as their younger brothers, and say the younger brothers are destroying the world,' he said.

'They take part in extreme prayer and we were often required to hold bits of grass and string while their priest would try to interpret our inner thoughts. We were trying to help them, but everything we did, or tried to do, had to have their blessing first, which took ages.'

Col Blashford-Snell and his group still achieved much during their stay, including helping the Wiwa to build a school in the mountains for 40 children.

'A lot of the Wiwa live in the mountains, so to help build this school we first had a five-hour climb in 40-degree heat, and everything had to go up on men's backs and by mule, including lots of school books,' he said.

'When we went up with our engineers we found they hadn't designed the school bathroom properly and had put in plastic water pipes. These wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the extreme temperatures they get, so we had to start replacing them.'

'That's due to be finished this weekend – we gave a lot of engineering advice to them.'

The group's doctors, nurses and dentists treated more than 250 patients during the trip, and the engineers also gave some advice to the Wiwa on bridge design. 'I hope the

work we've done has really helped them,' Col Blashford-Snell said.

While the Wiwa were hospitable, some of the wildlife in the undergrowth was positively poisonous. Fortunately, two-headed snakes and jaguars – the lesser-spotted species rather than the road-going variety – stayed under cover.

Although, as one could detect

**'The army were worried that the terrorists might do something to harm us to get massive publicity'**

from Col Blashford-Snell's disappointed tone, he would have enjoyed taking a Siamese serpent's picture to send back to the Scientific Exploration Society. The UK-based charity, which initiates a worldwide programme of scientific expeditions focusing on scientific, conservation, education and community aid projects, was established in 1969 and co-founded by the Colonel.

'The Wiwa talked about double-headed snakes that live in the undergrowth, but we didn't see them on this trip,' he said. 'There are also jaguars in the forests – the forests are totally untamed.'

Perhaps the most pressing worry was the threat of the Zika virus spreading across the Venezuela border. 'There was one guy, a translator, who was with us and had just had it. He said it was like the flu, and believes he caught it in the area very near us, but on the Venezuelan border.'

'The big worry we had was for the women in our group. Fortunately, the mosquitoes in our immediate area were not that bad. But it's early days – hopefully the Zika won't emerge in any of us.'

So is Col Blashford-Snell relieved to have led his group of adventurers back in one piece? 'It's certainly a relief when you get everyone safely back on the plane,' he said. 'The terrorists were always a concern, but we came back alive. Ultimately there's always an element of risk, but you could be run over by a car in St Helier just as easily.'

Jersey is never far from the Colonel's thoughts. He took a Jersey flag along with him to South America. 'I take a Jersey flag with me wherever I go,' he said.

And he is taking three Jersey people to accompany him on his next expedition – to Mongolia this summer. 'It's an expedition on hors-

es and camels delivering community aid and dental care, and carrying out archaeological studies in the western Altai, one of the least-known areas of Mongolia,' he said.

Although his penchant for exploring the planet remains strong, the sight of familiar fields and coves draws him back to the Island he loves. 'Exploring Jersey as a youngster was a wonderful start – it's a launching platform,' he said. 'The happiest days I ever had were in Jersey. As a boy at Victoria College I did all my early adventuring in Jersey, from scrambling around the cliffs to diving off the coast and swimming underwater. I actually talked to the Wiwa tribe about the Island – they were very interested.'

In October he becomes an octogenarian, but don't expect him to let birthday celebrations get in the way of adventuring.

'Eighty?' he said. 'Really? Yes, it's something like that! I'm not bothered with it.'

Rather than blowing out candles, he would prefer to set his gaze and point his compass towards the skyline. So what feeds his insatiable appetite for exploration?

'Curiosity. People constantly come to me with interests and problems and ask why can't this or that be done. Ultimately, my background was working as a Royal Engineer, so if someone asked me to climb Everest because there was a rare flower growing on it containing a cancer cure, I'd be delighted to do it. But first I'd build scaffolding at the side!'

'Over the years so many Jersey people have gone out and seen the world. You need to go to the next horizon. But having done that, they return to Jersey. I love it when I come round Corbière and see the lighthouse welcoming me back. I don't even mind taking the ferry.'

● For more information on Colonel Blashford-Snell's expedition work visit [johnblashfordsnell.org.uk](http://johnblashfordsnell.org.uk).