

Bridport

news

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ESTABLISHED 1855

WHEN adventurer Jason Lewis called in to the News office, a wave of hysteria gripped the reporters. Here was West Dorset's very own intrepid explorer and he'd come to tell his story. RENE GERRYTS was dispatched to find out what makes him tick. This is the first of a News two-part special.

FOR a man who thought sailing was rather a bizarre, cold and a wet way to do things, Jason Lewis from Askerswell, chose a strange way to spend months and months of his life – pedalling across two oceans in a tiny wooden boat.

Then who knows what motivates an otherwise sane man to spend the past six years of his life making a bid to circumnavigate the world using muscle power alone.

To find out, I talked to 33-year-old Jason Lewis and see if he could explain what drives a person to take up in-line skating for the first time when aiming to cross the American continent, break both legs while doing so, then carry on in-line skating (on \$2 a day), be upturned in a tiny boat by a nosy whale at three o'clock in the morning, suffer the gastronomic attentions of a hungry oceanic white tip shark in the depths of the Pacific, nearly die from blood poisoning, get chased out of a lake in Florida by a hungry alligator, sleep completely under water in Arkansas to escape bird-sized biting insects, share 26ft by 4ft boat space with a fellow human being when neither of you can see the funny side of being thousands of miles from the nearest land-mass, and countless other heart-stopping adventures.

When you meet him, Jason doesn't immediately strike you as the stuff heroes are made of but an hour later you can see he obviously has what it takes to make his dreams a reality and push himself to the limits of human endurance and beyond.

Jason's family moved from Nettlecombe to Askerswell in 1976 while his father was still in the army being posted all around the world.

The earliest family story of Jason's wanderlust was when he was a year and a half old and was discovered half a mile down the road exploring the wonders of a big, yellow JCB.

Jason went to boarding school in Sherborne where he confesses to barely scraping through his English exams, having a very unscientific head and being mediocre all round, with the possible exception of music and theatre.

Nevertheless, he left with an A level in English, biology and geography but no idea what he was going to do.

The first real taste of adventure came on a trip to Kenya with his mum in his gap year where he remembers taking a train trip with friends down the coast.

"It was the first time really felt I was on my own. It felt quite daring and exciting for someone who had come from a relatively sheltered background. That pricked up my ears a bit."

Jason tried a short spell in the army, partly to please his father and partly because they offered him a bursary to go to university.

"It was a very short spell. It was a two months course but I realised in the first two minutes when this guy starts yelling at me on the station for being late that the army wasn't for me."

He did go to London University where he changed courses from biology to geography. It was here he met fellow adventurer Steve Smith.

"We both shared a common interest in pushing ourselves to the limits. We'd take expeditions off into the middle of nowhere and just start walking."

Jason retained his interest in music and played with a band in London with a couple of friends from Beaminster but fame and fortune eluded him and a job cleaning carpets and windows for West London hotels kept body, if not soul, together.

Then one of those accidents that can turn the course of your life happened when Jason broke his foot.

To recover he took a three-month break in America, bought an old Chevy Caprice in New York and got as far as Montana before the car blew up in a snow storm.

"I remember walking through snow drifts until I found a cabin by the side of the road with a madman of Scottish

descent. After we'd got through his bottle of whisky he'd convinced me to forget about the car and hitchhike the rest of my way round. There was this immense sense of space and freedom, a space that I had never experienced before. I thought I'd like to have more of this. The bug really caught me."

This bug meant another change of direction and Jason decided to find something he could do and earn money. He thought of cooking and massage and chose massage.

After completing a course in London he headed to the south of France for the ski season and a captive market of people wanting a post prandial massage.

Then his friend Steve Smith, who'd already thought of the idea of going round the world on muscle-power alone, asked Jason if he was interested. What else could he say but yes?

Between them they developed the idea further and brought in an educational angle. Ever since, that has been an important part of the venture and Jason has visited hundreds of schools and spent months at sea thinking up brain teasers, mathematical, technical, geographical and even psychological problems for schoolchildren to solve via his email and internet links on Moksha.

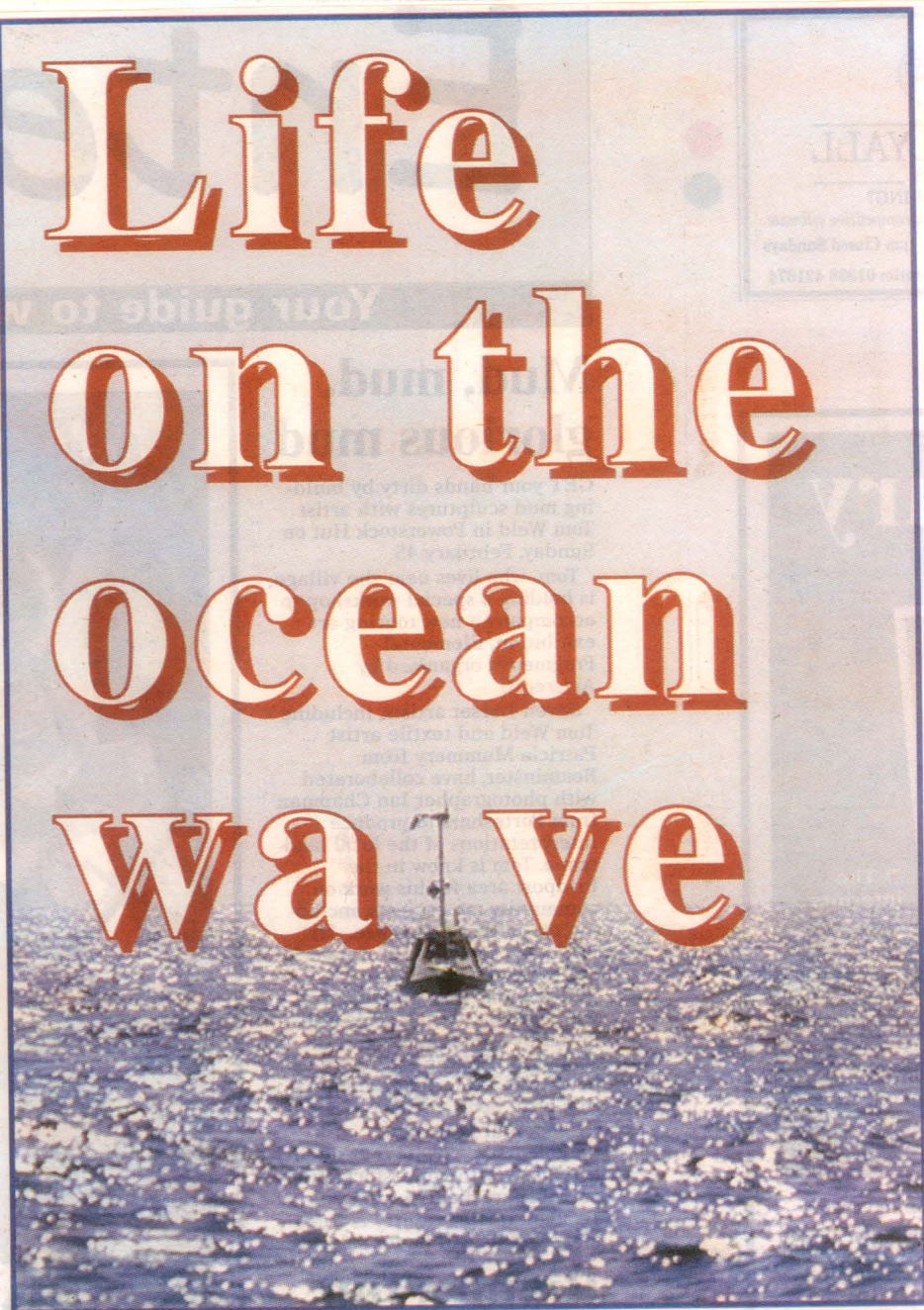
To start with Steve and Jason had the idea of kayaking from Greenland "and all that sort of madness. We soon found that that would be a quick way to freeze to death," said Jason.

The next option was to go East but they changed their minds again and decided if they were going to run out of money it would be better to do so in America rather than Russia.

To make that a reality they contacted the Council for Education in World Citizenship and UNESCO and through the two organisations they were able to start the ball rolling.

They started fund-raising and borrowing money and finally set off across the Atlantic from Portugal on their 4,500 mile voyage across the sea in the 26ft by 4ft Moksha designed by Alan Boswell and built at Exeter Maritime Museum by Chris Tipper and Hugo Burnham.

Life on the Ocean wave



□ Showing the propulsion mechanism a 16 inch stainless steel propeller with a 6:1 pedal ratio mechanism capable of 400 rpm.

● DON'T MISS PART TWO NEXT WEEK ●



□ **KEEPING IN TOUCH:** Jason shows how he maintains the link-up with schools via satellite on board his 26ft x 4ft boat Moksha



LEFT: Leaving Lagos Portugal
ABOVE: Atlantic crossing one month in - shortly before a rogue wave threw Steve overboard. His shoe caught on the tube of the water maker and probably saved his life.



□ **VEGGIE SURPRISE:** Jason has honed his cooking skills to survive



□ **WET, WET, WET:** Near the Great Barrier Reef in Australia August 16, 2000

Peddalling and skating through pain barriers

THERE were no manuals for this sort of expedition so what to take and what not to relied a lot on common sense, research and guesswork.

Said Jason: "Even the day before we set off, people were giving us stuff that we didn't have - like charts for the other end of the journey - that proved invaluable."

Jason was concerned that he'd had so little experience of the sea but thought of that part of his odyssey was taking the 'rough with the smooth'.

For a man who doesn't appear to complain about anything he did admit the first month was dreadful and he wondered what on earth he had done. It took him and companion Steve Smith 111 days to get to Miami in the tiny craft, Moksha.

They were not the easiest 111 days he's ever spent but to cope with the immensity of the task they'd taken on Jason tried to concentrate on the little tasks of everyday survival on a tiny craft cooped up with another human being.

"After the first month you have almost moved through the pain barrier, you just forget about the land and immerse yourself in the wilderness. You have to try and find equal things of beauty and interest on the boat and just build a different universe on the boat with a different value system - like making a cup of tea, that became very special, almost Zen-like, how you do things and how you can get a great amount of pleasure from doing simple things. It was a very meditative state."

The problem was it was not anywhere near the same state as his companion Steve had got into.

"The trouble was Steve had in his mind an almost romantic idea of what it was going to be like according to the books he'd read but the reality was you get out there and it's just a grind."

"His sense of well-being was directly linked to the number of miles we'd gone on the chart. The human mind can't motivate itself like that in such a harsh environment when you are surrounded by only blue and white hues for 111 days."

"There is something very primal about never being more than four foot away from the other bloke, you can try and be nice to each other, and you have to really try hard, but now and then you can't deny that you

Last week, we told how explorer Jason Lewis was bitten by the travel bug. In the second part of our News special about the adventurer from Askerswell, Reporter RENE GERRYTS charts his progress as the idea for his muscle-powered journey around the world finally begins to take shape.

just want to punch the other guy's lights out. "The key to the whole thing is humour. Unless you can keep humour you are in trouble. We couldn't laugh anymore."

Jason and Steve had already spent a year and a half together in a flat in London and they were sick to the back teeth with each other before they even left.

"If I have a regret it's that I remember deciding half way through that I wasn't going to let my voyage be spoilt by a bloke who was not having a good time, if anything I ostracised him and let him stew and get on with his own problems. If I had been a nicer person I would have tried harder to help him get over his problems," said Jason.

They have since done another sea crossing together - but that was years later and they had both grown older and wiser.

"That actually turned out to be a good crossing. We'd both come closer to a point of compromise."

Steve has now decided that he really doesn't like cycling or pedalling in the middle of nowhere and is pursuing other projects. They remain the best of friends.

When that crossing was over there was some serious fund raising to do. Jason decided to in-line skate across America and in so doing earned his place in the Guinness Book of Records.

You could say it's an ill-wind that blows nobody any good and at 5.30pm one fateful afternoon in Colorado an 82-year-old motorist, who was booked in for cataract operations, mowed Jason down from behind. He didn't stop until run off the road by another motorist who'd witnessed the accident.

Jason broke both his legs and was told by the surgeon that because of the nature of the wound he might lose his left leg.

"I was a little bit gutted," said Jason, in what must have been an understatement.

That same surgeon offered him a home on his Colorado ranch to convalesce.

He spent nine-months getting back on his feet and two years waiting for compensation.

It was that money - and an indomitable spirit - that allowed Jason to continue following his dream.

Jason had already decided even if he remained in a wheelchair he would carry on trying to fulfil his goal of getting round the world on muscle - and willpower - alone.

Luckily it didn't come to that - he soon found that getting around in a wheelchair as relatively OK on the flat but not so funny going up.

Understandably Jason was a little nervous to get back on the skates, but get back he did.

Luckily he was joined by schoolteacher April Abril who came with him on a bicycle and the pair finished off what Jason began in June 1995.

He is still paranoid of main roads and the next leg of his epic journey which will begin in April will be most definitely be in the out-back of Australia off the beaten track.

"I am planning to be off-road if I can. You can deal with the creepy crawlies and crows with a bit of common sense, it's interacting with the other human beings in large tin boxes that's the trick."

There's lots more to tell - but no space to do it - of Jason's voyage - his solo 2,200-mile trip from Hawaii to Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, his trip from there with Moksha's builder Chris Tipper from the Solomon Islands to Cairns on the Queensland coast of Australia with April, who'd never been to sea in her life!

The best way of really get a feel for the whole trip is to log on to www.goals.com or www.goals.com, the Global Online Adventure Learning Site and read their daily reports.

Although those daily reports are one of the reasons he feels it will be a relief for his family when he does hang up his pedals.

"It has been hard on the family although these days with modern technology I had more contact with them from the boat than I did when I was in London."

"And although it is statistically safer ped-

alling across the ocean than being on a road people have the perception that being out on the ocean is more dangerous than it really is because it is the unknown.

"Also because I was writing every day for the web update you are writing a story so you don't want to play things down. I wish I could have written a different version for the family and one for everyone else, but it doesn't work that way."

When - and it won't be for a while yet - Jason finally finishes his journey he's hoping to settle down, a bit, and concentrate on developing the educational side of his trip, tapping into the maths and science context of the expedition and using that, and the cultural exchanges he's had, to really fire up the enthusiasm of children to learn.

"Still using the hook of adventure, expedition and discovery," he said. During the trip the children he has aimed his teaching at are between nine and 14.

"We have gone to lots of schools and given lots of talks to fire up kids using stories of our adventures and letting them know it is about personal choices they may make and to live a dream, so they can recognise the immense capacity of human potential when your heart and mind is set."

"Whatever I end up doing, and I am not quite sure what that will be, I want to get the message across to kids that the most important thing in this life is to realise your potential as a human being and that takes many forms, you don't have to fit into any mould or be dictated to by society to get along in life. You must identify what you believe in and what you are passionate about and follow your dream."

He also wants to use his experiences to teach each and every one of us to be aware locally and globally of the way our actions effect the rest of the world - having seen the glories of a great deal of it he can speak with an authority most of us don't have.

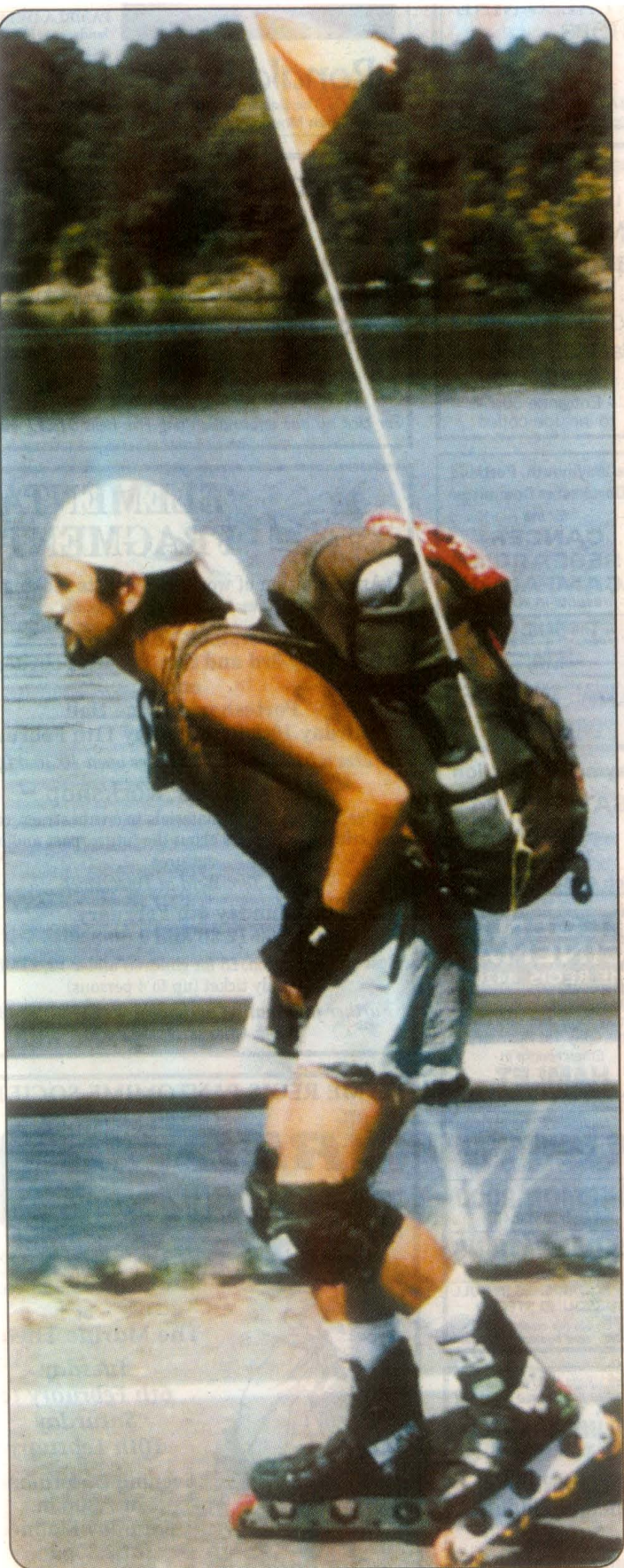
After all he has seen a great deal of the glorious diversity of the world first hand.

"If we don't find a way of living sustainably we are going to live in a very grey world in 50 years time."

You can hear from Jason for yourself. He will be giving a talk at Bridport Arts Centre at 7.30pm on January 31 and the exhibition of photographs from his journey will be on at the arts centre until February 10.



ABOVE: 1994 Launch of Moksha with Patron of Council for Education in World Citizenship, the Duke of Gloucester. LEFT: Chris Tipper and Hugo Burnham building Moksha.



Jason in-line skating across America during which he was seriously hurt when knocked down by an 82-year-old motorist on his way to an eye appointment. Jason broke both legs and was cared for by the surgeon who operated on him.



Moksha arrival in Providenciales in the Turks and Caicos Islands 1994



Island of Tulagi with welcoming committee, the coastguards! June 2000

BELOW: Testing that a capsized Moksha could be righted at Exeter Maritime Museum - a precaution that was to prove essential after a curious whale upturned the boat in the middle of the Atlantic at 3am

