

TV Close-Up: Bear Grylls

by Eirik_Knutzen

It was just another glorious summer day off the coast of Oahu, Hawaii, when master survivalist Bear Grylls was demonstrating how to survive at sea on an open bamboo raft. Spotting a group of small sandbar sharks playing in the relatively shallow water, he dived in with a small camera to record the festivities.

BEAR GRYLLES - Bear Grylls, the 33-year-old star of 'Man vs. Wild,' loves adventure in the great outdoors. CNS Photo courtesy of Discovery. Cooled off, Grylls slithered back on the raft to deliver an educational lecture on the edible creatures in the immediate vicinity.

"Having fun, I decided on one more dive just as a 17-foot tiger shark passed straight under the raft about 6 inches under the surface," explained the 33-year-old star of "Man vs. Wild," still not amused by the moment of terror.

"Already off-balance and unable to stop the dive - and completely surprised - I basically landed on top of the massive shark," he continued slowly. "It darted off, which gave me enough time to scramble back on the raft where I peed in my trousers - for the first time ever. Then it came back to circle the raft for several minutes before getting bored and moving on."

Only weeks before the real-life "Jaws" encounter, the strapping English lad from the Isle of Wight's countryside found himself in the jungles and mangrove swamps of Panama, where the slimy mud served as a cozy home for really large alligators and extremely poisonous water snakes.

"Panama's mangrove swamps are very scary," said Grylls, who is frequently dropped in remote regions bearing only a knife, a flint and a bottle of water. "I was immediately bitten by a snake, which fortunately wasn't venomous. I got even by biting its head off and eating it on the spot. The taste was like a mix of blood, gristle and skin. It had its revenge when I had intestinal diarrhea for the next few days."

The previous week, Grylls had returned from 10 delightful days and nights in the Sahara Desert, where he was dropped by parachute into a scalding area of Morocco that reaches 130 degrees. According to military and park ranger experts, a person without water and survival skills is not expected to live past three hours.

A fast study, he already knew to wrap a urine-soaked shirt around his head to prevent heat stroke, but the news didn't get around fast enough to warn three crew members that were felled by heat and had to be evacuated to a far-flung hospital by air. Grylls also learned from a nomadic tribe how to use the carcass of a camel for food, water and shelter.

Impressed by the young adventurer and former combat survival instructor and patrol medic with Britain's elite Special Air Service - who broke his back in three places in a parachute accident in southern Africa while on leave from military duty - the Berber desert nomads rewarded the resourceful man who collected dew to wash down fresh camel spiders and scorpions with a delicacy: raw goat testicles. Possibly a Berber practical joke, Grylls vomited on camera for the first time.

The son of a lieutenant in the British Royal Marines and a business-minded mother, Grylls learned to love adventure in the great outdoors from his intrepid father. It was at the end of his dad's rope that he learned to climb mountains at the age of 5. On May 28, 1998, he became the youngest Brit at 23 to scale Mount Everest, an effort that took 90 days in weather good, bad and ugly.

In May 2007, Grylls and his crew revisited the Himalayas after 2 1/2 years of meticulous planning for him to attempt paragliding (with a 105-horsepower engine strapped to his back) from 15,000 feet, fly over the tallest mountain range in the world at around 29,000, then land at 15,000 feet - a first.

"This amazing machine was built by my co-pilot Gilo Cardozo, the unsung hero in this tale," he explained.

Before takeoff from their camp at 15,000 feet, Grylls and his henchmen had raised \$1.7 million from sponsors and donors for the Global Angels, a London-based organization donating funds to the most impoverished children's charities around the world.

"They said it couldn't be done and at minus-65 degrees and some 20,000 feet, the oxygen would freeze. Any problem with oxygen under those conditions, you're unconscious in 30 seconds and dead in two minutes.

"It was an amazing experience - a dream come true - when I returned to the mountain that has been such a big part of my life from growing up to an adult," he continued. "I'll admit that my heart was going woo, woo, woo and I was dreading the morning before the flight, but once in the air ... I could see the whole Himalayas beneath and black above me. ... It was a privilege."

Very much a family man living in a converted barge on the Thames with his mountain climbing wife of 8

years, Shara, and their two boys, Jesse, 4, and Marmaduke, 1 1/2, Grylls seldom mentions his work when he gets home for rest and relaxation.

Or the recent criticism he has taken for not always sleeping in the wild, but often staying in the base camp tents housing his production crew.

"I'm not a bad, tough guy or a superhero - I'm just a man doing what he was trained to do," he explained. "My brilliant crew, including my amazing cameraman, Simon Ray, are right there with me. I think it was a mistake not telling people enough about what takes place."

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