Ed Stafford

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About the Book

In April 2008, Ed Stafford began his attempt to become the first man ever to walk the entire length of the River Amazon. Nearly two and a half years later, he had crossed the whole of South America from the Pacific coast of Peru to reach the mouth of the world's most colossal river.

With danger a constant companion – outwitting crocodiles and killer bees, avoiding jaguars and pit vipers, not to mention overcoming the hurdles of injuries and relentless tropical storms – Ed's journey demanded extreme physical and mental strength. Often warned by the Peruvian natives that he would die, Ed even found himself pursued by machete-wielding tribesman and detained for murder.

However, Ed's journey was an adventure with a purpose: to help raise people's awareness of environmental issues. Ed has unprecedented access to indigenous communities and witnessed first-hand the devastating effects of deforestation. His story of disappearing tribes and loss of natural habitats concerns us all.

Ultimately though, *Amazon* is an account of a world-first expedition that takes readers on the most daring journey along the world's greatest river and through the most bio-diverse habitat on earth.

About the Author

Ed Stafford started running expeditions after retiring from the British Army as a captain in 2002 and has led expeditions all over the world. When not leading trips, Ed worked alongside the United Nations in Afghanistan assisting with the running of the first-ever presidential elections. Prior to this journey Ed was in production with the BBC on their conservation series Lost Land of the Jaguar. In August 2010, Ed became the first man to walk the length of the River Amazon, accompanied by forestry worker Gadiel 'Cho' Sanchez Rivera for all but four months of the 28-month journey.

Walking the Amazon

860 Days. The Impossible Task. The Incredible Journey

Ed Stafford

For my dad, Jeremy Stafford, for moral courage,
mental strength and unquestioning love.

WALKING the AMAZON
2008–2010
START
2nd APRIL
2008
FINISH
09:30 9th AUGUST
2010
COLOMBIA
ECUADOR
PERU
BRAZIL
BOLIVIA
GUYANA
SURINAME
FRENCH GUIANA
BOGOTA
QUITO
LIMA
LA PAZ
CAYENNE
Iquitos
Pucallpa
Atalaya
San Martin
Yavri
Nevado Mismi
Camana
Manaus
Coari
Belem
Amazon Delta
Atlantic Ocean
Pacific Ocean
N
S
W
E
SCALE
0
300
600
km
PATH
RIVER

Foreword

WHEN THE TRUSTEES of the Transglobe Expedition Trust (TET) first heard of Ed Stafford's planned attempt to walk the length of the Amazon, we asked some notable authorities on the region for their opinion. The reply came back – 'impossible'. TET likes to support projects that are so challenging that they risk failure. We like to share the risks in the hope that, against the odds, the expedition will succeed and make a significant impact in the evolution of human achievement. Our Patron, HRH The Prince of Wales, in describing the 1979 Transglobe Expedition, referred to it as 'mad' (as an almost impossible goal) but 'marvellous' (in its achievement). Ed Stafford's plans were clearly mad and, if he succeeded against the advice of the pundits, it would also be marvellous.

When Ed set out, he was accompanied by a colleague, Luke Collyer. For various reasons, Luke had had enough after three months and returned to the UK. Undeterred, Ed carried on. One of the most impressive aspects of his performance throughout this expedition is Ed's absolute determination to succeed. On an almost daily basis, he must have faced obstacles that would put most people off. His is a truly magnificent demonstration of the stubborn grit that you need to succeed in such difficult and dangerous terrain. Five months into the expedition, Ed met Gadiel 'Cho' Sanchez, a local who agreed to walk for five days with Ed. Two years later Ed and Cho were still marching.

We in the TET are delighted and hugely impressed by Ed and Cho's success, not only in the physical achievement but also in Ed's dedication to relaying on his website the environmental and humanitarian stories, which were followed by both schoolchildren and adults around the world. Such stories draw much-needed attention to the very real problems that exist in the Amazon basin and beyond.

I am delighted to have been involved as a supporter and look forward to hearing what Ed will be attempting next. You can be sure it will be every bit as mad and, hopefully, equally marvellous.

Sir Ranulph Fiennes

Prologue

AFTER RECEIVING A very direct warning over the HF radio that we would be killed if we decided to continue our journey, we reach the downriver end of the shingle island in the middle of the Amazon. I drop my inflated pack raft into the shallow brown waters and roll my heavy backpack off my stiff, grimy back and into the rubber boat.

'*Mira, Ed, atrás*. Look, Ed, behind you,' says Cho calmly. As I turn I see five dugout canoes coming towards us fast, full of indigenous Indians. Many of the Indians are standing up in the narrow boats; bows drawn, arrows trained on us. Those who are seated are thrusting hard with big wooden paddles.

Fuck. My T-shirt clings to my body and sweat pours down my temples. My body is still but my heart is quickening, adrenaline pours into my brain allowing me to process the imminent danger rapidly. My perception of time slows down. The carved boats cut through the choppy river fluently. The dangerous scene in the middle distance is framed by a green wall of overhanging jungle beyond. The brown faces of the Asheninka men and women are warlike and fierce, highlighted by lines of bright red face paint. I notice the women are all clutching machetes.

As the boats beach, the tribe leap out and run directly towards us. The men's faces are now taut with anger, eyes wide and white, and the women look possessed. Cho and I are unarmed, with nowhere to run, trapped at the tip of the

island like animals. Every sense is now alert and our minds ignore all that is not relevant to immediate survival.

HUANCAVELICA
San Martin
Pacaypata
CUSCO
Ayacucho
Abancay
CUZCO
Road to Cusco
ICA
ICA
AYACUCHO
APURIMAC
Quehue
PERU
Yauri
N
W
E
S
START OF THE
RIVER APURIMAC
Nevado Mismi
Colca Canyon
Lari
Canco
Uñon
Ayo
Acoy
Majes River Valley
SCALE
0
50
100
km
START
2ND APRIL
2008
AREQUIPA
PATH
Camaná
RIVER
(Oswaldo joins Ed and Luke)

PART 1: PERU AND THE SOURCE OF THE AMAZON

Chapter One

Conception to Birth

A FURIOUS CAGE of heavy tropical rain enclosed the wall-less bar. The extraordinary force of water drowned out the persistent Creole drums from across the muddy street. A cool evening freshness accompanied the rain, cutting through the usual humidity. I sat, beer in hand, with a fellow expedition leader, Luke Collyer, and breathed in the cleansing power of nature. As we reclined in low wooden chairs, a ball of excited apprehension sat conspicuously in both of our stomachs. We'd just come to a decision that could change our lives for ever and we had shaken on it. We had agreed to attempt to walk the entire length of the Amazon River together. My eyes gleamed and I grinned at Luke. 'Fucking hell, mate – this is going to be mental.'

It was January 2007 and we were in the former British colony of Belize, Central America, running conservation expeditions for a British organisation called Trekforce. I'd just relocated our field base from the capital of Belize City to the smaller, more Latin town of San Ignacio near the Guatemalan border. Most people here were 'mestizos', a mix of indigenous Mayan and colonial Spanish, but there was a handful of Creole settlers who were relatively new to the town.

The following morning we stumbled round the field base in our boxer shorts eating egg banjos (fried-egg sandwiches) and drinking imported Earl Grey tea.

Surprisingly, when the subject of the Amazon walk came up again neither of us backed down from the gentlemen's agreement. It would have been fairly excusable to blame the bravado on alcohol but, as we scratched our stubble and our balls waiting for the shower, we were both even more animated about the idea than we had been the previous evening.

Two years earlier I had been employed by a British company to set up a scientific research expedition in Argentine Patagonia. I had recently started going out with a girl called Chloë and, both having an itch for travel, we decided to apply for the job together of leading and managing this cold-weather expedition. Chloë was younger than me, with a coarse laugh, a curvaceous body and an endearing passion for doing good and preserving the vulnerable. We were much in love and the scope to do what we wanted and to make our lives in this unknown country was huge. The Argentine Patagonian people had a lovely confidence and humility that we both quickly fell in love with, too. We found Argentine biologists to work alongside and assist and Chloë and I both worked very hard to make the volunteer expedition work.

The expedition was largely a success but at the back of my mind I had a yearning to return to the tropics. Part of me feared the cold, the amount of equipment we were dependent on, and the amount of experience you needed to be safe in the mountains. I started to dream about the simplicity of an environment that I knew a lot better – the jungle. With long, eight-hour Land Rover journeys commonplace, I allowed my mind to wander and dream – what would be the ultimate expedition I could ever conceive of doing?

I had never been to the Amazon, my jungle experience had mostly come from Central America with some short trips to Borneo, but the Amazon undoubtedly had a mystique all of its own. Surely the trees would be much

bigger, the wildlife had to be much richer and more diverse and the people would be that bit wilder and cut off from the outside world. It gave me butterflies to think of spending time in the Amazon. Not knowing the geography of the area in any detail, my dreams were restricted to what I did know. There was a ruddy great river that virtually crossed the whole continent from west to east, and … that was about it. I had heard of expeditions that had kayaked the entire river from source to sea – phenomenal endurance feats taking five-plus months – the problem was I was a rubbish kayaker. Sure, I'd done a bit on the canals in England as a Cub Scout but that cold, depressing experience had been enough to put me off for life. What a dull, miserable sport, instructed by overenthusiastic dickheads in stupid helmets.

What I was experienced at, however, were expeditions on foot. After one long Land Rover journey I burst into the Patagonia field base alive with excitement; I was sure deep down that I'd stumbled upon a world first. 'Amazon walk' I typed in; 'source to sea Amazon'; 'Amazon expedition'. The minutes flew by.

I kept searching and searching and began to smile. Unless a trip to the Royal Geographical Society could prove otherwise, no one, in the history of mankind, had ever *walked* the length of the Amazon. This could just be a true remaining world first. I was hooked.

Back in Belize two years on, Luke's arrival in country and his announcement that he was having ideas about kayaking the same river had brought things to a head. I'd never put a timescale on my dream but I'd recently split up with Chloë and was, for the first time in a while, able to think independently without having to worry about, or compromise with, anyone else. I quickly pointed out to Luke that kayaking the Amazon had been done five times before and that a fat Slovenian bloke was currently swimming the low-altitude part of the river. I put forward

my idea, a world first, all carried out on foot. Luke thought about it for five seconds. ‘I’m in,’ he grinned. ‘Let’s do it.’

We had no idea how long this would take us but we wanted it to be a year. That was manageable in our heads and so we divided 4,345 miles (the length of the river according to Washington’s National Geographic Society) by 365 days and came up with the very plausible figure of eleven miles a day. Having spent most of our jungle time on paths and trails, Luke and I naively rejoiced in the fact that we’d be home in just twelve months. How neat and tidy.

Luke was thirty-five; I was thirty-one. Despite being very different characters we shared a slightly reckless desire to ‘do something amazing’ that ran deep in us. We both wanted to achieve something that we could look back on in future years and be proud of.

I could see that Luke was genuine in his desire to prove himself. He’d never joined the army – something I believed he slightly regretted – but he had led several expeditions since I’d known him and he was generally very well liked. Finding each other in a similar state, with such comparable expedition dreams, was surely some sort of sign. The coincidence was suggesting an exciting course to us and we each allowed ourselves to be easily swept up by the other’s enthusiasm.

Luke lost his parents in his early twenties – both mother and father dying in rapid succession – so had needed to become pretty independent. He had ‘found himself’ when he saved enough money to travel to Australia but while he was away one of his two brothers also died. While in Australia he learned to juggle – everything from machetes to fire – and worked as a street entertainer. On return to the UK he had obtained several outdoor instructor qualifications and had become a keen climber. He had worked for several years in outdoor education for low pay but enjoyed his job. Using his skills he became an

expedition leader in 2004, and by 2007 had led four three-month jungle expeditions – all to Belize – the last three to Davis Falls National Park. Luke had a serious girlfriend, Katie, and her family had become his family.

My life had been different. I was born to a sixteen-year-old single mother in the East Midlands and been adopted as a baby by Jeremy and Barbara Stafford. Apart from the fact that my dad had sporadic bad health, I would say we were as happy as any other family. The bits of my family upbringing that shaped me into an expedition leader are, first, that we lived in a small village so I grew up in the country; second, that my parents would encourage me and my sister to make our own decisions from an early age; and third, that my dad influenced us all by his firm conviction that if you say you are going to do something you have to try to do it, and you should not abandon it until you know you have given it your best shot. Dad pushed me into rugby and the Scouts and both had a big part in moulding my character. Their love for me was always evident and being adopted was never an issue or a problem.

My confidence grew when I realised I had a talent for playing rugby. I was six foot one at the age of thirteen and found that I could take the ball from the opposition and run through everyone. What a great sport, I thought, and this confidence spread to other aspects of my life. I left Stoneygate, my prep school, as a prefect and a very proud captain of rugby.

I also thrived in the world of Cubs and Scouts where I was introduced to camping, walking and the outdoors. They were based in a nearby town called Fleckney. My mum and dad both valued education highly and they managed to put my sister and me through private schools. The immersion into Cubs and Scouts was not only a great grounding; it was also a juxtaposition to my private education. Like rugby, outdoor life was something that I could just do. I loved learning the skills needed to live next to nature and

become comfortable and competent outdoors. Although Fleckney was in some ways a bit rough, it wasn't geeky – we didn't sit round in a circle saying 'Dib, dib, dib!' and practising our knots. We played murderball, we built things and we made fire.

Boarding school at Uppingham was an experience that undoubtedly shaped my life, too. The school, still officially in mourning for Queen Victoria – boys dressed entirely in black – failed to look at what made many boys tick – and that included me. I soon became disenchanted and rebellious.

Teachers had no background in child psychology and apart from a very few notable exceptions were visibly bored with their secondary role of parenting the children as well as educating them. Each term was about twelve weeks long and I rarely saw my parents while I was there. The elder boys ran the house and 'educated' the younger ones in whatever eccentric manner they deemed right at the wise old age of seventeen. We were lucky enough not to be too physically bullied (that era had pretty much ended) but the environment was not conducive to a healthy, balanced upbringing. For a large part of the first year I, and many boys, lived in fear and confusion.

After nearly four years and predicted to do badly in my A levels, I was eventually expelled for a number of reasons, not least acts of minor vandalism. I have always thrived on danger and adrenaline and sneaking out of my boarding house armed with a wire saw and industrial bolt cutters to cause havoc seemed to be my main outlet at the time. It was completely misguided, of course, but perhaps understandable in an all-boys' boarding house that had a ten o'clock curfew and that failed to address the real needs of many of its students.

I believe strongly that the school mismanaged me and other boys like me. I still feel today that they had a responsibility, *in loco parentis*, to get to the bottom of my

behaviour and harness my adventurous spirit rather than simply to label me as ‘bad’.

After getting A grades at A level from Brooke House Sixth Form College in nearby Market Harborough, I went to Newcastle University and scraped an honours degree in geography despite living in a thick haze of marijuana for the first two of the three years. Repulsed by the cliquey university rugby team, where to have gone to the right school guaranteed you a place in the first XV, I joined Rockcliffe RFC, a local Geordie men’s team in Whitley Bay and savoured the weekly dose of non-student life.

Now a graduate and terrified by the prospect of an office and a desk, I joined the British Army. This might sound an odd choice from someone who had had such an issue with boarding school, but I felt that I was capable of putting up with the regulations in return for a life that was physical and outdoors – a life that played to my strengths. I was always adamant that the military would not change me; I wanted to learn from it but I didn’t want to become like so many of the pompous old idiots who had made it past the rank of major. The fear that people sometimes describe when they enter military barracks for the first time never really left me, and although I had some great individual moments in the army, mostly involving nights out in Tamworth, I never quite felt that I fitted in.

In 2002, after four relatively successful years, I’d made the rank of captain but was pleased that my contract was up for renewal and had decided I did not want to extend it. I said as much to my Commanding Officer at the end of a Northern Ireland tour to Crossmaglen, South Armagh. He smiled, recognised my decision was probably for the best (and no great loss to the battalion, I am sure), and so I went looking for civilian work.

After weeks of trying to network in the London financial sector I stumbled across an advert seeking expedition leaders to run conservation projects in Central America.

This offered a three-month contract that I accepted; it allowed me to bide my time until the economy recovered and I stood a better chance of becoming a stockbroker. The experience changed my life more than any other: I fell in love with the adventure, the people and the lifestyle. This was outdoor living as a career without the regulations and inherent seriousness of the military. What's more, the whole thing had a purpose that I believed in – my days as a Scout meant that I had a deep affinity with nature and a real desire to conserve the rainforest. The combination of the two made me happier than I'd ever been and dreams of a Porsche 911 and fancy wine bars full of Essex girls slipped away.

*

Five years later, having led expeditions from that point onwards, I was now Country Director of Trekforce back in Belize. I started to plan how Luke and I were going to get this personal Amazon expedition off the ground. We made a list of the different areas that we had to work in. The checklist below gives an idea of all the things that had to come together if this was to work.

. Research. We need to do enough to know that our trip is, in theory at least, physically possible.
. Mission. What is the expedition's aim? Is this a purely selfish feat or do we have a deeper purpose to our journey?
. Risk assessment. We need to evaluate the risks, highlight the dodgiest areas and actively work to make sure we aren't going to die.
. Evacuation plan. If things go wrong how will we get to medical help or safety?
. Training. We need to be at a competence level that is appropriate for the task. Are there any areas we should focus on where our ignorance is dangerous?

. Languages. There are more than thirty languages spoken in Peru alone. We have to be able to converse in Spanish (Peru) and Portuguese (Brazil) at the very least to understand our surroundings and be in control of situations.

. Accounts. We need to estimate the total cost of the expedition and account for all spending.

. Fundraising. We need money to live while planning and organising in the UK and we need money for conducting the expedition itself. We need to try to get as many of the individual expenditures as possible sponsored (given to us for free or at a reduced cost) so that the overall monetary cost is reduced to the minimum.

. Insurance. We need to find a package that is appropriate in the middle of the Amazon that covers our kit breaking or being stolen or lost as well as medical evacuation and treatment costs.

. Communications. How will we communicate with the outside world? What will work under the jungle canopy? What if it breaks?

. Website. This will be our shop window to sponsors, charities, the public, and everyone. It’s also the way most people will experience the expedition.

. Charities. Who do we want to help? How will we raise money? How do we work with these charities?

. Permits and visas. Where do I start getting permits to allow us to visit indigenous tribes in Brazil who are autonomous and yet have a governmental department overseeing their welfare? How do I legally stay in the two main countries longer than the normal three-month tourist visa?

. Kit. We need to ensure we are taking the best kit we can find that will survive extended exposure to the humidity and wetness of the jungle and the extreme cold of the mountains. Everything from jungle boots to warm gloves, hammocks to kerosene stoves.

5. PR. How is anyone going to know about us? If no one does, how will we achieve our aims?
6. Filming. How will we record the journey? Where do we start to ensure that somebody someday might watch what we’ve filmed? Can we speak naturally in front of a camera?
7. Book. Where does one go to try to get a book deal? Can we write?
8. Guide. Can we find one who will walk with us for $7 a day and who speaks English, Spanish and, initially, Quechua?
9. Photography. How will we get great images that can be used to tell our story when we are both rubbish photographers?

By far the most important of the above tasks was getting the expedition funded. With sponsorship everything else would fall into place. Our back-to-nature dream would become a reality only if we addressed that most boring of modern-day worries: money.

As we attempted to put together a proposal document we realised that we needed the expedition to have a purpose for which it was worth giving up our lives. We immediately saw the scope for raising awareness of the need to conserve the rainforest. We would create a website and write regular blogs that adults and kids alike could read, following our adventure in real time. We could describe the rainforest day to day, and how it was taking its toll on us. We could engage people in their schools and offices so that they would start to feel they had a connection with the jungle. Neither of us wanted to be eco-warriors; we were aware that if we branded ourselves as such we might alienate the Brazilian authorities and have difficulty getting permits. So we didn’t want a ‘Take action now!’ campaign, but what we thought we could do was educate and raise awareness. As soon as we discussed this it felt appropriate and worthwhile; we now had a cause worthy of giving up a year of our lives.

For this to be a Guinness World Record we had to be scrupulously strict. We would walk 100 per cent of the journey and never use a motor, a sail or even the flow of the river to propel us. Clearly we would have to cross bodies of water, and for that we would be in boats, but we knew from the outset that every metre of each crossing should be paddled by hand to make the journey truly human-powered.

We also saw the scope for raising money directly for charities. We wanted a rainforest conservation charity as it made sense, as an umbrella charity that was in line with the main mission of the expedition: Rainforest Concern fitted the bill. My dad had died of cancer a few years earlier and my sister had (and still has) ME, so Cancer Research UK and the ME Association were two more charities that I wanted to help as well. Finally, we wanted to select charities that would benefit the host nations, so we found two UK-based children's charities, Project Peru and Action for Brazil's Children, which would mean we could give something back to the countries we passed through without upsetting governments by backing strongly anti-deforestation organisations.

I don't ever want to pretend that the charities and rainforest awareness were the reasons why we chose to walk the Amazon. These were things that we believed in, that were worthy, but the initial drive was far more selfish: the adventure, the challenge and the recognition were at the core of our motivation when we set out. The nice thing was that the adventure was essential for the other parts to work. A nice safe walk that had been done before wouldn't have attracted any media attention and therefore wouldn't have had the same potential for doing good. Equally, we also saw that carrying out the journey for purely selfish reasons was empty and pointless. The selfish and non-selfish goals weren't just compatible; they ended up being essential to each other.

Carried away by our excitement, we thought that this might make a good documentary so I got in touch with the only person I knew in television, Craig Langman. Craig is a softly spoken bloke who often takes a back seat among more forceful characters. What he does say, however, is all the more worth listening to as a result. 'Of course you are completely crazy,' Craig said, 'I love it. It will make great TV.' He agreed to help us find a production company which could partner with us in the making of a documentary.

Permits and visas were the next thing I looked into and at the time both Peru and Brazil normally gave out only three-month tourist visas. I wrote to Mike Horn, the South African adventurer who had descended the Amazon on a hydrospeed and later in a dugout canoe, to find out what he'd done. His wife kindly wrote back:

Dear Ed,

Thanks for your mail. We have found it best not to speak too much about your expeditions to the consulates and embassies. Get all your visas as is necessary through the usual methods and take the necessary safety precautions ie global tracking device, satellite phone etc. The authorities do not know how to handle anything out of the norm! All the very best for your adventure!

Best regards,
Cathy

Such wise words from Cathy and, looking back on it, I wish I'd taken her advice to the letter. But at the time I was adamant that we needed to be above board because, unlike Mike, Cathy's husband, we already had commitments to charities and I felt that, to be safe and insured, we had to be 100 per cent onside with the law in each country.

I contacted the embassies and consulates and started a long and tortuous journey to try to get us extended cultural

visas that would cover nine months in Peru and a further nine in Brazil. This would allow buffer time if our journey took more than six months in each country, which I was already beginning to think it might.

Convincing companies that you are worth giving kit to without paying for it isn't easy. We were two balding nobodies who were planning an expedition far bigger than either of us had ever attempted before. The chance that the company would see any return on this 'sponsorship' deal was slim and so we wrote endless emails to very little effect.

I thought one piece of kit that I'd seen used in Patagonia would make a perfect transition to the jungle. Inflatable pack rafts are one-man boats designed to be light enough to carry in your backpack. We knew there would be hundreds of tributaries to cross and so we had to have a workable strategy. Alpacka rafts are made in Canada and so I emailed them asking if they could help. Their response was kind: they had some superficially damaged rafts that they could let us have for US$300 each. This saved us $475 per raft, which I thought was a great deal, and it was the first positive response we'd received. I bought three on my credit card – one for Luke, one for me and one for a theoretical local guide. Hennessy Hammocks then agreed to give us two free hammock systems and Altberg gave us a couple of pairs of handmade jungle boots. Each one of these small sponsorship deals gave us great satisfaction; we were inching closer to making the trip happen.

Despite the success and the accumulation of a bit of kit, however, we were now a couple of grand in the red. We really needed a financial sponsor.

Still planning from Belize at this stage, I received a cautious email from Rainforest Concern:

> *Firstly, we want to make sure that we are not encouraging you to do something which is excessively*

risky to your personal wellbeing. You have backgrounds in expeditions, but we would like to meet you to discuss this further. You have already listed the kind of dangers we would have envisaged, but equally I am sure you can expect progress to be painfully slow on occasion.

Secondly, there is the impact of your hunting to eat. Fishing is one method you might be planning and we would probably be comfortable with that. However, the hunting of mammals and birds is not something we would want to encourage for unessential endeavour. This is something we will need to discuss.

The third question is your potential contact with indigenous people as this is not always to their end benefit.

All these points were very sensible and the expedition began to take shape as we drew up a no-hunting policy and we started to formulate a plan as to how we would carry food and resupply at settlements along the way. Both Luke and I glossed over the question of indigenous people as we had very little experience in dealing with them and could only come up with the rather feeble 'We are nice people and we will treat everybody with respect'. How naive we were.

Our deployment date from the very beginning had been 1 January 2008. It would give us enough time to prepare, we could spend Christmas with our families, and on paper it seemed like a good solid date. We contacted a Peruvian mountaineering company and they firmly advised us to avoid walking in the Andes between December and March: it would be winter, snow would be heavy and the swollen rivers and gorges might be impassable.

Bugger.

Neither one of us was very experienced above the snowline and so the idea of ‘crossing the Andes’ was formidable enough without our electing to do it in winter. So we put back the start date to 1 April 2008 to ensure that our time at over 5,000 metres was as comfortable as we could make it. At the back of my mind I already had suspicions that the expedition could take more than a year, so the chances were that we were going to have to endure at least one Amazonian flood season anyway.

It was now May 2007 and Luke and I were becoming good friends, having been very amicable colleagues before, with a strong collective purpose of getting this expedition off the ground.

Despite all our work trying to ensure that we had kit, a purpose and permits, the fact still remained that no one in the world of expeditions we had spoken to could be convinced that it was in fact possible to walk the entire length of the river. The main reason for this was that the Amazon is characterised by a very shallow basin that is prone to enormous flooding. The river regularly bursts its banks and water enters the forest up to 70 kilometres from the main channel. This means that the forest adjacent to the river is flooded above head height for large parts of the year. Not great for walking.

In my simple mind I knew this and thought that we could just handrail the river at a distance that was safe enough away from the main channel. The trouble was, there was no way of knowing the extent of the flooded forest in each area so I scoured the Internet for more information. I eventually stumbled on a very low-resolution image that seemed to show the flooded forest as a different colour from terra firma or solid ground. The image was credited to Bruce Chapman at NASA and so I emailed Bruce to see if he would share his data. Two days later a CD-ROM came through the post at no charge with fantastic images of the entire Amazon basin at high and low water. NASA’s project

enabled me to effectively see through the canopy from above and get an overview of the extent of the flooded area at peak flood season.

This was a big breakthrough. With this data I would be able to annotate the maps when they arrived and we could plan our route to avoid the worst of the flooded areas. OK, the images were from 1995 but the topography wouldn't have changed too much since then – just a few river-shape changes. We had a workable plan.

We still had the flooded forest adjacent to each of the tributaries that we needed to cross to contend with – that was unavoidable – but now we could use NASA's imagery to cross rivers at points where the floodwaters were at their narrowest. In such circumstances, we would just have to inflate the pack rafts and advance through the forest in them, with machetes in hand, if the water was too deep for us to walk through. The thought of cutting through undergrowth from our inflatable rafts both scared and excited us. We envisaged nights spent in hammocks above the water and even designed ideas for fire trays in which we could light fires in the crooks of trees above the murky water.

People go to the jungle all the time; in fact, several million people live in the Amazon Basin. The Amazon River is well populated and therefore good for resupplying food and broken gear. There is substantial traffic on the river and so if we had an emergency it would afford our natural exit strategy. These were all positives but our problem was that, once we pushed away from the main river channel to avoid the flooding, all the previously manageable dangers would now be amplified. If we went where there are no people then we had to fend for ourselves. In places, self-evacuation would be long and hard and on conventional risk assessment came out as simply 'unacceptable'. With no helicopters in many areas and no rescue teams, we just had to make the decision that if we wanted to do this journey