



Hammer Time

Global talks to Dr Matthias Hammer, the German-born founder of UK-based Biosphere Expeditions, a volunteer organisation offering people a chance to help in conservation projects around the world

Above: Matthias Hammer on expedition with one of his trusty Land Rovers

G: Tell us what Biosphere Expeditions is all about?

MH: Biosphere Expeditions is about pragmatic, hands-on conservation. We close the gap between fully qualified scientists and the general public who want to get involved in these types of projects. There are lots of scientists with worthwhile conservation projects but who don't have the funding or help they need. Biosphere Expeditions finds people in the UK and elsewhere who want to go beyond just lying on a beach for their holiday and who want to give something back to the planet instead.

We are an award-winning, hands-on, non-profit conservation organisation that enables ordinary people to come with us and help with conservation work worldwide. For example some of our current projects include cheetah conservation in Namibia, a snow leopard survey in the Altai mountains, and a whale and dolphin project in the Azores. Our conservation expeditions are not about playing the primitive and are open to all. There are no special skills or fitness required to join and there are no age limits whatsoever. People can join for anything from two weeks to several months and at least two-thirds of their expedition contribution (which starts from £990 for a couple of weeks) will be spent locally, going directly into the conservation project. We always work with local scientists and people from the host country and teams are small and an expedition leader from Biosphere Expeditions will be by their side.

G: What is your role within the company?

MH: I'm the Field Operations Director, which means that I am responsible for all our expeditions across the world. But I also help out with UK-based office work when I am around.

G: Is there such a thing as a typical day for you?

MH: No, not really, and that's the beauty of it. One day I could be assessing a possible new expedition on elephants and leopards in Sri Lanka, then I could be mucking in with office work in the UK, and then checking up one of our established expeditions and training staff on the job on a boat cruising around the Azores archipelago looking for sperm whales. I honestly think this is the best job in the world.

G: What can volunteers expect to get out of a project?

MH: An adventure with a purpose; a unique insight into how conservation works on the ground – challenges, failures, warts and all – but also a sense of having made a difference. We take our post-expedition scientific output very seriously and always publish an expedition report to the scientific community and our expedition team members, where they can see what we have found out and where their money went. We also publish in scientific journals whenever possible.

G: What's the best piece of equipment you have?

MH: Our Land Rovers, without a doubt - many of the things we do would be impossible without the vehicles. We have a good number of them all across the globe, and the best thing is that Land Rover very kindly give them to us for free, as we are one of four global partners in their Fragile Earth programme, next to household names like the Royal Geographical Society and the Born Free Foundation.

G: On all the trips you've done, have you ever had any encounters with wildlife that were a little too close for comfort?

MH: No, not really – the dangers from wildlife are often wildly exaggerated by the media and therefore in people's minds. You're more likely to come to harm in a car crash on your way to the research site than being bitten by a poisonous snake. Sadly, it's usually the locals who suffer most because they live in the area day in day out, not the travellers who may only be there for a few weeks. You still need to be aware, though.

G: Is there any one moment from your trips that stands out as particularly special?

MH: Every time an expedition team departs, say in their boat up a river in the Amazon on their way to base camp, it's a special moment. It's when lots of work and sweat and tears come together and an expedition team is formed and about to embark on their adventure with a purpose. It's great to see all that enthusiasm, and a little trepidation, in people's eyes and the scientists getting really fired up. It's one of those great moments when you get a sense that it's all been worth it!

G: What is the most rewarding project you've ever been involved with?

MH: There are lots of rewards, really. Our work helped to prevent a wolf cull in Poland and we are helping to create a National Park in Ukraine. But talking to people on the expeditions and getting their emails afterwards is great too... I can't really tie it down to one particular project.

G: Do you ever go away to just kick back by the pool with a few cocktails or do your holidays always involve conservation work?

MH: I don't drink, so kicking back at the pool with a few cocktails is not me at all. But a city break away from it all with my wife is a great way to recharge batteries.

G: What's been your best travel read?

MH: *The Razor's Edge* by Somerset Maugham – a real journey of self-discovery and what's important in life. ©

If you would like to know more about Biosphere Expeditions call 01502 583085 or visit www.biosphere-expeditions.org.