

## 10 Questions: Richard Wiese



Photo: Jorgen Frank

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by Jennifer V. Cole

When you climb Mt. Kilimanjaro at age 11, there's little doubt that big things lie in your future. Even so, Richard Wiese never expected to become the youngest president in the history of The Explorers Club. The New York native first heard about the group—a century-old organization dedicated to promoting field research and exploration—on the radio when he was a child, and he later attended their guest lectures to capture what he terms "threads of genius." Ever the adventurer, Wiese has spent the past few years cavorting with Sir Edmund Hillary and Buzz Aldrin; taking samples from Tanzania's Oldonyo Lengai volcano; and radio-collaring jaguars in Mexico. T+L caught up with him before his recent trip to Iceland, to find out how his father inspired his adventurous spirit, why thunderstorms and metal boats don't mix, and where to find the best Italian food in Kenya.

### **1) The roster of adventurers at The Explorers Club is impressive. Is it humbling to be among them?**

It is. At our annual dinner I ask, "Who's been to the North Pole?" or "Who's summited Everest?" and 50 hands go up. Buzz Aldrin called me to get tickets to the dinner. I hung up and thought, "My God, that was Buzz Aldrin." Never in my wildest dreams did I ever entertain the thought that I would join the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, as a president of this 100-year-old organization.

## **2) Whom do you most admire?**

Sir Edmund Hillary is one of the most profound men I've ever met. He's not only a very intellectual man, he also has great humility. Fifty-one years after climbing Everest, he's managed to keep his head on straight.

## **3) What made you want to be an explorer?**

My father was the first man to fly solo over the Pacific Ocean, and I grew up traveling with him. He took me to climb Mount Kilimanjaro when I was 11, which got me interested in mountaineering. Sometimes we'd go to Senegal, Liberia, or Germany for three-day weekends. In college, I took Pan Am Flight 1 around the world, stopping in New York, London, Frankfurt, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Honolulu, and Los Angeles-all within 48 hours.

## **4) How does adventure travel change you?**

I think Jimmy Carter used to say that Americans are in the habit of wanting to take their slice of America wherever they travel. But I think it's better to get out of your element, because that way you gain perspective on how other people live. Your guard comes down, because you're more dependent on strangers.

## **5) Any favorite off-the-map destinations?**

Isla Victoria in Patagonian Argentina has giant sequoia trees and retamas (huge yellow flowers, like forsythia on steroids), and a blue lake surrounded by snowcapped peaks where you won't hear a single mechanical sound.

## **6) Have you had any memorable food experiences during your travels?**

The strangest food I ever ate was in Brisbane, Australia. My guide rolled over a log to reveal what he called a witchetty grub. "It's what the Aborigines eat: try it," he said. I swallowed it whole, but he said I should chew it. After I tried another grub, which didn't taste very good, he let me know he had never actually eaten one himself. But there's a distinct difference between people who look at food they've never seen and say "Ewww! What's that?" and those who say "Ooooh! What's that?" I like to eat and I think there's a direct link between someone's passion for food and his passion for life. Another time, in northern Kenya, a friend and I were mountain climbing by Lake Turkana. Around sunset, we ran into a group of six Italians who had a full spread of pasta and the requisite red-and-white-checked tablecloth. On the bluff, under a carpet of stars, we could hear lions roaring in the distance while we ate. I remember pushing back from my dinner and thinking that there was no four- or five-star restaurant on earth that could match that meal.

## **7) What's always in your bag?**

Clothes that rinse and dry quickly, a water purifier, and a tiny hard drive with all my vital info on it. I've had my passport stolen on more than one occasion.

## **8) You've spent a lot of time studying and documenting volcanoes. Is there one that stands out for you more than the others?**

In Tanzania, there's a volcano called Oldonyo Lengai whose lava turns white when it hits the atmosphere. It's the most sacred spot on earth for the Masai, a people with a vanishing culture. I once climbed up and down the volcano in one day with a young Masai-a very difficult climb of about 7,000 vertical feet. While we were at the summit, I managed to photograph the volcano's eruption.

### 9) What's the most dangerous thing you've ever done?

Sailing with Geraldo Rivera from Cape Cod to New Jersey during a thunderstorm. Everything on the boat was metal, there was lightning, the mast broke, we were floundering about-I thought I was going to be a footnote in Geraldo's obituary.

### 10) Is there anything that you wouldn't do?

I'm adventurous, but I don't have a death wish. Even though I've done free-climbing on ice and rock, I know when I set out that I'm not going to push anywhere near my limits. If you do enough of these kinds of activities, you have red lights that go off when you're in a situation beyond your comfort zone. If you're smart, you listen to your gut-getting up to the summit is optional; getting down is mandatory.

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