

# MAN ON A MISSION

## THE MAN

Paddy Scott is the kind of cameraman you call when you need a steady hand and a cool head. His work has taken him to war zones, ski-kiting across Greenland, and to the South Pole on a Massey Ferguson tractor.

## THE MISSION

A sortie up the Rio Negro to scout the mighty river's hidden tributaries: 14 days on an inflatable paddleboard, one badly timed puncture and an awful lot of piranhas.

## DISTANCE TRAVELLED LAST YEAR

46,000 miles

## HAIRIEST MOMENT BEHIND THE CAMERA

'Being kidnapped at gunpoint in Crimea while reporting on the Russian invasion. Cossack pro-Russian rebels questioned me for a day on suspicion of working for the CIA. They released me but took all my kit, so I had to leave.'

## MUST PACK

'For this trip I was on one of Boardworks' SHUBU Mod inflatable paddleboards, and always take a roomy Hilleberg Staika tent. In extreme cold nothing beats the Fjällrävens Smock No 1 jacket (and the pockets are huge).'

PHOTOGRAPH: ALAIN GILLET

My inflatable paddleboard has a slow puncture. Mo, our Brazilian guide, has just told us that we've reached a part of the Rio Negro where, as he puts it, the caiman ambush hunt. We're miles from anywhere, it's the first time I've paddleboarded, I'm losing buoyancy and there's a chance we might be attacked by a gang of vicious crocodilians. Was it, I wonder, wise to take on this assignment?

Standing here on my board in the searing heat of the Amazon jungle it seems improbable that just a few days ago I was in the Antarctic with the fearless American explorer, Doug Stoup, founder of Ice Axe Expeditions. It was his idea to go in search of the Rio Negro's hidden tributaries – waterways so dense with vegetation that even kayaks and canoes can't navigate them – in an attempt to go to parts of the jungle that feel like they might never have been visited by Westerners and to see if they might be suitable for trips in the future.

I make it through the caiman's corridor and patch up my board. It's only then that I discover that the caiman – which grow up to eight feet long and live in trees – aren't much to worry about: the real concern is the piranhas. To illustrate their potency Mo catches one and offers it a branch thicker than my thumb that the piranha effortlessly snaps in half. This is not water into which you want to fall. Not least because you wouldn't be able to see your predators: the Rio Negro is black. Nutrients from soil eroded upriver are suspended in it, making it acidic and foreboding; although at least it means there are no mosquitoes.

As far as we know we're the first to travel this way up the Rio Negro. By day we glide up and down the tributaries and at night we sleep on an expedition boat that follows us upriver, waking each morning to the wall of noise created by the howler monkeys that can be heard up to three miles in the jungle. All around is vegetation enlivened with bright flowers and extraordinary birdlife. In the trees there are macaque monkeys, anteaters and sloths. The chatter is constant until midday when the oppressive heat drives the animals to retreat and silence falls. Our nightly boat journeys take us 150 miles upriver. It's easy to imagine we are the first outsiders to travel along the far reaches of the tributaries as the land is too dense to hack through and the waterways are effectively flooded forest. Our boards can be pushed under low-lying branches, giving access to the remotest parts of the river system.

It is evening, towards the end of trip. Dusk is falling and we are tired, our feet and backs sore from the journey. Suddenly, Mo shouts. He has spotted kinkajou, shy, nocturnal animals seldom seen by humans. We move silently, watching two of them play in the tree canopy, feeling like the paddleboard pioneers of these waters.