



Ranulph Fiennes (below) began his adventuring career more than 20 years before Alex Hibbert was born



the age of exploration

Adventuring has changed with time and technology, but is it getting easier or is the modern world throwing up new challenges? *MF* finds out from veteran expedition leader Ranulph Fiennes and up-and-comer Alex Hibbert

Words Joel Snape Photography Tom Miles

Outside the Royal Geographical Society, the home of great British adventure, there's a statue of polar pioneer Ernest Shackleton. Indoors there are rooms full of books, maps and art related to some of the greatest feats of exploration in history. It's the perfect venue for a meeting between two of Britain's foremost expedition leaders: 24-year-old Alex Hibbert, who in 2008 made the longest unsupported polar expedition in history, and 66-year old Sir Ranulph Fiennes, who's done everything from climbing the Eiger to discovering lost cities in the Oman desert.

MF joins them as they pore over maps and happily discuss where in the world they've been, the maximum speed you can reach with a kite and how much butter to eat on a polar expedition.

Getting started

MF: You both grew up in different eras of exploration. Who were you inspired by when you started out?

Fiennes: My dad was my biggest influence, really. He was definitely the bloke who I wanted to copy, and 18 years after he died I joined the regiment he commanded [the Royal Scots Greys].

Hibbert: My motivation and inspiration comes from my family as well. My father was in the Royal Navy for 40 years, but the main thing my family showed me was that it's important to find your own direction and plug away until you succeed. In the polar world my inspiration is very much the Norwegian pioneers – these guys were born on skis, so they really are the experts. Even now I spend as much time as I can with Norwegians in the incredible areas of southern Norway where they train all the time.





The Newcomer ALEX HIBBERT Age 24

In 2008 Hibbert led the Tiso Trans Greenland expedition which, at 2,211km, is the longest fully unsupported polar expedition in history. He's also one of the youngest people to complete the 200km Devizes-to-Westminster kayak ultramarathon, and has finished the London Marathon in 3hr 19min and climbed Mont Blanc in the French Alps. He also enjoys mountaineering, skiing, photography and 'drinking good beer'.

Fiennes: I find that interesting, because our group, since the 1970s, has always been vying with the Norwegians from a position of British inferiority. In the late '70s one of our competitors, a man called Ragnar Thorseth – we called him 'Foreskin' – said that we'd set off with a prostitute on our sledge. Luckily my wife had seen us off, so she knew we weren't hauling anything that wasn't vital. That's my experience with the Norwegians, but they're great competition to have.

Military efficiency

MF: You both have experience in the armed forces. Do you think the military mindset helps in exploration?

Hibbert: I was a Royal Marines officer for about a year, but then I managed to get injured at the critical point towards the end of training, so my batch have just gone to Afghanistan without me. The polar world was always going to be my long-term direction, but I was really keen to spend time in the military, because it's a wonderful environment to develop everything from your technical skills to working in a team at the very highest level.

The unit I trained in has a family feel, where everyone looks after each other. The people who've had military experience do have a certain something, a team ethic that I've seen lacking in other people.

Fiennes: I got thrown out of the Hereford lot [SAS], and when I applied to go back in they reminded me of my previous misbehaviour with explosives [Fiennes 'borrowed' some incendiaries in an attempt to sabotage the film *Doctor Doolittle*, which was being shot in the Wiltshire village of Castle Combe]. So I left them and came to London, and was there for 15 years as a captain, which was hugely helpful for getting expeditions going. At group headquarters in the Duke of York's barracks in the middle of London, they gave us space for our snow tractors for free, and

I spent several years there, filling the various rabbit holes around the offices with rations. The military were hugely helpful to me.

Next big thing

MF: There's a lot of debate about what exactly constitutes an 'unsupported' attempt on the poles. What's your take? And what do you think is left to be done?

Hibbert: The debate about what constitutes travelling 'unsupported' has been going on for decades. Because polar travel isn't a sport, there isn't a governing body, so people claim that what they've done themselves is within the 'rules'.

Fiennes: The debate seems to have moved to whether wind counts as support.

Hibbert: That's the big thing, and I'm a firm believer that wind is support – very much so. Ronny Finsaas, the Norwegian chef from Patriot Hills base camp, recently kite-skied 600 miles [966km] from the South Pole to Hercules Inlet in three days, and he was just playing around. [Measuring that against what I do] is like pitting a racing yacht against a swimmer.

Fiennes: Surely that's unarguable.

Hibbert: But some people say it's a 'natural' means of propulsion. I try to steer clear of arguments and just state what I do, which is to haul my own gear, completely man-powered.

Fiennes: With no kit drops?

Hibbert: Absolutely. What a lot of people do to get headlines is come up with outrageously contrived new records which they'll pluck out of thin air. I try to come up with big things that haven't been done.

Fiennes: What are, in your opinion, the big polar things that haven't been done?

Hibbert: There's reaching the South Pole in winter. I know there's talk about it among the Norwegians, and I'm interested in that one. Then there's a fully unsupported traverse of the Antarctic, going from the proper start point, which is about 200 miles [322km] from Hercules Inlet, where the commercial teams go from. What I'm not going to do is invent challenges. I won't be going to the South Pole backwards on a pogo stick.

Fiennes: It'll be a camel next. A camel with its hump injected with anti-freeze.



Into the blue: Hibbert on his record-breaking 2008 expedition



Just to prove he didn't take a photographer along

Going solo

MF: Ran, you've made solo attempts on both poles. What's the biggest difference travelling alone makes? And what advice would you give Alex?

Fiennes: I'd say that the biggest difference is that if there are crevasses in the area you're better off with a colleague, because it's unusual for two people to fall into the same crevasse, so one can pull the other one out. Similarly, in sea ice it's pretty unlikely that both people will fall into the water. If one falls in and gets cold hands the other can get the tent set up and get the cooker going, so it's no problem [in his North Pole solo attempt, Fiennes fell in alone and developed serious frostbite]. That's the big difference. Apart from that, being alone

'You're better off with a colleague. It's unusual for both to fall in the same crevasse, so one can pull the other out'

Ranulph Fiennes

is certainly more boring, and you can't sit in the pub when you get back talking about it.

Hibbert: If you're not particularly good at self-rescue you can get in trouble very fast in the Arctic. But I think the most dangerous way to travel a glacier is to be in a pair roped up with sledges, because the chances of the second man arresting the fall of the first are pretty slim – you'll pull the second guy off his feet and both go in. The safest way is roped up in a three or a four.

That's the technical side, but on expeditions that go on for months, I think the mental side is critical. In my biggest trip to date we were skiing for 113 days, and you find all sorts of demons you had no idea existed. Thankfully at the end of the day I had someone to chat to, even if it wasn't a scintillating conversation. Going it alone isn't something I want to get into at this start of my life. Right now I enjoy achieving things as a team and sharing experiences. Being able to rely on someone is really important to me.

Fiennes: I've always preferred to travel with one other person. I find that Mike Stroud [the British doctor who has accompanied Fiennes on several polar expeditions] is ideal, so I just automatically ring him.

Hibbert: You don't need the same personality as your team-mate. That can be quite destructive. I just think you need to be very tolerant. There are so many things on a long trip that will grind away at you and irritate you, but you have to put that to the back of your mind.

Fiennes: Like what?

Hibbert: Things like cleaning socks in the communal area of the tent, or being the first to dive into the tent in high winds. George Bullard, my partner on the Arctic trip, was

always a trooper, but I've been on trips where there's one guy who's always the first in.

Fiennes: What gets me is when you've got a daily supply of chocolate bars and somebody saves them up for the end of the day. On one trip when we were eating a lot of high-fat flapjacks, Mike was handing them out, and I noticed mine was always smaller. I didn't say anything, but after a while I suggested that we should pick our own flapjacks. Then I starting thinking that mine was smaller than his, even though I'd picked it. That was when I realised it was completely in my mind.

Hibbert: I find the high-fat problem one of the most difficult things about polar travel.

Fiennes: What's the highest percentage of fat you've ever managed?

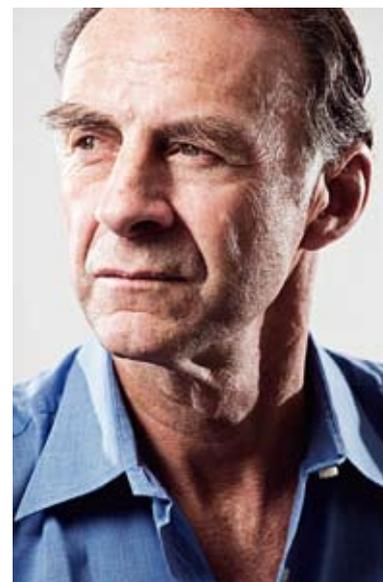
Hibbert: We were eating 3,500 of our 5,500 calories a day in fat, including 200g of pure ghee butter every day. The holy grail is to keep your food rations under 1kg a day. In our rations 400g of that would be flapjack, which gives you fat, complex

carbohydrates to burn, and sugar for a bit of a boost. It works like magic.

Getting technical

MF: The amount of kit available to the modern explorer definitely makes things easier. What's the biggest technological advance you've seen in your careers and what's just around the corner?

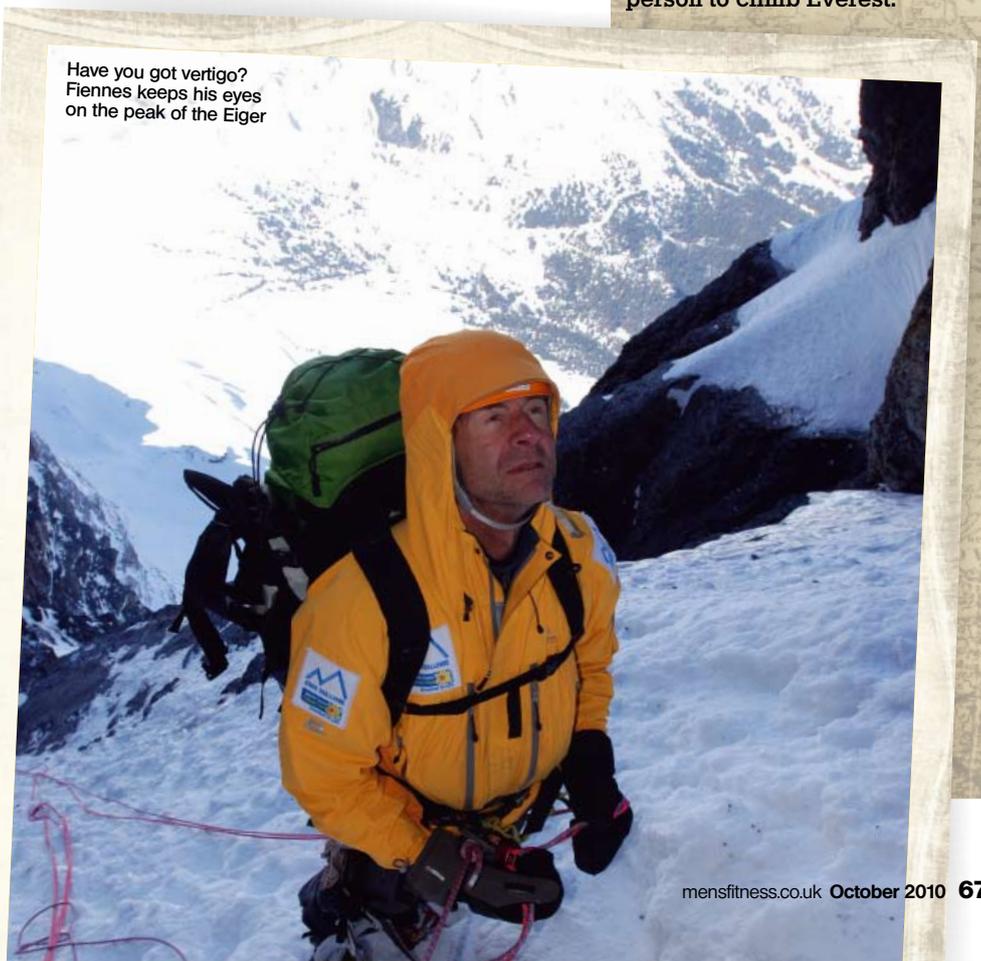
Fiennes: I don't consider what I do a career. It's just expedition leading. But in the deserts using a GPS is a big change – up until about the early '90s, you'd have to get out of the tent and use a sextant [a mechanical instrument



The Veteran
RANULPH FIENNES
Age 66

Fiennes made his name leading the 1979-82 Transglobe Expedition, which journeyed around the world on its polar axis using only surface transport. In 1992 he led an expedition that discovered the lost city of Ubar in Oman, and in 2003 he ran seven marathons on seven continents in seven days. In 2007, despite a fear of heights, he climbed the Eiger, and in 2009 he became the oldest British person to climb Everest.

Have you got vertigo? Fiennes keeps his eyes on the peak of the Eiger



'So this is the place where
I nearly died...'
'That's quite close to a
place where I nearly died'



used to measure angles]. Also, for decades the radio operator would have coaxial cable coming into the tent and knocking people's cups of tea over, and you'd have to go outside the tent and fiddle with the aerial every time you wanted to change frequency. So GPS and modern radios are a huge change.

Hibbert: The main technological drive at the moment is to try to make charging systems for the batteries smaller and more efficient. I had a solar panel laid out on the back of my sledge, and I'd do high-priority things like GPS batteries and satellite batteries first, then work all the way down to low-priority things like my iPod. Also, you want all your kit to be as light as possible – you want a lighter, stronger sledge. Fabrics are moving forward, too.

Fiennes: Do you use Ventile cotton?

Hibbert: Ventile's very good, very light, but I prefer Pertex. It's wind-resistant and very breathable.

Fiennes: I shall have to write that down.

bit higher we came to my Sherpa's father's body, which had been there for eight years. And then we found a Swiss climber, who'd summited the previous night without oxygen and then died of hypoxia. I recognised that spot, because it was where I'd turned back the previous year, where I'd told my guide Kenton Cool I was too knackered to carry on.

This time I thought, well, now I'm not knackered. At that point I ceased to have any recollection of anything until I got to the top. We got to the summit before the sun came up, so we had to wait, and while I was waiting my camera stopped working. Kenton turned up, guiding a different party, took one look at the camera and breathed on it, and it worked.

Hibbert: You can't really do serious polar exploration when you're under 16, so one of my earliest challenges was the Devizes-to-Westminster kayak ultramarathon. In fact I had to lie on the entry form because I was 15, and you have to be 16 for insurance purposes.

'You have to hit the depots every time or you're done, that's it. You're on a knife-edge'

Alex Hibbert

Changing course

MF: Although you're both polar specialists, you've done plenty of adventuring elsewhere. What makes you want to take on such a variety of challenges?

Fiennes: Well, tackling mountains for me was a personal thing in that I thought I'd stop being frightened of them, and it took five or six years for me to realise that that wasn't going to work. If you dabble in rock climbing and you've reached a certain age, you'll never be able to do what these proper rock climbers can do.

Everest, on the other hand, basically anybody can do it if they're reasonably fit and they have good weather and companions and a good base leader. And if they don't have an inbuilt physical weakness which they won't know about until they hit a certain point. Once when I was at the Tibetan base camp, one fairly serious climber came down being led by a Sherpa – he had tunnel vision because all the blood vessels behind his eyes had burst at 17,500 feet [5,300m]. That's the sort of thing you don't hear about.

Hibbert: People ask me, 'Isn't Everest really easy now?' But of course it isn't.

Fiennes: The second time I tried to summit Everest [in 2009] we passed the body of Rob Mill, who's a very good Scottish climber. Then a little

Fiennes: You did the DW when you were 15? Good Lord.

Hibbert: So I started young, trying to find out what I enjoyed, but I don't want to be a jack of all trades – I want to be a polar specialist. I want to travel the world, but I want to serve my apprenticeship in the polar regions and become a specialist in that area.

Full steam ahead

MF: What are you planning to tackle next?

Fiennes: I'm planning a big expedition for 2012, but I can't talk about the details yet because I'm still looking for sponsorship.

Hibbert: I can't say either, but it'll be another polar expedition. You learn an awful lot when you're on your own out there. You come up with lots of little ideas to make your life a tiny bit more comfortable, a little bit more efficient, shaving little percentages off here and there. There were times on the 2008 trip where I had 40 days to go and less than two days' food on the sledge. You have to hit the depots every time or you're done, that's it. You're on a knife-edge. So those little percentages can make all the difference. There's a lot to learn. ■

For sponsorship details for Ranulph Fiennes's 2012 expedition, go to campbell-bell.com

Think you're an expedition leader in the making? Then take MF's Ranulph test at mensfitness.co.uk/links/areyoufiennes