LIFE LESSONS FROM THE AMAZON

A Guide to Life From One Epic Jungle Adventure

PIP STEWART

summersdale

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An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

Summersdale Publishers Ltd
Part of Octopus Publishing Group Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
LONDON
EC4Y 0DZ
UK

www.summersdale.com

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-78783-980-9

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PART ONE

LIFE IN THE JUNGLE

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Direction

(noun): a course along which someone or something moves.

How do you shape the most fulfilling life possible? It's a question I've pondered a lot over the last few years. If you're unsure about where you're trying to get to or what you want out of life, it's a question that can feel massively overwhelming. Perhaps I've spent too long around rivers, but the clay found in them has helped me to develop a weird visual to deal with a lack of direction: I think of life as pottery.

We all start with a lump of clay and – regardless of how much we have, its consistency or type – we all have the ability to shape something out of it. Whenever I feel out of my depth about where I'm going or what I'm doing, I always try to remind myself: *Don't worry! I'm still shaping my pot; I just don't know what it's going to look like yet.* We might not be sure what the artistic direction of our masterpiece will be, but the key is in showing up to the potter's wheel and giving it a whirl. If we get our hands dirty and attempt to shape the clay in some way, then at least we have created something. The jungle showed me that even if you have a plan in life, you need to be flexible. However much you try, your pot might look squiffy, have a wonky handle or end up a different shape than you expected. Embrace these things as part of your story, and don't let them throw you.

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Thorough preparation is a good way to arm yourself against a change of plan, and will stand you in good stead whether your goal is to kayak down a river or deliver a presentation at work. First, figure out everything you might need for the undertaking, practise the skills you require, ask for help from those with more experience and check that your plan makes sense. Think about your physical and mental prep; what's your backup if it all goes wrong? Work through these scenarios in your brain and then factor in the unexpected. If you do so, you're less likely to get flustered when something does threaten to change the shape of your pot – which will probably happen, because that's life.

Changing direction in life – whether this is taking up something new, starting or ending relationships, moving, or having an honest conversation – is scary. For many of us it's bravery in action, as we must acknowledge our fears and the stress they bring. In some ways our fear acts as a barometer, showing us the size of our challenge and how much we have to do to reach our goal. But, if you do decide you want it, how do you push through that feeling?

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There might not be an answer other than to just accept it. I took the fear with me to the jungle. I kept my hands, however shaky, on the potter's wheel. Yet, for all the angst, a larger dread lay underneath. It propelled me in the direction I knew, deep down, I wanted to go. It was a simple question that you may find useful, too: what would happen if I didn't go for it?

Days on expedition: 4

Location: heading upstream of the Essequibo River, south of Masakenari

Status: bricking it

I wish I could say I took to life in the jungle like a duck to water but, truthfully, it took me a little while to get used to it.

"Watch out for the bamboo…" Nereus Chekema warned as I picked up what I thought was dead wood for the fire. "It's like a bomb."

He said it just as I'd placed the sticks on the flames. Too late – the bamboo was alight. I beat a hasty retreat from the fire, bracing myself for an explosion. When I realized that a Hollywood-esque *boom* hadn't yet catapulted me from the camp, I tentatively turned around. My teammates hadn't moved from their positions around the fire and were looking amused. The burning bamboo suddenly sprang into action: a wheezing noise followed by a short, sharp "pop". It turned out it was more of a firecracker than a bomb.

I breathed a sigh of relief and tried to style out my overreaction by pretending I was on the way to get something from a bag next to my hammock. Judging by the laughing I heard as I rummaged around in one of my large dry bags, I'm not sure I pulled it off. On the plus side, I hadn't blown up myself – or my teammates – so I took that as a win. We'd survived, for now at least.

"You're such a klutz, Pip," shouted my friend Laura from around the campfire, teasingly.

"Well, you invited me along. I hold you entirely responsible," I shot back, smiling.

I'm pretty certain everybody has a friend that gets them into trouble. You know the sort: the person who convinces you that one last drink on an already boozy night is a good idea or that you're entirely capable of running a marathon in three weeks with zero training. I have a friend like this. Her name is Laura Bingham.

Laura doesn't do things by halves. It's fair to say she is one of the most driven people I've ever met. Over the years Laura has sailed across the Atlantic and cycled across South America, with no money, to raise funds and awareness for Operation South America, a children's charity in Paraguay. She's also got a sharp sense of humour and an uncanny ability to persuade people to do things – which is perhaps how we became friends. I found myself offering to help change her baby's dirty nappy at Campfire, an adventure festival we were both speaking at less than a year before.

In all honesty, I'd rather change a nappy than engage in small talk. I'm not very good at it and I'd rather know the content of your soul than bore you to death with chat about the weather. On this particular occasion I chose to get stuck into the contents of her son Ran's nappy. Laura's soul would have to wait. Getting to know each other over poo – particularly yellow poo, if I remember correctly – perhaps wasn't the most promising start to a friendship, but it created an immediate bond between us.

Two months later, I received a call from her just after lunch, while I was sitting at my desk at Red Bull, where I was working as their Adventure Editor. I didn't make a note of the conversation, so forgive the creative licence, but I am pretty sure it went something along the lines of:

Laura: "How do you feel about attempting a world-first expedition through the Guiana Shield – 'the greenhouse of the world' – and part of the larger Amazon biome? Paddling down the Essequibo, Guyana's largest river, through dense rainforest,

from source to sea? Around three months? We will need to hike to the source, which is exceptionally mountainous and located in the Acarai Mountains, but we should be physically fit enough after the training. Oh, and it's a fairly quick turnaround – we're talking in eight months' time..."

Me: "Floating down a river, watching wildlife, with a piña colada in hand, no experience required? Yes, brilliant. Sign me up!"

I am not a natural office person. In fact, 20 minutes doesn't go by without me standing up, pacing the room or making at least one cup of tea. It's not that I'm avoiding work (well, not most of the time). Movement just helps my mind. Clearly, on the day Laura called, I had been sitting down for far too long and my brain had addled. However, our conversation made me realize that I was craving a new direction in life.

Set your compass in the rough direction you want to travel

It was only when I had put down the phone to Laura and called my partner Charlie that the reality of what I'd just agreed to began to sink in.

"You hate kayaking," Charlie reminded me when I started to explain the plan. "I remember you saying, when you tried it in New Zealand, that it was – and I quote – 'a rubbish sport, and I can't understand why anyone does it', and that your shoulders felt like they were on fire."

It was also around this time that words from my conversation with Laura, such as "caiman", "piranha", "machete", "waterfalls" and "jungle training", began to emerge through a post-lunch-induced brain fog.

"Who else is on board?" Charlie asked.

"Laura's best friend – Ness Knight. You know, the one I have a girl crush on, the woman who was the first female to swim the River Thames."

I'd never actually met Ness, but if she was anything like how she came across on social media, I knew I'd like her.

"So, in summary," Charlie clarified, "in eight months' time you're planning on kayaking a river through the rainforest with two women – one of whom you've only recently met and the other you don't know at all – for three months, and you don't currently know how to kayak, let alone take on white water. Good luck!"

Thankfully, Charlie – my partner of 12 years – is both used to, and supportive of, the adventures I get myself into. Together we cycled home from Asia, where we'd been living for five years, to London: a journey that took us 13 months and through 24 countries. I hadn't had much experience when we set off. I'd only ever really cycled around in a city, while I was at uni, so I was hardly a pro athlete. In fact, the whole journey nearly ended in disaster when, three weeks in, at the sight of our first small incline (I can barely call it a hill), I threw an absolute tantrum, flung my heavily loaded bike to the ground and declared that Charlie had picked the wrong woman. I wasn't capable of this and there was no way I was continuing either with the journey or the relationship. The reality of the situation was that I was embarrassed: I was unfit. I'd told my friends and family that I was going to "cycle halfway around the world" and, when push came to shove, my legs burned, my chest wheezed and my bloody inner critic set in.

Don't let your inner critic take over (it will try)

To his credit, Charlie handled my snot-filled meltdown brilliantly. After nearly three hours (yes, three!) of trying to calm me down on a Malaysian side road, he offered to take me to the nearest airport, although we had no option but to cycle there. He then said something to me that I've never forgotten

and have repeated to myself on every subsequent journey: "Pip, these are not physical journeys; they are mental ones."

Something switched in me that day. I knew that if I could spend 8 hours a day at work, I could spend 8 hours a day on a bike. I realized that if I could quieten my inner critic that told me I was "too slow, too unfit, too fat, too much of this and not enough of that" then perhaps, just perhaps, I could do what I knew deep down I really wanted to. After 13 months, a few days before Christmas Day 2014, we cycled to Big Ben in London, where our family and friends were waiting with banners of congratulations. We'd done it. Through tears of joy, it dawned on me that we'd experienced a journey of over 10,000 miles that would stay with us forever; a journey that was possible because I'd pushed through my own fear and self-doubt.

Break your goal into smaller chunks and work on what you can control

I didn't overcome fear on that expedition; I just learned to live with it. I began to realize that whenever I made a decision that would alter the path I was travelling on – be this a massive expedition, or a change in a job, a relationship or a flat – uncomfortable feelings would always arise. You too may find that, at times of upheaval, fear will often pop up and announce that it has come to move in with you for a while. It's a blooming annoying housemate but, in a sense, it shows we're alive, and are fully functioning humans with the prerequisite insecurities that ultimately serve to keep us safe and out of trouble.

Even though fear had taken up residence in my brain since signing up to the kayak expedition, I focused on what I could control. I'm not a natural planner, but fear propelled me to take action. For an expedition of this magnitude, we needed to plan and prepare properly. In the build-up to the trip,

Laura had done the bulk of the heavy lifting when it came to organization.

First up, we needed permission for our journey. The headwaters of the Essequibo and the surrounding 625,000-hectare area of pristine forest are protected by the indigenous people of the community of Masakenari. We needed their authorization to enter for the expedition. Their village is the closest settlement to the river's source and it was the place where we were planning on starting our paddle. We connected over Facebook to Paul Chekema, the leader of the village (known as the Toshao) and used fixers on the ground in the capital Georgetown.

We also had the backing of the then First Lady of Guyana, Sandra Granger. She had heard about our trip and said it was a great thing for young women to see other women embarking on such "out-of-the-box" adventures. She even agreed to be a patron of our journey – and asked our fixers to pass on the message that we were to put every possible safety procedure in place, as the Essequibo was the country's biggest and mightiest river. As well as highlighting possibilities for women in adventure, both in Guyana and elsewhere, the joint expedition also offered opportunities to showcase, explore and document the incredible natural beauty of the nation and its rainforest. The country is one of South America's most heavily forested and has one of the world's most flourishing jungles. The Tourism Authority asked us to share with them, on our return, our thoughts and insights about what we witnessed on the journey.

Once we were granted the necessary permits from the village, as well as from the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs and the Protected Areas Commission, we were left with the small matter of working out how to pay for the expedition. Like many large-scale projects, unless you're utterly minted, you need to find sponsorship. Given the remote nature and

inaccessibility of the trip, Laura was looking to find around £30,000. This would be used to cover the cost of flights – both to and from Guyana, and internally – guiding fees, food en route and hotels in Georgetown, as well as any kit that we couldn't get sponsored. Often, getting these trips off the ground is as hard, if not harder, than the actual journey. Our success in this instance was down to Laura; she produced a stellar pitch document, outlining who we were, what we were doing and what companies could expect in return for their support (e.g. social media posts, their logos on our boats, and talks and blog posts that we'd produce for them when we returned).

Then there was the mind-boggling task of organizing logistics: arranging flights, internationally and locally, getting the right travel jabs, learning about navigation and remote, emergency medicine, preparing our kit, and figuring out how much food we'd need. There was also the small matter of actually getting fit enough to manage the journey. The list of things to do seemed endless. Laura farmed out a few tasks to Ness and me but, for the most part, she pulled the whole thing together. How she managed to do it while looking after a young baby is beyond me.

I realized how incredibly driven she could be when Ness and I went to stay with her around Christmastime to do some kayak and jungle training. Thankfully, Ness was just as I imagined her to be: ballsy, charming and up for a laugh. The expedition prep also meant I got to know Laura's husband, Ed Stafford, better. Ed was the first person to walk the length of the Amazon River. Following such an incredible feat, he made a TV career out of adventure and one journey took him to Guyana. Apparently, after this trip he told Laura that the rainforest there was like nothing he'd ever seen – "Disneyland for animals" was how she described it to me. His description of how remote the Essequibo was planted a seed in Laura's brain. The comment had clearly

taken root, as the idea turned from concept to reality. Slowly, step after step, it morphed into our source-to-sea expedition.

Having settled into my room at their house in Leicestershire, I pottered down to the kitchen, where Ed was fixing us up a cup of coffee with a dollop of coconut cream.

"I'm on a keto diet," he said, "trying to get in shape for *First Man Out*." His new series involved pitting himself against other world survival experts in a race to get out of hostile environments. It was during his break from filming that we were attempting the expedition, so that he could look after Ran.

Given that Ed was both a world expert in jungle survival and Laura's husband, I asked him how the preparation had been going since we last spoke.

"I don't know. She won't let me look at it," he said, shrugging and handing me a surprisingly punchy coffee.

"Damn right," said Laura, coming through the kitchen door after having fed the chickens in the garden. Winston and Maggie, their two large, beautiful – but seriously slobbery – Newfoundland dogs, were in tow. "Although I have said he can help us with a jungle survival lesson." She added, "You get used to the dribble," as one of the dogs made its way straight to my groin. A massive drool patch now covered my crotch.

"Before we get cracking with the lesson, we've got you some presents," said Ed, as Laura disappeared off to get them. "You'll need them where you're going."

"Aw, mate, that's so kind of you guys," said Ness, when Laura returned and handed over two parcels. I reiterated the sentiment.

We opened a small box first: an electronic Casio watch from Laura.

"It's not sponsored or anything," she said. "They're not expensive but they're waterproof and the light function is super

useful. I love mine and my bridesmaids even had to force me to take it off for my wedding."

Ed then handed us both a long, thin parcel. "Careful how you open it."

Ness and I slowly unwrapped a machete in a leather sheath.

"I picked these up in Brazil. I used the same for the Amazon. Hopefully, they won't let you down."

The gifts spoke to the very generous and thoughtful nature of the couple.

"Right, let's get cracking!" said Ed, once we'd thanked them again. We were going to disappear into the woods at the end of their garden to string up hammocks and tarps, learn how to find material to light a fire in the jungle, and practise using our new machetes.

"Not you, Winston," said Laura, shoving the dog back into the kitchen. "We'll be back soon."

That training day seemed like a world away, as I stood in the middle of the rainforest in Guyana, fiddling around in my hammock. It felt as if a million cicadas were buzzing and clicking around the canopy. I knew we had done all we could in the build-up to the trip. Our team had trained through the cold winter days. We asked for assistance from the outdoors community and received more than we ever could have anticipated, including fitness training, survival tips and help with analyzing topographical maps to gauge how big the rapids might be. But I'd still been nervous when getting on the flight to Guyana, as this was the most dangerous journey of our lives to date. Fear left me acting in peculiar ways.

Before we left, I was having nightmares and lashing out at the people I loved the most. I felt as if I had been put in a washing machine and churned around. Matters didn't improve when we visited the helicopter rescue team in Georgetown, who had

agreed to ensure that a medical evacuation plane would be on standby during the expedition. As we were shown around the chopper they'd use in an emergency, we were told that rescue was entirely possible but there were a few issues. One: they didn't currently have a winch operator in the country. Two: they wouldn't fly at night. And three (the final nail in the coffin, so to speak): in order to land, they'd need either a sandbank or an area slightly larger than the chopper's rotor blades and tail. Given that we were heading to dense primary rainforest, the subtext was quite clear: get into trouble deep in the jungle and you're stuffed.

Thankfully, we weren't entirely on our own. After leaving Georgetown, we headed in a small chartered plane to the village of Masakenari, where we would meet our guides from the Waî Waî community, who would help us on our journey to the Acarai Mountains. This mountain range also serves as the modern border between southern Guyana and northern Brazil, and we were hoping to find the source of the river there. We expected the journey to the source to take a few weeks and then we would begin our paddle to the Atlantic Ocean. As the plane took off, I saw the ocean stretch before the capital city. Only around 800,000 people live in Guyana – a country of a similar size to Britain – and 90 per cent live along the northern coast we were flying over. The plane turned and headed to Guyana's interior.

I spent a good proportion of the three-hour plane ride watching the numerous waterways winding through the lush green terrain beneath us. To think we would spend months paddling back was mind-blowing. Looking down at the rivers beneath, I could understand why Guyana is an Amerindian word for "land of many waters". For better or for worse, in so many ways, water links us all.

Guyana is one of the greenest and most forested places on Earth and, although it is naturally resource-rich, it has

historically been one of South America's poorest countries. It has had a turbulent history: it was colonized by the Dutch and later the British – in 1814 it became known as British Guiana – until independence was declared in 1966. Venezuela and Guyana are still locked in a long-standing border dispute over the territory to the west of the Essequibo, which makes up a large proportion of Guyana's current land mass. The impact of the centuries-old division of land by Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom can still be felt today, as Venezuela refuses to acknowledge the border. Similarly, the diversity of Guyana's current population – indigenous Amerindian, African, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese and other Europeans – has its roots in colonial rule, the forcible moving of people across the globe for slavery and indenture, and a colonial plantation labour economy that helped fuel an empire.

I peered out the window, at the very waterways that gave life to the British Empire. Demerara sugar comes from the river of the same name. Rubber and gold, and other precious metals, flowed from Guyana's rivers into oceans and onto British shores. We had yet to realize it, but the twists and turns of our journey down the Essequibo River would reveal some uncomfortable truths about life past and present.

Now, fully immersed in the jungle, I stood by my hammock and looked up at my tarp. Small spiders seemed to be building a home for the night there, too. *At least my mosquito net should protect me,* I thought. After a few nights in the jungle, the journey had gone from being theoretical and conceptual to being very, very real. The fear was still there but I was getting more comfortable with it. I reminded myself that I just had to implement what I already knew and listen to what our Waî Waî guides were teaching us. We had brought with us a Garmin inReach Explorer for sending and receiving messages, as well as for navigation.

We also had a satellite phone for emergencies and a BGAN – a Broadband Global Area Network – a nifty device that provided broadband if there was enough clear sky for us to point it toward. We also had our mobiles and a generator to charge electronics. However, despite safety precautions, we knew there was little chance of rescue if something went wrong on this section of the journey, as it was so remote. We had to rely on each other.

I looked over my shoulder at the team gathered around the fire. Ness and Laura were chatting away to Cemci Suse, the oldest and most experienced member of the group. Next to him was his 16-year-old grandson, Nigel Issacs. It was his first time joining an expedition and you could tell he was excited. He'd made me chuckle earlier in the day; he shared that when the village was told of our expedition, he'd assumed we'd be men, so he was quite surprised to see three women step out of the plane.

I watched as a bright orange firefly flew past his face, perilously close to the fire and into tomorrow's potential breakfast: armadillo.

Brothers Jackson and Aaron Marawanaru were checking on how it was cooking. The armadillo had been shot with a bow and arrow earlier in the day and was now in halves, roasting. From where I was standing, I could see pools of blood and juices collecting in its cavities. Jackson had mentioned that armadillo usually takes a while to cook but should be ready by the morning. It was also, apparently, a highly unusual catch, as armadillos tend to clock up around 16 hours of sleep a day. This one had been spotted running out of its burrow and we were told that it had probably been under attack from a jaguar – a theory made even more likely when Cemci pointed out some fresh, distinctly cat-like paw prints on the sandy riverbank near where we'd set up our camp.

I rejoined the campfire in time to hear Nereus, the son of the village Toshao, deliver some advice in the eventuality we ever did encounter a jaguar.

"Don't run away or it will get you. Instead, take out your machete and get ready to fight," he cautioned. It's fair to say, as far as bedtime stories go, I wasn't sitting comfortably for this one. The thought of encountering a jaguar, or "tigers" as our guides referred to them, wasn't exactly filling me with joy. It's not quite as relaxing as counting sheep, that's for sure.

"Oh, and always take your machete with you if you go to defecate alone," he added.

"Are you ever scared of the jungle?" I asked him.

"No, the jungle is my home. I've been going into the forest on my own since I was 14 or 15," he said, staring at the stack of bamboo that I had mistaken for dead wood. Nereus gestured to it.

"When I was little, my grandfather burned bamboo and smeared the ash on my face. He told me that tigers can't get through bamboo, so it will protect me. He's passed away now, so unfortunately my younger brother didn't get the ceremony. My grandfather loved the jungle. He taught me a lot."

The embers dimmed to ash and the team slunk off to bed. The next few weeks, as we made our way to the source, were going to involve very hard, physical labour. Any sleep we could get was precious. In the brief period we'd been in the jungle, I had learned not to panic if I heard a low-pitched, otherworldly growl; it was likely just a howler monkey, not a sign of impending death and doom. That being said, I looked at the fire and pondered tales of jaguar. I wondered about retrieving the ash from the now exploded bamboo – I would happily receive all the protection I could get for this journey. As fate would have it, we were going to need it.