

# The day job

## Do you dream of earning a living from a life in the outdoors?

Mark Kalch has the coolest job title around – he’s a professional adventurer (told you). We find out more...

**“I still cringe a bit when I tell people what I do,” says Mark Kalch. “They always get a slightly confused look on their faces. But it’s a good dinner-table conversation if nothing else!”**

Professional adventurer Mark was born and grew up in Australia, but he’s been based in London for the past 10 years. His most recent expedition was a solo trek through the whole of Iran, starting at its northern border on the Caspian Sea and finishing at the southern border on the Persian Gulf.

“I chose Iran was because I wanted to reveal a country that’s much misunderstood and misrepresented in the West,” says Mark. “I trekked and climbed through subtropical forest, 5,000m-plus mountains, high plateaus and desert landscapes, but the highlight was the people – they were unbelievably friendly and let me stay in their homes, school sports halls, Mosques – anywhere. I really can’t describe how friendly they were.”

It sounds like the dream job – and he doesn’t deny it – but there’s more admin than you might think.

“My trip to Iran took two years of planning for just a two-month expedition, and most of that was sitting behind a computer,” Mark says. “You have to sort the route, the maps, what kit you’re going to take... Some people might have been able to organise it more

quickly, but that was how long it took me – and nothing went wrong anyway!”

Before becoming a full-time adventurer, Mark was a white water rafting guide in South Africa. “Whenever we had time off we’d organise our own mini expeditions, so it was a natural progression really,” he explains. “And it meant I didn’t have to get a real job.”

Nice. But how does being a professional adventurer pay the bills?

“I do a lot of speaking – for example public speaking, or giving talks in schools. If it’s to sixth formers, for instance, I talk about things like leadership, teamwork and motivation, or if it’s younger kids I can bring to life what’s on the curriculum – like what it’s like in the Amazon jungle, and what impact humans are having.”

“There’s also sponsorship,” he continues. “I have great, continual sponsorship now [his sponsors include Rab, Meindl and Sony] but when I first started I had to phone around potential sponsors for every expedition. I got about 1,000 rejections for every one that took me up on it.”

The worst bit of the job is also the best: the uncertainty. “I had a normal nine-’til-five back in 1999 and even if I didn’t work very hard one month, I’d still get paid,” he says. “You can spend a whole month just getting by. If I get distracted now, I don’t get paid.”

Another aspect that’s both good and bad is getting to the end of an expedition. “It’s a strange part of the job. For example in Iran I arrived at the southern border in the afternoon. It was such a big deal for me, but everyone else was just going about their business and looking at me as if to say ‘there goes another Westerner’.

“And then you have to start organising how you’re going to get home.”

Mark’s certain that if he wasn’t an explorer he’d still need to have a job in the great outdoors. “I think I’d like to be a pro-freesurfer. My brother sent me some DVDs about it and they reminded me of what I miss about Oz and Bali. Not that I’m good enough to be one, but it sounds a cool job.”

And, most importantly, what’s the next big adventure? “I’m thinking about the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan. It’s a thin section of the country separate from where all the troubles are, near the Chinese border, and there are some really high mountains. But instead of just turning up to climb a big mountain, I’d rather explore the region in which the mountain sits, meet the people and find out more about the area. A proper expedition, not just grabbing a trophy summit.

“But we’ll see. The beauty is, I can just ponder my map of the world, find somewhere that looks interesting and that’s where I’ll go.” ■




## Mark says

Age: 32

**Occupation:** Professional adventurer

**What's the biggest challenge on your list of 'things to do before I die'?** To lead a life worth remembering.

**What album or book would you wish for if you were stranded?** *Musashi* by Eiji Yoshikawa. It's an inspirational read that will give anyone the motivation to escape.

**What can keep you awake at night?** Pre-expedition nerves and that damn rooster!

**What do you miss most about home when you're away?** My family, my friends and being warm.

**What's your ultimate indulgence?** Living my comfortable, decadent, western existence.

**What's your worst ever injury and how did you get it?** I wish I could regale you with my death-defying parachute accident in Africa which broke my back and forced me to leave the SAS but alas, I have been pretty lucky. A couple of knocks to the head and overuse injuries resulting in fractured vertebrae, separated AC joints in both shoulders and a dodgy knee is about it. No worries.

**What's your best characteristic?** Not wishing to settle for a 'normal' life. It keeps me always wanting more and makes things a hell of a lot more exciting and unpredictable.

**And your worst?** See above!

**What's your best tip for aspiring explorers?** Forget records, first ascents, first descents, highest, longest and all that rubbish. Just go!

**Any role models?** In adventure and exploration, South African hard man Mike Horn. In life I admire anyone who strives to better themselves.

**And finally: blondes, brunettes or redheads?** I try not to discriminate (better odds!).

