AN ADVENTUROUS LIFE

Last spring I received an email from a fellow named Ryan Trapp. He had just published a book entitled Chasing 193: The Quest to Visit Every Country in the World.

Every sovereign country, for him, meant all 193 UN member states (although for me that also includes states the UN refuses to recognize: Taiwan, Kosovo, and Somaliland – add the two UN observers, Palestine and the Vatican, and the real number is 198).

Less than 100 people on earth had ever done so, he told me, 2% of the number of people who had climbed Everest (over 4,000).

He had interviewed 34 of these folks for his book, and had been unable to contact me to be one of them. Due to the book's popularity, he was writing a Volume II, and now that he had tracked me down, asked if I would be interviewed for it.

I consented, entitling the interview *An Adventurous Life*. I thought I'd share it with you, especially at this time of year when it's good to take a break from our world going bonkers.

Answering Ryan's questions was an interesting experience of self-exposure and self-reflection. It's fairly lengthy at over 6600 words so it's probably best digested not all in one go. I hope you enjoy it. Photos at the end.

An Adventurous Life: Jack Wheeler Chapter for Chasing 193 Vol II

Where did you grow up, and what was your early life like?

I grew up in Glendale, California near LA. It was the idyllic childhood of the 1950s American Golden Age, especially in Southern California. My dad worked for a local television station, my mom was a homemaker, we were all blissfully unaware of the world outside Glendale.

The only time I left Glendale as a young boy was in 1954 at age 9. My parents took my sister Judy and me on a giant road trip throughout the West: the Grand Canyon, Bryce, Zion, Yellowstone, Custer's Battlefield, Crater Lake, Yosemite. I was stunned by what I saw; the impact of the American West's natural beauty and grandeur has never has left me.

At 11, I got into tennis and the Boy Scouts. Torn between the two, I got off to a slow start with Scouting, taking over six months to get from Tenderfoot to Second Class. I spent the summer of 1955 trying to make First Class and get my Camping Merit Badge.

While at camp, I had a day-dream that I could make First Class by September, Star by December,

and be a Life Scout (the highest next to Eagle) by March, making each in the 3-month minimum for advancement. When I made the mistake of telling the other kids, they laughed at me, and it made me mad. By March of 1956 I was a Life Scout and no one was laughing.

Now 12, my whole life was dedicated to Scouting, to reach the required 21 Merit Badges and fulfill the other requirements for Eagle. The minimum from Life to Eagle was six months and I was determined to make it, which I did in August, whereupon I was notified by Scout Headquarters (then in New Brunswick, New Jersey) that I was the Youngest Eagle Scout in the history of the Boy Scouts.

I was invited to New Brunswick to receive my Eagle medal by Chief Scout Executive Arthur Schuck, and then to the White House where, with my parents, I met President Dwight Eisenhower.

It was a life-altering experience to have the President of the United States put his hands on my shoulders, look me in the eye, and tell me, a 12 year-old boy, “I am proud to have met you, Jack.”

When did you go from casually traveling to making this a full-time goal, and what motivated you to travel to every country?

Those are two entirely separate questions. For the first, the answer is when I was 14 and read Richard Halliburton’s The Complete Book of Marvels, suddenly opening the world to me as place of endless wonder and adventure. It was his account of climbing the world’s most famous mountain, the Matterhorn in Switzerland, that transfixed me.

The timing was lucky, because my dad had just gotten his television station, KTTV, to pay for our going to Europe and film it for a TV special. Going to Europe was exotic in 1958, but the real selling point was Russia – taking an American family there was a big deal back then.

I tell the story of why my father said yes when I asked if I could climb the Matterhorn at 14 in What Life Is All About. When I reached the top with my guide Alfons Franzen, Dad was flying around the summit in a small plane and we waved to each other. One of the most profound moments of my life to this day, it was the experience we shared at his death in 1980.

It was a moment that set me upon my life's direction. People collect things. They collect stamps, or coins, or porcelain. At 14, I decided what I wanted was to collect extraordinary experiences. You could lose your stamps or coins, but you can never lose what you have done with your life. A collection of unbelievably memorable adventures can never be taken away.

So I set off alone, to swim the Hellespont like Leander in Greek mythology (4 pages LIFE Magazine Dec. 20, 1960), get adopted into a tribe of Amazon headhunters (the Shuara Jivaros in Ecuador), and hunt a man-eating tiger in South Vietnam while still in high school.

By the time I was 17, I was the subject of Ralph Edwards' *This Is Your Life* television show. By the time I was 21, I was named one of *America's Ten Outstanding Young Men* (TOYM) by the US Jaycees.

I haven't stopped since, but it never occurred to me to get to every country in the world until about 10-11 years ago – it's always about experiences not country-counting for me.

One evening while my wife and I were having dinner talking about some remote part of the planet, she asked, "Just curious – how many countries have you been to?" I told her I didn't have a clue.

So I looked up the State Department list of Independent States and counted – it was 140. When I told her, she asked, "How many countries are there?" "Depends how you count," I replied.

> "Obviously UN Member States, of which there are 191 (Montenegro added in 2006, South Sudan in 2011). Add the Vatican as a UN Observer State (Palestine added 2012). Add 2 countries that are clearly sovereign nations but the UN won't let them join: Taiwan and Somaliland (plus Kosovo since 2008). Forget colonies like Greenland and French Polynesia, and phony countries that are really colonies like Russia's Abkhazia or Morocco's Western Sahara. So my count is 194." (*Now in 2015, 198*: 193 UN, 2 UN Observers, 3 sovereign non-UN: Taiwan, Kosovo, Somaliland.)

She thought for a moment, then with a smile and her eyebrows raised, asked, "Why don't you try for them all?" At first it was a strange thought. I never went to a country just to *go* there but to *do* something cool and memorable. I told her I'd think about that.

Afterward, I started doing something I hadn't before. Whenever I led an expedition someplace, like to the CAR (Central African Republic), I began making it a point to explore a neighboring country like Chad or Cameroon. I'd go to find something interesting to experience and to see what made this place tick as a country.

My "Every Country" project was completed last year (2014) on a scientific pilgrimage to São Tomé-Principe (Principe is where Einstein became *Einstein* – see my Science in Africa).

What have you done over your life to gain the freedom and finances to pursue as much travel as you have?

Real high adventure didn't cost much when I was young – no fancy hotels in jungles. I saved up by giving tennis and judo lessons. In my college years I alternated semesters at UCLA and running a business in South Vietnam. There were no adventure travel companies in those days – to do something adventurous you had to figure it out yourself. Eventually I wrote a book, *The Adventurer's Guide*, where I told how I did something and how the reader could do it too.

There were chapters on *Climbing the Matterhorn, Living with Headhunters, Swimming the Hellespont, Hunting a Man-Eating Tiger*, and *Exploring Outer Mongolia*. It got me on a host of television shows like Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin. Merv made me his co-host for any adventure-themed show, when he'd have guests like Thor Heyerdahl or Jacques Cousteau.

It was this enormous publicity that enabled me to start my own adventure-expedition company, *Wheeler Expeditions*. I began with the first commercial expedition to the North Pole in 1978. It had never been done before. I've been to the North Pole now 21 times.

This went on for 25 years. Then in 2003, I launched a subscriber-based geopolitical website, *To The Point.* This gave me a purpose for going to countries I'd never been to before – I'd write about them, explaining their history, how they came to be, and in many cases, how they might cease to be.

I had a reputation for doing this, as I predicted the demise of the Soviet Union years before it happened. Many countries are artificial constructs. They never emerged organically out of history, but were either created by colonial powers such as Britain, Germany, or France – or they are a part of colonial empires of conquest within their own borders like the Soviet Union until we broke it apart.

So I bring a unique outlook on geopolitics that people are willing to pay for – and that justifies a lot of unique travel.

What was the first international trip you took and what do you remember most about it?

In 1958 before the Matterhorn, I and my family went to Moscow where I saw Stalin entombed with Lenin in Red Square. (Khrushchev had Stalin removed in 1961.) It was impossibly creepy.

I was only 14, yet I knew that these two men had murdered millions, that they were among the most evil men who had ever lived, that they were moral equivalents of Hitler. The reverential silence, the worship of evil, displayed by these Russians all around me as we slowly shuffled past their corpses was terrifying and mysterious.

When we came out again onto Red Square, I felt overwhelmed by a question: *Why would people worship evil?*

Why would they worship monsters as heroes, monsters who took away their freedom, who slaughtered and starved them, put them in concentration camps, caused them to live a life of fear?

It puzzles me to this day. Especially since the Russian kids I met in one of their schools were very friendly to us. An interaction with them profoundly affected me. When I made notes with a cheap Papermate pen, the kids couldn't believe their eyes. I asked our Intourist guide Valya why they

were so curious. She studied the pen, which to me was the most ordinary thing I could imagine, and said, "We do not have such things in Soviet Union."

I stared at her for a moment while her words registered. I had a few extra pens in my pocket and gave them to the kids. They were almost giddy with excitement, and I thought: "What kind of a country is it that can maintain an Iron Curtain and threaten the West with atom bombs, yet doesn't know how to make a ballpoint pen?"

The answer came to my mind as a revelation: “It’s a country that can be had.” 25 years later, that revelation would enable me to create what the press called The Reagan Doctrine.

Has there ever been a time when you considered abandoning your travel goal?

Twice. When I was 19, I started a business in South Vietnam exporting cinnamon to spice companies around the world. I kept it going until I managed to graduate from UCLA (in anthropology) and get back there – but it soon collapsed when the Viet Cong killed my Vietnamese partner and blew up our cinnamon groves. I ended up in Hawaii broke and found solace in reading Ayn Rand’s *Átlas Shrugged*.

(Don Parrish, who has a chapter in *Chasing 193*, is smiling now. I thought I was the only person on earth inspired by both Halliburton and Rand until Don was too. No wonder we’ve become good friends.)

Rand, and subsequently Aristotle turned me on to philosophy so much that I decided to get a doctorate in it. Thus I spent three paradisical years in Hawaii with a gorgeous Hawaiian maiden who also was a Randian, being in the graduate school of philosophy at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu, and having so much fun with fellow Randians driving the campus lefties crazy with our group *Students for Laissez Faire*. The rest of the world was a long ways away.

After I got my MA, I got a job offer to teach and get my Ph.D. at the University of Southern California in LA. I would take summers off to get into trouble somewhere in the world – all over Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific and elsewhere. One real highpoint was reaching a group of Aushiri Aucas in the Amazon – the ones who kill all the missionaries. It was a “first contact,” and memorably intense.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Aristotelian ethics and *The Adventurer’s Guide* at the same time. It was a wild intellectual ride. When I got my Ph.D. I knew I didn’t want to teach anymore. I wanted to be a professional adventurer.

On the book tour, attending a lecture I gave at the University of Las Vegas was the most extraordinary woman I’d ever met. Her name was Jacqueline. She was from the Alps of France, and she was the star show girl of the *Folies Bergère*. I moved to Vegas and launched my

expedition company with her.

Jacqueline and I lived with a cannibal tribe in New Guinea (the Wali-ali-fo, my second "first contact"), went to the North Pole, took elephants over the Alps via the actual pass (the Col du Clapier) used by Hannibal in 218 BC. The business was really taking off, we were planning our wedding, when we discovered that Jacqueline had breast cancer. She died in my arms three months later, on March 12, 1980.

I retreated from life not knowing if I wanted to live or not. I got a small apartment in Malibu to walk the beach and mourn. The one thing that kept me alive was sky-diving. Any problem in a jump has got to be solved instantly, so you'll find out quick if you want to die. When I solved problems in the air like a malfunction, I knew for sure I wanted to live.

On a North Pole expedition in April 1981, I set a Guinness world record for the "Northernmost Parachute Jump," the first freefall sky-dive onto the sea-ice at 90 North, which as Guinness states (1984 edition), "is a record that cannot be bettered after setting."

I had gotten to know Clint Eastwood via Merv; we ended up alone on an iceberg in Greenland during the filming of *Firefox*. I launched the original "Seven Summits" expedition (to climb the highest mountain in each of all seven continents) with Frank Wells (then VP of Warner Brothers). But by 1982, the grief became too much to bear and I gave up my expedition company.

Then a friend ended up in the Reagan White House, and my idea of how the Soviet Union could be had was revived. It dawned on me that a number of anti-Soviet insurgencies were emerging in various Soviet colonies – but neither my friend nor anyone else in the White House believed it. I had something to live for again.

I took off for six months talking my way into guerilla-held territory in Nicaragua with the Contras, Angola with UNITA, Mozambique with RENAMO, the TPLF in Ethiopia, and the Mujahaddin in Afghanistan.

When I came back, I showed my pictures of these freedom fighters to the White House. It was November 1983, and the people there credit that meeting as the birth of what the press was later to call The Reagan Doctrine, the strategy to rid the world of the Soviet Union. (We didn't call it that, however. We just called what we were doing "FTC" – you can figure out what we wanted to do with "The Commies.")

But I was still a mess personally – until I met a woman who saved me. Her name – her real name on her birth certificate – is Rebel Holiday. Rebel healed my crippled soul. I had found my life partner. We were married in St. Tropez with Congressman Charlie Wilson (of the Tom Hanks' movie *Charlie Wilson's War*) as my Best Man. There are pictures of our wedding in Charlie Wilson and Ronald Reagan's War.

I restarted my expedition business, while continuing forays into guerrilla territory and reporting back to the White House. I was myself again, thanks to Rebel.

What do you consider to be your two favorite travel experiences and why?

It's really hard to pick two. Blowing up the Soviet High Command at Bala Hissar in Ghazni, Afghanistan has got to be up there. The Guinness North Pole solo sky-dive, the Hannibal Expedition, any one of the three first contacts I've had with a tribe from the outside world.

(I've mentioned the first two, the Aucas in 1972 and the Wali-ali-fo in 1977. The third was with an uncontacted band of San Bushmen in the Kalahari of Botswana-Namibia. It affected us all very deeply. One of us, John Perrott, formed a charity to help the Bushmen people, SavetheSan.org.)

It's a long, lifetime list, and I've enjoyed them all. The one that means the most to me is my being the unofficial liaison between the Reagan White House and all the various Anti-Communist insurgencies that emerged in the 1980s mentioned above, plus the Hmong guerrillas in Laos, the KPNLF in Cambodia, and the Karen-ni in Burma.

I spent much of the 80s with these insurgencies as they fought to liberate their countries from Soviet imperialism. I also spent time with the all the democracy movements emerging in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union itself. It's why I'm credited in a number of histories of the Cold War as the originator of the Reagan Doctrine that was successful in breaking the Soviet Union apart like Humpty-Dumpty.

It's why the *Washington Post* dubbed me "The Indiana Jones of the Right" (April, 1986).

Now that's a series of experiences, and you want a story about a particular incident, so here's one. It took place in the exotic locale of Capitol Hill in Washington in October 1996. A Congressman I know, Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), insisted I attend a meeting with some Russians in town – the Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg and his entourage.

This was a time of Boris Yeltsin and good feelings with Russia, so after the meeting – it was the end of the day – Dana asks the Russians if they'd like to have a beer. They think that's a great idea, so we retire to the Irish Times pub on the other side of the Hill. After a pint or two of Guinness, Dana and the Deputy Mayor decide to have an arm wrestling match to see who really won the Cold War.

Too much Guinness – but this story is true, there were/are several witnesses (such as Ed Royce, current chairman of House Foreign Relations). The Deputy Mayor puts Dana down in a New York second. Holding his arm and looking very bewildered, Dana sees me and says, "Wheeler, defend the honor of your country!"

The Russians of course want to see another *Amerikanski* get his ass kicked and start calling, "Hey, *tovarich!*" – so I think, why not? The Deputy Mayor had blond hair, blue eyes, and a smirk. Okay. We set it up and I let him give me his shot – I didn't want to crush him like he did Dana, I just eased him down. Instantly, up went his left arm. Really? Okay… and down he went again. He wasn't really very strong.

But as I stood up to leave, thinking that was over, up stepped the Deputy Mayor's KGB bodyguard. He was huge, and wanted to dislocate my shoulder. Somehow, I don't know how to this day, I managed to beat him, both arms.

So weird story, which was forgotten until January 2000, when Dana and I were having lunch discussing what was going on in the world, and he asked about Russia. Suddenly, a man's picture in the newspaper I had seen that morning clicked. I asked him if he remembered the Russians we arm wrestled four years ago in the Irish Times. He finally did and asked so what? "You don't remember who the Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg was?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "Who cares? He was some Deputy Mayor." "Well, Dana, I just recognized his picture in the (Washington) Post today. He's been elected President of Russia. His name is Vladimir Putin."

Again, true story with Congressional witnesses.

What are the main things you seek to experience when you travel (culture, cities, nature, animals, adventure activities, etc.)?

The new. Someplace I've never been to before, to discover what's interesting about it. Or what if anything is important about it geopolitically, not only to write about it for *To The Point*, but also for the geopolitical briefings I give to people in Congress or international companies I consult for.

Looking back from when you started traveling to where you are now, in what ways, if any, has travel changed you?

Once change in particular comes to mind. It was late 1987 and I just got back from an extravaganza – Afghanistan with the Mujahaddin fighting the Soviets, an overland expedition from Beijing across Tibet to Kathmandu, Mozambique with the RENAMO anti-Soviet guerrillas, et al. I was sitting on a couch at home telling our four year-old Brandon about where I'd been, when he said barely above a whisper, "I missed you, Dad."

My life was different after those four words. I realized I could never again go off into the world without taking Brandon – and later his younger brother Jackson, while they were growing up – unless it was to a war zone.

Do you speak any foreign languages, and if so, what has been the most useful for you besides English?

Not a one. It's amazing how much communication is non-verbal. I spent a month in Afghanistan with a Mujahaddin commander named Qari Baba – he looked like a cross between Genghiz Khan and Buddha. He didn't speak a word of English and I didn't of Pushto. We had a fabulous time together and became fast friends.

What was the longest continuous trip you have ever taken, when was it and where all did you go?

That six months I first spent with a number of anti-Soviet guerrilla movements mentioned above.

What two countries have exceeded your expectations and which ones left you feeling underwhelmed, and why?

There are more of the former than the latter. Only two? *Rwanda*, certainly. I wrote about it in Gorillas, Savages, and Redemption (March 2011). I think Rwanda's leader, Paul Kagame, deserves the Nobel Peace Prize.

Another would be *Malta*. In The Siege of Malta (December 2009), I describe how it's where civilization emerged from the Stone Age, where the Knights of Malta saved the Christian West in 1565, and where that assault has begun anew. An extraordinary place.

Underwhelmed? Sadly, *South Sudan*. In the Newest African Farce (March 2011), I explain why the latest UN member state is unlikely to succeed. That's unfortunate, but the reality is, virtually the entire map of Africa needs to be redrawn.

Another would be *Nauru*. It's the most pathetic excuse for a country I know of. It's The Land of Fubar (October 2013).

When you travel, do you prefer to go with others or solo, and why?

It depends on who the others are! Of course, I'd rather travel with my wife or my sons. And with a number of friends with whom I've been exploring the world for decades. I don't tolerate whiners and complainers, though – everyone who travels with me knows I'll send them back home *immediamente* if they do that, so it happens rarely.

But taking people to remote places is a heavy responsibility. So it's a real luxury for me just to get lost in the world all by my lonesome, where I don't have to take care of anyone except myself.

What has been your most uncomfortable mode of transportation?

A captured Russian truck with blown shocks driving thousands of kilometers across the roadless African bush with the UNITA anti-Soviet guerrillas in the 80s.

What is the strangest thing you've seen/experienced while traveling?

NorkLand. Anyone who has ever been to North Korea understands why. It's beyond surreal. The Norks have drunk the kool-aid, it's Orwell's *1984* made real, where they really do love Big Brother. Most fully demented country on the planet. I've been all over it – even to their sacred mountain of Paekdu – three times. Never ever again.

What are the best and worst meals you have ever had traveling and where was it?

The best steak in the world is the nerve of an elephant's tusk. The first step in the recipe is to shoot an elephant. I shot mine near the Cambodian-Vietnam border. Extract the nerves from the tusks – it's like a New York stripper that comes to a point. Slice it into steaks, pan fry it over the campfire. Not even a porterhouse at Peter Luger's in Brooklyn comes close.

The most bizarre meal I've ever had was in Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown, in 1961. We were seated circling the usual round table enjoying normal dishes when waiters removed everything including the white tablecloth. In the middle of the table was a small hole about 2 inches in diameter. A spoon with a very long handle and very small bowl was placed beside each of us.

A waiter brought out a live monkey, crawled underneath the table and strapped it down so the top of his head poked through the hole. He then leaned over the table with a large sharp knife and sliced/pried off the top of the monkey's skull exposing its brain. The monkey must have been drugged or something as it didn't make a sound.

The waiter then poured boiling hot oil into the brains, everyone picked up their spoon, and dug in.

Out of the thousands of places you've stayed around the world, what have been your best and worst accommodations?

A Grand Suite at the Sacher Hotel in Vienna overlooking the Opera House is exquisite. A Dung-ri-la next to a Chinese Army garrison on the Tibetan Plateau isn't.

What is your favorite "off the beaten path" destination and why?

Tristan da Cunha. It's the people that make it so incredibly special. See Freedom Paradise Found (April 2013).

What were your most challenging countries to visit and why?

Any country with an active war zone that you walk right into is challenging. Crossing borders illegally with heavily armed insurgents fighting government soldiers trying to kill you makes any challenge visiting a normal country as a tourist exceedingly tame by comparison.

In Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Laos, Cambodia et al rebelling against the Soviets, I had a purpose in doing so. After that purpose was fulfilled, I've never had a desire to walk into another.

What travel accomplishments are you most proud of?

FTC… (what we called the Reagan Doctrine, remember?)

If you could travel back in time, which era and place would you go to and why?

1776, to Revolutionary America to meet the founders and creators of the most successful country in human history – and to ask their advice on how we can recreate the freedom they gave us, which has now been lost to such a tragic degree.

Can you describe any specific situation where you felt completely out of your comfort zone?

I'm sure there have been but none come to mind.

What are your three favorite cities in the world and why?

Perth, Singapore, and Munich. Perth for the Sail & Anchor Pub in Freemantle, Singapore for the snooker table at the Raffles, and Munich for the Hofbräuhaus. Mostly though, big cities are places to get out of and into the world.

What is the ideal amount of time you prefer to travel on each trip before you are ready to go home and take a break?

It depends on how long I can stand being away from Rebel if she's not with me. Even after over 30 years, more than a month away from her is a very long time. Also, Rebel's cooking is better than most any restaurant.

In your opinion, where are the most beautiful places on Earth?

The world is neither beautiful nor ugly, it just is. The beauty is inside us, in the incredible human capacity to experience the world as magical. A sunset in the ocean, the sun filtering through pine trees and lighting up a gurgling stream with sparkles, your wife's smile, the sound of your

children's laughter, we are surrounded by beautiful things and places.

That said, there are places of overwhelming awe. The most magnificent mountain scenery on earth is at Concordia in the Karakorums of northern Pakistan, the junction of the Godwen-Austen and Duke of Abruzzi glaciers forming the Baltoro glacier. You are surrounded by 7,000 and 8,000 meter peaks, including K2, the world's second highest mountain. To get there you pass by the Trango Towers, the world's highest rock spires.

The most beautiful scuba-diving I think is in Palau, the most beautiful island for me is La Digue in the Seychelles (although Norfolk Island comes close), the most beautiful city is Cape Town, the most beautiful sunset is the North Face of Mount Everest when the setting sun turns the whole Tibetan mountainside rose-red pink while the jet stream blows a plume of cloud off its peak.

If you had an unlimited budget and space and time were no object, what would your perfect travel day look like (for example: start your morning in Bora Bora; afternoon on a safari in Kenya; night in Australia, etc.)?

It's hard for me to imagine something that's purely fantasy, only something that's possible in reality.

If you could only recommend three countries to adventurous travelers for them to visit, which ones would that be and why?

Well, I'd first have to ask what kind of adventure rattles their cage and tailor three with that focus. How extreme, what skill level, what are they capable of? It's what you can *do* in a country that counts, not just going to a place on the map circumscribed by artificial lines called "borders."

Also, there are astounding places within countries but not the countries themselves. The island of Socotra is an absolute mind-blow, but the country it belongs to, Yemen, is currently (and very sadly) belly up. The same for the Tassili-n'Ajjer Plateau in southeast Algeria, or the Ténéré and the Lost City of Djado in Niger. The same for many other countries.

So, OK, three out of 193, that's the game. First, *America*. I thought I'd seen a lot of our country by the time my youngest son, Jackson, was 8 and we launched his Nifty Fifty project – for him to see and experience something cool and memorable in each of all 50 states (and for me to take him!).

Do this – of course with your kids if at all possible – and it will blow you away how much there is of natural grandeur, geology, history, opportunity for exploration and adventure, plus most of all, how wonderfully friendly Americans are just about everywhere you go.

Second, *New Zealand*. South Island is an absolute wonderland of every adventurous sport and activity you can imagine.

Third, *China.* The opportunities for exploration are almost bottomless. Unfortunately, the Chicoms have destroyed Tibet, which is now just a theme park for Chinese tourists. And climbing Everest now is just a traffic jam. But there are other giant mountains galore like Minya Konka, Amne Machin, and Muztagh Ata – almost 25,000 feet and you can ski/snowboard down it.

From the Guoliang Precipice Long Corridor to the Hani Rice Terraces to Wa headhunters on the untamed border with Burma (although they'd rather grow poppies, dance in their incredible Wood Drum Ceremony, and drink their *baijiu* moonshine – the best in China -- than hunt enemy heads now) to… well, you'll never get to the end of it.

Do you ever feel you have missed out on certain aspects of life being away from home and traveling so much?

I've been blessed in my life with luck enough to have a balance between home with my wife and family, and to have an adventurous life as well. I have yet to figure out why I'm so lucky to have such a supporting wife.

In your first edition of *Chasing 193*, the fellow who impressed me most with achieving such balance in his life is Robert Bonifas. It's that balance in life you want to strive for, not a single-minded obsession.

What advice would you give to others who would like to travel to every country?

The first and most important is: *Don't go to a country just to check it off the list*. Having been to a country just to say you've been there, just as a tick in the box, means nothing. *Nothing*. It's what you *did* there that counts, what you *experienced*, what you *learned*.

My advice is to go to those places that fascinate you, that call to you, that you want to make a part of your life. You have one life – that's it. One chance to make it special. Fill it up with memories. Not with ticks on a checklist. When your grandkids ask you about a country, you never want to say, "Well, uh, I was there for just a little while and looked around…" You want to be able to light up and say, "Oh, wow, while I was there I did the coolest thing, here's the story…"

I'd like to suggest that before you commit to this every-country goal, you really drill deep and ask yourself *Why?* What do you actually, truly, meaningfully-to-you intend to accomplish? And of equal importance, what would you give up? Would you, say, divorce your wife, abandon your family?

There are a lot of things in life far more important than traveling to another country. I've been ridiculously lucky to have a wife and life-partner who lets me go off into the blue yonder while she works on the business she loves. (Yes, she does go with me somewhere adventurous whenever she can.) I've also been so very lucky to take my boys with me on expeditions when they were growing up – or else I'd have stayed home.

Do your best to create your own luck, to forge your own life, but be very sure of your priorities.

For someone who has been almost everywhere, what still gets you excited about packing your bags again?

There's no everywhere, not even close. There's an old saying, "The more I know the less I know" – i.e., the more you know regarding any subject, the more you realize how much more there is to learn. It's the same with travel – the more of the world you see, the less you see.

That is, the more of the world you see, the bigger it expands in your mind. There's a tiny speck in the Pacific called Niue. Go there and explore it – it's now a lot bigger for you than a tiny speck on the map. You'll never get to the end of all the history, the beauty, the wonder, the magic of what there is to experience on our Earth. There will always be people to befriend and learn from.

The bottom line is: if you have an adventurous attitude toward life, you'll always be excited about packing your bags and being off to experience more magic in the world.

Looking ahead, what travel plans and goals are you still pursuing, and what is on your "Bucket List"?

I don't have a Bucket List. What would you do if you complete it? Kick the bucket? No, you need a list so long you'll never get to the end of it. There will always be another adventure to add to your life.

If you had just one travel story to share with someone, what would it be?

The Indian Ambassador to the US once had a private luncheon at his residence in Washington for the Dalai Lama to which I was invited. Sitting next to him, I said, "Your Holiness, I must tell you a story…" Here is that story.

In 1987, I drove across the *Changtang* plateau of Tibet north to south. When we reached *Kham*, I began looking for *Khampas*.

(As the Dalai Lama well knew, the Khampas are the nomad warriors of Tibet. The CIA sponsored a rebellion by the Khampas against the Chicom seizure of Tibet in the late 50s-early 60s, led by legendary agent Tony Poe – who during the 80s would become my dear friend. The Chinese are terrified of the Khampas to this day.)

I spotted four riders trotting along a high ridge. I told our Chinese driver to stop the jeep, got out, told those with me to stay here, I'll be back. When the Chinese driver saw the Khampas, he freaked… *"No, no! Stop! They will kill you! Stop!"* he yelled in panic. I told him to calm down, just stay here. I began walking up to the ridge where the riders had by now halted.

As I approached them, they had turned their horses towards me in a row. They looked straight out of a movie, long black hair interwoven with the Khampa red silk topknot, long mustaches, wearing knives, swords, pistols, muskets, and cartridge-filled bandoliers across their chests, the horses blowing steam out of their nostrils. They looked like they could kill me without hesitation.

> “I walked right up to them, put my hand in my vest pocket, took out a picture of you, Your Holiness, and handed it to one of the men. I took out another, another, and another, so each had a picture of you. Instantly they jumped off their horses. They were transformed. Before they were stern and wary, now they were all smiles, touching the picture of you to their foreheads. They didn’t know who I was or where I was from. All they knew was that I was their friend.
>
> “I had given each of them the most valuable thing it was possible for them to possess – a picture of you, which, as you know, the Chinese issue a death sentence for any Tibetan having one. They crowded around me, put their hands on my shoulders and pushed down – they wanted me to sit and have a cup of yak butter tea. I looked far below to the jeep and waved to my friends to come. They did – the Chinese driver stayed of course – and we proceeded to enjoy the most memorable cup of tea we’d ever had with these wild Khampa warriors. When we finished, one of them unwrapped his red topknot from his head and presented it to me in gratitude.”

The Dalai Lama was impressed at this. “Oh, very high honor from Khampas,” he said. “The honor was mine, Your Holiness,” I replied, “in my being able to give them your picture.” Here we are after I told him that story:

And here are a few more photos:

JW with guide Alfons Franzen Matterhorn Summit September 15, 1958

JW with KPNLF guerrillas Cambodia 1984

JW with son Brandon age 5 – Serengeti 1988

JW with son Jackson age 9 – North Pole 2003

JW with Rebel and Charlie Wilson

JW and friend – Virunga Mountains, Rwanda 2012

Flag Jump, Perris Valley CA - JW on the right