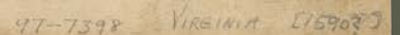


Quarterly



Africa's Pole of Inaccessibility

A Journey to the Heart of Nowhere



*British explorer **Chris Brown** shares the tale—with a pinch of classic British droll humor—of his exceedingly mad expedition into one of the most dangerous places on the planet to claim a unique geographical waypoint. Survival was not in the top-ten certainties.*

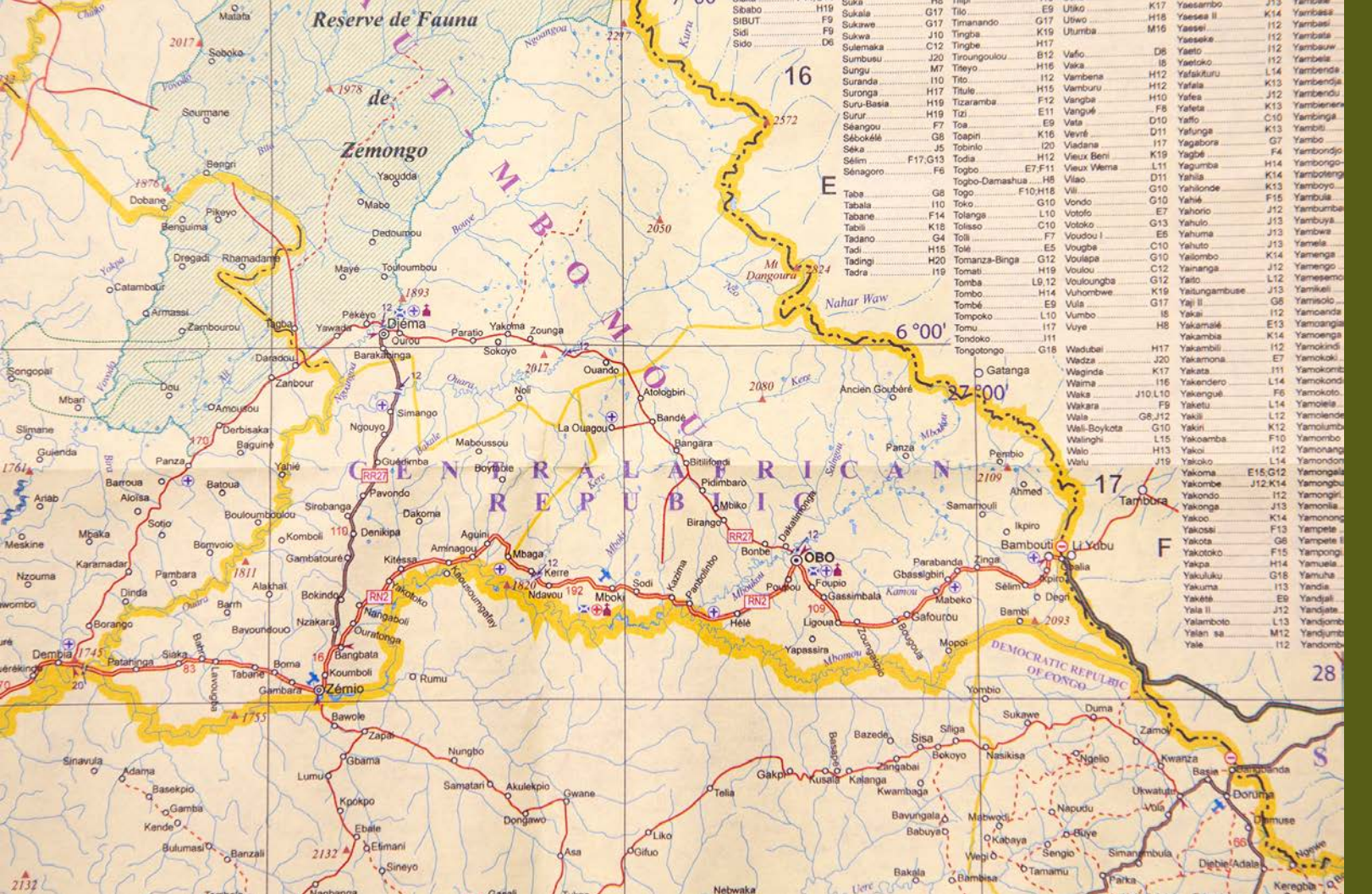
*Images by **Cat Vinton***

Deep in the southeastern corner of the Central African Republic (CAR), a little-known geographical Easter egg beckons the adventurous: the African Pole of Inaccessibility. This specific location, first calculated by geographers Garcia-Castellanos and Lombardo (see sidebar) lies at latitude 5.65°N and longitude 26.17°E, a staggering 1,814 kilometres (1,127 miles) from the nearest coastline. At an elevation of 640 meters and in the middle of nearly impenetrable triple-canopy rainforest, it is an epitome of remoteness. Yet, its isolation isn't just geographical; it's fire-walled by an environment fraught with extreme danger.

The entire region surrounding the African Pole of Inaccessibility is a paragon of instability. Governments worldwide uniformly advise against travel to anywhere in CAR, citing armed bandit patrols roaming the country and setting up roadblocks, emboldened by a weak and corrupt police force. Reports of violence, looting, and kidnappings—including those of aid

THE POLES OF INACCESSIBILITY ARE THE LOCATIONS ON EARTH FARTEST AWAY FROM THE OCEAN, OR, IN THE CASE OF THE OCEANIC POLE OF INACCESSIBILITY AND THE NORTHERN POLE OF INACCESSIBILITY, FROM LAND. DANIEL GARCIA-CASTELLANOS AND UMBERTO LOMBARDO ARE GEOGRAPHICAL SCHOLARS WHO DEVELOPED AN ALGORITHM THAT ALLOWED THEM TO CALCULATE THE POLES OF INACCESSIBILITY FOR EACH CONTINENT PLUS TWO OCEANIC POLES (SEE PAGE 49); THEY PUBLISHED THEIR WORK IN THE *SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL*, VOLUME 123, ISSUE 3 (SEPTEMBER 2007).

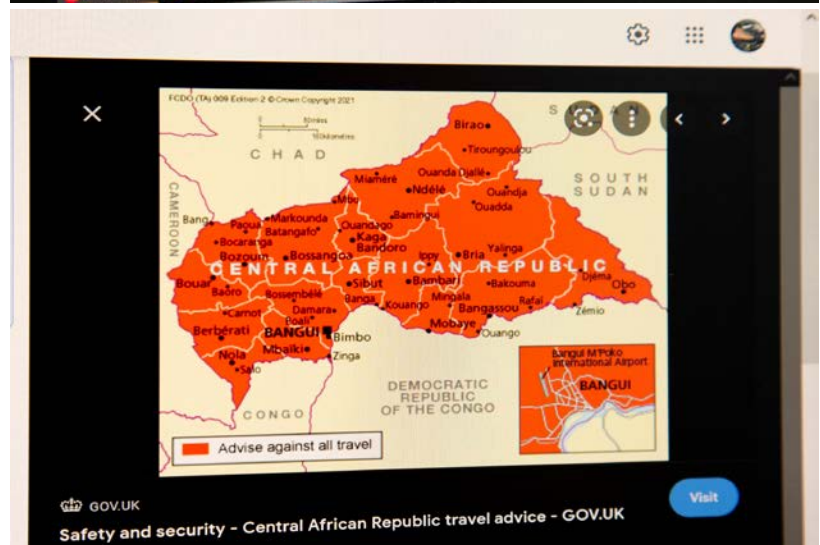
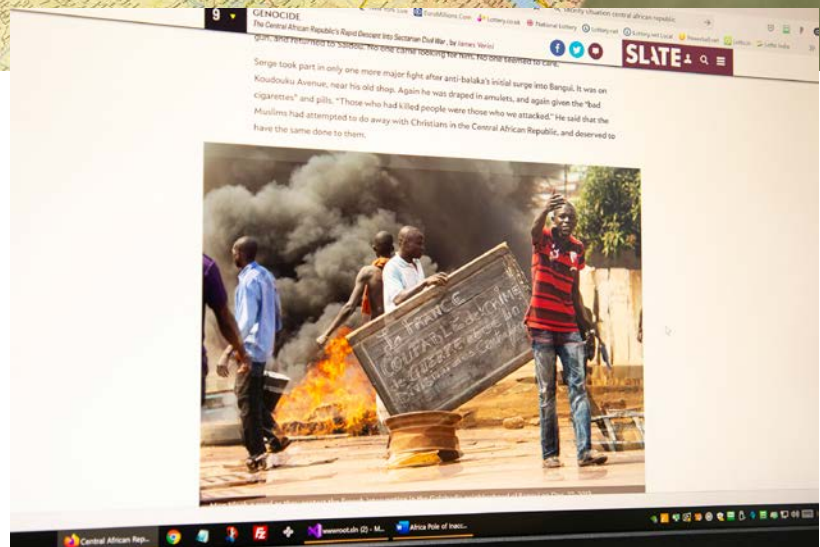
LEFT: THE AFRICAN POLE OF INACCESSIBILITY LIES IN THE CENTER OF A DENSE WILDERNESS OF TRIPLE-CANOPY RAINFOREST WITH FEW SETTLEMENTS AND—AT THE TIME OF THIS EXPEDITION—MORE THAN A FEW POACHERS, REBEL MILITIAS, BANDITS, AND SHADOWY MERCENARY GROUPS. ABOVE: GOOGLE EARTH IMAGE.



workers and government officials—have become grimly routine. Poachers, rebel militias, and shadowy mercenary groups (we all became familiar with the Wagner Group at the beginning of the Ukraine invasion) further haunt the lawless borders near South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

On top of all this, a host of health risks—from Zika virus and dengue fever to Ebola and polio—makes CAR one of the most dangerous destinations on the planet.

It's this forbidding reputation that left the African Pole of Inaccessibility, well, inaccessible. But as an adventurer and explorer, the challenge was irresistible. How could I overcome these serious dangers and become the first recorded person to visit the pole? Apart from being a requirement in my quest to be the first person to visit all of the planet's Poles of Inaccessibility, it would give me an edge over those other mad explorers with the same aim.



FROM NAÏVE OPTIMISM TO STARK REALITY

At a glance, the plan seemed straightforward enough. I'd fly to Bangui, CAR's capital, rent a vehicle, and drive the RN2 highway to Obo, the nearest town to the pole. From there, I'd rely on Google Maps to guide me down a jungle track before setting off on foot. Perhaps with a little local assistance, I'd reach the pole by mid-afternoon.

It didn't take long for this bubble of optimism to burst. Obo is over 1,200 kilometres from Bangui, and the so-called "highway" is little more than a ribbon of potholed dirt. Banditry, roadblocks, and lawlessness would turn the journey into a suicide mission. Apparently the most likely outcome would see me being kidnapped before I'd even left the capital, then held in a wooden cage for ransom. If that wasn't forthcoming, I'd be sold to ISIS for their political aims. Nice.

Furthermore, I discovered that Obo lacked even the most rudimentary accommodation for travelers, let

alone anything resembling safety for a Westerner. As a red-headed northern European, there was no way I'd avoid attracting attention or pass as a local.

Clearly, I needed a new plan—and a personal security detail with intimate local knowledge.

SEARCHING FOR ALLIES

Hiring security personnel for a journey into CAR turned out to be its own labyrinthine ordeal. Most private security firms wouldn't touch the region with a ten-foot pole. Even hardened ex-SAS operators politely declined, citing the lack of reliable intelligence on the ground. "You need someone with experience of African operations," I was told.

Bearing that in mind, I turned to a group of South African mercenaries—as one does—but their response was equally sobering: "Too dangerous."

The African Pole of Inaccessibility was starting to feel truly inaccessible. Then, a stroke of luck came my way.



Infrastructure in the Central African Republic is rare. The main highway to Obo is a dirt track, which in the rainy season is often impassable.

I reached out to Global Rescue, an organization I’d contracted with for emergency evacuation planning during previous expeditions. If you have a medical or security emergency, they will come and get you. So, my thinking went a bit like this: if I’m at the African Pole of Inaccessibility and I break my leg, they must have a way to come and rescue me. Thus, in theory, they could take me with them to rescue the hypothetical ‘me.’

I called their helpline and got an unexpected reply from the guy (let’s call him Barney) on the other end: “You’re joking, right? Who is this?”

Turns out I’d hit the jackpot.

Barney was no stranger to CAR. Ex-special forces, he’d been part of an international operation to neutralize the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) who operated on the border of CAR and the DRC. The LRA was a particularly evil bunch who would invade villages, kill the men, rape the women, and kidnap the young to be child soldiers.

And you guessed it: Barney and his operation had been stationed in Obo. Now we were getting somewhere.

His expertise and regional knowledge were a lifeline. Together, we devised a bold plan: fly to Bangui, charter a fixed-wing aircraft to Obo, and from there, use a helicopter to get within striking distance of the pole. By minimizing ground travel, we’d reduce the risk of run-ins with bandits or rebels. It was audacious but achievable.

OBSTACLES AND WORKAROUNDS

The plan was solid, but CAR had other ideas. Permission for any flight over its territory requires government approval, and navigating the bureaucratic maze was slow and costly. A key breakthrough came when one of Barney’s contacts introduced me to Jonas, special advisor to the president and responsible for inward investment.

Jonas not only secured the necessary flight permits but also arranged for a group of FACA (Forces Armées Centrafricaines) soldiers to accompany us. Their presence was both practical and symbolic: the fledgling democratic government wanted to ensure our safety to showcase CAR as being open to investment and exploration.

The logistics continued to evolve. Our original plan to stage helicopter fuel in South Sudan collapsed when the fuel dump was blown up, literally, in an armed insurgency by the National Salvation Front. The workaround? A six-week journey to



The team flying from Bangui to Obo, CAR; “Bam-Bam,” Jonas, Chris, and “Barney” (Cat Vinton behind the camera).

transport fuel overland along the RN2—remember, this was the road along which I’d planned my jaunty road trip in a hire car.

THE FINAL PUSH

After another year of planning, problem-solving, and the intervention of COVID-19, the mission finally launched. Our team—Barney, his ex-SF buddy (let’s call him Bam-Bam), photographer Cat Vinton, and me—flew from London to Bangui via a patchwork of flights through Brussels, Douala, and Kigali.

Being December 2021, much of the world was still in the grip of the second wave of COVID-19, so we had to wear masks on the flights. You had to pass an ironic smile at this knowing the significantly more tangible dangers we were heading into.

If you’ve ever arrived into a small African airport, you’ll know how chaotic it can be. Bangui, during COVID, was like that on steroids. Sweat, dirt, coughs, and money seemed to change hands at every juncture. I’m still not 100% sure what happened, other than our

passports disappearing for an anxious 50 minutes, but we made it through with relevant paperwork in hand.

Outside the airport we were met by Jonas and taken to a safe refuge ‘hotel’ outside of the UN-protected airport zone.

The next morning, we boarded our chartered plane for the dirt airstrip at Obo, where we were greeted by our FACA security team. Part of the deal was that we’d take Jonas with us so he could do some electioneering in Obo. True to his job function, he spent a large part of the flight trying to elicit inward investment. This included him pointing down to an area of jungle under which he said was a valuable seam of diamonds—did I know anyone who would like to exploit it?

At this point I took a moment to reflect on why we undertake these crazy expeditions. I’m on a privately chartered prop-job in the darkest heart of Africa with two ex-special forces and a friend of the president who’s trying to sell me a diamond mine. Doesn’t happen every day. Completely mad. For me the answer is simple: these expeditions are the ultimate



ABOVE: A FACA (Forces Armées Centrafricaines) security detail met the team in Obo. TOP: a classic Toyota “Technical” with a bed-mounted 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun. CENTER: “Barney” discussing the pole attempt with Jonas, who also took the opportunity to campaign for the president in the upcoming CAR elections. LEFT: In remote Obo, where visitors (who are not bandits or militia) are rare, the expedition drew a crowd of boys and men.



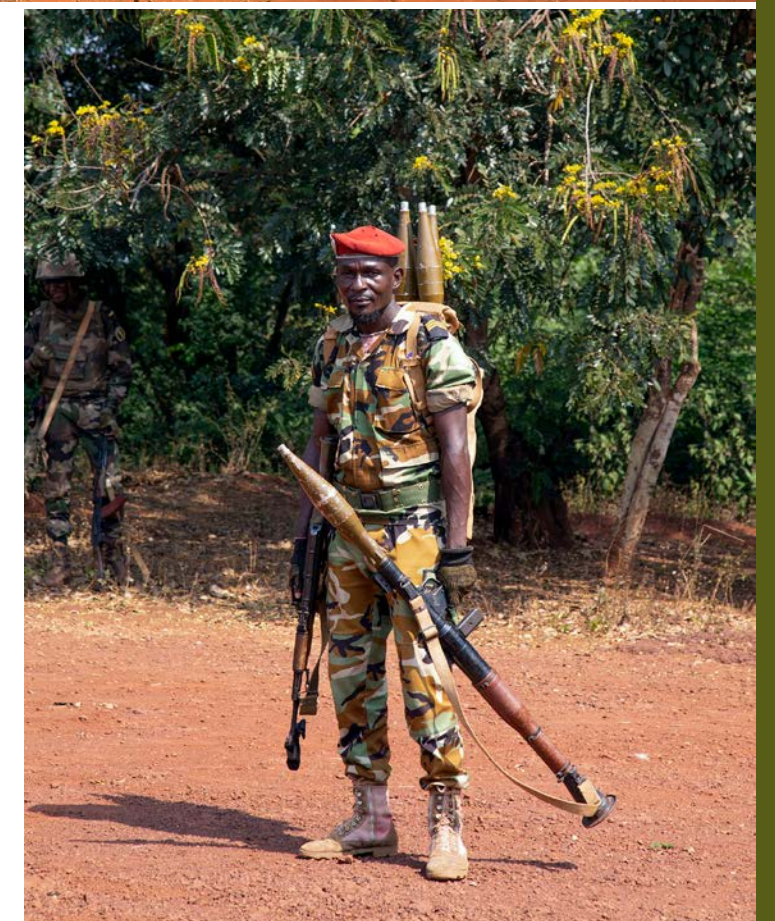
tests of human endurance and resourcefulness. Not to mention sheer determination. Also truthfully? I love every bit of it.

We were met at the Obo landing strip by a contingent of FACA with several armed vehicles, including pick-ups with mounted machine guns—and a light tank.

The helicopter, staged from Kenya via Uganda, had arrived ahead of us. We met the pilots and prepared for the flight. During discussions I overheard one of those sentences that makes sense, but which you never thought you’d hear in the course of your normal life: “No RPGs on the heli.” I turned round to see a guy slowly walking away in disappointment with his rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Two flights ferried our team closer to the pole. Barney had identified four potential landing spots where there were small breaks in the canopy. These had been labelled England, Scotland, Wales, and, bizarrely, Norway. Nobody knew which one we’d be landing at, including myself, to minimise the chances of an ambush. Attention to detail, it matters.

The plan was that Bam-Bam and the FACA guys would go out on the first flight, secure the landing spot, then



Sorry, “no RPGs on the heli.”



we'd follow on a second flight. We'd then bash through the jungle to the pole, and exit from a different landing spot. Again, this minimises the chances of being ambushed by not retracing our steps.

INTO THE WILD

The final leg was grueling. From the landing spot, we hacked through dense rainforest under the oppressive heat and humidity of the canopy, with the helicopter hovering out of small-arms range as a precaution. Every step was a slog, the air thick and unmoving, and time was of the essence. Fuel limits and a Bangui nighttime curfew imposed a strict schedule.

Though the trek covered just 500 meters, it felt like miles. By the time we reached the pole, we were drenched in sweat and aching. We hadn't used machetes—which would be normal for breaking through the brush—because we needed to minimise the noise we were making. Similarly, directions and instructions were made by hand signal.

I've been asked by many people how I felt when we eventually arrived at the African Pole of Inaccessibility. Was I euphoric? Relieved? Tranquil? The truth is that none of those emotions really prevailed. As all explorers will attest, whilst on the mission, it is the process that's forefront of your mind. What are you doing next? When do we need to do it? When do we need to do it by?



BOTTOM LEFT – VIDEO: Progress through the triple-canopy rainforest was slow-going on the way to the Pole. Click on image to watch video.

FROM UPPER LEFT, CLOCKWISE: The rainforest stretches for thousands of square kilometers over central Africa; at the landing zone on the way in. Success in reaching the Africa Pole of Inaccessibility—a handmade sign, and the Central African Republic flag.

In the end, we spent roughly 20 minutes at the site, taking soil samples, snapping photos, and recording the fact that we'd reached this remote point. Underneath the canopy, GPS signals were faint, but we pinned down the coordinates as best we could.

The return journey turned out to be slightly uphill and even more demanding, but the sight of the helicopter waiting at the extraction point was a welcome relief.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Retracing our steps back to Obo, Bangui, and eventually home, the enormity of what we'd achieved began to sink in. The African Pole of Inaccessibility wasn't just a destination—against all odds we had passed the test of endurance, resourcefulness, and determination, overcoming logistical nightmares,

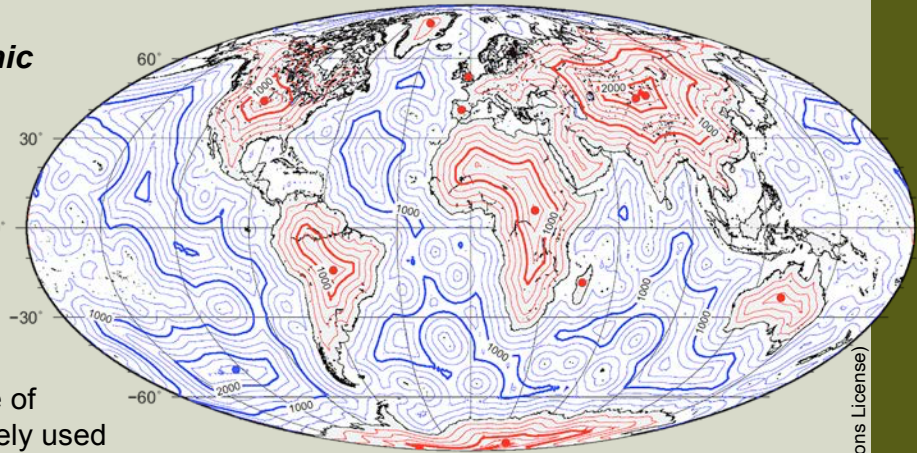
navigating dangerous terrain, and making history as the first to stand at Africa's remotest point.

CAR had left its mark on us. The Pole of Inaccessibility may be the heart of nowhere, but for our team, it became the centre of an unforgettable adventure. 🧭



Who first came up with the geographic concept of a pole of inaccessibility?

According to [this web page](#) from the Department of Geography at UC Santa Barbara, "The concept was first introduced by Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1920) to distinguish between the North Pole and the most difficult-to-reach place in the Arctic [the Northern Pole of Inaccessibility]. Thereafter, it has been widely used to refer to the place in Antarctica furthest from the sea [the Southern Pole of Inaccessibility]."



What are the eight Poles of Inaccessibility?

1. North America (SW South Dakota)
2. South America (Brazil)
3. Africa (Central African Republic)
4. Eurasia (northwestern China)
5. Australia (northwest of Alice Springs)
6. Antarctica
7. Northern (Arctic Ocean icepack)
8. Oceanic (aka "Point Nemo," South Pacific)

How many other people are attempting to visit every pole?

Researching the idea after my Everest dinner party (see bio, page 6), I discovered nobody seemed to have achieved that target yet. Several were trying, such as Hugo and Ross Turner (known as the Turner Twins in the adventurer community) and Jim McNeill. Since then, I've had letters and emails from at least five other explorers and adventurers who say they are attempting the same feat, but how seriously they are taking it I'm not too sure.

How do you know you were the first to reach the Africa Pole of Inaccessibility?

In truth, of course, we can't be 100% sure. What I can say is that there is no record of anyone even attempting to get to this point, let alone having achieved it. There are no resources, minerals, or crops at the African Pole of Inaccessibility, so there is no reason to go there. To get to the pole from the nearest settlement, if you could keep up our fast rate of progress for 24 hours with no rest, it would take more than eight days. And, it is not on the way to anywhere else. If you did arrive at the pole from the nearest settlement, it

What is the record thus far for your "Eight Poles Project"?

1. North America—2019
2. Africa—2021 (first)
3. Antarctica—2021/22 (failed attempt)
4. Australia—2022
5. Antarctica—2023
6. South America—2023
7. Point Nemo (Oceanic)—2024 (first)
8. Northern (Arctic)—planned 2025
9. Eurasian—TBD

would then take you another three or four weeks to get to the 'other side,' thus it is highly unlikely anyone would be "just going that way."

The African Pole was one I'd targeted from the beginning as the pole to which no one had been. The same was being said about the Northern Pole, but then a Russian researcher, Dmitry Shparo, claimed to have skied through that point one night in 1986, but provided no evidence.



