FOLLOWING IN STANLEY'S FOOTSTEPS

In advance of the Dulverton Exmoor Literary Festival this November, Rachel Mead heads to our national park to meet one of the best-selling authors who will be taking to the stage. Join her as she walks and talks with STANLEY JOHNSON

PHOTOGRAPHY: Graham Trott

As photographer Graham and I loaded up my 4x4 with tripods, reflector and soft box lighting it was fair to say that we were intrigued by what our trip to a remote farm on Somerset's Exmoor hills was going to bring. After all, it is not every day that one gets invited to a former prime minister's childhood home, and it's certainly not every day that one has the opportunity to meet the patriarch of such a renowned family. Stanley and I had agreed, prior to our meeting, that the interview would not be focusing on 'political matters' and that our conversation would focus on his latest book, *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo* and his 'Somerset life'. And so it was, at Stanley's request, that we threw our wellingtons in the boot and jostled and bumped our way to Nethercote Farm.

I'm not being disrespectful when I say 'bumped' – in fact even Stanley's email invitation alluded to the fact that we'd be in for a spot of off-roading: 'The gate on the bridge may be closed. If so please shut after you and bump up the track for one and a half miles, then cross second bridge and drive through the first farmyard to the next after a second gate. Bring wellingtons in case it's wet.' My 4x4 certainly relished the swerving of potholes, and as we oohed and aahed at the crystal clear waters of the River Exe sleepily meandering beside the track, we arrived at the medieval Johnson farmstead; a home which is listed in the Domesday Book and one that, if I'm being truly honest, was well, reassuringly 'normal'.

To be even more honest, we did think that we had arrived at the wrong place. There was a battered old 1972 series Land Rover truck cab parked beside a huge pile of firewood and the entire settlement was, even by Exmoor's standards, surprisingly deserted. As we wandered around trying to make ourselves unobtrusively conspicuous – as you do when you feel you may be trespassing – the silence was reassuringly broken as Stanley suddenly emerged from his porch, arms outstretched in warm welcome. 'You've made it. Well done, well done, jolly wonderful to see you. I thought we'd go for a drive? I'll take you out to my favourite view and then we'll come back for a cup of tea!'

And that is how Graham and I found ourselves bundled beside Stanley in a 50-year-old Land Rover with no windows and a rusty can of WD40 rolling around in the footwell...

At 83 years of age, it's apparent that Stanley has lived and continues to live a very full life. There isn't any hint of retirement in the air as the former MEP and vice chairman of the European Parliament's Environment Committee continues his environmental work as president of the Gorilla Organisation, adviser to the World Coastal Forum, whilst also fulfilling his duties as chairman of the Global Education Advisory Board. How he has managed to follow in Marco Polo's footsteps and author the accompanying book whilst filming a forthcoming documentary shot on location on the Silk Road is absolutely remarkable, all whilst of course, tending to his 628-acre farm on Exmoor.

With Graham hopping in and out of the cab to open and close gates as we jolt across the fields, Stanley is unguardedly chatting away about the farm. He has a real warmth and openness about his manner, only pausing mid-conversation to lower his voice to a whisper as he points to the herd of deer which we have inadvertently disturbed as we trundled over the tufty tussocks, 'We heard the cuckoo too this morning, and oh just look – there must be about 20 deer there!' Stanley unlocks his smartphone, 'I have my telephoto lens here!' he chuckles, as he snaps a few shots to share on his Instagram feed later on. 'We have so much wildlife here, the Butterfly Conservation team are coming later this week to do a head count because the rare high brown fritillary has been spotted!' As we quietly sit and watch the deer make their way down the coombe, Stanley tells us how most of his days at the farm begin with a wild swim in the river, 'and then we must make sure we have enough wood to burn. That's a priority of life on Exmoor, check all those teeth on the chainsaw are neatly sharpened and then get started!'





PHOTO WITH THANKS TO STANLEY JOHNSON

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After driving up and through a few more fields, Stanley brings the Land Rover to a stop in the field named 'Bankies' where we are surrounded by a friendly flock of sheep that are owned by one of his 'graziers'. We begin our walk and Stanley tells us how we are now 1,220ft above sea level and as we wander through 'Three Corner Field' and on to 'Brakes Field', a viviparous lizard runs across my boot. 'Our farm certainly has a high rating when biodiversity is concerned. Our coombe is in the area with the last recorded sighting of a wild cat too!' he laughs.

It doesn't take long before we are overlooking the most incredible unbroken view and if you had binoculars you'd also be able to zoom in on the Exmoor ponies across the valley. 'Those are owned by Mrs Lindsay Mitchell, they are a registered herd and we've agreed they can stay on my land until the last one dies. And if you look out over there you can see where we are busy planting over 77,000 native trees. With thanks to the interest of Forestry England we're creating a woodland which will absorb a lot of carbon. This is the heart of the moor and its one of my favourite spots.'

We're overlooking Winsford Hill, which is actually a touch higher than the Johnsons' farm, 'and as you look around you can see we're in a cradle and you can hear the River Exe running down below. What you're experiencing here is the very warp and woof of Exmoor.'

Stanley moved to the farm at the age of ten. 'My earliest memory is when my parents brought me here in the summer of 1951, they'd been down to see my sports day at prep school [near Tiverton] and whilst they were down in the West Country we all drove over and walked to this very spot. I was amazed by the steepness of the hills. When I think back to my childhood, I remember those important times of the farming calendar; lambing during the Easter holidays, haymaking during the summer, and then of course the bad winter of 62/63 when we were digging sheep out of the snow drifts. Farming is a way of life and even though the graziers on this land have been on Exmoor longer than I have, I do have pretty strong Exmoor roots. My mother was a 'Williams' and her great, great grandfather, Sir George Williams, was born on the moor near Dulverton. He married a wholesale draper's daughter, moved to London, and founded the YMCA. Sir George Williams is buried at Dulverton Church; the engraving on the headstone says 'Also, his wife', as a child, I always wondered why his wife was named 'Also'!'

As we turn and retrace our steps, our conversation turns to Marco Polo, and how Stanley's book launch and planned documentary will coincide with the 700th >



anniversary of the Venetian merchant and explorer's death. Stanley had first attempted to retrace his steps back in 1961, completing 5,000 km with travel companions, British explorer, Tim Severin and novelist and travel writer, Michael de Larrabeiti before failing to secure the correct visas for onward travel. Fast-forward 62 years and Stanley completed the final 3,000km of the journey into China, with his son, Max. 'As I look at my ninth decade, finishing the Marco Polo trip has been particularly significant. I'm an environmentalist and travelling through China has also been an excuse for me to have a close relationship with the Chinese authorities. Seeing how China has bought into the whole environmental debate was an absolute revelation. Take their air pollution; it used to be massive, and now with the take up on electric vehicles the air quality in their cities is extremely improved. The trip was extraordinarily interesting; both professionally and as a writer.'

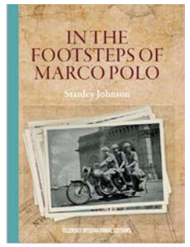
In the Footsteps of Marco Polo is written in two parts, the latter of which tracks Stanley and Max as they visit China's far-flung western provinces, Xinjiang, Ganzu, Ninxia and Inner Mongolia where they even travelled to Xanadu. 'Reaching Xanadu, now known as Changdu, was such a high point for me, and of course, I recited Samuel Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* to all and sundry. I know the poem by heart. I had learnt it at prep school and can still remember it word-for-word 70 years later. Written on Exmoor, though his genius was interrupted by the man from Porlock!'

It's time to head back to the farmhouse for a cup of tea, so we all climb back into Land Rover and make our descent down through the fields. I enquire after the family. 'I'm tremendously proud to be the father of a former prime minister. Not every chap lives long enough to see their son or daughter become PM. I've been particularly lucky having my first family quite young and have been steadily overtaken by all of my children. All parents should welcome the chance of being lapped by their children in the great velodrome of life and I've been lapped successfully by all six of mine.'

I suggest the grandchildren must love spending their holidays roaming the fields at Nethercote. 'Yes, we throw the grandchildren in the back of this vehicle, though you never have as many children at the end as you began with! Then we all go off on a quest to find them again.' Cheerily laughing at the anecdote, Stanley then points out the brand-new gate which we are approaching at a steep downwards gradient. 'It looks surprisingly new because my brakes failed me a couple of weeks ago!' Graham and I look at one another and laugh nervously. 'It was all extremely dramatic as I careered through the old gate splintering it into pieces! Thankfully, all was well as I could veer off left to bring the vehicle to a stop.' I can't wait for that cup of tea. ●

To purchase the book send an email to sales@telenskyeditions.co.uk

STANLEY JOHNSON ON TOUR



The Dulverton Exmoor Literary Festival is taking place on November 16 and 17 and Stanley will be interviewed by travel editor Miranda Taylor on the Sunday afternoon. Expect a lively conversation as he recounts tales from his travels whilst giving insights into the writing of his latest book, *In the footsteps of Marco Polo.* Box office tickets on sale from Monday September 23 via: ***visitdulverton.com/dulverton-exmoor-literary-festival***

