



The thrill of the chill

Young explorer and extreme adventurer, ice swimmer, sun-bleached surfer, Big Bay lifeguard and maritime captain in the making, 19-year-old Henko Roukema of Durbanville says life is all about leaving your comfort zone behind. By Nelia Vivier.

Henko Roukema is asthmatic and cold air is his trigger. Furthermore, during his recent three-week adventure in the Canadian Arctic with Mike Horn, the South African-born adventurer widely acknowledged as the premier explorer of our era, our young adventurer also had to conquer his fear of heights.

Add living to tell the tale of a rockfall while descending a sheer rock face above the freezing sea water, during this Arctic Ocean Expedition in Nunavut, Canada and the Baffin Bay area just west of Greenland, and you get an inkling of the youngster's innate

belief "that we are all capable of so much more than what we think we can do!"

"I knew going to the Arctic was going to be a physical challenge," he explains. "However, being on controlled medication helped so that the extreme conditions we were exposed to during the expedition did not pose a problem at all.

"I must admit that before the selection camp (which included a 30-hour, Alpine raid trekking 90 km through the Swiss Alps and climbing heights totalling 6 000 m), I was a complete novice when it came to Big Wall climbing, as it's called, and definitely way out of my comfort zone during the rock-climbing challenge in Switzerland.

"I decided there and then to face my fears and went for several rock-climbing and ascending lessons on Table Mountain before leaving for Nunavut. In the end, living (and literally sleeping) in the vertical world of Big Wall climbing, was one the most extreme things I have ever done in my life and a certain highlight of the expedition. What I've realised from the rockfall incident is that sticking to safety precautions and wearing the correct gear is crucial in the vertical world.

His main sport as an endurance athlete

is open-water swimming. "The further the distance, the more I like it!" he writes on Mike's website. "My favourite ocean swim, the 7.5 km 'escape' from Robben Island across Table Bay to Big Bay beach, is considered by experts to be the world's most extreme long-distance cold water ocean swim. It is a big mental and physical challenge as the water is very cold, there are strong currents, you don't see land for miles, and all kinds of creatures join you in the water."

He has completed this swim four times now, in an attempt to raise money for children with cerebral palsy, physical disabilities and other barriers, aiding charities being not only a defining feature of the 'ice-mile' swimming community, but also of Henko personally and that of Mike Horn's projects.

He is also the youngest to compete the 1 mile (1,6 km) Speedo Africa Ice-swimming event, held at Nuwedam in Fraserburg, in the



Northern Cape, that made global headlines this year, when the swimmers became the biggest group of athletes participating at the same time in freezing water temperatures, of 5 °C and under.

"Staying in the moment and doing a lot of self-talk and the preparation we did, submerging ourselves in ice baths in the weeks before, to acclimatise, making the body familiar with such icy conditions, carried me through. In my mind, I knew I could do it; so it was a question of controlling my body's reaction and pushing through. The reward? I realised just what humans can do when they put their minds to something.

"I'm not the kind of person, though ... well, not at this stage of my life anyway, that focuses on only one thing," he professes. "Right now I love surf-skiing, but irrespective of what sport or activity I'm involved in – from lifesaving competitions to mountain biking in the Majik Forest or on the farm hills nearby – I want to have fun. On a scale of one to 10, I lean towards the daring side. I love a bit of adrenalin. One needs to be daring, but I'm not impulsive and won't do a daft thing when it counts."

As for the adventure and exploring

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side, it is his belief that young kids and modern youth "need to be inspired by extraordinary adventure, to learn about the great world out there, about other cultures, to develop a kinship for and to take responsible ownership of the planet and the environment".

Which does not mean he takes himself too seriously. In fact, Henko's idea or nirvana is "being a beach bum, chilling under a palm tree with *lekker* waves crashing in the foreground and a bit of mountains as a backdrop", but for now he is passionate about being an ambassador, to be the best role model he can be and to carry the entire message of what Mike's expedition stand for, out to other youngsters.

"Mike Horn's Pangea Young Explorers Programme entails a four-year expedition, including 12 expeditions undertaken from 2008 to 2012. On each expedition he selects eight young adults, between ages 15 to 20 from a pool of applicants from all over the world," he explains.

"On our expedition we hiked over glaciers,

camped in the wild Arctic, climbed up Big Walls and slept on portaledges and sailed the Arctic on Mike's massive Mercedes-Benz/Geberit 32-meter (105-foot) double-master. We also took unique collections, samples, and readings from the area to study the effects of global warming on an area that's so susceptible to the consequences."

All young explorers are encouraged to start projects the world over in an attempt to raise public awareness of environmental issues, and Henko went one step further. "I did an official one-mile ice swim while on this expedition, a new world record as the most northerly one-mile ice swim completed according to the International Ice Swimming Association's rules – wearing only a Speedo, a cap and goggles in water temp below 5 °C.

"I wanted to raise awareness of the effects of global warming of the fragile Arctic area and also as an athletic feat to show what the human body is capable of if you are well prepared mentally and physically. With the asthma and all it was of course a double challenge, so it was huge for me when I was successful in my attempt. But I was also sad that it is now possible to swim in the once frozen Arctic waters."



Some definitive memories centre around meeting the local Inuit community and how they had adapted or not to changing life conditions, to the extent that "the younger generations is scared to live in igloos, fearing it will fall in on them". Since being sponsored by their government to remain in this sparsely populated area, they really don't have enough to occupy their time, apart from surfing the net on their iPhones, and often suffer from depression. Young Explorers donated first aid kits and soccer balls to encourage the kids to engage in an outdoor lifestyle.

He does dream of another trip, this time to Antarctica. Soon, as maritime navigation student at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Studies ("the campus is right next to the ocean, where dolphins and whales swim past"), he is about to embark on another sea adventure. This time round, as a cadet, he will board a Safmarine vessel for a few months of practical work.

However, wherever his sea legs may carry him, "I do believe a huge part of my life will be spent exploring the world's oceans, learning from the mistakes we humans make, experiencing what's out there and applying and sharing new knowledge," he concludes.



YEP: Images Dmitry Sharomov, Mike Horn, SARL.

GET EXPLORING

Visit www.mikehorn.com/en/yep/young-explorers-program/ if you want to know more about Mike Horn's Pan Global Adventure for Environmental Action (Pangaea) **Young Explorers Programme (YEP)**. Also, get **Shark Smart** with Henko on www.mikehorn.com/en/yep/young-explorer-act-projects/pangaea-shark-project/shark-smart/.

Arctic sailing, polar bears and icebergs!

A fantastic day of arctic sailing, polar bear encounters and floating on icebergs! I am so grateful towards Mike Horn and the Pangaea team, I struggle to express my feelings ... The day started with us taking a short trip with the rubber duck to the town of Clyde River, where we visited the local school and health centre. When we return from the Big Wall climbing and hiking over the glacier, we will have a day to do some culture exchange with the local Inuit of Clyde River. This will surely prove to be another unique experience! After 10 minutes and one mile of sailing someone shouted: **'There's a polar bear in the water!'** We all ran on deck and immediately turned the Pangaea to get closer to the bear. It was totally amazing to see the polar bear swimming 5m next to our boat, not in a zoo, but in nature. It seemed so unreal. Never did I imagine seeing a polar bear in real life, swimming in its natural surroundings – this truly is an experience of a lifetime!

It is really unusual to see polar bears this far south in summer when there's no ice around and also so close to a village. Due to global warming there is not enough ice for them to hunt seals in summer, so they swim hundreds of miles to find food, and finally end up in places like that where they most probably get shot by hunters.

The day's trip was the most exhilarating ever! There were icebergs all the way... they are drifting all the way from Greenland (300 miles away) to the 'Pass of Death' as they are surely going to melt due to the warm water temperatures ... getting smaller and smaller due to climate change. There is less ice forming each year due to the prolonged warmer seasons in the Arctic! After the initial excitement, we gathered in the yacht's conference room where Mike and Prof Roswitha Scholtz gave a talk about icebergs ... basically ice that is thousands of years old!

We also saw some whales, but the best part of the day was when we got the chance to climb onto a small flat iceberg! What a rush! I really felt so humble while standing on a piece of ice in the middle of the ocean. We stood on the about 30 000 year-old Iceberg, floating around, for half an hour. We all will never forget this first day of sailing in the Arctic – **Henko Roukema's Young Explorer's Blog, posting abbreviated, and source: m.blogs.gotravel24.com**



Ice maiden

In July this year, marathon swimmer Cecilia Schutte of Milnerton became the first South African woman to swim an 'ice mile' and the first woman to be accepted into the International Ice Swimming Association, after competing in the Speedo Ice Swim Africa event.

Long-distance and now also extreme swimmer Cecilia Schutte was one of a group of 16 swimmers from all over the country who made history this year, as the most swimmers in the one event to complete a mile in water temperatures of under 5 °C and under.

"Actually, the air temperature at Nuwedam, Fraserburg in the Northern Cape was believed to be 0 to 5 °C," the swimmer recalls. "The locals described it as sheer madness. The first half of the mile was the worst and you do wonder if you are going to be able to do it. Once you get around that, things go more smoothly and it is almost as if you become part of the cold. You accept it in a way.

"The recovery afterwards is the most dangerous part. As your body thaws, so does the ice flowing through the veins, cooling the body further to dangerous levels. With a great medical team, you get through that stage pretty well, as your recovery is monitored every minute. All is really mind over matter. You tell yourself you are going to complete it and then you complete it, no

matter how cold the water is or if your hands feel as if they want to fall off.

"I do feel very honoured to be the first woman to have done this. I did not realise how big this actually was, until people congratulated me on the achievement. I'm also very proud of the other guys who have completed the swim, such as veteran ice swimmer, Ram Barkai, who is going to be in a television programme called *Superhumans*."

Other well-known swimmers were Ryan Stramrood, Andrew Chin, Toks Viviers and Kieron Palfram. Palfram and Barkai recently became the first swimmers in the world to swim around Cape Horn at the most southern point of Chile.

"I myself have been training on and off for two and half years in cold water," she continues, "but more intensely so, the last two months before the competition. I'm actually more into marathon swimming – 10km and up. I do train outdoors all year round, combining ocean and pool training as part of my programme."

She's looking forward to doing some more amazing swims in the near future. "It is wonderful that Speedo can give extreme swimmers the chance to be able to raise funds for community projects – this event alone raised about R15 000 for a local school. Soon I'm going to do a 9-hour, 25 km swim in the Atlantic Ocean, on a route never done by anyone else before, in aid of a young cancer patient.

I'm always looking for sponsorship to continue training, as I'm committed to doing swims like these to raise funds for social development and community projects. In conclusion, I do hope that my achievement will open the door to more women taking part in open-water swimming as a sport.

● Contact her at ☎ 071-941-6870 and add her on Facebook.