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As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with Rob Lilwall, the Nat Geo Adventurer and author of *Cycling Home from Siberia* and *Walking Home from Mongolia*.



[\[link to the audio\]](#)

AV: Well hello. Hello and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights and today I am in the Fullerton Hotel in Singapore with adventurer Rob Lilwall. How are you?

RL: Very well

AV: Good. Welcome to Singapore. Rob is originally from the UK, now lives in Hong Kong and is the author of a couple of books and speaks at various conferences around leadership. Rob, tell us a little bit about the big adventures you've done.

RL: Well I've done two particularly big adventures, first one was a bicycle ride, where I had decided I was going on a very long bicycle ride but instead of setting off from England where I lived, I flew as far away from home as I could think of -- which was to Northeast Siberia -- and then I spent three years cycling back home again. I went through places like Russia in the winter, Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, had tons of new adventures and finally got home. The second big adventure I did was a walk where I flew from where I now live -- which is Hong Kong -- up to Gobi desert in Mongolia and then I walked home, which took me six months. Again it was the winter in the beginning in the Gobi desert and walked the length of China. I have to say, it was harder doing a walk than the bicycle ride.

AV: Wow! Well I left England in 1988 and I went to Australia and I never returned, but I didn't have half of the adventures that you've had, I have to say [laughter]. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but when I heard about this guy who had walked across Mongolia and China and ridden across Siberia and Afghanistan, I was expecting some kind of gung-ho Royal Marines type ... and, well, you're not, are you? [laughter]

RL: Yes I'm pretty ordinary. Actually before I started doing these adventures I was a geography high school teacher, and I've never been the sort of person who was in the top sports teams, and I've never been a very brave person; I used to get frightened of things very easily, and I still do. But I found on these adventures, it wasn't about me being super tough and being able to get through the obstacles, it was much more about my mindset, my attitude that I took to the challenge.

AV: Clearly it hasn't held you back, and of course, many of the things that you've learnt along the way are what you can help others with. I've listened to you speak about your journeys and it's extremely personable and honest story but it's not just about you, it's about your exploits and it's how you draw your audience in I think, relating to their worlds too.

RL: Yes, yes I think there're a number of different things I've learnt along the way. I've heard the job of a storyteller is to tell the truth, and so I really feel I've got to be honest about how I felt, the doubts, the fears, the times I almost gave up along the way and I reflect on some of these, what I call, 'attitudes of adventure' that I learnt along the way; those would include things like, having a resilient mindset, practicing self-care (so, looking after myself), learning how to network with people -- actually, rather than use the word 'network' I'd like to say, 'remember we don't have to make it on

our own', because although on these adventures I was usually on my own, I couldn't make it on my own. I had to learn to ask for advice and to receive help. Actually I find speaking at corporate conferences that these lessons I share seem to connect with the corporate world, though their context is so different.

AV: Yes, I remember you saying that we are all on some kind of adventure and that it's about how we apply ourselves to that. Perhaps you can go a little bit more in detail about some of the examples that you give.

RL: Yes, so there's all sorts of different ways; I learnt these lessons kind of intuitively as I went along; one for example would be, when I was in the depths of winter in Siberia and I knew at the start of the journey that I had a three year goal to cycle back to London. It's great to have a long term goal, but sometimes a long term goal is just too big and too kind of depressing when you've got a long way to go. So I broke it down into, what is my medium term goal? It's to get to Russia before my visa runs out. Then I ended up having to break it into my day to day goals, which at that point was, I had to cycle 67 miles every day on these really bad quality roads to hit those other goals. I found that in the rest of life as well I need my long term goal to know where I am going, but sometimes you have to break it down, day to day what you're really looking to try and do Another one was when I was in Papua New guinea and I was trying to find a boat in this whole expedition without flying, hitch-hiking across the sea on boats. I was trying to find a boat from Papua New Guinea to Australia and I ended up just having to meet so many different people and asking them "do you have a boat?" and everybody would say "no, but you should meet my friend Andrew, he might help", and then Andrew would introduce me to his friend Keith, who would then introduce me to his friend Pete ... and there was this huge chain of people I went through to find a boat and it just taught me the power of learning to ask, to follow up leads and you finally find your boat.

AV: So that's goal setting ...

RL: ... goal setting, and networking.

AV: One of your 'claims to fame' is that you were noticed by National Geographic.

RL: Yes, I had some good fortune; I had, on the first trip, the cycling trip, I filmed myself by balancing my camera on a rock and cycling past it doing video diaries. So it was very much a self filmed effort. When I got back to London I had a fortunate break, National Geographic got in touch and bought my self-filmed footage, made it into a six-part series, and then when I did the walk, they pre-commissioned a four-part series, which added new challenges having to film it at a more professional level, but it was a great experience.

AV: Yes, I can imagine. And recently you have just come back from your latest little adventure with Christine, your wife, where you cycled across America.

RL: Yes, this was actually Christine's idea. We've been married a few years and I've gradually got Christine doing more adventures but usually they are for only one or two nights, maximum two nights in a tent, but about a year ago she had this idea; why don't we go on a big expedition, so we went on a tandem bike which worked very well.

AV: So you *had* to stay together!

RL: We had to stay together [laughter] and actually it meant we were on the same team, not like "oh, why are you going so fast? Why are you going so slowly?". Together we were going up this hill

or whatever the challenge was. We started in Los Angeles in March and then by the end of August we made it to New York; it was a great joint adventure.

AV: Terrific, that's really great to hear. We look forward to hearing more of your adventures in the future, and hopefully we'll see you back in Singapore very soon.

RL: Brilliant, thanks so much Andrew.

<http://www.insightbureau.com/RobLilwall.html>