

## ***EXTRAORDINARY TRAVELERS CLUB Dispatch***

### ***ISSUE #19 - December 2025***

- The Best Wildlife in 2026 - by Richard Bangs
- Invitations & Calendar for Extraordinary Travelers - Feb-Oct 2026
- Extraordinary Traveler Profile - John French
- Extraordinary Traveler Bookshelf - New Books!

## **The Best Wildlife in 2026**

by Richard Bangs

**Adventure, I've long believed, is the bright edge of awareness—those electric moments when the membrane between human and wild grows thin, translucent, and we glimpse our original selves reflected in untamed eyes.**

As 2026 unfurls, the world offers a constellation of such moments, rare as eclipses and twice as stirring. From the desert canyons of Arizona to the primeval wetlands of Brazil, from Kenya's fossil-rich north to Mongolia's wind-licked steppes, these are the places where the pulse of the planet still beats loudest—and where we, if only briefly, can sync our hearts to its ancient meter.

### **1. Kenya: Footfall in the Dawn of Time**



Photo courtesy of Richard Bangs and MTSobek

**There is no wilder intimacy than standing on African soil with nothing between you and its creatures but your own breath.** A walking safari in Kenya—boots whispering through the savannah grass, sun not yet fully committed to the day—is the closest you can come to the continent’s original grammar.

This year, the path leads north to Lake Turkana, the shimmering jade scythe carved into the cradle of humankind. Here, in this stark, lunar basin, Nile crocodiles—giant, primeval, unblinking—crowd the black volcanic shores. They seem like survivors from a previous manuscript of Earth, relics that time forgot to erase. **You move lightly, aware that every footprint is an offering, every shadow a possibility.** In the Turkana winds, you can almost hear the echo of early hominids whose bones rest nearby. It is not a safari; it is a pilgrimage.

## **2. Serengeti Spring: Witness Wildlife Newborn**



**This is the place where life begins in thunder. The short-grass plains of the southern Serengeti, where the Great Migration is born.**

In late February, the land turns emerald. Storm clouds stack on the horizon. And then it happens: more than a million wildebeest gather shoulder to shoulder, and the Serengeti becomes a nursery on a continental scale. Eight thousand calves a day drop into the world—wobbling, blinking, running within minutes—while lions, cheetahs, and leopards prowl the margins, testing the ancient balance between life and death.

**This is Africa at its most raw and revelatory. You don't just see nature here—you witness creation in real time.**

You'll live deep in the wild in our private luxury tented camp, perfectly placed - away from the herds, yet easily accessible. Days unfold to the rhythm of dawn game drives, Hadza trackers reading the land like a living manuscript, afternoons watching predators teach their cubs the art of survival, and sundowners as the plains burn gold.

Next, the Ngorongoro Crater—Africa's Garden of Eden—closes the circle in one of the most wildlife-rich places on Earth. This is not a safari many know about. But those who go, never forget it.

### **3. Arizona: Down the Salt into the Secret Desert**



Rafting the Salt River, photo Richard Bangs

Adventure doesn't always require a passport—sometimes it flows just beneath the desert varnish of the American Southwest. **The Salt River in Arizona is one such serpentine wonder, a brief, miraculous ribbon of spring snowmelt that carves through a wilderness seldom seen and barely believed.**



**A raft trip here is a fast-moving theater of the unexpected.** Wild horses—manes tangled with sunlight—wade into the shallows as if to bless your passing. Javelina scuttle in comic procession along the bank. Coatimundi flick their ringed tails like exclamation marks. **Coyotes sing from the ridges while raccoons steal the show with masked curiosity. Desert bighorn sheep perch on improbable ledges, sentinels of stone; a bobcat ghosts the underbrush; and if whisper and luck align, the ember-glow eyes of a mountain lion may watch your campsite after dark.**

**Above, the sky performs its own pageant:** bald eagles spiraling on canyon thermals, great blue herons unfolding like origami into flight, egrets flaring white against red rock, roadrunners stitching quicksilver lines across the sand. Even the earth itself seems animate—rattlesnakes coiled in sunlit reverie, and the mythic Gila monster lumbering like a beadwork dragon across the desert floor. **The Salt runs for only a few ephemeral weeks each year. To ride it is to borrow time from a river that rarely wakes.**

#### **4. Mongolia: Into the Kingdom of Ghost Cats and Sky Horses**



Przewalski's horses, last truly wild horses on earth- by Richard Bangs

**Some places are so vast they swallow your sense of scale, leaving you as small as truth.** Mongolia is such a place—a cathedral of sky stretched across an unbroken horizon, where the winds carry the songs of nomads and the hoofbeats of ancient migrations.

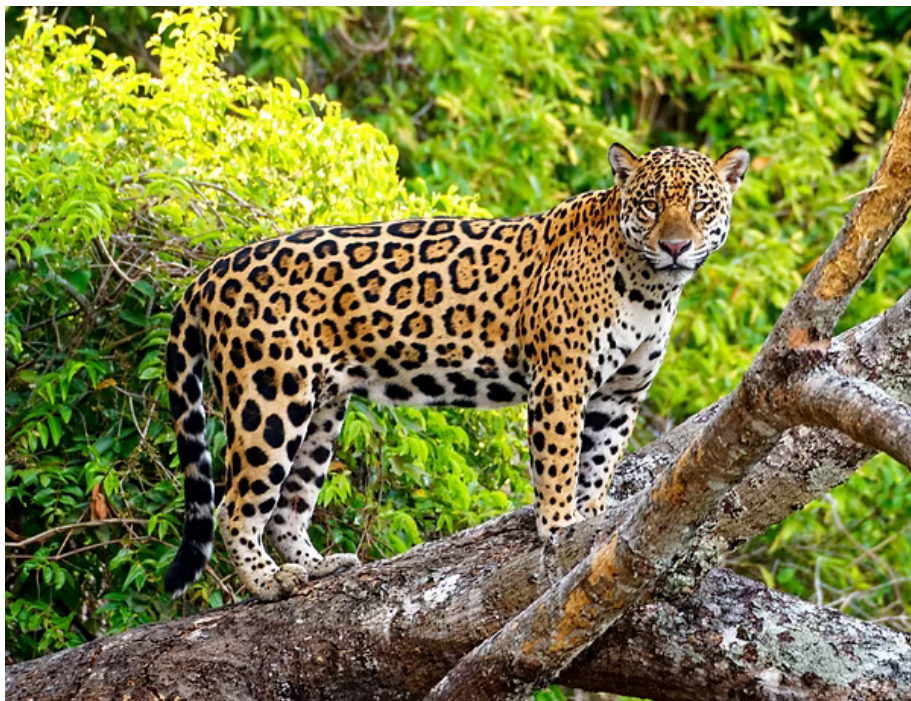
In 2026, a unique expedition with private-planes and scheduled flights offers access to Mongolia's wildest quadrants—an aerial thread stitching together worlds few have ever stepped foot in. **Snow leopards prowl these crags, spectral and elusive, their presence more myth than mammal. Przewalski's horses, the last truly wild horses on Earth, gallop across the steppe with**

the authority of ancestors reclaiming their dominion. Twin-humped Bactrian camels sway through desert dunes like ships of a forgotten armada.

Golden eagles wheel through cobalt skies; gray wolves course the valleys in disciplined formation; kingly argali sheep crown the mountainsides with curling horns that seem sculpted by storm; and Siberian ibex dance on cliff faces where gravity clearly has different rules.

To travel Mongolia this way—leaping between ecosystems by air, then grounding yourself in their silence—is to traverse not just geography, but epochs.

## 5. Brazil: Pantanal—The Pulse of Water and Fang



If the Amazon is South America's mythic heart, the Pantanal is its sprawling, beating lung. **This is the world's largest tropical wetland, a shimmering mosaic of rivers, lagoons, and grasslands that breathe in seasonal rhythms, expanding and contracting like a colossal organism.**

**A trek here is a wade into abundance.** Capybaras—gentle, buoyant, vaguely amused—dot the banks in herds like shaggy punctuation marks. Spectacularly colorful tropical birds flaunt their vibrant plumes. Caiman slip beneath the surface with predatory punctuation. **But it is the jaguar—the Pantanal's spotted sovereign—that draws travelers across continents. To lock eyes with this cat in the wild is to witness power in its purest syntax: muscular, deliberate, unhurried, aware of its dominion.**

In 2026, the Pantanal is poised to offer encounters that feel almost tapirs ambling through mud as though sculpted from it. You leave with boots full of



marsh, memory full of pawprints.

## **The Wild Invitation of 2026**

**We travel not just to see wildlife, but to remember that we are wildlife—restless, curious, longing to belong in landscapes not shaped by our hands.**

**The year ahead offers rare portals into that truth.** Whether it's the volcanic hush of Turkana, the desert-river secrecy of Arizona, the boundless steppes of Mongolia, or the liquid universe of the Pantanal, these journeys don't merely take us somewhere.

**They return us to ourselves.**



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## **Calendar for Extraordinary Travelers - 2026**

Invitations to Join Us - by Date Feb to Oct

**February 28-March 10, 2026 - Serengeti Birthing Safari**



## Serengeti Luxury Birthing Safari

Saturday, February 28 – Tuesday, March 10, 2026

*Designed by Jack Wheeler*



The Short Grass Plains of the Serengeti's far South is where, from January through March, up to two million animals return for their Birthing Season and the herds are replenished with new life. We'll be in a private camp for our "safari in style," we'll have the area to ourselves, and game drives to see them up close.

Note: **We can take only 2 more couples on this spectacular safari** -- so if you want to go, click the gold box for photos and the itinerary! This one always fills up. **Questions?** Email Rebel [holiday@wheelerexpeditions.com](mailto:holiday@wheelerexpeditions.com)

**Click Here for Details**

### **SERENGETI BIRTHING SAFARI** *A Luxury Expedition*

**February 28 - March 10, 2026**

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**March 29-April 4, 2026 - Arizona Canyon & River Adventure**



## **Arizona Canyon & River Adventure**

**Designed and Led by Richard Bangs  
March 29-April 4, 2026**

MT SOBEK ADVENTURE



This special experience was conceived by Richard Bangs and is now in final stages of planning by MT Sobek. **SAVE THE DATES!**

This handcrafted Arizona odyssey braids together desert hiking, cultural discovery, and a rare four-day descent of the Salt River Canyon—a spring ephemeral, a hidden cleft of polished granite and sandstone where the world feels both primordial and entirely new.

***SAVE THE DATES - DETAILS TO FOLLOW***

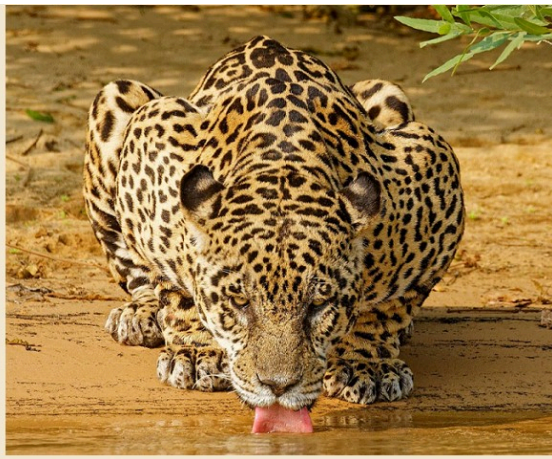
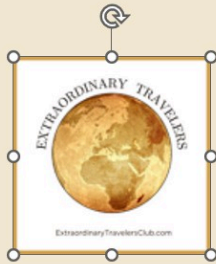
**ARIZONA CANYON & RIVER ADVENTURE  
with Richard Bangs**

**March 29 - April 4, 2026**

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**May 17-26, 2026 - Pantanal: The Wonder of the Amazon**





### **The Pantanal: Unknown Wonder of the Amazon**

Designed and Led by Jack Wheeler

Co-Led by Rebel Holiday

May 17 to May 26, 2026



Comprising the world's largest tropical wetlands, the Pantanal contains the largest concentration of wildlife and tropical birdlife in the Amazon, in all South America, the entire Western Hemisphere, and possibly the entire world. Yet its remoteness keeps it unknown to all but the most saavy world travelers.

**You'll visit tribes of Amazon Indians;** snorkel in crystal clear lagoons like an aquarium of tropical fish; see **parrots, toucans, hyacinth macaws, roseate spoonbills and other birdlife in astounding numbers, giant anteaters, an unbelievable profusion of caiman alligators,** and be up close and personal with the **Amazon's iconic yet rarely seen animal, the jaguar.**

Email Rebel: [holiday@wheelerexpeditions.com](mailto:holiday@wheelerexpeditions.com)

**Click for Photos & Details**

**THE PANTANAL: UNKNOWN WONDER  
OF THE AMAZON**

**May 17-26, 2026**

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**June 18-30, 2026 - Exploring Mongolia**



## EXPLORING MONGOLIA

*An Adventurous Luxury Expedition*  
*Designed by Jack Wheeler*  
**June 18 to June 30, 2026**



**Exploring Mongolia** is an in-depth experience of this vast, beautiful, and historic country that you will explore, connect with the people, and see diverse nature and meet both Kazakh and Mongol nomads to learn their ways of life. We explore Mongolia efficiently by adding in private chartered planes to reach some remote areas. Land Cruisers take you to extraordinary vistas, historical sites, luxury camps and lodges. This is a luxury exploration of Mongolia that is unique to Wheeler Expeditions. You won't find it anywhere else.

Email Rebel: [holiday@wheelerexpditions.com](mailto:holiday@wheelerexpditions.com)

**Click for Details & Photos**

**EXPLORE MONGOLIA**

**June 18-30, 2026**

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**Oct 20-31, 2026 - Kenya Walking Safari with Richard Bangs**



## Kenya Walking Safari with Richard Bangs

Designed and Led by Richard Bangs  
October 20 to 31, 2026

MT SOBEK ADVENTURE



**So, take a walk on the wild side with me in the remote corners of Kenya.**

This safari includes incredible wildlife encounters, moderate walking with various tribes as guides, and deeper explorations of Nairobi National Park, the Mathews Range, Lake Turkana, Laikipia, and the legendary Masai Mara.

**Contact Nicole Russo at MT Sobek** [NicoleRusso@MTSobek.com](mailto:NicoleRusso@MTSobek.com)

+1 510 594 6041 **or** +1 800 974 0300

**Click for Details & Photos**

**KENYA WALKING SAFARI with Richard Bangs**

**October 20-31, 2026**

**So come—step off the well-worn path. In 2026, join us for something that shimmers with the spirit of real adventure.** Walk Kenya's wild tracks with me. Or explore Brazil's Pantanal, the great expanses of the Serengeti and Mongolia with Jack Wheeler and Rebel Holiday, or join one of the many soul-stirring journeys offered by [MT Sobek](https://www.mtsobek.com).

There's a peculiar alchemy that happens when shedding the weight of everyday obligations and pointing toward an unmapped quadrant. **When you push through the undergrowth and leave the marked signs behind, when you taste the metallic flavor of genuine risk, you're not just passing time. You're stoking the fire that keeps us human.** You're reasserting what it means to play, to want, to be utterly present in the narrow space between nothing and everything.



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The moment is fleeting. The time is now.  
Come join us on an Extraordinary Travel Experience. *Carpe Diem!*



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Questions? Reach out to us:

[richardbangs@extraordinarytravelersclub.com](mailto:richardbangs@extraordinarytravelersclub.com)  
or  
[rebelholiday@extraordinarytravelersclub.com](mailto:rebelholiday@extraordinarytravelersclub.com)

We're happy to discuss!

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### ***Extraordinary Traveler - John French***



<p><b>About John French</b></p>
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John French was but one thread in a tapestry of scholars, bums, intellectuals, drinkers, womanizers, feminists, stoners, hippies, punks, and misfits woven into the fabric of adventure travel in the early days of whitewater rafting. Starting on Northern California rivers, he quickly worked his way into the Grand Canyon crew and seized an opportunity to guide on the Zambezi River in Africa, which led to running rivers across the globe. What started as a summer job became an obsession as he traveled the world in a quest for the perfect oar stroke and the intimate melding of hands, oars, raft and river on a seam of currents through big whitewater. He is the author of *The Tao of Running Whitewater: Lessons from Rafting the World's Wildest Rivers*.

### **Rivers Guided**

**North America:** Forks of the American river, including Giant Gap & Dream Gap, Merced, Tuolumne, Cal-Salmon, Scott, Kern, Middle Fork Feather, Colorado, Green, Tatshenshini, Alsek, Tsirku, Kongakut

**Africa:** Zambezi

**Asia:** Karnali, Bhote Koshi, Gilgit, Ishkomen, Ghizar, Alas

**Australia:** Nymboida, Gwydir, Franklin, Snowy, Mitchel, Mita-Mita

**Europe:** Coruh

**South America:** Bio-Bio, Futaleufu, Upano.



John French Rowing Rapids

## **Extraordinary Traveler Interview: John French**

**Q: How old were you when you began to dream of and imagine extraordinary adventures?**

**JF:** I launched into adventures before I dreamed of them. At eighteen, I dropped out of college and pursued money-making schemes. At twenty-two, I took off across the country on my motorcycle, which was stolen in New Orleans, leading to a stint as a barker on Bourbon Street. The rest of that summer, I worked in the pits for a race car crew before hitch-hiking across the country to San Francisco and pursued a career as a stage actor,

which I dropped after a few years and moved to Hawaii. After a working in Italy for a few years to settle my traveling bills, I returned to San Francisco and seriously considered where to turn for my next adventure and, at thirty-two, I discovered the life of a river guide.

**Q: What is one of the more extraordinary travel experiences that you have had?**

**JF:** Of all the grand adventures I experienced around the world, I would say exploring rivers in Northern Pakistan was the pinnacle. We rode in old Willys jeeps for days, higher and higher on dirt mountain roads into the mountains of the Hindu Kush. We crossed Shandur Pass and launched at 10,000 feet into a small clear river that grew to resemble the Colorado. Imagine a rocky desert river with Himalayan sized mountains towering above. Absolutely fantastic!

**Q: Have you had a close call while traveling, and if so, did it motivate a re-assessment or change in behavior?**

**JF:** Running Class V rivers is always a dance with a close call, but in twenty years of rafting I never thought to myself, "This is where I die." Well, at least not while on the river. It would cross my mind while scouting rapids. The only change in my behavior has come with old age.

**Q: Who are extraordinary travelers whom you admire? If you could sit down and speak with any extraordinary traveler, living or dead, who would it be?**

**JF:** Sir Richard Burton, the nineteenth-century explorer, was extraordinary. His work as a spy in The Great Game fascinates me. His feat of co-discovering the source of the Nile overshadows his many other accomplishments.

**Q: What mindset do you adopt, or have naturally, when you venture into the world?**

**JF:** Appreciation! I love working in another country to feel the cadence of language and the humor of everyday encounters. While stocking supplies for a river trip, or repairing gear for a season, the locals were so supportive of our efforts to run rivers in their backyard. We helped bring tourism to Victoria Falls, fight dams in Chile, and protect wilderness in Alaska. Each time I visit a country that I love, like Chile, I hope to return, but I remind myself that each trip could be my last time there.

**Q: What characteristics do you choose in your traveling companions?**

**JF:** A sense of humor is absolutely critical. A good laugh can get you through a lot of challenges.

**Q: What is something you dream of doing – or a place that you dream of exploring?**

**JF:** I never made it to China. I have studied Taoism and Buddhism for decades. However, the China of my imagination is probably far removed from the reality of China today.

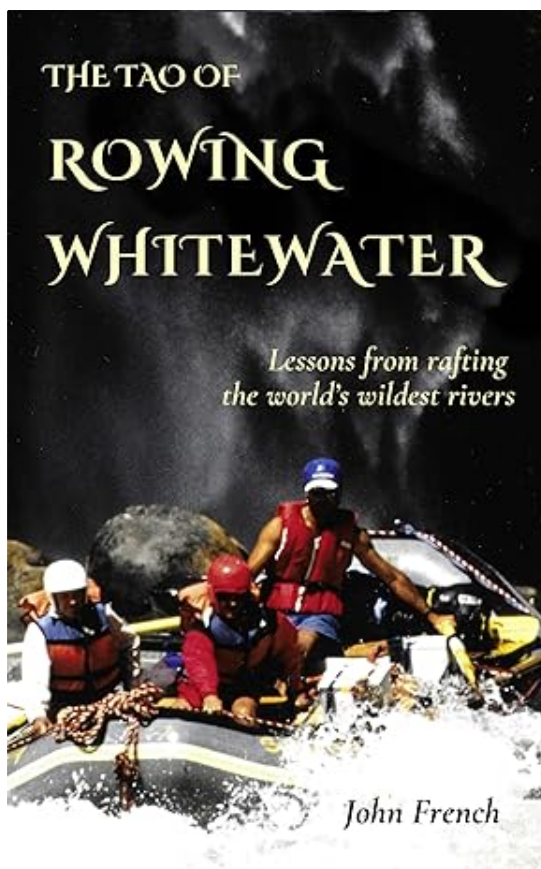
**Q: As a veteran explorer and extraordinary traveler, any advice for a young traveler just setting out?**

**JF:** Do it while you're young! Explore the world while you have the fire in the belly and are mad for experiences.

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## Extraordinary Travelers' Bookshelf





## ***The Tao of Rowing Whitewater***

***Lessons from rafting the world's  
wildest rivers***

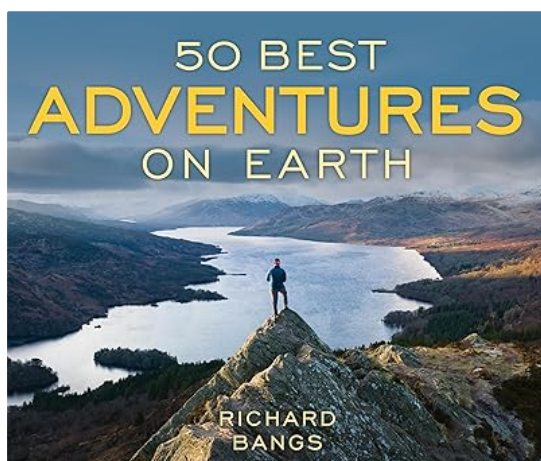
**by John French**

**About the book:** In an intriguing mix of memoir and philosophy, a veteran guide shares what he learned from navigating the world's most challenging rivers. By blending the art of running rapids with the practice of Tai Chi, he found techniques for rowing whitewater with grace while remaining calm amidst chaos.

**“Uplifting, soul-stirring, exhilarating! ...John French’s brilliant writing has a beautiful, relatable clarity and a poetry that explains his growth-filled journey and puts you right in the boat with oars in hand, in the zone, in the flow, running the rapids.” ~**

William McGinnis, Author of Whitewater Rafting.

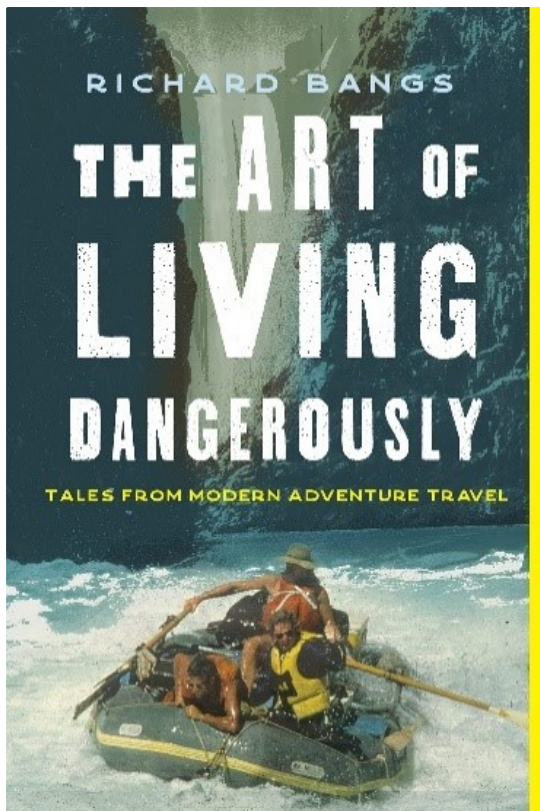
River runners need instinct and skill to meet the demands of split-second timing and adrenaline pumping fear. This book offers lessons for the novice that take years to learn. Shore-bound readers will experience the thrill of a wild and exotic sport, as well as anyone seeking to push boundaries to live life at full capacity.



## ***50 Best Adventures on Earth*** **by Richard Bangs**

**About the book:** From scaling untouched Himalayan peaks to navigating pristine Amazon rapids, *50 Best Adventures on Earth* is your ultimate guide to the planet's most extraordinary experiences, handpicked by legendary explorer Richard Bangs. Transform your travel dreams into reality with this definitive guide from the

founder of Sobek Expeditions, who has led over 35 first river descents across six continents.



## ***The Art of Living Dangerously*** **by Richard Bangs**

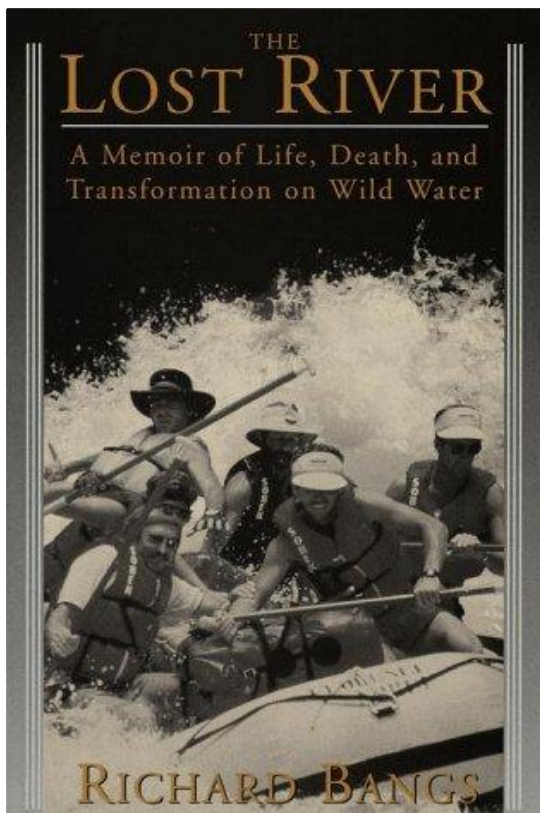
Be swept away by these awesome and implausible tales from Richard's 50 years of insanely great explorations.

### **What reviewers say:**

Thom Beers, creator of The Deadliest Catch, says ***“Richard Bangs is the epitome of living life to the fullest. Danger is and has always been his comfort zone.”***

Paul Maritz, conservationist, tech investor, former senior exec at Microsoft and VMware says, ***“Richard tells great stories, some of them true.”***

[The Art of Living Dangerously](#).



## ***The Lost River: A Memoir of Life, Death, and Transformation on Wild Water*** **by Richard Bangs**

Finally, now available in Kindle.

### **What reviewers say:**

***“It is not only a wonderful adventure story...it is also an intensely personal self examination by Mr. Bangs. This is one of the great adventure stories of all time, but for me, it also served as a “self help” book. You’ll be amazed and entertained by a fabulous story while going through your own internal exam at the same time..”***

[The Lost River: A Memoir of Life, Death, and Transformation on Wild Water](#)

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**Yes, Let's Go There!**



Jack Wheeler and Richard Bangs, always reaching for the stars. (photo by Jasper Bangs)

Write in and tell us where YOU want us to take you!

**Jack and Richard, at it again - Mongolia, June, 2025**





# Extraordinary Travelers Club



**Richard Bangs**  
Founder



**Jack Wheeler**  
Founder



**Eddy Downpatrick**  
Founder



**Rebel Holiday**  
Founder

The **Extraordinary Travelers Club** is a celebration of extraordinary travels and those who pioneer and partake. Each month we offer commentary, interviews and opportunities to explore our remarkable world, to turn unturned corners and breathe rarefied air.

This is a club for the bold, the curious, and those who seek exceptional experiences in the hidden scapes and the back of beyond. There is no membership fee; just the currency of curiosity. We invite you to be a part of this wayfaring League, a community within which to share the insights, codes and secrets with like-minded travelers from around the globe.

Join us in the [The Extraordinary Travelers Club](#).

## Prior ETC Dispatch Issues:

<https://www.extraordinarytravelersclub.com/etc-newsletter-issues>

## Upcoming Club Expeditions:

<https://extraordinarytravelersclub.com/extraordinaryexpeditions>

Your comments are welcome, email:

[richardbangs@extraordinarytravelersclub.com](mailto:richardbangs@extraordinarytravelersclub.com)

Share with us your Extraordinary Travel experiences!

## Connect with Richard Bangs



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**Special Thanks To Our Fellow Travel Pioneers...**



## Extraordinary Travelers Club

2598 E Sunrise Blvd Suite 2104, 33304, Fort Lauderdale, FL

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