

Michel Georges Francois Peissel (1937-2011)

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Michel Peissel, who died on 7th October 2011 aged 74, perhaps travelled more widely throughout the Himalayan and greater Tibetan regions than any other westerner. Between 1959 and 2003 he undertook 29 major trips to the region. Another passion was for the eastern coast of the Yucatan, Mexico. Although regarding himself as an amateur adventurer rather than an academic, he wrote more than 20 books and was involved in 22 documentary films, mostly on his Himalayan and Tibetan expeditions and including a four part series, 'Zanskar, the Last Place on Earth', for the BBC in 1980. He was fluent in several languages, including Tibetan. He was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and was the youngest member of The Explorers' Club of New York when he joined. Frequently he had to battle with Indian, Chinese and Nepalese bureaucracy in order to cross disputed borders. He was twice banned from India and on occasion declared *persona non grata* by China and Nepal. He was someone who loved solving geographical puzzles and making cultural comparisons. For example, he once found an amulet in Lhasa of a similar design made by Scythians on the Black Sea 2,000 years earlier and wondered what historical links there might be.

The son of a French diplomat, whose negotiating skills he learned to use with great effect, he was brought up in England and France. He learnt English before French, because his father was posted to London when he was young. Peissel studied for a year at the University of Oxford and for a year at the Harvard Business School, dropping out from both. Subsequently, however, he obtained a doctorate in Tibetan Ethnology from the Sorbonne, Paris.

At the age of 18, he became fascinated by Tibet after having read Fosco Maraini's book *Secret Tibet* and he started to learn Tibetan from Sir Charles Bell's *Grammar of Colloquial Tibetan*. However, Tibet was sealed off to foreigners following China's annexation of the country in 1950, so he looked at a possible career in economics and attended the Harvard Business School. After a year, in 1958, he decided to take a spring break to Mexico with a companion, and exploration replaced economics in his life. In

Yucatan, Peissel continued on alone and in 42 days he walked 200 miles to Belize, coming across fourteen unknown Mayan archaeological sites en route. He wrote his first book, *The Lost World of Quintana-Roo* (1963), about this journey,

In 1959, his interest turned again to the Himalaya when he hoped to get permission to enter Bhutan. However, authorisation was denied him until 1969. Therefore he decided to go to Nepal and study the Sherpas in Solu Khumbu. In Nepal he penned his second book, *Tiger for Breakfast* (1966).

Peissel and his translator Soko Karmay spent several months in the remote and minute kingdom of Mustang during the summer of 1964. He was the first westerner to reside there for long enough to study and record its culture and history. With this material, he completed a doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne and wrote a cover story for the National Geographic Magazine in 1965. His third book, *Mustang, a Lost Tibetan Kingdom* (1967), won several major awards and became an international best seller. It secured him a reputation and the finance to support further adventures. He visited Nepal and Mustang again in 1966 and 1967.

In 1969, he was finally able to cross Bhutan from west to east and was one of the few westerners, other than diplomats and doctors, to travel through the kingdom. About this journey he wrote *Lords and Lamas, a Solitary Expedition across the Secret Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan* (1970).

In 1972, as a spin off from his sojourn in Mustang, Peissel published *Cavaliers of Kham: the secret war in Tibet*, which got him into serious trouble with the Americans, the Nepalis and the Chinese, who banned him from visiting China for years. Other than George Patterson of the *Daily Telegraph* [London], who filmed the conflict with Adrian Cowell in the mid 1960s, he was the first to describe in detail the bitter guerrilla war that had been fought for 20 years by the Khampas. During the 1950s and 60s, the Khampa rebels were supported by Nationalist China (from Taiwan), the American CIA, India, and even the USSR. They would attack the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army posts and military convoys on foot or horseback, using only rifles. Soon afterwards, Mustang was closed to foreigners for the next 25 years because of political sensitivities and in 1974 the Khampas were eliminated by Nepalese forces due to Chinese political pressure. In 1991, Peissel made a return visit to Mustang to investigate ancient cave sites.

In 1972, he made an expedition of 1,200 miles along with Michael Alexander and Bob Cordukes in a one-man hovercraft, up sections of the

unnavigable Kali Gandaki River in Nepal that included a gorge section flowing between the 26,000-foot peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. This journey is described in his *The Great Himalayan Passage: across the Himalayas by hovercraft* (1974). They claimed to have pioneered the sport of shooting up rapids.

In the mid to late 1970s he turned his attention to the other minor kingdoms of the Tibetan cultural zone, which he visited as soon as foreigners were permitted to enter, namely those of Ladakh and Zanskar, about which he published *Zanskar. The Hidden Kingdom* (1979).

In 1980, he travelled to the source of the Ganges and the next year studied the Minaro people of the upper Indus, recording an extensive vocabulary of archaic Shina. He was intrigued to encounter long nosed, fair skinned European looking people, who some think may be descended from the troops of Alexander the Great, or who some regard as Aryans or refer to as 'Dards', the name used by Herodotus for the inhabitants of 'the region of gold digging ants'. The latter, he concluded, were burrowing marmots, which threw up goldbearing sand. Further research took him, in 1982, across the Indo-Pakistan cease-fire line in disguise, having dyed his hair and skin with walnut juice. Consequently, he published *The Ants' Gold* (1984) and continued this research in 1996 to theorise that the Dansar plateau in Baltistan was the true location of Herodotus's account.

In 1982 he made a winter journey around Mount Minya Konka in Kham and in 1986 penetrated humid, tropical southeast Tibet around Pemako and the pilgrimage region of Tsari along the great bend of the Brahmaputra river, which until then had been visited by very few western visitors.

His next interests led him to, in 1992, 1993 and 1994, to tiny isolated Tibetan valleys to study ancient breeds of pony sized horses, namely the thoroughbred Nangchen Horse and the Riwoche Horse which resembled the primitive horses depicted in ancient cave paintings. He studied horse care and equine pharmacology in Tibet and undertook further research along with Dr Ignasi Casas in 1995.

Another journey during 1994, along with Sebastian Guinness and Dr. Jacques Falck, took him along an unfrequented, difficult route to the historical source of the Mekong River by following the branch of the Black Mekong. About this journey he wrote *The Last Barbarians: The discovery of the source of the Mekong in Tibet* (1997). (However, satellite photography later proved the White Mekong branch to be 2.6 miles longer.) In 1997, Peissel

went to Guge in western Tibet in search of cave sites and salt routes and a year later was on the Western Changthang plateau filming Tibetan bears, blue sheep and wild yak. He again crossed the plateau in 1999 to film more wildlife and to study the Sengo nomads. A further journey was made in 2000 to Amdo, as well as to the spectacular 160 foot tall, dry-stone tapering Towers of Pasang Kongpo, some of which have survived 700 years in an active earthquake zone. Peissel's final journeys were to Pe Yul in 2002 and other areas of eastern Tibet in search of animalistic art objects and Scythian traditions and, in 2003, to lower Mustang and Patan to study bronze casting.

Meanwhile, Peissel continued his interest in boats. In 1987, along with Mexican archaeologists, he built a sea going ancient Mayan style dugout canoe and travelled 500 miles along the Mexican Yucatan coast to replicate 10th century Mayan trade. The following year he fabricated a replica Viking longboat and with a crew of six navigated up the River Dvina and down the River Dnieper from the Baltic to the Black Sea, a 53 day, 1,500 mile journey recreating that of the Varangians, a group of whom, the Rus - 'the men who row' - founded the state of Rus and the Russian monarchy.

In 2003, in one of his last books *Tibet, the Secret Continent*, Peissel distilled his knowledge of his many Asian adventures. In it he describes high altitude flora and fauna; the history of Tibetans from the stone-age to the golden age of Tibetan Buddhism and the rise of the Dalai Lamas; he relates the spiritual aspects of everyday life and chronicles the exploration of Tibet from the early Portuguese missionaries to the 1904 military invasion of the British and the 1950 military annexation by China; he describes the destruction of the Cultural Revolution and the more recent reconstruction of monasteries and the relative relaxation on religious and cultural practices; he expresses his concern about the ethnic swamping of the Tibetans by Han Chinese and what he saw as the second class status of Tibetans in their own land. He concluded that Tibet is much the same as the proverbial elephant described by blind people: everyone grasps a different aspect, but no one gets the whole picture. During his 40 years of traversing over 12,000 miles on foot and horseback with various companions in the Tibetan cultural region and the Himalayas he conversed with hundreds of locals whom he found, as have so many, to be particularly endearing. Peissel was perhaps the only traveller in the region ever to have seen, touched and understood the whole animal.

Michel Peissel was married three times: first to Marie-Clare de

Montaignac, with whom he had two sons; second to Mildred Missy Allen with whom he had a son and a daughter; and finally to Roselyn LeBris with whom he had another son.

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