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Exploring Africa to Find Riches in Ratings

By [BILL CARTER](#)

“DR. Livingstone, I presume.”

It is one of those inescapable phrases that everyone seems to know, though just how remains a mystery. It is also the only connection most Americans have with David Livingstone, the subject of the phrase, and Henry Morton Stanley, the man who (reportedly) said it.

So finding these two men at the center of an expensive hybrid television series — part history documentary, part reality show — may be something of a surprise, until the concept of the show is tied to [Mark Burnett](#), the television producer most closely connected to adventure programs in exotic locales. “Expedition Africa: Stanley and Livingstone,” an eight-part series starting May 31 on the History Channel, is Mr. Burnett’s latest foray into the wilderness. The series sends a team of high-energy, frequently fractious, quasi-professional explorers on a trip to recreate Stanley’s 1871 journey to find Livingstone, the lost titan of African exploration.

The program is a change of pace for the History Channel, where the programming has tended toward World War II documentaries and, more recently, reality fare like “Ice Road Truckers.” The goal was to “find a more active and entertaining storytelling style,” said Nancy Dubuc, the general manager of the network.

She approached Mr. Burnett with the idea of an exploration series. He started in television producing “Eco-Challenge,” essentially a race through rugged, uncivilized territory, then hit the jackpot with “Survivor,” which puts ordinary people at the mercy of the environment (and their own egos). The original expedition notion leaned toward Lewis and Clark, but Ms. Dubuc and Mr. Burnett quickly realized the terrain of the American Northwest had changed far too much since those two men’s journey more than 200 years ago.

But Africa, they thought, might fit the bill. Mr. Burnett, who grew up in England, was familiar with Livingstone (he is routinely taught in school there) and his expedition to find the source of the Nile.

In a telephone interview Mr. Burnett said he visited the Royal Geographical Society, where he is a member, and “I went to Westminster Abbey and spent time alone with Livingstone’s tomb.” He even rewatched films like “Out of Africa” and “King Solomon’s Mines” to “get the fabric of the lensing we could do on the show,” with wide-vista shots and gauzy cinematography. He sent a team to do what he called his “truth-on-the-ground survey.” It found that the trip through Tanzania from Zanzibar to the village of Ujiji (where Stanley ultimately found Livingstone) would be scenic, testing and probably dangerous. “Until you’ve walked it, you don’t know,” Mr. Burnett said.

He went casting for experienced adventure seekers and scientists, people who would be in it for the challenge and the experience. Novices didn't need to apply; the journey would be much too difficult for them, Mr. Burnett said.

The group of four he assembled included Benedict Allen, an author and filmmaker who had twice been left to die in the Amazon jungle; Kevin Sites, an author and former war correspondent for CNN who had once been captured by the Fedayeen in Iraq; Pasquale Scaturro, a geophysicist and expedition leader who once led a group of blind climbers up Mount Everest; and Mireya Mayor, who has a doctorate in anthropology, was a Fulbright scholar and discovered a new species of mouse lemur.

Of course the group does not exactly resemble the high school science club; this is reality television show after all. Mr. Allen looks right out of central casting for the safari leader. Ms. Mayor jumped into anthropology after working as a cheerleader for the Miami Dolphins.

"I gave up my pompons and walked off to go to Guyana," Ms. Mayor said. "The other cheerleaders said, 'You're going to leave all this and chase monkeys without hot showers and hair dryers?'"

But, she said, exploring was simply in her and her comrades' blood. They felt a pull to retrace Stanley's steps. Of course Mr. Burnett picked them for another reason. He needed conflict. "Four Type A people all trying to lead is a recipe for disaster," Ms. Mayor said.

The idea was to duplicate Stanley's conditions as closely as possible, so a harrowing trip from Zanzibar to the mainland was made in a 19th-century vintage boat, and no modern conveniences were allowed.

That meant no bottled water, and the greatest difficulty the expedition came to face did not involve the prevalent lions, snakes or bugs, but nearly nonexistent potable water. This led to what Mr. Burnett described — in oblique terms — as a true life-threatening event. "We had a real case of malaria," he said.

Could it really be all that tough when constantly accompanied by camera crews? Mr. Burnett said the rule on all his shows is that the crews say and do nothing to help. Ms. Mayor and Mr. Scaturro said the lack of interaction soon caused them to forget the crews were even there. "We called them the Others," Ms. Mayor said,

So how closely did the expedition duplicate Stanley's journey? The show's team takes 30 days to travel a distance it took Stanley 16 months to traverse. And with roads and villages having sprung up near the route, the trip took many detours.

"At times we were pretty close to his exact route," Mr. Scaturro said. "Other times we would veer off. We would do figure 8's around things."

In the end, despite the feuds and the jockeying for power, the journey brought the group together, Ms. Mayor said. "In a heartbeat I would do it again."

That is very much what the channel and Mr. Burnett would like to see happen. If the show pulls an audience, he is ready to gather the same gang of four and send it on another adventure. He mentioned a few possibilities: retracing [Marco Polo](#)'s trip to Asia or journeying the paths of Genghis Khan through Mongolia

or Pizarro through Peru.

"I'm ready to start again today," Mr. Burnett said.

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