

SON OF THE DESS

WIRED



Max Calderan has completed exploration. By making a west to east crossing of the Empty Quarter, the world's biggest sand mass, he ventured through the last remaining unexplored land on the surface of the earth and achieved the dream he has had since he was seven. Here, he tells **Anna Smith** of his remarkable achievement.



“I saw snakes and scorpions blah blah blah. There are a lot of other animals..” Hold on. Blah blah blah? Let’s go back to the snakes for a second. And the scorpions. In my life a snake or a scorpion would make headline news, this whole article would be about that one time I saw a snake. Even if it is normal for the so-called Son of the Desert, Max Calderan, to come across snakes and scorpions, I still get the feeling that there are stories buried in the “blah blah blah”. Admittedly, they are buried by his own headline news – becoming the first person to walk the Rub’ al Khali, the Empty Quarter, west to east. By doing so in 2020, he explored one of the last undiscovered places on the surface of the earth and cemented his name on geographical maps forever. The ‘Calderan Line’ is a part of history now.

“When I was in Italy, in 1974 I was seven years old. My mother bought an encyclopaedia. The Encyclopaedia was about Geography. I was reading about the empty quarter and I asked my mother to explain it to me in a better way. She told me it is a very difficult desert, even camels cannot survive inside. Migratory birds make a diversion around it. I said ‘Why?’ She replied, ‘nobody knows.’

‘Okay, I will be the first man who will know the reason why.’

From when I was seven years old I chose to become not an explorer but *the* explorer of the Rub’ al Khali.”

The History of Exploration

“Rub’ al khali is the biggest sand desert all over the world. Within Rub’ al Khali you can fit France, Belgium, and The Netherlands all together and

made entirely of sand. It has been recognised for hundreds of years as the most impassable, the most impossible, the most inhospitable, the most dramatic, difficult place all over the world. And it was the last unexplored portion of the world. Except for the eastern and the western side, close to the Yemen border and the UAE, it is still mostly unexplored. The Calderan Line, that now is a historical landmark on the geographical maps of Saudi Arabia, is right in the middle. Journalists, Saudi authorities, and universities, they say now nothing else is to be explored on the surface of the planet. Is this missing the caves? Of course, the depth of the sea as well, but as for the surface of this planet, we’ve closed the history of exploration.”

This is a monumental claim for any explorer, and seeing as it was Max’s lifelong goal since he was seven, it must feel like the close of a certain part of his history as well.

“I was lucky because my mother told me ‘Do it. If you want to become an explorer, do it.’ So I started to prepare myself in the best way. First with skiing then with free climbing. I was one of the pioneers in Italy, together with 20-50 other people, who started to copy US climbers and climb without ropes.

Then I started to apply deprivation. In the desert I would have difficulties eating, so I started with the deprivation of food, then the deprivation of sleep. If I went to the desert, I might not sleep during the night because maybe there are animals, maybe there are ghosts, maybe there are things that I don’t know that can scare me, so I won’t sleep. After that, I started to invest all my money taking trips in the Middle East. But the most important thing was having very strong relationships with Bedouin people.

Right

In the Empty Quarter, Max dealt with temperatures from 2 to 40 degrees celcius.

Above

He carries as little as possible, learning from experience to leave as much as possible at home

Staying with them, eating with them, following the camels, staying in the camel camps. When I had one month of vacation, I would spend one month with the Bedouin in the desert. After that, I did just three competitions in the desert to understand what kind of organisation was needed. That was not exploration of course, in competition the risk is zero. But just to find out the vehicles, the cars, the GPS and things like that. That's it, and then I became an explorer."

It's Easy

Along the way, Max picked up 14 world firsts in desert exploration, including 90 consecutive days traversing the Tropic of Cancer through Oman and 22 hours climbing the Moreeb Dune in the UAE. Training aside, Max has undergone tests to find out what makes him so supremely adapted for these remarkable feats. The tests showed that he has low levels of cortisol, meaning he will experience less stress and be able to make clearer judgements.

Despite this, in the 2017 Al Jazeera documentary *Max Calderan: Son of the Desert*, he declared "if you think in the desert, you die". Rather than thinking, he allows the desert to tell him where to go. I wanted to know exactly what that sensation felt like, to be guided by an invisible power, for someone who has never experienced it.

"When someone says that they have not experienced it, I can easily say 'oh come with me, I am organising a lot of experiences in the desert, you will come down, you will find yourself, you will discover the forces within you.' It would be easier, but I never say anything like that because when you come to the desert, you have only to follow the teacher. That is not me. It is the desert itself. Once you stay by yourself alone without any kind of interference, nobody tells you what you have to do, minute after minute you will discover your origin and your origin does not belong to the fact that that you are born in a hospital, does not belong to the fact that someone is taking care of you, giving you an education and so on. The origin is nature and you will discover that without me, without anyone. It is what is inside you. And once you come back, you will discover a lot of things that you wanted, you will put them in the garbage. A lot of things that you have at home, a lot of things that you have in your phone, a lot of people - the people you can't put in the garbage - I mean the relationships you have with other people will change. You will keep what is in your frequency. Then of course you can go on having a beer, going to the disco, go and enjoy. But it will be different because somewhere within you is still 'boom, boom, boom' [he mimicked a heart beat], it's always there. When you see the sun, you remember the desert, when you see the stars, your mind will go there. You will go to your origin. It's easy."

This profound relationship that the 56-year-old clearly shares with the desert is neatly balanced with decades of hard earned practical wisdom.

"You know that if there is a footprint of a small mouse, it means that there are snakes, because the snakes eat the mice and so on, it's a chain. I found mountain hyenas in Oman, and close to the Yemen and Saudi border there are still 60 or 70 cheetahs. Of course, they could be a danger.



**Above**

The Calderan line is officially recognised on the geographical maps of Saudi Arabia

As far as I know, they have never seen a man walking alone in the desert, they are not used to seeing tourists where I go. So, when I start to move in the desert, I don't take any kind of shower and I always dress in the same clothes for two or three weeks, because I need my original smell. They need to smell something different from perfume. They smell the energy that you project from yourself if you are going to be a danger for them. Once they feel that they are not in danger you won't have a problem. I never had a problem even when I faced a hyena 10 metres from me or a cheetah from 100 metres. I saw snakes or scorpions blah blah blah. Snakes could be a food for me. Scorpions are not a danger because they don't bite you because they want to have fun. If you respect them, they will respect you."

The Luckiest Man All Over the World

I made a comment on how scary going face to face with big cats, snakes, scorpions and 'blah blah blah' must be.

"The scary situation is in Milan rail station when I'm coming back from the Middle East because I see bad people around me. That is a very scary situation," he laughed.

"No, in the desert? I've never had a scary situation. I say there are different situations. In life, we don't have to be scared about anything. Of course, when I found the hyena it was a scary moment but it is really a different moment and you have to manage it in a different way.

When there was a sandstorm, a retired general from the Saudi army who was Chief of rescue for the Rub' al Khali said 'Max, the sandstorm that you faced totally alone in the desert and in the darkness was the toughest sandstorm I ever saw in the Rub' al Khali.' In such a situation, a car would be covered by sand dunes because sand dunes can move 80 metres in 24 hours. If you slept in the car, you would literally be covered and you would die. But for me, my thought in the Rub' al Khali was 'my team are far from me. (I was going to meet them after 180 kilometres). The satellite phone doesn't work. There's no way to move, no electrical device could work' and I said to myself, 'I am the luckiest man all over the world. I am alone in such a big sandstorm. Who is in the world so lucky to have such an experience?' So I talk to the sandstorm, because you talk a lot with the nature - with something that doesn't



exist. You say thank you; 'thank you for coming. I want to live with all my heart, with my body.' I covered my face and had to walk. After two days, the sandstorm finished and in the night I arrived very close to the meeting point. So this scary moment is only the biggest gift that I could ever ask for in my life. Still I say my life is enough for me now because of what I experienced, at least from my knowledge, very few people could have the same experience."

The Good, The Bad and The Crazy
 It had become clear that to put into words what the inner most reaches of the Empty Quarter looks like, seen by few and recorded by only one, is a near impossible task. The kind of place and the kind of experience that you will only understand if you make the journey yourself. If you do the research, the training, the understanding of the culture and the five decades of dreaming to make it happen.

"I can only tell you 50% of what I saw because if I told you 100% you would say I am crazy."

Max has gone on record to say that whilst on his 1100km trek (800km of which was "virgin territory") in January 2020 he walked for an average of 18 hours a day in temperatures between 2.7-35°C. Waking at 01:30 and sleeping between 7- and 9PM, he was tracked for his safety via satellite by a team in London.

He encountered dunes as high as 300 metres; "it was as if I had travelled to hell."

"Usually I tell journalists, 'I saw doors of light and people from other planets, but I was so dehydrated' but it is all true."

Lessons Learned

Having completed his one and only dream since childhood, you have to wonder what is next for Max. He mentioned that he is always looking for his next adventure, ("an explorer can change his clothes but he is still an explorer. It's an attitude") and made some brief comments about enduring a place in Iran where it reaches 80°C during the day because of how the sun reflects off the rocks, as well as a project through which he and a team will extract water from the atmosphere of the Rub' al Khali along the Calderan Line. At the same time, he is also a father, which I'm sure is an adventure in and of itself.

"The only lesson that you can learn from the desert is to be humble. Because anything that we have; certifications, jobs, activities, money, 'I have a university degree, I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor', is nothing. Once you learn that you can live with nothing you can try to achieve the best - money, luxury, nice car, nice food, nice everything - knowing that if you lose everything it doesn't change anything. If it changes something that is a very big problem because your life is linked with something that society built for you, but you don't need. You need water and food and walking in nature. You know what I mean?"

I motioned to move on with my next question- "Wait, wait, wait."
 "Oh, sorry," I stopped.

"So when are you coming to the desert?" **W**

Above

Max is now working with a team to extract water from the atmosphere in the Rub' al Khali along the Calderan Line